To the Muslim youth who welcomed me into their stories

And to Mom, Dad, Sarah, Lila, and Will
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Southern Crescent: Muslim Youth in the American South

By

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May 2017

Chair: Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons
Major: Religion

Muslim youth from diverse backgrounds are growing up across the region of the American South. This ethnographic study focuses on the religious lives of Muslim youth growing up in this region. Drawing on grounded theory and the study of youth religion in America, this thesis examines how Muslim youth develop their religious beliefs and practices in this American and particularly Southern setting. This work argues that Muslim American youth express and embody a relational Islam, built to bring them together with diverse Muslims and non-Muslims in America, arising through emerging pillars of practice: the belief in tolerance, speaking for Islam, interfaith friendships, and relationally practicing Islam in their American religious and public communities.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION: MUSLIM YOUTH IN THE AMERICAN SOUTH

They called Ibrahim a terrorist to his face and laughed. I was horrified. As a second year teacher in a public high school, I had already witnessed many examples of teenagers shuffling each other into unfair stereotypes, but this was my first time observing Islamophobia firsthand. I began to steel myself to challenge these students to respect religious diversity and reject stereotypes. Then, before I could say a thing, Ibrahim laughed. And his friends laughed too. He tossed back a sarcastic jab and they laughed more. I realized that Ibrahim did not really need me, and took these jokes far less seriously than I did. They may have called him a terrorist, but he was their friend. He disarmed the stereotype by his good humor. Though I would not say that he turned his friends into enlightened critics of Islamophobia, it was a start. I often wondered how he developed that skill, and what he was thinking but never said. I should have asked.

This is the state of the scholarship on Muslim American youth: mostly they have not been asked. The youth voice has barely been featured in the academic scholarship on Islam in America, even when the topic, such as schooling, self-evidently calls for such voices. Furthermore, the distinctive experience of Muslim youth in the American South has been absent from even the existing literature. Finally, significant research on youth and religion in America released in the last 15 years gave no significant attention to the growing Muslim population. This thesis, then, is an effort to help rectify these exclusions.
Research on Muslim youth in America has been pioneered by Sunaina Marr Maira¹, Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine², and Nahid Kabir³, who have explored how Muslim American youth negotiate their multi-faceted identities amidst the assertions and coercions of government, popular culture and media, friendships, and families. Christian Smith, meanwhile, has recently illuminated the religious lives of American youth, revealing broad currents emerging across religious difference, mostly among Protestant and Catholic Christians and Jewish youth⁴ and young adults⁵. As I read these incisive studies, it became increasingly striking that there was very little and only non-specific attention to the religious lives of Muslim youth in my own region, the American South. The religious and political culture of a region where churches dot street corners, a pastor made international news for burning Qur’ans, and city councils are promoters of conservative Christianity, provides a fascinating and sometimes contentious context in which Muslim youth develop their own religious self-understanding and their views of other religions.

In this thesis, I will argue that Muslim youth express and embody a relational Islam in America. In doing so, I shed light on the southern experience and uncover

emerging pillars that unite Muslim youth in their American experience with each other and with non-Muslims.

**Literature Review**

American Muslims under 30 now represent a 36% plurality of the Muslim American population, and are projected by 2030 to represent a majority of all American Muslims. Yet, research on this segment of population is thin. Karen Leonard, in her 2003 work, *Muslims in the United States: The State of the Research*, illustrates how research on older generations compels research on the young:

> Just as compelling political events and experiences marked earlier indigenous and immigrant Muslim histories, formative social and political experiences are crucially shaping Muslim Youth, rooting them in the histories, cultures, and languages of North America. The ways in which they think about themselves and form political coalitions are new and different, and their religious and political markings are colored by the ways in which they are creating a new generational memory and ‘claiming America’.  

Islam for these new generations of Muslim Americans is not a replication of something from immigrant homelands, or merely a battleground for insular generational struggles, but embedded in the politics, histories and cultures of North America. Muslim youth find their own diverse ways to claim America. This is how Leonard begins her brief recap of the state of Muslim scholarship on youth up to 2003. This is a helpful marker, as the major works on Muslim American youth addressed prominently throughout this thesis, were released after this summary.

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Leonard’s summary of the state of research on Muslim American youth underscores the newness of the field: the earliest citation of a significant reference to Muslim youth is a 1994 work by Ron Kelley on Iranians in Los Angeles, and no other work before 1998 is significantly about youth. Furthermore, most of the books and articles Leonard cites are not primarily about youth. Youth tend to figure as marginal players in studies on other phenomenon, such as feminism and choices over whether to wear hijab. Though the trend of focusing on Muslim American youth as a subject worth studying on its own emerged after Leonard wrote this summary, one persistent thread was to focus on identity negotiation as a central concern of study about youth experience. Leonard highlights generational, institutional, ethnic, and gendered tensions through which youth negotiate their identities within American cultural and historical contexts. No context looms larger for Muslim American youth today than the cultural and political aftermaths of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. In the post-9/11 landscape of America, Muslim youth struggle to negotiate complicated identities in the face of the stereotypes which flatten their identity into “Muslim”. Consequently, the emerging literature on Muslim youth in America has helpfully challenged this gross simplification.

In Missing, Sunaina Marr Maira unpacks the various forms of citizenship practiced by South Asian Muslim American youth in a New England community in the years immediately following 9/11. She situates these youth living under intense scrutiny from the “American empire” for their ethnic-religious identity, conflated by popular sentiment, media presentation, and hegemonic authorities. Against monolithic identities, these youth express complex citizenships:
Mohiuddin, Zeenat and Ismail all spoke about feelings of belonging in relation to several nation-states, such as India and Bangladesh; regional or linguistic identifications…and localities…[T]heir desires for U.S. citizenship and permanent residency were not seen as conflicting with their affiliations with their home nation-states but layered in a flexible understanding, embedded in mobility and migration.\textsuperscript{8}

As the Empire narrowed Muslim youth identity through rhetoric and profiled surveillance, the particular histories and allegiances and yearnings of these South Asian Muslim youth gave the lie to such reduction. Additionally, the desire on the part of some to establish themselves in the U.S. speaks to the value they ascribe to their new nation, an allegiance doubted by those who fear Islam and people of color. Maira highlights this common ground between Islam and larger communities of color in America by contrasting multiculturalism, an ideology of siloed cultures, with a more politically synergistic polyculturalism: "boundary crossing…embedded in political experience but also in popular culture practices shared with youth of color."\textsuperscript{9} Though racism did still go both ways between South Asian youth and Black youth, nonetheless, some began to find new allies: "Muslim immigrant youth sense a connection with other youth of color and with African Muslim youth in the city, based in common social and political experiences of cultural citizenship".\textsuperscript{10}

The Muslim youth experience of being stereotyped and vilified minorities produced opportunities to exercise dissenting citizenship, using one’s rights within the rules of American democracy to critique the American Empire. Maira found youth straining against “the anti-Muslim backlash after 9/11 and…the U.S. war on

\textsuperscript{8} Maira, \textit{Missing}, 101.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 180.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 181.
Some felt more comfortable expressing such dissenting views in private, while others boldly spoke out in public, at their schools especially. To be clear, they were not only educating others about Islam, a common activity typically allowed by domesticated multicultural rhetoric, but critiquing the surveillance, violence, and injustice of the Empire. This is another example of how these complicated youth cannot be flattened into a simple category; their dissenting citizenship “encapsulates the contradictions of challenging the state while seeking inclusion within it.”

This is not a challenge that has gone away. The diverse, conflicted identities uncovered and detailed so skillfully by Maira persisted beyond those early days after 9/11, as is clear from the following decade of research and the undeniable relevance of that struggle for Muslim youth in the wake of subsequent terrorist attacks, the recent rise in Islamophobia, and political profiling of Muslims in the 2016 election cycle.

In *Muslim American Youth*, Sirin and Fine surveyed a nationwide population of youth several years after Maira’s study and mapped the hyphenated identities Muslim youth negotiate in the face of continued suspicion, surveillance, and exclusion in America. In contrast to Maira’s development of Empire as the force for youth to reckon with, Sirin and Fine frame a system of “moral exclusion”. Moral exclusion is the process by which a group within a society is marked as “the Other” and subsequently loses rights, wealth, and safety. While portraying a more optimistic vision of American integration than Maira, Sirin and Fine nonetheless present a similar portrait of American integration.

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11 Ibid., 197.


exclusion: “The United States has a long and celebrated history of successfully integrating various immigrant groups. But the country has an equally long history of exclusions, denying full membership to various groups, a paradox, or tradition, that is currently at play.” Sirin and Fine trace from the genocide and expulsion of Native Americans, through the internment of Japanese Americans in World War II. This is a history of surveillance and violence, as well as forced “ethnogenesis”, whereby “as these groups are targeted, we argue, they are homogenized; that is, they are constructed ideologically as if they were monolithic identifiable groups.” Sirin and Fine situate the Muslim youth they studied in this history of moral exclusion and ethnogenesis, processes not dissimilar from Maira’s construct of Empire.

Against this reduction, Muslim youth, through various approaches, establish and assert hyphenate identities: “Overall, we found that young people devise very complex dynamics at the hyphen, mainly with their ‘American’ and ‘Muslim’ identities but sometimes also with their ethnic identities, political engagements, school, music or fashion.” In these different arenas, Muslim youth find pressure points but also opportunities to perform their identities into reality. The complexity of their identities emerge clearly in identity maps Sirin and Fine asked them to create, expressing through words, images, and color, “your many ethnic, religious, and social identities…how you

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15 Ibid., 59.
16 Ibid., 135.
see yourself as a Muslim American person”.\textsuperscript{17} This prompt may be better described as two prompts, and the maps reflect different foci. Some zero in on the complexity and challenge of Muslim American identity, while others focus on the various identities. Moshen, a 20 year old of Persian descent, did not portray any concepts directly related to religion: FAMILY, $Money, College, Bars/parties, a picture of a person lifting weights, Patriots (presumably the football team), etc.\textsuperscript{18} Bushra, a 24 year old of Palestinian descent, blended national and religious identity with other identities: Islam, Arab, American values of freedom, liberty, Being a woman, hijab, Palestine, Resistance, etc.\textsuperscript{19}

In order to make conclusions about an overall Muslim American identity, Sirin and Fine grouped these maps into three categories of identity negotiation:

(1) “integrated” if the Muslim and American identities were fully blended in a nonconflicting way, (2) “parallel identities” if both identities were depicted as separate worlds, or (3) “confictual” if the maps represented tension, conflicting elements, hostility, or irreconcilability of the identities.\textsuperscript{20}

An interesting gender divide emerged: young women were more likely to create an integrated map, while young men were more likely to express parallel identity. Of the minority who expressed a conflictual identity, most were female.\textsuperscript{21}

Sirin and Fine pushed further into these identities in focus groups, especially by drawing out experiences in “contact zones”, where various works of negotiation, including education and argument, happened between Muslim youth and non-Muslim peers and adults.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{18} Sirin and Fine, Muslim American Youth, between pages 192 and 193, 6\textsuperscript{th} identity map.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 136.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 137.
Almost a decade after 9/11, Nahid Kabir followed Sirin and Fine in conducting a broad, nationwide research project on Muslim youth. Her findings reflect the growing distance from 9/11 and the exclusionary forces related to it, which opens her conversations and discussion to deeper engagement with broad topics not subsumed under the umbrellas of “moral exclusion” or “Empire”. She leads not with the portrayal of an excluded and threatened minority, but with a wildly diverse and engaged population:

I take the research one step further by incorporating a wide range of cohorts from diverse ethnicities and examining the dynamics of one’s identity from single, hyphenated to multiple identities…I have done extensive research on diverse topics, for example, media, politics, and international relations.22

Starting with larger questions of cultural belonging in America and expectations within diverse ethnic and country origins, Kabir then narrows to focus on how Muslim youth identity formation occurs in interaction with American media, in reactions to the rise of Barack Obama, and in particular concerns about the ‘Palestinian question’.

Kabir immediately departs from the previous research, bypassing the oppositional setting for Muslim youth as excluded minorities. Instead she begins by introducing a developmental perspective which emphasizes, first, the shape given to young lives by their immediate surrounding religious, economic, and cultural setting. She quickly comes to questions of “acculturation” or “second-culture learning” and interaction with America challenges but not before exploring enculturation: “the process by which individuals learn and adopt the ways and manners of their respective cultures…ethnic identity development…first-culture learning”.23 Thus emerges a picture

22 Kabir, Young American Muslims, 7.
23 Ibid., 42.
of Muslim youth being raised in distinctive ethnic and religious identities, drawn into social and especially familial expectations and needs. This subsequently produces tension for the youth, who are simultaneously held tightly within the native culture and pushed out as necessary ambassadors in American culture by their parents:

Most wanted their children to adopt the parents’ ethnic culture. On the other hand, the parents needed help from their children to improve language skills. Often parents were not fitting into the host society. In the face of these tensions, second-generation Muslims were trying to be a part of the host society.24

This is a crystallization of the central challenge for Muslim youth in Kabir’s findings. She emphasizes that in the midst of their various diversities, Muslim youth “need to acquire a bicultural stance so that they can be competent in both cultures”.25

Allowing youth to identify their identity belonging, Kabir found that a plurality, over a third, 144 youth, spoke of dual identities.26 Not all of these dual identities included being Muslim. On the other hand, several dozen others identified as only Muslim.27 Several dozen more identified with a group identity or single ethnic identity. 19 of the 379 identified as only American, while others defined themselves outside of being American, due to, for instance, the experience of moral exclusion: “I don’t consider myself as African American nor solely American. American history is full of oppression. I’m only Muslim.”28

24 Ibid., 64.
25 Ibid., 64.
26 Ibid., 74.
27 Ibid., 71.
28 Ibid., 71.
Such direct and sometimes firm self-identifications exist alongside more complicated allegiances. Kabir begins complicating these religious, cultural, and ethnic markers by introducing the effect of sport on identity. Anwara, a 15 year old female of Pakistani origin, described herself as “100 per cent Muslim ’cos I wouldn’t want my culture of anything to mix in with my Islam and my religion” while also asserting “I love to watch basketball, soccer, and baseball”. 29 Such involvement, whether through fandom or playing, is what Kabir calls ‘cultural capital’: “competence that is conducive to membership of a cultural community”. 30

One of the most unifying themes of Kabir’s research is a common enemy: “Most of the participants in this study were critical of the American media in general and the Fox channel in particular”. 31 Where Maira and Sirin and Fine gave attention to media as part of the larger socio-political forces of exclusion and threat, Kabir zeroes in on specific incidents reported on in media, including a pipe bomb explosion at a mosque in Florida, a rare reference in all the literature referring to Islam in the American South.

In her final chapters, Kabir provides two specific case studies to measure identity belonging, focusing questions of political involvement, support, and critique through the prisms of President Barack Obama and the Palestinian American experience of the Israel/Palestine conflict. Both topics demonstrate Kabir’s move beyond the singular focus of 9/11 to other concerns, some new, some enduring. She showcases Muslim youth balancing critique and praise, as in the views of Siddique, a 23 year old male

29 Ibid., 103.
30 Ibid., 107.
31 Ibid., 117.
Pakistani American, on the President receiving the Nobel Peace Prize: “I really share President Obama’s views on nuclear non-proliferation…But I do think that maybe it was a bit premature because this was his first year in office and he is sending 30 or 40,000 troops to Afghanistan…”32 On the Palestinian question, notably, Kabir highlights youth distinguishing between state action and the Jewish people: “It’s Zionism we’re against, not Judaism.”33 This recalls the challenge for Muslim American youth of belonging while critiquing the state.

Perhaps as a consequence and necessary limitation following from an encompassing perspective, Kabir chose not to investigate the religious aspect of her subjects’ lives: “I respected their identity as ‘Muslims’ and did not delve into their degree of religious practice”.34 Sirin and Fine give more space to religious views, but still emphasize that, “Our study of Muslim American identity…is not necessarily a study of ethnicity or religiosity but a study of emerging collective identity influenced not only by ethnic or religious background.”35 Similarly, Maira sought in her ethnography to reveal the complexity of her subjects:

So rather than accept at face value the categories—particularly that of ‘the Muslim’—that are assumed to be the most obvious frames in which to place the stories of the South Asian youth in this study, I have purposefully tried to complicate how the identities and experiences of Muslim immigrant youth are imagined in the mass media and public discourse after 9/11.36

32 Ibid., 170.
33 Ibid., 198.
34 Ibid., 34.
35 Sirin and Fine, Muslim American Youth, 6.
36 Maira, Missing, 27.
In the humanizing move to reveal the rich, dynamic identities of Muslim youth, these studies purposely avoid focusing prominent attention on the religious views of these young people. They are more than Muslim. However, this intentional turn away from religious examination creates an opening to turn back to religious identity and to see the complexity within that particular label, of which many Muslim youth are proud. Though this aspect of their lives is not prioritized in the research, it is still evident their religious and spiritual lives matter to them.

The observation that American youth care about their spiritual lives and yet often are not asked about religion was the driving force behind Christian Smith’s National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR), “a unique research project on the religious and spiritual lives of American adolescents conducted 2001 to 2005…”\textsuperscript{37} This mix of surveys and in-depth interviews of over 3000 American youth is, “the largest, most comprehensive and detailed study of American teenage religion and spirituality conducted to date”.\textsuperscript{38} In seeking a representative sample of the U.S. population ages 13-17, his team understandably uncovered more about the spiritual lives of Protestant and Catholic teens than any other religious or non-religious identification. Because of their significant numbers, he chooses to give Mormon and Jewish youth special attention among the minority religious perspectives. He also delves into the detailed views of non-religious teens, a prescient focus before the now well-documented “rise of the Nones”.

\textsuperscript{37} Smith, \textit{Soul Searching}, 4.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 7.
Smith situates the findings of the NSYR against some popular conceptions of youth and religion in America: “[T]he vast majority of American adolescents are not spiritual seekers or questers of the type often described by journalists and some scholars, but are instead mostly oriented toward and engaged in conventional religious traditions and communities.”39 Unsurprisingly, then, Smith and his researchers found that youth become like this through family influence, again overturning assumptions: “Some observers suggest that American teenagers have outgrown the influence of their parents and other adults, are shaped primarily by their peers…Such views are badly misguided. Adults inescapably exercise immense influence….”40 This portrayal of the transmission of tradition goes against the grain of narratives about religion dying in America, but certainly resonates with the findings of of Maira, Sirin and Fine, and Kabir on the persistence of Islam despite other generational struggles within the Muslim American community.

Another major finding of the study helps explain how, despite religious continuity, particularity has changed in the new generation:

The majority of American teenagers appear to espouse rather inclusive, pluralistic, and individualistic views about religious truth, identity boundaries, and need for religious congregation…This is true for notable percentages of teens even in America’s more conservative and strict religious traditions.41

This new strain within youth religion operates as a diffusely and culturally transmitted modification to various denominations and religions, a new “de facto dominant

39 Ibid., 27.
40 Ibid., 28.
41 Ibid., 115.
religion…we might well call ‘Moralistic Therapeutic Deism’.”\textsuperscript{42} Outlined below in my theoretical approach, this tolerant view of religion also resonates with my research of Muslim youth in America.

Yet, one would be hard pressed to conclude much of anything about Muslim youth from \textit{Soul Searching}. Fifteen Muslim youth and twelve parents were surveyed, and two Muslim youth interviewed in depth. Only two brief quotations of Muslim youth make it into the main text. Statistics regarding survey answers specific to Islam only make it into the endnotes of the book, where the authors assert that nothing conclusive can be rendered from such a small sample. Their survey questions regarded the practices of the five pillars of Islam and level of religiosity, with the suggested finding that the youth who identified personally as Muslim, more than just having Muslim parents, indicated higher levels of religious practice.\textsuperscript{43} Smith invites further research.

A new frontier of research on Muslim American youth will illuminate their complex religious identities and regional experiences. Muslim American youth are Muslim, and that identity is no simple formula. Muslim youth in the South have particular regional experiences embedded in an intensely American Christian culture. The religious lives of these Muslim youth are rich in diversity and when studied in parallel with other Muslims and other religious youth, reveal similar and related currents of American religion.

\textbf{Theory}

My study draws primarily from three theoretical approaches. The first approach is grounded theory as developed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss. The second is

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 162.
  \item \textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 315.
\end{itemize}
the “Lived Religion” approach of Robert Orsi. The third is the “Levels of Operative American Religion” developed by Christian Smith in his study of youth and religion in America, and partly inspired by Robert Bellah’s concept of American Civil Religion. By employing these theoretical approaches, I seek to understand how Muslim youth express and embody the religion they claim, how they navigate relationships to institutions of their own religion and how they make connections across religious difference, and thus how they fit within the landscape of youth and religion in America.

Grounded theory is an inductive approach to sociological research. It offers an alternative to traditional deductive research designs. Rather than developing research design around a thorough literature review, grounded theorists look to the data collected: “A fundamental premise...is to let the key issues emerge rather than to force them into preconceived categories.” The excellent (and lonely) research on Muslim American youth by Maira, Sirin and Fine, and Kabir presents dynamic analyses of complicated identities. Already intent on giving voice to this population, I was further inspired by these researchers to let youth speak for themselves. I sought to provide the opportunity to express the complications of their identities, whether or not it lined up with the existing theories about identity negotiation among Muslim American youth. I was curious about what new facets might emerge due to the geographical particularity of this study, in the American South. In view of all of this, I was naturally drawn to a grounded theory approach, where I could allow my research to be shaped by the voices, views, and experiences of Muslim American youth in the American South.


45 Ibid., 351.
Focusing on both the views and experiences of youth springs from another dimension of grounded theory: “Our emphasis on what people are doing also leads to understanding multiple layers of meanings of their actions...looking at action in relation to meaning helps the researcher to obtain thick description and to develop categories”.\(^\text{46}\)

It was important to pay attention not just to values of Muslim youth, but also to how they embody those values, to what hidden tensions might exist within their embodiment, and to how this is shaping the future of their practice and relationships. Illumination of these dynamic processes helped reveal how youth moved within different levels of national discourse and institutional religion, and came together around particular pillars of practice.

I blend this grounded theory approach with Robert Orsi’s theory of “Lived Religion”, which he spells out in his essay, “Everyday Miracles”.\(^\text{47}\) The everyday miracles of lived religion are not confined to questions of doctrine or within the walls of a place of worship, but happen in the daily spaces and relationships of ordinary people, where meaning is received and created and reformed, limited by power but boundless in creativity. Orsi identifies four elements to understand religious practice from a lived religion perspective:

1. a sense of the range of idiomatic possibility and limitation in a culture—the limits of what can be desired, fantasized, imagined, and felt;
2. an understanding of the knowledges of the body in the culture...
3. an understanding of the structures of social experience...and
4. a sense of what sorts of characteristic tensions erupt within these particular structures.\(^\text{48}\)

\(\text{\textsuperscript{46}}\) Ibid., 339.


This vantage point brings the religious scholar directly to the practitioner, bypassing traditionally prioritized dogmas and institutions. Meaning arises in bodies in relation to these powers but are not wholly controlled by their influence. Neither do dogma and institutions, of one’s primary religious identification or of other religions, constitute the only social structures shaping religious practice. Especially in a diverse society and globalized network of knowledge, people receive and imbibe many idiomatic possibilities from various cultural settings: “religious practice is polysemous…it is constituted—assembled—by cultural bricolage.”\(^{49}\) Tensions usually erupt because such freewheeling is outside the limits established by the powers that be of various cultural and religious institutions, whether society-wide structures of ethnogenesis or particular expectations of one’s ethnic community and family. Muslim American Youth live in this complex interplay, pulled in many different directions, by American civic, media, youth, ethnic, and religious cultures, to name just a few influences, which limit and shape their beliefs and bodies. Navigating these powers and influences, Muslim youth have found themselves rapidly thrust to the front lines of establishing a sense of ‘American Islam’, assembling their religious practices, dearly held religious dispositions, and diverse experiences into a gradually emerging and converging new cultural movement.

In giving special priority to how individuals practice religion in their unique contexts, lived religion provides an antidote to essentialism, whether at the institutional or individual levels. When identifying larger trends within a population of individuals, such as the emergence of American Islam among Muslim youth, it is important to see

\(^{49}\) Ibid., 7.
this analysis not as postulating a pure or uniform religious practice (though “pure
religion” is indeed a common trope embraced by religious practitioners). Rather,
expressions are not only as diverse as all the individuals involved; they are also varied,
polyvocal, and even fractured within individuals: “The key words here are tensile,
hybridity, ambivalence, irony; the central methodological commitment is to avoid
conclusions that impose univocality on practices that are multifarious.”

50 The construction of American Islam varies in the experience of each Muslim American
youth, and often exists as a tension within their own self-identification and practice. For
my research, this meant paying careful attention to the ways Muslim youth in the South
describe the essence of their religion, the ways they practice, and the contours of their
American and embodied Southern experience.

Christian Smith provides additional theoretical context to situate Muslim youth
within ubiquitous American youth culture and the overall religious power structure of
America. He posits, as the major theory and finding of his study, the existence of an
influential level of American religion affective especially among youth, called Moralistic
Therapeutic Deism, or MTD for short. The concept is a religious view of the world that
boils down to this: Religion teaches us that God created us to be happy and get along,
and as long as we are good people, we will go to heaven.51 It is infiltrative and parasitic,
latching onto and subtly morphing religious traditions, without causing enough damage
to lose its host.52 As a subconscious interfaith movement, MTD creates common ground

50 Emphasis original. Ibid., 11.
51 Smith, Soul Searching, 163.
52 Ibid., 166.
for tolerance among youth of diverse traditions and cultures. This is a passive tolerance, however, and as such is essentially apolitical. There is not an overarching vision of coexistence or harmony but rather a pervasive commitment to individualism. Muslim youth in America live within this current, but bring with them experiences of moral exclusion, critical views of failed tolerance, political solidarity, and friendship across difference which challenge the apolitical and individualist stance of MTD.

Smith also introduces a structural model which sheds light on the levels of belief, intention, and action of Muslim youth: the levels of operative American religion. There are four levels of this model, rising from Individual Religion, to Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, to Organizational Religion, and finally to American Civil Religion. These levels are defined as follows:

- **American Civil Religion**: “public symbols and discourse oriented toward national civic solidarity and politically sacred meanings.”

- **Organizational Religion**: “formal religious institutions and organizations, denominations, seminaries, divinity schools, camps, parachurch organizations, publishers, conference centers, etc.”

- **Moralistic Therapeutic Deism**: “a widely shared, interreligious faith fostering subjective well-being and lubricating interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere.”

- **Individual Religion**: “idiosyncratic, eclectic, often syncretistic, popular, ‘lived’ personal beliefs and practices of individuals.”

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53 Ibid., 169.
The relation between these levels illuminates the varied ways Muslim youth express and embody their own religion as they dynamically navigate their beliefs and experiences, the expectations of organizational and civic religion, and the hidden currents of belief coursing through the landscape of youth religion in America.

Method

Muslim youth in America encompass many diversities, including religious sect, ethnicity, level of education, and social class. Perhaps the most prevalent similarity among the cohort of my interviewees, besides shared religion, was that all but one were college students. I purposely limited my fieldwork to the youth between the ages of 18 and 28, in order to interview them at a moment in life to reflect on their experiences as youth. Also, in American Muslim communities, a person is customarily considered a youth even into their 20s, until they are married. I sought out a diversity of ethnic and religious backgrounds, as well as gender balance. I also limited my fieldwork to youth who spent some time growing up in the American South, in order to gain a variety of perspectives within this particular region which heretofore has been neglected in the scholarly literature on Muslim youth. I chose not to do an ethnography of a particular city or community, but rather to consider experiences across the region. I structured my interviews with questions in three sections: life background, view of Islam, and view and experience of other religions. When I cite them in this thesis, I have changed the names of youth in order to protect their identity.

Fieldwork

My fieldwork took place from May 2013 to January 2014. I conducted 23 interviews with Muslim youth in three Florida cities. Some the interviewees I already knew, and they referred me to others to interview. I also received recommendations
from professionals in the community. The interviews took place at a variety of locations, including college campuses, mosques, and cafés. I endeavored to meet in a place comfortable and convenient to each interviewee. The interviews were audio-recorded. The interviews ranged from one hour to two and a half hours, largely dependent on how much interviewees wanted to say.

In accordance with my intent, the interviewee cohort represented a variety of diverse identities. Twelve were female and eleven male. Seven of the twelve females wore hijab, while five did not. One out of twenty-three of the interviewees was Shia, approximately half the percentage of the worldwide population of Shia. One was Sufi. Twelve were born in another country. Five were of Pakistani descent and five of Palestinian descent. Three were of Bosnian descent and three of Syrian descent. Two were African-American converts. One each represented Moroccan, Indian, a Persian Gulf state, and Nepalese descent. Eleven had spent some time growing up in or near a large north Florida city. One had lived in Oklahoma, one in Tennessee, and one in Texas. The rest grew up across the state of Florida, in small towns, suburbs, and cities.

Most in the cohort were students at three major Florida universities. These are large public institutions with large Muslim populations. Each University has a Muslim student organization, and public space provided for prayers.

**Autobiography**

My own interest in this topic grew out of several formative experiences, starting with the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. A freshman in college, I was becoming aware of the world in a new way, and one thing which struck me early on after the attacks was the animosity and unfair prejudice toward Islam as a whole. Several years later, as a young teacher, this prejudice became embodied in experiences like my
opening story of Ibrahim. I began to speak to Muslim students about their beliefs and practices and how they viewed the world. These particular students belonged to an Islamic community which had seen a partially successful attempt to firebomb their mosque and one of their prominent members subjected to a smear campaign when he was nominated to the Mayor's Human Rights Commission. And only an hour away, the extremist pastor, Terry Jones, was threatening to burn Qur’ans. These youth were not just American Muslims; they were Muslims in the Christian, Bible-soaked south. After several years, I became determined that these voices should be heard and understood, which gave birth to this thesis.

Like many scholars, I come to this topic about which I am passionate, with subjects for whom I have profound empathy and respect. It is easy for me to enter into a polemical mode when it comes to the place of Muslims in America. That being said, in this research, I attempt to set aside my activist leanings to present the voice and experience of Muslim youth in the American South as they express it. I attempt to interpret these voices of Muslim youth within the relevant academic literature and through a grounded theory approach which articulates new findings arising as these voices come together.

**Thesis and Argument**

This thesis theorizes the existence emerging pillars of American Islam. Combining grounded theory, a lived religion perspective, Christian Smith’s research on American youth religion, and the existing literature on Muslim youth in America, this theory is a typological approach which draws attention to relational and unifying ways that Muslim youth practice their religion in America. The four pillars I identify are by no means the only emergent unifying currents in American Islam, and they certainly do not
supplant the traditional pillars of Islam. However, as my interviewees spoke of what mattered to them in religion, it became clear that, for these American Muslims, there was a particular set of beliefs, practices, and unifying place functioning comparably to the way the five pillars function to unite all Muslims. The four pillars I uncovered were: a belief in tolerance; a commitment to speaking for Islam; a practice of interfaith friendships; and a relational experience and expression of America, even the American South, as a place that unites Muslims. Expressed through many voices and different approaches and conceptions, nonetheless these Muslim youth are on the front line, rapidly constructing a new, emerging “American Islam”, a new movement of religious and cultural relationship.

**Chapter Outline**

In the first chapter, I address how Muslim youth generally express a belief in tolerance. I begin by discussing the meaning of tolerance and the place of Islam in discourse on tolerance in America. After surveying the literature, I move on to analyzing religious meanings of tolerance for Muslim youth. I identify five main ways youth express this: as the essence of Islam, through scripture, through reference to Allah and Muhammad, and through their relationship with other people of the Book, Christians and Jews. Next, I distinguish and elucidate eight different modes of tolerance expressed by Muslim youth, broken into two categories: the inner mode and the outer modes. The four inner modes are: Self, Internal, Against Islamic intolerance, and Isolation. The four outer modes are: Reciprocity, Against Anti-Islamic intolerance, Universality, and Mercy.

In the second chapter, I examine how Muslim youth speak for Islam in ways distinct from the common role of educating people about Islam. I first show how Muslim youth shift speaking for Islam from political to religious discourse, claiming a place for
Islam in American Civil Religion. Then, I examine how Muslim youth find a space to speak for Islam in friendships of mutual interest and care. Next, I illuminate the bold and gentle proselytizing undertaken by Muslim youth, especially suited to the American South. Finally, I show in the story of a Muslim youth convert how speaking and proselytization help lead people to Islam.

In the third chapter, I illuminate how Muslim youth come together with non-Muslims in interfaith friendships. I first expose the dearth attention on friendships in the existing literature on Muslim American youth. Then, I map the connections between interfaith friendships and the pillars of speaking for Islam and the belief in tolerance. Next, I distinguish between how young women and young men form interfaith friendships. Finally, I show school becomes an important place for Muslim youth to form interfaith friendships.

In the fourth chapter, I argue that America is a place of relational Islamic practice for Muslim youth. I will first illuminate the development of Muslim youth religious practice in relation to diverse Islamic communities. Then, I track how Muslim youth take their religious practice into public America. Finally, I offer several thick descriptions of life for Muslim youth in the American South, showing how the belief in tolerance, speaking for Islam, interfaith friendships, and American life come together in the distinct region.

Finally, in my conclusion, I evaluate my theory of the pillars of emerging American Islam based on the evidence provided. I also suggest areas for further study of Muslim Youth in the American South, including ethnographies of Muslim youth life in Southern cities, examination of how Jesus becomes an intersection and influence point between Muslim and Christian youth, focus on Muslim minority youth (such as Shia),
sociological analysis of interfaith friendships, and longitudinal studies of Muslim youth into young adulthood. By bringing light to the beliefs, religious practices, and experiences of Muslim youth in the American South, I hope to contribute to opening a new field.
CHAPTER 2
BELIEF IN TOLERANCE

Jeremiah grew up in one of the largest African-American Baptist Churches in a large city in north Florida, and then, at age 19, he converted to Islam. Only several years after his conversion, he speaks with the eloquence of a budding scholar. But true to his age and southern roots, he occasionally expresses profound religious truths with a casual, folksy twang: “I’m cool with everybody. ‘Hey, what’s up? Let’s go have some sweet tea and fry some chicken.’”¹ His southern-fried charm is unique and his status as a convert distinctive, but in spirit, he is characteristic of the Muslim youth I interviewed. “You have your way, I have mine,” said Martina, a 21-year old of Bosnian descent.² Sayid, an 18 year old who was born in Syria, says, “Be respectful, no matter what. There is no exception to that. It’s extended to all people, even if they’re atheist or have no religion.”³ Rabia, an 18 year old Shia of Pakistani descent, says, humbly, “I could be wrong about everything I believe in, so I can’t judge anyone else upon what they believe.”⁴ In interview after interview, in one way or the other, I heard my interviewees speak for Islam in this tolerant manner.

In this chapter, I will examine the various beliefs about tolerance held by Muslim American youth. First, I will offer a theoretical frame for understanding the contours of tolerance as they relate to Muslim youth. Then, I will illuminate religious understandings

¹ Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. May 21, 2013 2:00 p.m.
² Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. September 15, 2013 12:00 p.m.
³ Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. May 7, 2013 7 pm.
⁴ Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. December 1, 2013 12:00 p.m.
of tolerance expressed by Muslim youth. Finally, I will distinguish different modes of tolerance expressed by Muslim youth.

**What is Tolerance?**

When I set out to conduct this research, I was intrigued by the role of spokesperson taken on by Muslim youth, especially in a region, the American South, where devout, traditional Christianity still holds privilege and practices dominance. Often as the sole Muslim members in a friend group or in a classroom, these youth were called on to speak for Islam. A decade after 9/11, the memories of what it was like, immediately after the attack and in the years to follow, helped shape a narrative honed through many tellings and some intense, even harrowing experiences. The narrative was also shaped by many other religious, political, and social settings unrelated to 9/11 or other attacks, especially their families, religious communities, and peers. Over the course of these formative years, my interviewees had learned to speak of Islam in a particular way: informal, unorganized talking points which nonetheless coalesced into an emerging pillar of belief. For these Muslim youth who grew up in the American South, a central belief of Islam is tolerance.

Tolerance is the ability or willingness to coexist with people who have different religious, cultural, or political views. While it is popularly portrayed as an anemic or patronizing sentiment which amounts to putting up with something one does not like, I heard something quite different among almost all Muslim youth I interviewed. Most have strong beliefs about the importance of tolerance. Most are either generous or at least humble in their expression of tolerance.

My analysis assumes that Muslim youth, like anyone else, can speak beliefs and engage in discourse about tolerance without actually using the word itself. For instance,
when a Muslim youth speaks of how Islam “respects” other religions, this is a mode of
tolerance. Likewise, when another says she should be “nice” or “kind”, she is expressing
another mode of tolerance. As I will show, the usefulness of the category “tolerance” is
that it captures a real phenomenon happening among Muslim youth, where a common
space has been created which facilitates increasing coexistence and co-mingling of
Muslims with people different or no religion in America. At the same time, there is
diversity of belief and understanding within this space. This is what pillar does: it raises
a structure where many, different people can gather.

Just as there is not one voice on tolerance within Muslim American discourse,
the particular meanings of tolerance in any society are always contested. In the U.S.,
different currents of socio-political discourse express strong predilection for or aversion
to tolerance as a primary concern. Conservatives are wary of tolerance, and do not rank
it above such concerns as truth or security. The liberal establishment relishes in
embracing tolerance. That being said, tolerance is not simply a belief but also a tool, a
highly politicized discourse.

Muslims in America, like other minorities, have always found themselves beyond
or, at best, on the edges of tolerance. Kambiz Ghaneabassiri charts this history in A
History of Islam in America, from runaway slaves to controversial African-American
expressions of Islam, to the modern challenge of defining identity against the perception
of Islam as intolerant and Muslims as terrorists.⁵

Discourse on Islam and tolerance took on new urgency after the 9/11 attacks. *The Place of Tolerance in Islam*, a book written soon after 9/11 in response to the attacks, shows a complex view of tolerance and Islam, rooted in historical tradition, Qur'anic interpretation, and socio-political analysis. Sunaina Maira addresses tolerance in *Missing* as she illuminates the struggles of Muslim youth to be accepted in America while also challenging the intolerance and violence, external and internal, of the American Empire. Sirin and Fine show in “Muslim American Youth” how Muslim youth negotiate their identities in the context of moral exclusion, a form of nationalized intolerance. Maira and Ghaneabassiri examine how Muslims find their way in the American empire and out of exclusion by embracing “Good Muslim/Bad Muslim” view of Islam. To be a “Good Muslim” means to denounce every intolerant act and belief of particular Muslims, and to accept the domestic and foreign policies of the United States, even those which may appear intolerant. Of course, some American Muslims genuinely accept this identity in part or whole, while many also challenge the notion that America is a pure beacon of tolerance.

Muslim youth also take part in a significant discourse on tolerance taking place among American youth, impacted by Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, as theorized by Christian Smith. In public schools and universities, Muslim youth have absorbed and practiced popular American youth religion, with its emphasis on good behavior, happy feelings, and an interfaith, benevolently disengaged God. At moments they echo these

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8 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 162.
sentiments almost as if on a script, while at other times they expertly weave them into Islamic discourse. They rarely express opinions outside the tacit boundaries of acceptable beliefs about tolerance among youth.

In analyzing the beliefs of Muslim youth about tolerance, I take several cautions. First, I try to both accept and transcend the centrality of 9/11 to their lives. It would be disingenuous not to recognize the massive impact the attacks and the fallout have had on their lives and their views of tolerance. Even so, I attempted to allow them to give voice to their views of Islam and other religions without forcing 9/11 as an issue. The same is true of the perception of Islam as intolerant or violent; I allowed them to bring up these ideas in their own words, and then attempted to probe those meanings.

Second, though religious tolerance and interfaith cooperation are dear to my heart, in this study I am not cheerleading tolerant Muslim youth. I seek only to illuminate what they believe about tolerance. In the next section, I will turn to their religious understandings.

**Religious Discourse on Tolerance**

To delve deeper into the religious understandings of tolerance in Islam is to privilege an inner architecture of belief, to see how pillars create space for a particular people to gather, to agree and to disagree. Scholars of American youth Islam have justifiably widened the scope of their research beyond religious identity, illuminating the contact points with the larger American society. However, as Ghaneabassiri notes in his history of Islam in America, such a focus has usually reinscribed Orientalism: “Much of the existing scholarship further the politicized dichotomy of ‘Islam and the West’ by
inquiring primarily into the assimilation of Muslims in the United States.”

This is a fair characterization of Maira, Sirin and Fine, and Kabir’s work on Muslim youth, where discussion of religious understandings intentionally receives little more than surface attention. Whereas Ghaneabassiri answers this challenge in a historical analysis of American Islam by “focusing on the histories of their institutions and community building efforts, which…were persistent and significant.” I meet the challenge in this chapter by focusing on how Muslim youth understand the texts and stories of their institutions and their religious meaning building efforts. To privilege religious meanings is not to essentialize religion, but to illuminate the persistence and significance of religious meanings in their conception of tolerance.

I found five significant religious frames Muslim youth deploy in their understandings of tolerance in Islam. First, on the surface level, they identify the essence of Islam in tolerant terms. This is the storefront, so to speak. With more extended discussion, they reveal four particular religious frames: texts (including the Qu’ran, traditions, and stories), the example of the Prophet, the character of Allah, and a relationship to other People of the Book, Christians and Jews. These frames have significant overlap, but emerge enough individually to warrant separate attention.

**Tolerance and the Essence of Islam**

The importance of tolerance as a central Islamic value for Muslim youth was clear early in some interviews, without any prompting. After several questions about their upbringing, I asked them “What is Islam?” Khalid, a 21-year-old born and raised in

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9 Ghaneabassiri *A History of Islam in America*, 379.

10 Ibid., 379.
Southwest Florida, did not waste any time cutting to the quick: “I always hear that question. Everyone always gives the basic: Islam is peace, Islam is a way of life. I agree with those.” The first sentence shows the social location of Muslim youth in American religious discourse: they are asked questions all the time because they are expected to speak for Islam, a pillar of experience I will explore in the next chapter. Khalid then prefaces his answer as the all-time Muslim answer. Peace clearly fits within tolerant discourse.

Less obviously connected to the concept of tolerance is his second answer, “way of life”. Almost half of my interview subjects, 10 of 21, defined Islam as “a way of life.” While they could all identify particulars of Islamic practice with the concept, its phrasing and placement in the essence of Islam draws attention to its utility for explaining Islam to outsiders. “Way of life” is a generalized, relatable explanation, accessible without needing any specialized Islamic knowledge. It is a non-threatening phrase in an age when “religion” carries many negative connotations in American culture, not just with regard to Islam. American Christian youth practice a similar avoidance when they characterize their faith as “a relationship, not a religion”. A popular spoken word poem uploaded to Youtube called “Why I Hate Religion, But Love Jesus” has over 32 million views. Similarly, Muslim youth embrace details of their faith, like reverence for the example of Muhammad, while espousing its essence in broad, pluralistic terms, such as “way of life.” Using this phrase to explain Islam to non-Muslims creates a bridge of understanding and increases the possibility of tolerance.

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11 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. October 3, 2013 4:00 p.m.
Khalid continues his explanation of the essence of Islam by outlining this “way of life” with practices which lead back to the concept of peace: “The shahada…prayers, incorporate them in your time…try to be mindful of what you’re saying…cut down on cursing and talking negative about other people.” He started with elements of personal devotion, and by the time he was done with his list, he had rounded back to an example of peace between people. Then he segued back into asserting a generalized, universal Islam:

Religion is continually trying to make yourself a better human being. To be a good Muslim, you have to be a good human being. Treat others right, treat each other equally, be nice to others. Care for your fellow human being. Do what would be generally, universally regarded as what is the right thing to do.

All I asked was, “What is Islam?”, and Khalid was already making the case for Islam as a tolerant and compassionate religion in its essence and details. This way of life means treating human beings (an all-inclusive category) with equality, kindness, and care. This appears to be what Khalid means by peace.

Sirin and Fine found Muslim youth to express a similar tolerant impulse when defining Islam. They asked Muslim youth an open-ended question: “If you could produce an MTV video or a book-let for non-Muslim youth about being Muslim American, what would you want to tell them?”¹³ The overwhelming majority of respondents wanted to educate people about an Islam, which in implies a desire to be tolerated and possibly to extend tolerance. To reach out with explanation may imply that the one being reached out to is worthy of attention and conversation, someone to be

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tolerated. This is an implied tolerance, embedded in action and interaction, like the use of “way of life” to describe Islam.

Beyond tacit tolerance, some in Sirin and Fine’s study explicitly defined Islam in terms of tolerance. One youth said, “Islam is a religion of peace that doesn’t discriminate people or is intolerant to others.” At first echoing Khalid’s view of Islam as peace, this youth goes on to define Islam in terms of what it is not. Another Muslim youth in that study did not even bother with a positive definition: “Muslims do not support killing or revenge, Islam does not advocate events such as 9/11.” Persistent negative definitions of what Islam is not show up across the literature and in my own interviews. Many of these statements are rooted in a response to 9/11 or more recent terrorist attacks attributed to Islam. No wonder so few Muslim youth articulate tolerance in purely positive terms, as Khalid did in his initial statement about the essence of Islam. Most find themselves caught in what Sunaina Maira characterizes as a civically coerced identity shift: “The desire to perform so-called good Muslim citizenship has inevitably altered the identities produced in Muslim American communities after 9/11.” This expectation to be a “Good Muslim” and to therefore always denounce violence as a part of one’s identity comes down in part from narratives of American Civil Religion, which cast Islam as a constant question Muslims must answer.

As a question comes down from higher levels of operative religion, individuals interpret the directives in idiosyncratic ways, creating tension and irony within idiomatic

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14 Ibid., 51.
15 Ibid., 51.
16 Maira, Missing, 236.
limits. When I interviewed Aisha, a native of a Persian Gulf state who spent her teenage years receiving cancer treatment in a Texas hospital, she characterized Muslims in a similar positive/negative dialectic as with the statement above about Islam being peaceful and not intolerant: “A Muslim is a person who obeys Allah, treats people nice as our Prophet taught us. Not a killer, not a jihadist.”17 Though this definition clearly shares a concern to assuage Islamophobia, it also goes beyond identifying Islam with simple dispositions to creating a subtle theological argument for tolerance from the essence of Islam. Obedience to Allah and the instruction of the prophet, which are almost indisputable central values to Islam, lead to treating people nice, and not to killing or jihadism. There is a small irony here that even as Aisha addresses the fear of Islam as violent, she codes her theology of tolerance with names, Allah and Muhammad, central to fears about Islam. It is a small and perhaps unconscious rebellion, but in doing so, she offers a strong theological alternative to the negative perceptions she cites.

The Qur'an, the Sunna, and Tolerance

One frame of religious meaning for Muslim youth is religious texts. In Islam, this includes the Qur'an and the Sunna (the traditions of the Prophet, both teachings and stories.) Sayid, a 19-year-old who I heard recite verses from the Qur’an at a public event, had a sense of how all these texts speak as one in response to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing: “In no way are you allowed to kill innocent people. The Qur’an, Hadith, Sunna all say you cannot hurt innocent people.” What the texts say are an important element in how some Muslim youth explain their belief in tolerance.

17 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. January 13, 2014 2:00 p.m.
While some of my subjects confessed to know very little about the Qur’an, others had a cache of verses ready to deploy. These verses came up in our discussions of the relation of Islam to other religions. Amina, for instance, a 21-year-old who initially defined Islam as peace, later invoked a verse in her explanation of the relation of Islam to other religions:

Islam, we have always been taught to be respectful of other people’s religion. There is an ayat: ‘We have our religion and they have theirs.’¹⁸ We are not supposed to be disrespectful. We spread the message of Islam, teach others, make them aware of it. It’s not our job to force Islam on anyone…you can’t expect others to respect your religion or even bother to listen what your religion is about if you’re not going to give them that same respect in return.¹⁹

In her particular interpretation of this verse of the Qur’an, Amina colors in shades of how tolerance fits in Islamic history and a pluralistic society. She credits historical Islam with “always” teaching respect, and cites the verse from the Qur’an in support. Just a minute earlier in the interview, she was speaking of how Islam is perceived in the media, so she may be responding to the assumption that Islam is intolerant. She goes on to stipulate tolerance as a reciprocal value in society which creates space for people of different religions to respect and listen to each other. Significantly, tolerance does not preclude spreading the message of Islam, and in fact is the precondition for getting people to listen. This is an example of a belief in reciprocal tolerance, which other youth expressed as well. While a literal reading of the ayat could easily lend itself to being interpreted as a suggestion to simply leave each other alone, or even an announcement of difference without any obligation to be tolerant, Amina brings a moral sense of

¹⁸ He is referencing the Qur’an, Surah al-Kurifan, 109:6.

tolerance to the verse. Khaled Abou El Fadl, in his book on tolerance in Islam, identifies such a sense as a key to interpreting the Qur'an: “In regards to every ethical obligation, the Qur’anic text assumes that readers will bring a preexisting, innate moral sense to the text…the text will morally enrich the reader…if the reader will morally enrich the text.”

Salma is a 21-year-old who says that she “learned tolerance and patience because people say the most random crap.” This flippant colloquialism gave way several moments later to deep concentration as she tried to remember a verse from the Qur’an which she had memorized in Arabic. She slowly recited in English as she translated from Arabic: “O ye who believe we have created you male and female and put you into nations and tribes not that you may despise each other but so that you may work together. The best among you is the one who is most righteous.” She goes on to paraphrase the verse, reemphasizing that differences are meant to be brought together and people are to work together. She says, “my entire religious outlook, theology is based on that.” She extends this tolerance even to God, who is “not judging differences.” She seems to hold dearly views of tolerance circling this verse from the Qur’an. Earlier in the interview, well before she quoted the verse, she said that Islam brings religions together and that, “There’s not much difference.” She said that regarding salvation of non-Muslims, “It’s not our place to judge.” This is an example of what we might call a “life verse”, where a particular portion of a religious text becomes a

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20 Abou El Fadl, The Place of Tolerance in Islam, 15.


22 She is referencing the Qur’an, Surah al-Hujurat, 49:13.
central piece in one’s interpretive framework of the religion. Salma weaves the words of this verse throughout her explanations of religious views, which consistently support a universal tolerance for all people: “We ultimately all want to be happy, have families taken care of, and live peaceful lives, whether Atheist, Buddhist, anything at all…Don’t limit it to People of the Book…I treat people as people.”

I also found Muslim youth to cite Sunna, or the traditions of the Prophet, in support of tolerance. Farid, a 22-year-old who speaks with confidence in his views of Islam and more than once characterized non-Muslims as misled, retold a story from the Sunna to explain which parts of his tradition influence his view of the relation between Islam and other religions:

Here is an example of God's mercy. There’s this story, a guy saw a guy doing a lot of sin.\(^{23}\) He says, ‘Hey, brother, don't keep doing this, this thing is gonna take you to hell.’ He saw him again and said the same thing. Then he said, ‘YOU'RE GOING TO HELL.’ He was supposed to be a righteous guy. At that, God took both up, because of him saying that. God switched them, because one guy can’t tell the other guy you’re going to hell. It’s not for you to judge, it’s for Allah to judge. Because he did that, they switched destiny, heaven and hell.\(^{24}\)

Mercy is a mode of tolerance which came up in other interviews as well, often tied to the character of Allah and concerns of salvation, and I will give more attention to it later in this chapter. Interestingly, this was the first mention of mercy in my interview with Farid. Otherwise, his beliefs about the relation of Islam to other religions tended to be condescending or embattled. Yet, in this moment, as he thought about the religious texts that inspired his views, he thought of mercy. Then he introduced this story and by

\(^{23}\) He is referencing Sunan Abi Dawud 4901.

\(^{24}\) Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. June 8, 2013 3 pm.
the time he reached the end, he interpreted it to mean judgment is only in the hands of Allah. While mercy is a concept important to Islam, judgment is a discourse common not only to many of his Muslim youth peers but also youth religious discourse in general. As part of his chapter introducing Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, Christian Smith titles a section “Who Am I to Judge?”, which he identifies as a typical byword of American youth on religion: “most teens embrace a very strong ethos that forswears judging any ideas of people that may be different.”\textsuperscript{25} He also notes the ambivalence and multivocality of their views of this form of tolerance: “few teenagers actually sustain such radical relativism. In certain ways and areas of life, teens do actually draw clear lines, often quite moralistic lines…In matters of religion, however, it is…the nonjudgmental demeanor, that normally wins out.”\textsuperscript{26} Farid indeed weaves Islamic understandings of tolerance, touching on the character of Allah and the scope of salvation, with youth currents of religious tolerance, which seem at odds with his otherwise judgmental attitude. Whether the nonjudgmental demeanor, in Smith’s words, “wins out” or not seems to me an unhelpful reduction of the complex tensions at play.

Even when two youth recount the same story, both supporting tolerance, subtle differences emerge. Khalid, who identified Islam as peace, tells a story celebrating the peace of another religion. He told of the first migration, when Muslims migrated to Abyssinia (modern day Ethiopia) after persecution in Mecca. Here, the Christian king allowed them to practice Islam. Khalid recognizes the tolerance extended: “An example of when Muslims were helped by other faiths. We always work to help others regardless

\textsuperscript{25} Smith, \textit{Soul Searching}, 144.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 145.
of what they believe.” In this interpretation, the tolerance is a reflection or even an influence on the tolerance he practices. When Layla, a regular participant of interfaith dialogue, shared the same story, she not only added more detail and intrigue, but also credited Muslims for laying the common ground for tolerance by reading to the King the chapter of Mary from the Qur’an, which esteems Jesus and his mother. In the face of Meccans seeking to extradite the Muslims, this chapter touched the king: “The King cried, tears in his beard. He got up and drew a line with a stick. ‘The difference between you and me is no thicker than this line. I would not hand you over for a mountain of gold.’” In this version, the King had already offered preliminary tolerance, but makes his final decision in response to a moving Muslim storytelling act which created common ground. Layla calls it a “strategy of solidarity”: “He did not fall down crying. He elevated the status of Islam, so the King could see it as honorable.” In this instance, tolerance comes not through a weakening of conviction or tradition but through a proud interpretation of a particular text.

The Prophet and Tolerance

The Prophet Muhammad is close to the heart of Muslim youth. As Layla enthusiastically exclaimed, “Best. Man. Ever!” Though several youth emphasized that Allah has no partner, this does not diminish the prominence and even centrality of the Prophet in their religious understanding. Though this is not unusual for Islam, I am nonetheless intrigued by commonalities with Southern Christians committed to the

27 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. October 3, 2013 4:00 p.m.

28 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. January 13, 2014 8:00 p.m.
person of Jesus. Further comparative research of the ways Muhammad and Jesus figure in the lives of youth in the American South could bear intriguing fruit.

Throughout my interviews, it became clear that the example of Muhammad was an important guide for Muslim youth in how to live, especially regarding tolerance. Jeremiah, a 21-year-old African-American convert, quickly lifted up the tolerance of Muhammad as we began to discuss the relation of Islam to other religions: “Prophet Muhammad left Mecca under persecution to go to Medina. Jews and Christians lived there. He commanded his people to treat them as they would anyone else because they are human. They are people of the book…” Though this places Islam in a context of being persecuted and driven from Mecca, at the same time there is a proactive command to extend tolerance in Medina. Grouping Jews, Christians, and Muslims together in this way is common among the Muslim youth I interview, almost instinctual, and represents a Muslim-based concept of civil religion. Whereas a larger narrative of 20th century religion was Judeo-Christian civil religion, Muslim youth appear to see themselves fitting naturally into an Abrahamic superstructure. That being said, Jeremiah’s wording of the Prophet’s command clearly extends tolerance to all humanity. This double vision of tolerance toward all people with the People of the Book as a specific example, centered on the person and actions of the Prophet, showed up in Nahid Kabir’s research also, 24-year-old Faizul saying: “if there’s an accident outside my road, or outside right now in the building, I’m not going to sit here and identify this

29 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. May 21, 2013 2:00 p.m.
individual as Christian or Jew, I’m going to identify them as human and that is why Allah has sent Prophet Muhammad [PBUH] to serve the humanity.”

The Prophet is also known among youth for his tolerance in the face of persecution. When I asked the aforementioned Sayid about religious stories that influenced his view of other religions, he recalled vividly a story from the tradition:

Stories of the prophet Muhammad, a role model, the way he dealt with people of different faiths. One that sticks out like a sore thumb, from the Sunna. His [Prophet Muhammad] Jewish neighbor who would lay bag of feces on his front doorstep each day. Muhammad would clean it up and say no word to him. It went on for a while. Then, one day, Muhammad did not find it, so he got worried. He went over to his neighbor to see what was going on, and his neighbor was sick. So he visited him, comforted him, brought things to comfort him with. This young Jewish man reverted to Islam. Myself, I don’t know if I have the restraint to not do something….

By telling this story, Sayid sets up Islam as embattled and being treated unjustly, an unsurprising posture given the criticism raining down from the highest levels of political and religious discourse and experienced in the everyday lives of Muslim youth. Some youth I interviewed had stories of being harassed, and those who did not generally presented a larger picture of Islam under attack in America. Sirin and Fine found this view to be rooted in personal experience of Muslim youth they interviewed: “About 84 percent of the younger cohort, aged twelve to eighteen, reported one or more acts of discrimination during the previous twelve months…” So it is not surprising to find Muslim youth framing tolerance through their experience or perception of intolerance toward Muslims. In the face of this, Sayid affirms through this story non-violent non-response to harassment, the unattainable example of Muhammad, which he does not

30 Kabir, *Young American Muslims*, 97.

31 Sirin and Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 86.
think he could do. The story also fosters mercy for those who have not treated you well. Finally, he ends with a subtle addition to the overall thrust of the superiority of Islam: the Jewish man “reverts” to Islam due Muhammad’s charitable treatment of him.

**Tolerance and the People of the Book**

Nearly 75% of Muslim youth I interviewed spoke in some way of the special relationship between Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Ibrahim, son of a Palestinian refugee, immediately thought of this relationship when asked about the relation of Islam to other religions: “Judaism and Christianity because they’re monotheistic. Believe in the same God, more similar than they are different…Qur’an says they are family, people of the book, people who believe there is one God eventually will go to heaven.” This succinct statement about the Abrahamic religions emphasizes how they compare, how they interact, and where they end up. Sarah, who is involved with Muslim-led interfaith events on her campus, sees a similar relation with a slight difference:

> All connected. All believe in one God…With Islam, we believe, sometimes, some things may have gotten a little bit skewed with elevating. In our religion, we don’t elevate Jesus to the Son of God. He’s just a prophet. That’s one of the major differences between us and Christians. In Jews, they don’t believe in the Prophet Muhammad…Ours is more of a continuation, you would say of everything but it’s just tweaked a little bit.

Sarah walks a fine line between acknowledging similarity and asserting the superiority of Islam. Her emphasis on “all” creates an umbrella, under which she adds qualifiers like “a little bit skewed” and “tweaked a little bit.” She also manages to show the importance of Jesus while distinguishing the Islamic and Christian views. Ultimately, she makes a

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32 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. May 6, 2013 3:00 p.m.

33 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. January 13, 2014 12:00 p.m.
soft landing on Islam as “continuation”, a way of describing the relationship I heard from other youth as well.

Ibrahim implies positive relations by grouping the People of the Book together as a family. This is language the aforementioned Jeremiah uses as well, calling them “one big family” after his words about Prophet Muhammad commanding Muslims to treat Christians and Jews well. Farid also emphasizes good treatment: “As Muslims, we are not allowed to curse at Jews or Christians.” Though none of them advocate poor treatment for other religions, the Abrahamic religions receive priority of tolerance.

On the matter of salvation, Sabeen, who spent her high school years in the Bible belt of Oklahoma, also mentioned the same verse from the Qur’an, quoting it after looking it up on her smartphone:

Quite a few verses in the Quran that talk about relations between Muslims and Christians, and the people of the Book, the Christians, Jews. In one of the verses [paused to look up in app]: “Those who become believers and the Jews and the Christians and the ones who are monotheistic, believe in the God and the day of judgment, and strive righteously will receive their reward, nothing to fear or grieve.” Surah 2.62. That makes one a lot less judgmental, not to judge people by their religion, or at all, but mainly not to do it by religion because that’s something personal between one and his Lord.34

In quoting and explaining this verse, Sabeen could easily fit into the categories of Islamic scholar or typical American teen. This very verse is cited by Khaled Abou El Fadl in his brief survey of how “the Qur’an also accepted the more specific notion of a plurality of religious beliefs and laws”; the verse is among “a rather remarkable set of passages that, again, have not been adequately theorized by Muslim theologians.”35

34 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. January 13, 2014 6:00 p.m.
35 Abou El Fadl, A Place of Tolerance in Islam, 17.
Sabeen, however, intentionally or not, does not mention a nearby passage in the same chapter of the Qur’an “that instructs Muslims not to take the Jews and Christians as allies.”\textsuperscript{36} Her interpretation of the verse focuses on judgment and the privacy of one’s relationship with God, which, while reasonably following from the passage, also shares the language of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Sabeen frames a doctrine which binds people together as family and turns it toward American religious individualism. Smith’s evaluation of youth beliefs seems to undergird this frame: “American youth, like American adults, are nearly without exception profoundly individualistic, instinctively presuming autonomous, individual self-direction to be a universal human norm and life goal.”\textsuperscript{37} Arguably, this also serves the interest of American civil religions which benefit from the political division of minority religious groups and cultures.

\textbf{Modes of Tolerance}

Speaking with religious reasoning and sources makes up large portions of what Muslim youth have to say about tolerance. Much of what they say also involves different modes or ways of expressing tolerance. Some are evident above, expressed directly as religious reasoning or woven together with religious sources. They range from inner modes of tolerance, toward the self or toward Muslims and Islam, and outer modes of tolerance, towards non-Muslims. In this section, I focus on eight modes I observed in my interviews. Some warrant attention for their ubiquity, while others stand out as unique, distinctive, or important in context. The four inner modes are: Self, Internal, Against Islamic intolerance, and Isolation. The four outer modes are: Reciprocity, Reciprocity,

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 17.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{37} Smith, \textit{Soul Searching}, 143.}
Against Anti-Islamic intolerance, Universality, and Mercy. These are by no means the only modes of tolerance, nor do they constitute a formal system. However, they do suggest a dynamic of tolerance reaching in and reaching out.

Self-Tolerance

In the literature on Muslim youth, plentiful attention is given to what Sirin and Fine describe as the “hyphens”—the ways that Muslim youth negotiate complex, multiple American identities. Kabir illuminates different types of identity as well, multiple and singular, but especially related to what it takes to be American. Maira contextualizes Muslim youth in multi-faceted forms of citizenship. The spotlights of these research projects shine on multifarious identities within cultural and civic communities, but consequently give little attention to a fascinating mode of tolerance, that of self-tolerance. The American context and their various hyphens certainly affect how Muslim youth view their own religious beliefs and practice. Just as Muslim youth find themselves challenged to tolerate different beliefs and practices within and outside the walls of Islam, they find themselves challenged to tolerate their own selves. It raises the question of what they think it takes to be a Muslim. Usually, this is expressed in the form of tolerating a lack of personal religious practice or knowledge that they find inadequate. Self-tolerance also appears to be connected to tolerance toward others.

A prime example of self-tolerance is Tariq, the son of an Imam at a small masjid in North Florida. Early in the interview, he shared that since going to college, his involvement in religious community had fallen off. When I asked him about reading the Qur’an, he immediately played down his use: “Not widespread, not even daily. Ups and downs throughout the year. One month reading three out of seven nights, and then go
three months without touching it.”

He went on to describe his prayer practice with chagrin: “Not as good. This week been doing two [prayers a day]. Sometimes I don’t even pray.” Since he was downplaying his practice so consistently, I asked if he felt guilty about his lack of practice. His answer revealed his mode of self-tolerance:

Yes, sometimes. Then feel I really want to read the Qur’an. I’m not a very religious person right now. I have some moral values I feel are important to follow, derived from the teachings of the Qur’an. More important than rituals.

Like other American youth, he prioritizes morals over ritual, though he maintains a particular religious commitment to the teachings as originating in the holy book of Islam. Rather than judging his lack of practice, he finds room within his beliefs to tolerate himself. Ultimately, he credits his effort: “I’m not an ideal, obviously, but I’m doing what I can.”

Internal Tolerance

If Muslim youth are unified around general beliefs in tolerance, they are most uniform in their beliefs about tolerance within Islam. Well over half of the youth I interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with dividing Islam into sects. Yesenia, a professed Sunni, is irked by divisions:

We are all Muslims. It doesn’t matter what sect you are. It’s actually kind of annoying. When you hear things going on in Syria, Egypt, Middle East, all these revolutions. People that are like, ‘Well, it’s the Shia, they’re the ones that are doing all these problems.’ It’s kind of annoying because they’re Muslims. I don’t care if you’re Shia. As long as you’re Muslim, I don’t care. And it’s kind of annoying, Sunnis, all these attacks are coming from the Sunnis. Just downgrading them. Making them feel bad…blaming it on them. I feel like it’s not fair.”

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38 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. September 3, 2013 12:00 p.m.

39 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. October 31, 2013 2:00 p.m.
This is the clearest statement in my interviews defending Shia, the worldwide minority and American minority, and implicating Sunnis in intolerance. It is unclear whether Yesenia is placing Sunni and Shia beliefs on equal footing, or if she does not believe there are significant differences. What is clear is that togetherness as Muslims commands fair and kind treatment.

This sentiment was mirrored from the other side of this divide by the one Shia youth I interviewed, Rabia: “I don’t like that my community makes fun of Imams that Sunnis believe in…not our ground to do, not right. It starts the whole fighting and killing and craziness.” Unfair treatment leads to not only division but violence. For Rabia, religious violence is personal. Her grandfather’s brother was killed in Pakistan for his strident religious views.

The internal tolerance of Islam is also personal to William, a white convert to Islam, who once identified as Shia. After searching, he changed his view, but sports a typical youth blasé about his own views: “I like to call myself Sunni even though I don’t like the divisions themselves in Islam…In the broad, Shia, it makes me a little uncomfortable. But that’s my beliefs.” Though it is not true of all converts, William allows the same tolerance of others that he was allowed when he chose to convert.

**Against Islamic Intolerance**

Muslim youth often speak out against examples of Islamic intolerance. They may cite 9/11, the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings, or terrorism in general, and clearly have gotten use to this mode. Sirin and Fine found this particularly in regard to young Muslim men, who “walked in the shadow of the label of terrorists and heard comments

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40 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. October 29, 2013 12:00 p.m.
like ‘They hate women’; ‘They hate Christians’; and ‘They are really violent.’” They found that young Muslim women labored more under the label “oppressed”. In my line of questioning, I found the former to be the dominant label addressed by both genders, with issues of women being oppressed only being brought up several times.

The aforementioned Sayid reacted strongly when I asked about the influence of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, thoroughly defining Islam against Islamic intolerance:

> As I heard news, was hoping it wasn't the Muslims. Obviously in Islam, nothing like that is in any way permissible or applauded. It’s dearly frowned upon, punishable, not supposed to do, obviously. It was heartbreaking, ridiculous, I’m tired of it. People who might be Muslims but commit these things because they are so uneducated, manipulated to do things like that. Innocent people dying. They were college students, you would think they were more educated than that…Prophet Mo set ground rules. If you asked them, they would point out some things they interpret in an extreme way. You will never find a reputable Islamic scholar who says this is ok.

Though Sayid ably describes Islam in positive terms also, this thorough and almost systematic anti-definition is present as well. In this moment, he does not attack unfair media or address the expectation that he as a Muslim denounce all acts of violence by those who identity as Muslim. Instead, he blames his heartbreak only on these “might be Muslims.” Interestingly, he does not define them outside of Islam; they are still Muslims, but “uneducated”, “manipulated”, and not supported by any “reputable Islamic scholar”. This is a subtle shift from his initial statement, which placed all such acts outside permission or applause in Islam. It is a quiet acknowledgment of the challenges of tolerance within the house of faith.

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One way youth express this mode of tolerance stood out for its distinctive and personal framing within the family of Islam. Hasan, the only Sufi Muslim in my study, spoke of Islamic intolerance in an untypically typical way. His family follows the teachings of a Sheik who lives in New York State. The distinctiveness of their path leaps out through Hasan’s vocabulary and mindset toward Islam. He spoke extensively of the problem of ego, unique in my interviews. On the other hand, when it came to defining Islamic tolerance, he did use the common mode of defining against Islamic intolerance, and his language echoes that of many of his peers: “It’s a peaceful religion only if you make it peaceful. When it says there is not violence, the most important values, Islam is about peace, but only if you do the peaceful actions.”42 The context for his first statement of Islam’s essence (before I had even asked him to define Islam), however, frames this as a thoroughly internal expression of tolerance. The statement was the conclusion of a story about his Sheik visiting North Florida. In Hasan’s telling, the Sheik and his followers visited the Mosque, where he criticized their practice, and his followers tried to do a provocative prayer practice:

Why are people coming up with their own Islam? This is not right…should be the same for everybody…rule not to eat meat outside. If that is the rule, it should be the rule for everybody…He tried to interact with the [Mosque] but they did not like what he was saying, so they kicked him out…People at the mosque didn’t like how we were doing Zikr loudly. They thought we were going crazy. So they basically kicked us out and closed the doors on us. And the Sheik was very sad. He said, “Islam is supposed to open the doors, not close them.”

It is in the wake of this story that Hasan stated that Islam is peaceful if Muslims make it peaceful. This experience of disruption and rejection circumscribes his understanding of

42 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. September 20, 2013 3:00 p.m.
Islamic tolerance. He offers no sympathy to the perspective of the Mosque, where people may have felt quite the opposite about who was wielding intolerance. Usually, when Muslim youth define Islamic tolerance against Islamic intolerance, there is an implied frame of responding to non-Muslim views of Islam. Hasan expresses this mode in the unique frame of internal Islamic complaint.

**Isolationist Tolerance**

Hasan was also the most emphatic and systematic advocate for an isolationist mode of tolerance in Islam. His understanding is closely tied to the teachings of his Sheik. The core teaching, according to Hasan, is to learn how to “step on one’s ego”. A teaching which seems to extend from this core is, “If you don’t know what to say, keep silent.” Then, in response to how Islam relates to other religions, Hasan explained with some agitation and thoroughness:

> Another problem. Islam is supposed to be just Islam...That’s what the Sheik has been telling us...we are not allowed to criticize other religions, that’s the rule of Islam...If there was a religious leader from a different religion coming to us trying to teach us something...we just listen, and remember, silence is the key to conducting to yourself. You know, back off. Islam is respectful towards all religions. But it doesn’t try to allow other ideas, because they’re just going to confuse them and try to mix them with Islam. Then it’s going to make Islam weak...You can always find similarities but there’s not point of finding those similarities, because they’re not going to help you...The point is, understanding the core of the religion. If I’m in Islam, I need to busy in Islam.

In Hasan’s complex construction of tolerance, guided by the instruction of the Sheik, Muslims carefully guard their egos by not speaking out of turn but also by not actively seeking to learn about anything but Islam. Respect for other religions is explicit, but implicit is a fear of other ideas or beliefs. Due to this disengagement, Hasan appears to be the most isolated of Muslim youth I interviewed, with his belief system about tolerance, while bearing some similarities to youth currents of tolerance, most
influenced by the particular teachings about Islam from his Sheik. This is evident also in that Hasan barely engaged American civil discourse about Islam, despite having lived his whole life in the United States. His concerns are almost entirely with the internal aspects of Islam.

Others expressed the sentiment in a softer form, usually in terms compatible with Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and American discourses on civil religion. Aida, a 19-year-old of Bosnian background, repeated several times that she did not talk about religion with friends and when pressed on the status of salvation for non-Muslims, she crystallized her perspective: “I never focused on that part of religion. Always focused on my own personal.”43 When I asked her if there were ways the Qur’an shaped her view of other religions, she doubled down: “I don’t read it to inform about the other religions, why they’re wrong or right. Never questioned why other people believe in that. Done it for myself.” Unlike Hasan, she does not fear other religions: “Good to look at other religions…As I got older, open to other religions…Close minded never ends up good.” Aida keeps her religious beliefs isolated, but not her whole mind.

Reciprocation

The outer modes tolerance of Muslim American youth, directed outside their Muslim identity, circle around words such as “respect” and “open” and “judgment” (negating the latter). They echo their peers in the larger American landscape of religious belief:

Nearly all U.S. teens seem to have adopted a posture of civility and a careful and ambiguous inclusiveness when discussing religion with possible ‘others’ especially in public…Part of this careful civility seems rooted in the high premium teenagers place on being open to a vast

43 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. September 25, 2013 7:00 p.m.
variety of ideas, people, and experiences...This itself is another expression of anti-judgmentalism derived from the American individualism that adolescents have thoroughly assimilated....

Granting this context, Muslim youth can be quite succinct and unambiguous about tolerance: “I respect other beliefs as I want them to respect mine.” Further, a close reading of how these words are deployed reveal multiple modes of tolerance at play. It is not as simple as “not judging” or “respecting” or “being open”. A prime example is the reciprocal mode of tolerance. In this view, tolerance should be given and received between differing peoples. While this fits with Christian Smith’s evaluation of American youth religion, Muslim youth are able to express it in unambiguous religious terms.

Fatima, a Palestinian-America hijabi who identified Muhammad as her “biggest role model”, remembered his words when asked about parts of her tradition that speak about the relation of Islam to other religions: “One that comes to mind is the one where Prophet Muhammad says to love your brother as yourself. Hadith, I think.”

Just as a Christian youth may be able to express reciprocal tolerance through the words of Jesus, Fatima sees it deeply ingrained in her tradition, taught by her “biggest role model.”

Several other youth paraphrased the verse of the Qur’an which Amina used to explain tolerance, “We have their religion and they have theirs.” However, in these other cases, the paraphrase suggests the creeping individualism of youth culture. Martina says, “You have your way and I have mine,” when speaking about not wanting to be proselytized by Christians. Ibrahim also uses this paraphrase, but after adding context for the ground of reciprocal tolerance: “I know a truly religious person would not do something negative

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44 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 160.

45 She could be referencing a saying found in Nawawi’s 40 Hadith, Hadith 13. Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. October 31, 2013 2:00 p.m.
to a person of another religion, a really religious person would respect another
religion…You have yours, I have mine.” While some Muslim and Christian youth
distance their faith from the word “religion”, Ibrahim assumes that the “truly religious”
practice reciprocal tolerance. Yasmin, a Pakistani-American who has seen Christian
and Islamic conservatism up close, sees reciprocity to be a higher calling which is
currently and mutually lacking: “I definitely don’t think there is enough understanding on
both sides. There needs to be a lot more acceptance taught in the mosques as
well…Needs to be more intercultural, interreligious discussion.”46 Instead of the
language of religious texts, she uses the language of academia and America civil
religion to characterize the needed mutual tolerance.

**Against Anti-Islamic Intolerance**

Muslim youth have stories and complaints about intolerance in America. Some
are personal experiences, while others retell what they have heard from others. Some
even define tolerance as a contrast to anti-Islamic intolerance. Martina expresses this
when she calls for tolerance after recounting a friend who had converted to Christianity
trying to coerce her into doing so. Aisha had defined tolerance against intolerance
experienced in a thoroughly millennial fashion:

> I feel like Islam is a religion just like the other religions. People may not
accept it, may say it’s the devil, as on a video on YouTube. American guy
said that. Sometimes I don’t know how to answer when they ask me about
it, so I look up on YouTube. Looked up a Muslim guy who would reply, he
mentioned a guy who made fun of prophet and Islam, so I looked it up. I
shouldn’t because it bothers me. To be honest, I don’t know how to
answer this question. Religion as the other religions.

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46 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. October 10, 2013 1:00 p.m.
Aisha is talking about more than similarities when she uses “like” and “as” to link Islam to other religions. She may be unsure about her own answer, but her explanation implies a common ground between religions that delegitimizes anti-Islamic intolerance. In this way, she is not far from Ibrahim’s assertion that “true religion” is not intolerant.

Yasmin states unambiguously that this is true of the essence of Islam: “Religion of peace, contrary to what a lot of people, media may think.” Like other youth, she sees the media as an opponent, intolerant of Islam. Kabir found the same in her research cohort: “Many respondents said the media in general portrayed Muslims negatively…Overall, the majority of participants (about 78 per cent) observed that the American media was unfair.” In Yasmin’s presentation, Islam stands for peace in contrast against an intolerant media.

**Universality**

One of the most cited common grounds for tolerance among Muslim youth is common humanity; in the words of Salma: “I treat people as people.” Others cited verses examined above, about diversity being part of Allah’s plan. They are engaged in theological discourse which Abou El Fadl characterizes as historically neglected and imminently urgent:

Elsewhere, the Qur’an asserts that diversity is part of the divine intent and purpose of creation…remained underdeveloped in Islamic theology…Working out the implications of a commitment to human diversity and mutual knowledge under contemporary conditions requires moral reflection and attention to historical circumstance.48

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47 Kabir, *Young American Muslims*, 114-115.

I call this mode of tolerance “Universality”. I distinguish it from universalism, which I allow its traditional religious connotation of referring to forms of all-inclusive salvation or religious destiny. Universality is a form of this-worldly tolerance which emphasizes the togetherness of humanity. In addition to finding support in their own tradition, Muslim youth absorb expressions of this mode among peers in youth culture, where inclusivity and acceptance of many paths is the majority view. When 60% of youth believe that “Many religions may be true”, universality is a reasonable moral extension.

This is the general line of reasoning for Tariq, who wasted no time, invoking universality in his first statements about the relation of Islam to other religions:

If you strip most religions down, most are trying to get same message across. Details differ but essentially the same message: be a good human being to others and to yourself, to look to God for help, to live a life with good moral values. Even religions that are not monotheistic? Yes. Relation is the commonalities…If I meet a new person, the first question I don't ask is, 'What religion?' I ask, 'Is this person compatible with my moral values?' Actually, they don't even have to be compatible. No judgment.

Others shared the view that all religions (or the Abrahamic religions at least) have the same message, though some went on immediately to emphasize that other religions had distorted the message or been misled. Not so for Tariq. He emphasizes a common human goal of goodness and morality, extended to all religions. After I asked him about how this was reflected in his relationships, he went so far as to imply that even differing moral codes are acceptable.

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49 As a belief, its most familiar public expression may be the oddly controversial “Coexist” bumper stickers.

50 Smith, Soul Searching, 74.
Yasmin also believes in a universal striving for goodness, responding to a question about the final judgment by speaking about life in this world:

The most important thing is to be a good person, treat others justly, fairly. Religion does play a role, but you can be a good person without religion...teaching of Islam to treat others with respect. Whether they are Muslim or not. I wouldn't be able to get into specific passages...Teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, how he treated women, other religions, marginalized groups in general, helps me relate.

She expands universality beyond religion to the non-religious, untethering goodness from religion. Smith found this to be a common belief among American religious youth.\(^{51}\) However, later in the interview, Yasmin made another expression of universality, of good treatment for all, and explicitly explained that her openness to even the non-religious is, in her view, shaped by the inclusive teachings of the Prophet. For some Muslim youth, universality is Islamic. In the words of Martina, “Islam teaches nothing but love and acceptance for everybody.”

**Mercy**

In the National Study of Youth and Religion, Christian Smith found that over 70% of American youth believe in “a judgment day when God will reward some and punish others.”\(^{52}\) In the subsets of Conservative Protestant Christian youth and Black Protestant youth, 88 and 91 percent held the belief, respectively. These two groups are significant for my study because they make up the majority of students surrounding my interview subjects, growing up as Muslim youth in the Bible Belt. The belief is also a significant matter of discussion among Muslim youth. Like their peers, they can speak

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\(^{51}\) Smith, *Soul Searching*, 155.

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 41.
easily about issues of judgment and salvation, of paradise and hell. This is an ultimate form of tolerance or intolerance, who Allah will tolerate in his eternal presence. For Muslim youth, a mode of tolerance dominates their view of judgment day: Mercy.

William, a white convert to Islam in college, struggled to speak definitively about the final judgment: “I don’t want to be wrong.” So he shuttled between different understandings, eventually landing on a dual emphasis on good deeds and mercy: “Essentially, the weight of your good deeds compared to your bad deeds but also depends on the mercy of God.” He then recounted as an example a lengthy story told by the Prophet, of a man with blood on his hands. The man had killed 99 people, and felt guilty. He asked a monk if he could be forgiven, and when the monk said no, he killed him too. Then he goes to a scholar, who sends him toward a land with Muslims, where he says the man can change his ways. But the man dies on the way, and his moment of judgment arrives:

So then…the angel of torture and the angel of paradise were disputing over whether to take him to hell…or to paradise. So they went to God and God told them to measure the distance from where he started and where he meant to go, and if he is half-way or more, he goes to paradise, and if not, he goes to torture. So they measured the distance and it was just short. But then the ground moved him, a little over the mark, and he was forgiven. So what we believe is it’s an intent. He intended to go one place and he didn’t make it, but it was his intent. He is rewarded for that intent.

In William’s mode of mercy, God extends the tolerance of mercy for a good intention to a man who otherwise seems intolerable. However, there also does seem to be an element of penance, the man’s path toward the Muslim land. This human has a role in moving into a place where God extends mercy. The extremeness of the example might also suggest that if this man can receive mercy, then most anyone can. William seems
to think this way: “We’re not supposed to say, ‘Hey, this guy is going to hell.’ You can’t say that. Because we have stories like this where we are completely proven wrong.”

One of the most unique and conflicted statements of all my research came from Ibrahim when he spoke about the issue of salvation for non-Muslims. He starts by including People of the Book in God’s mercy, but then he makes a surprising qualification:

Qur’an says they are family, People of the Book, people who believe there is one God eventually will go to heaven; religions that are not religions of the book, for instance, Hinduism, that’s a different story. Buddhist, Hinduism, automatically sent to hell, no chance of heaven, according to Islam; but my belief is, as long you’re a good person, it shouldn’t make a difference whether you believe in God or not.

This moment stopped me in my tracks. He was making a clear distinction between Islam and his belief. To clarify, I asked him if he thought this belief was a different interpretation of Islam, and he had a clear answer: “I don't think my belief has anything to do with Islam.” In addition to creating space for mercy to include people who in his view are excluded in the end by Islam, he implies a tolerance for his own unorthodox belief. However, neither here nor elsewhere does he in any way deny he is a Muslim.

He simply is able to hold in tension his identity and a view he thinks is in conflict with the identity: “Makes me feel like I shouldn't be thinking that way. I try to follow my religion as best I can. Also, I try to follow what I feel is right as well. 99% of the time they agree. A subtle difference.”

Perhaps Ibrahim is able to hold the tension because he knows he is not alone. I asked if other Muslim peers believe this inclusive vision of God’s mercy too and he observed common ground not only with Muslims but across religious borders: “They feel this way but would not say it. A lot of people feel this way, Christians, same way there,
there are some who don't agree only Christians go to heaven.” His Muslim peers must have said something to him, as he does not claim to be reading minds. However, he implies a public silence. For him to know that Christians share this view means he has either known Christians to be public about such views, or has Christian friends who have expressed the view privately. In any case, this acknowledgment of common ground speaks to the place of Muslim American youth, developing their religious beliefs in a landscape of religious tolerance and interreligious friendship. Indeed, such friendships shaped Ibrahim, who found himself within the interview even shifting his view of God’s mercy toward atheists: “I don't know about that… I don't know…[long pause]… I guess I would have to meet an atheist; I know one but don't want to know him because of his personality. I have a few Buddhist and Hindu friends and that's where my perspective really changed.” In this emerging version of American Islam lived and shaped by Muslim youth, interfaith relationships and tolerant discourse combine with other factors to make this a transformative place and moment.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I contextualized the meaning of tolerance for Muslim American youth. First, I put tolerance in context as a concept. Then, I examined different religious understandings of tolerance for Muslim youth. Finally, I illuminated different modes of tolerance expressed by Muslim youth. In the next chapter, I'll focus on another pillar of the Muslim American youth identity, the bridge that carries the tolerant discourse of Muslim youth into interfaith friendships, that is, speaking for Islam.
CHAPTER 3
SPEAKING FOR ISLAM

Fatima was in second grade when her family moved across the country to a city in Tennessee. She was born in California, to Palestinian parents. In those early years, they lived in a tight knit Muslim community, and she attended Islamic school. The move to Tennessee turned out not to be as jarring as one might think, for she was not alone in the American South: “I knew the Palestinians and Arabs there. In high school, a lot of Muslims and Palestinians there.” For a while, she also received the gift or insult of not being recognized as Muslim: “People just thought I was just this Hispanic girl or this Indian girl.” This changed when she made the decision to start covering: “After I started wearing hijab, people knew I was a Muslim. Right away, I used to get questions, every single day. Just random people in the hallway. ‘Hey, why do you wear that thing on your head? What is that?’” Pressed into the role of spokesperson, she at least had a cohort of fellow hijabis who ate lunch together. Then her family moved to a city in North Florida. This time, she was alone: “I was the only hijabi in the entire high school. Only one there. I felt so alone because there wasn’t anyone I could relate to. I was kind of fighting the battle on my own. I felt kind of like an outcast.” Throughout my interview with her, Fatima repeatedly expressed a poignant sense of the burden she has had to carry as a Muslim youth. Yet, it appears that she never surrendered her agency or played the victim, always finding her way and speaking up, as she did in high school:

I tried to make it so that I would hang out with all the different cliques. I was a social butterfly. I didn’t identify myself with one group of people in high school. I talked to everyone and everyone would ask me questions. I ended up being the graduation speaker. I tried out for it. In my speech, I talked about how I was the only hijabi, and everyone was pretty much accepting of the fact that I was different. Even though I did have certain issues with some people who were uneducated about my faith, it didn’t stop me from trying my best to educate others.
This is the story of Muslim youth speaking for Islam. They face pressure and questions but find ways to speak back and assert the place of Islam in America. They speak in small ways, in personal interactions and relationships, and on big stages too. Speaking for Islam is more than reaction; it is a creative act and a pillar of their American experience.

Speaking for Islam is a given for Muslim youth in America, discussed extensively in the existing literature. Attention has been given to how Muslim youth educate and correct other Americans about Islam, and how they dissent from profiling and discrimination at different levels of government and public discourse, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In these studies, speaking for Islam tends to be reactionary, impersonal, and framed in political discourse. My research uncovered many similar experiences and views among Muslim youth in the American South, but also revealed surprising new frames and contexts for speaking.

In this chapter, I will examine how these Muslim youth are both bolder and more intimate in the ways they speak for Islam. I will first debunk the notion that 9/11 is the only context in which to understand Muslim youth speaking for Islam through the story of a young woman groomed from birth to be a spokesperson. I will then show how Muslim youth reframe their education of others in religious, rather than political, terms, especially accommodated to the cultural context of Evangelical Christianity. Next, I will shed light on the intimate setting of speaking for Islam in friendships. Then, I will analyze how Muslim youth deftly employ the act of proselytization with sensitivity to a belief in tolerance and their minority status. Finally, I will bring the chapter full circle by unpacking the story of a convert who benefitted from this complex of speaking in his
own journey to Islam. In the end, he embraced the role of speaking for Islam himself, showing that strength and intimacy in speaking are working together to make space for others under the pillars of emerging American Islam.

**Speaking before 9/11**

Muslim American youth of this generation live on a dramatic hinge in American history. On 9/11/2001, the youth I interviewed were between age 6 and 16, most around age 9. Muslim youth born since the attacks never knew the prior era, and sometimes in the existing research, it feels like youth who were alive did not have a history before either. Yet, they belong to communities and traditions which have trained Muslims up to speak for their religion for decades and even centuries.

One of the earliest records of Muslim community comes from the seaward islands of Georgia, where enslaved African Muslims formed a small community: “In biographical sketches of Bilali and Salih Bilali, there is fragmentary evidence of a small African Muslim slave community that attempted to preserve Muslim identities and traditions in the nineteenth century.”1 Though the community and identities did not sustain, the records of the community come from interviews in the 1930s with their grandchildren, who vividly remembered the practice of their elders. One woman remembered her grandmother telling her about the things of the tradition.

One hundred and fifty years later, in the Deep South of a north Florida town, a Palestinian-American family engaged in an Islamic community building effort of their own. Several decades later, I was interviewing their daughter, Layla, whose eloquence

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in speaking for Islam was planted well before 9/11, and even before her birth. She was walking in her parent’s footsteps:

They were well-known, very prestigious, well-respected, seen as authorities on Islam in town…Mom doesn’t wear hijab but people know she is Muslim…Dad built the first masjid, oversaw construction, initiated the idea, and has been president ever since.

Such was her father’s status, that he was asked to take part in interfaith events, “especially after 9/11,” she adds, with the implication that this speaking began before he had to react to those events. Both of her parents were allowed (or perhaps even asked) by media to speak about Islam. Her mother used to come into her school, where they were the only Muslim family, during the holiday Eid, to explain its significance. There is a fabric of confident representation of Islam in this family which extends prior to 9/11 and seems to carry a similar tenor of positive representation after the attacks. This was one inheritance of Islam Layla received from her parents, teaching her the things of the religion and how to speak about them.

One of Layla’s earliest experiences of speaking for Islam came from a case of mistaken identity at her private school. When she started covering her head, several years after 9/11, fellow students thought it was for different reason:

People forget the Middle East exists. They all thought I was Hispanic. One time Ramadan coincided with Hispanic Heritage Month. That’s why they thought I was wearing hijab. I definitely got to explain myself a bunch of times.

This is an intriguing case of mistaken identity in a time when so many Muslim women experienced immediate recognition and prejudice as Muslim for covering. Though this surely registered as an annoying and perhaps even painful cultural insensitivity, Layla had an opportunity, albeit perhaps fleeting, to hide from what she had to know was a
more feared identity as a Muslim. Instead, she notes the many times she explained herself, thus vocally claiming her identity as a Muslim youth. In addition to having learned this kind of proud spokesperson role in the fabric of her family life, she might also have felt comfortable at a school which, though predominantly white and Christian, had provided her mother with a platform to teach about their religion to the students. It seems they had found an enclave of openness in the Bible Belt, before and after 9/11.

**Asserting the Place of Islam in the American South**

The literature on Muslim American youth has intimately detailed the impact of the 9/11 attacks on Muslim youth and how they speak. Sunaina Maira found South Asian youth in the Northeast speaking bravely out of necessity in the immediate aftermath:

> Their dissent was driven by two factors: they had been forced to deal with the impact of state and civil society discrimination targeting their communities soon after arriving in the United States, and they were from a region that was now experiencing a U.S. military invasion.²

The research is also full of stories where Muslim youth have felt pressed into the role of spokesperson in order to correct misconceptions at every level of lifespan development and schooling. In fact, the prototypical origin story of youth speaking for Islam is correcting someone in their classroom or among peers. For example, Salma was 9-years-old when she was pressed into service by the ineptitude of a teacher:

> The week after 9/11 sucked. The teacher attempted to explain what happened, talking about my religion, getting everything wrong. I raised my hand to correct. After that, everything changed. Friends were not friends. Looked at me like I committed murder. It was a blessing to move to Islamic school. Good time for sheltering, allowing me to grow. Don't want to be a 4th grader explaining myself.

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Salma felt an urgency to correct because it was not just one person involved but possibly a whole classroom of peers who could walk away with the wrong idea about her and Muslims in general. She was carrying what Sirin and Fine refer to as the “weight of the hyphen”, the stress related to having to navigate multiple identities of being Muslim and American, among other identities. These are typical examples of how Muslim youth feel pressed into speaking about their Muslim identity in relation to political action and civic discourse about whether Islam and America are compatible. They are essentially reactionary and defensive.

In contrast, I found Muslim youth in the American South who were shifting the frame of their speaking from politics to religion and going on the offensive in ways suited to their context in the heart of the Bible Belt. In this shift, unexplored in the literature, youth undermine the political dichotomy of Islam vs. America by moving under the umbrella of American Civil Religion and asserting the place of Islam among other religions. The common Muslim work of speaking to educate and correct misconceptions takes on a new tenor under this shield.

Aisha received mixed messages about the place of Islam in America as she spent her high school years being treated for cancer, split between her home country, a Persian Gulf state, and a hospital in Texas. She recalls the loving care and friendship of Christians in the hospital, who did not seem to treat her any different. But her father cautioned her against openly displaying her religion, through hijab or participating in Islamic communities. In the wake of the War on Terror, he knew what Americans thought of Muslims. An experience in her college classroom in Florida brought home

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3 Sirin and Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 86.
this truth to Aisha, shocking her into a new role and a surprising assertion of religious devotion:

I was really shy, would not talk before this. A guy asked, 'Why do those people who worship Muhammad kill our soldiers in Iraq? Is that because they hate Jesus?'...And my dad always told me not to talk about politics or religion. I thought to myself, if someone talked about my dad, I would get so mad. If someone talks about my religion or my prophet, I should get mad. You would never hear my voice in that class. I raised my hand, told the guy, 'First, we don't worship Muhammad. He's a prophet. And second, we don't hate Jesus, I love him. In fact, I feel like I love him more than you do. And we don't kill your soldiers, would never do that...' He did not say anything. Before the next class, the professor apologized: 'Those are just kids. They don't know what they are talking about. I know you felt uncomfortable.' My eyes were really teary.

This was the very situation that Aisha’s father had worried about for his daughter, being confronted with a virulent strain of Islamophobia. The student’s accusation blends American politics with faith, producing a hostile version of American Civil Religion where Islam is quite literally the anti-Christ. However, in doing so, he unwittingly provided Aisha ground she could use to challenge him. At this crisis point, she did not retreat in shame at her identity but, inspired by love for her father, leaned into her religion and into religion in general. Sirin and Fine found that Muslim youth quite commonly rely on religion to cope with discrimination.4 Aisha not only fact-checked the role of Muhammad, but made the gutsy assertion of loving Jesus more than this student. Speaking about the importance of Jesus to Islam is common among Muslim youth in my research, probably amplified by being completely surrounded by the Christianity of the Bible belt. Aisha gives it poignant expression, placing herself in the same category as Christians who love Jesus, and thus arguing for the place of Islam within American Civil Religion.

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4 Sirin and Fine, Muslim American Youth, 105.
She became a unique spokesperson for Islam in the American South, though she was not happy about the change at first: “My first semester, I hated it.”

Muslim American youth also find proactive outlets to act as spokespersons, showing the same interreligious savvy. One of the oldest of these institutions is university-based Muslim Student Associations (MSA). Ghaneabassiri traces these organizations to their emergence in the 1960s, when they were already broadly engaged with speaking for Islam: “Its members also visited prisons to proselytize, gave lectures on Islam to local Muslim and non-Muslim populations, and taught at Islamic Sunday schools.”

Sixty years later, I found the institution to be thriving in at least several large state universities in Florida.

I interviewed the President of the MSA at one of the schools. Sarah, who started wearing hijab in 8th grade, felt stigmatized in her public high school and so had little interfaith conversation. College was immediately more comfortable for her because there were more Muslims but also because the social atmosphere was more welcoming:

Here, I felt more open. People were a lot more open to diversity and open to learning about new things…I’ve still found people who are still very close minded to the idea of Muslims…but here there is more open mindedness.

In this context of intra- and inter-religious camaraderie, she embraced a spokesperson role through the campus MSA, eventually becoming President of the board. She plays a central role in implementing the vision of the association, which includes an Islam Awareness Month, with events which show their awareness of their interreligious context:

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5 Ghaneabassiri, A History of Islam in America, 265.
So we do events that are geared toward non-Muslims about what Islam is, what the practices are, all about Islam basically...or to bring Muslims and non-Muslims together, like one time we did an event on Jesus and role in Islam. One of the major goals is to break down stereotypes and misconceptions of Muslims and Islam in America...because everything you see in the media and everything people say about Islam and Muslims is very, very skewed and not correct at all.

Muslim student organizations provide a safe space for Muslim American youth to assume the role of spokesperson and to correct misconceptions, where they have control of the context and presentation. That they gravitate toward topics like Jesus indicates the degree to which they recognize the need to engage the dominant Christian culture of American Civil Religion and their position amidst the Evangelicalism of the American South. Thus they establish the common religious ground of honoring Jesus, which predates any historical Muslim-Christian conflict. This is a savvy way of correcting misconceptions with gentleness and relatability.

Between the openness Sarah observes in her college peers and the corrections she and her co-religionists make to media and popular stereotypes about Islam, mutual pressure is exerted to create space for Muslims in narratives of American civil religion. This upward, political action is an unconventional use of the tolerance of youth religion, which Christian Smith argues does not agitate the political order:

Like American civil religion, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism appropriates, abstracts, and revises doctrinal elements from mostly Christianity and Judaism for its own purpose. But it does so in a downward, apolitical direction. Its social function is not to unify and give purpose to the nation at the level of civic affairs. Rather, it functions to foster subjective well-being in its believers and to lubricate interpersonal relationships in the local public sphere.6

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For Sarah and others to be mutually open with youth of other religions is to fit squarely within the tacit boundaries of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. However, correcting the misconceptions of peers and providing alternative voices to media stereotypes are political acts which speak truth to power and risk discomfort or even fracture in interpersonal relationships. Sarah finds courage to speak about the distinctiveness of her religion in part due to the openness of her peers, thus suggesting that the tolerance of youth religion in America is not simply Smith’s pejoratively portrayed “parasitic faith”, but also functions to uncork proud expressions of minority faith and enlarge the umbrella of American Civil Religion to include the practitioners of these faiths.

**Speaking in Friendships**

The reciprocity Sarah experienced on her campus, openness met with openness, hints at the intimacy possible between Muslims and non-Muslim friends. Indeed, most youth in my study reported speaking for Islam to friends. The character of these affectionate relationships, explored more in the next chapter, stands in contrast to the presentation in the literature of the relationships as impersonal and stressful: “Their priority seems to be educating others about Islam…they worry that most people don’t understand…and also are anxious to challenge stereotypes…They urge their peers not to associate them with ‘terrorists’…”\(^7\) With these friends, they create a space where they can practice reciprocal tolerance and even affection for each other as they speak about their traditions. These Muslim youth find a space to authentically express themselves and be transformed.

\(^7\) Sirin and Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 53.
Mutual tolerance is an accurate though not adequate characterization of Layla’s friendship with Lauren, a Catholic neighbor and classmate, though their friendship almost didn’t happen: “We lived in same neighborhood growing up. Didn’t like each other.” They finally became friends in 10th grade and began attending an interfaith dinner youth group together. Of the participants, her friend stood out: “Lauren is very unique, Mashallah, never met anyone like her. Her kindness….” This kindness shines through in how Lauren received Layla’s speaking for Islam:

If you’re proud of your religion, you don’t want to hide it. But you have to be smart about how you present it. “OMG let me tell you about this Hadith.” She’s like, “Please, tell me it.” So comforting. There is no veil with her. Don’t worry about offending. We recognize there are similarities and differences and respect that. She’ll tell me a story from church, I’ll tell her story from Quran.

Layla knows what it means to be a public spokesperson for Islam in America, living in the heart of the Bible Belt. She has learned to speak her truth but always in a guarded way. With Lauren, she found she could let her guard down and speak her mind. Interestingly, speaking her mind is not a rant about the difficulty of being Muslim in America or the South, but affection for the wisdom of her religion. They share each other’s tradition, but still maintain their integrity as Muslim and Christian.

Such intimate and religiously informed friendships expose a weakness in Christian Smith’s study of youth and religion in America. He appears to see speaking in interfaith friendship as only naïve agreement or careful avoidance of offending: “Part of obeying the general rule is being careful not to speak any potentially upsetting or exclusive things, particularly about religion.”

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8 Smith, *Soul Searching*, 160.
friendships are based only in this inauthentic principle of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, with youth as buffet consumers of religion as they please. He seems caught up in difference as oppositional and uncomfortable. So he might be concerned to learn that a Catholic youth did Islamic practices with her Muslim friend, but the vision of friendship in their mutual acts of speaking is stunning:

She loves the beauty of Islam…I will tell her stories, she will start crying. She says "Peace be upon him". She will ask me to do a prayer out loud that is supposed to be silent. The other day, she fell asleep while I was making iftar, listening to Qur'an, turned it off when she got up, but she joined me in making iftar and asked to put Qur'an back on. Then, when the sink was on, she asked to turn it off: "I don't want to waste it." A relief and blessing to have a friend like that.

Layla played for Lauren the holiest words which can be recited in Islam, and Lauren spoke tender affection for them, both moving expressions of love for the Islamic tradition and each other. This is mutual tolerance and so much more.

Muslim youth can also find friendships to be a safe place to speak for Islam when they have been cautioned not to do so by family. Rabia is a Pakistani-American and Shia Muslim who sets careful limits on how she will speak:

I am not going to attack someone or tell them to convert to Islam because that religion is wrong or right. This is how I feel I should live my life, and that’s how you’re judging to live your life. I’m not going to disagree with you on any part of it.10

While this thoroughgoing openness to other religions squares well with the tolerance of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism of her peers, sectarian and family history reasons also make sense of this hesitation to speak. Later in the interview, she recounts a story

9 Smith, Soul Searching, 166.
which explains that her family has seen the consequences of religious fervor and speech: a great uncle in Pakistan was killed, apparently because of his preaching. So, Rabia says, her grandfather decided he was not going to practice his religion like that. Another relevant dynamic for the family resides in their minority identity as Shia Muslims. Before going to college, Rabia’s mother cautioned her about speaking out: “Mom said, before coming to school, told us we’d have a lot more Sunni, so keep quiet about religion, because some people will have negative things to say to you.”

So Rabia found ways to speak in friendship. She responded to a request by a Catholic friend to show her how she prays. She and her Christian roommate in college discussed what they believed. Two Christian friends from an introduction to Islam class joined her for an MSA event.

In contrast to Layla, Rabia was groomed by her parents and family history to not speak for Islam, for reasons pre-dating, but certainly exacerbated by the 9/11 attacks. Given these pressures, it is unsurprising that Rabia has developed a relational way of speaking for Islam based on interest expressed by peers, and otherwise emphasizes how she will not speak out against others. She lives under the double moral exclusion of being Muslim in America and Shia among majority Sunni, exacerbated by her family’s memory of the violent consequences for speaking out.

Speaking for Islam in friendships ultimately seems to be part of what made space for Layla and Rabia’s interfaith friendships. They both recognize the lasting impact on their lives. Layla directs praise away from herself: “People say I seem impressive but its only because of my friends.” Rabia sees the world differently: “My Catholic friend opened my eyes about the similarities between every religion in the world.”
Proselytizing for Islam

A distinctive feature of Islamic faith which does strain against the laissez-faire notions of youth religion is the act of proselytizing, or da’wah. Some Muslim American youth, one third in my study, embrace this concept, even though it may be felt to put at risk Islam’s place in American Civil Religion and does not lubricate relationships with peers. Christian Smith found that, among the overall population of American youth, just over half thought it was permissible to try to get someone to convert to your religion. Of course, a vast majority of youth responding to this survey were Christian, and so in a place of cultural privilege and dominance. For Muslim youth to embrace this view is bold. Their common modes of speaking in defense or correction or merely to inform easily fit within boundaries of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and certain strains of American civil religion. Proselytization pushes at the edges of acceptability. Thus, it is not surprising that the act receives almost no attention at all in previous literature on Muslim American youth. Though proselytizing was a concern of some MSAs going back to the 1960s, the more central task in the post-war era, with a massive influx of Muslim students and immigrants, was gaining acceptance: “Islam recognized as an American religion.” This project renewed in urgency after 9/11, with the religious task of seeking inclusion in American civil religion central to the mission of Islamic organizations and individuals. However, based on my research, it appears that the importance of proselytization has remained firmly in the teaching of Islam in America, carried on by youth.

11 Smith, Soul Searching, 74.

12 Ghaneabassiri, A History of Islam in America, 228.
However, those who spoke about proselytization did so in ways that seemed to be optimized to create the least amount of controversy in American society. They are raising a pillar through speaking for Islam, creating their own space where non-Muslims can feel welcome and perhaps will want to stay. Khalid repeatedly articulated the importance of peace and how being a good human being is more important than any religious commitment. At the same time, even in the same breath, he could assert the need to proselytize:

Islam is tolerant of other religions. But it also works to disseminate knowledge of Islam to other people. We’re not trying to undermine them. Just as Christians proselytize, Islam does also. Getting as many people to Islam is the right way.

There is a dance in this statement that was present throughout my interview with Khalid, steps toward tolerance alternating with steps toward pride in Islam. Elsewhere, he paraphrased the Qur’an, saying, “You should work to spread Islam to others. But there is no compulsion in religion…Lead a horse to water, but can’t make them drink.”¹³ In both cases, he moves smoothly between tolerance and proselytization, underlining both the quality of relationship with non-Muslims and the righteousness of spreading knowledge of Islam to increase the number of Muslims. In doing this and comparing Muslims proselytizing to Christians doing the same, he also asserts the place of Islam under the umbrella of American Civil Religion.

Even as establishes a more inclusive space for Islam through proselytization, Khalid also can make space for outsiders in Islamic paradise: “Even if you reject God, as Muslims we believe in the day of judgment, if you lived a good life and you treated

¹³ He is referencing the Qur’an, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:256.
people right, I’m sure God would be willing to forgive.” Islam is the determining reality in this statement, with forgiveness necessary for not believing, but with a generous acknowledgment that these atheists got right what was most important. Khalid speaks about proselytizing with eloquence and tolerance, unsurprising given the influence of a mix of religiously and culturally diverse spaces in his life, including a stable upbringing in a mosque community where he was taught Islam and later was a teacher of Islam, and an International Baccalaureate high school program, which consistently receive praise from Muslim students for diversity and openness. He further honed his speech for Islam at a vibrant MSA on his Florida college campus.

In his articulate complexity, Khalid stands as a counterpoint to Christian Smith’s complaint about the conflicting views youth can hold about their religion: “So teens continually seesaw, with little self-awareness that they are doing so, between their individualist Jekyll and moralistic Hyde selves, incapable of reconciling their judgments with anti-judgmentalism, and so merely banging back and forth between them.”¹⁴ Smith sounds like the stern father, demanding his child stop playing on the seesaw and sit quietly before him to learn about logical argumentation. His mind does not reconcile playfulness with religious truth, seeing only a horrifying tale defying his conception of religious logic. Meanwhile, Khalid dances nimbly between tensile ideas with confidence and energy, apparently with no problem reconciling them for himself.

Another youth seemed to adjust his approach to proselytizing based on his relation as an American minority to his subject. Farid, a veteran of Qur’an competitions who comes across as more judgmental in his expression of Islam than most of his

¹⁴ Smith, Soul Searching, 144-145.
peers, used the distinction between words and actions to explain how he preaches Islam. In different moments, he expressed beliefs ranging across both ways: “What we should do is practice Islam and let them see how real Muslims are…It’s really love, if you really love someone, you’ll tell them about Islam. You want the best for the other person….” His latter phrasing is peculiar; Muslim youth rarely spoke about love in my interviews, and never in reference to proselytization. However, one commonly hears phrasing like, “If you really love someone…” in the voices of Southern Evangelical youth and their preachers. It tends to be used in a corrective mode, particularly toward people other religions, who do not know the truth. Farid reverses the flow, reflecting his view that Christians and others have been “misled” by people in power. He boldly suggests Muslims tell non-Muslims, including Christians, the truth.

Later in the interview, however, he doubles down on the work of proselytization as action-based, emphasizing example as the best way of da’wah and discouraging talk: “Do the right thing. Be real Muslims. The best form of da’wah: if you want them to become Muslims, better not to talk about it or them. Behave like a Muslim.” His friend Ali, an African-American convert, agreed: “Example is a good form of da’wah. Invitation of faith, at the same time. Example is more influential.”15 Speaking is included, but as the old adage goes, actions speak louder than words. Like Khalid, Ali and Farid have beliefs about proselytization that work within the tolerant framework of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism and American Civil Religion, not infringing too much on the dogma of individual choice and religious freedom.

15 Interview by Author, Florida, digital recording. June 8, 2013 3:00 p.m.
Though Farid has not systemized the tension between words and action into a precise theological doctrine, his experiencing proselytizing show how he deploys them based on his comparative standing with the other person. One day in philosophy class at his local community college, he expressed his “Islamic view” of God, and a Navy veteran of the Iraq War came to him: “He liked what I said…don’t even think we should be talking about it. They are God topics. I got to know him.” Farid spoke, but expresses displeasure with having to do so. Later, he sent the student a video about 10 reasons to be Muslim, a way for him to speak without speaking. Later he took him to his Mosque, but insisted: “I don’t want to you become Muslim. I just want you to see.” That day, he says, this man converted to Islam. This assertive role stands in contrast to what Sirin and Fine found among Muslim American young men: “from the men we heard contact as contentious, as potentially dangerous, offensive, engulfing, or annihilating. They tell one another that they recoil silently and retreat.”16 At the same time, he takes care not to be too assertive. He is a Muslim in America proselytizing to an Iraq War veteran. Boldly and carefully, he affirms the place of Islam in American Civil Religion.

In another encounter, his strategy varied, perhaps based on a tacitly realized more equal footing in America, when speaking to an African student: “I told him in 15 minutes everything about Islam.” He then asked the man, whose mother is Muslim, whether he wanted to become Muslim: “He converted on the spot. I took his number and told him, ‘I’m going to take you to the Mosque so you can learn more.’” Where there was more common religious ground and shared status as people of color, Farid spoke more forthrightly and directly invited the man to Islam before even inviting him to the

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16 Sirin and Fine, Muslim American Youth, 171.
Mosque, as he did with the Navy veteran. Though he may not have a resolved theological framework, Farid comfortably embodies different styles of proselytization; he understands how to dance with them that he brought.

The general sense of these approaches to proselytization is a partnership of words and actions enacted as invitation, which leads the potential convert to draw closer to Islam before finally, ideally, converting. Sarah, the aforementioned MSA president, has a well-developed theory of this process:

There is a portion, we should get the word out so maybe people will understand and convert. But it’s not like, ‘Omigod, you have to convert or otherwise you are going to hell’...People come to me or see what I’m doing. I wear hijab or do something different. People will come to me and ask, why’d you do that or why are you wearing that, what is this all about? Once they learn more, a lot of the time that triggers them to go find more knowledge, more information about the religion. A lot of the time that’s how people actually convert.

This savvy analysis blends religious doctrine with sociological insight and the recognition of how to present Islam in America. It sounds like Sarah has seen it happen. Farid’s experiences proselytizing confirms this process. Most convincingly, both of my interviewees who converted by their choice alone (another converted with his mother as a young teen) had this very experience. I will turn to one of those stories now.

**Proselytization and Conversion**

The careful yet bold dance of proselytizing by Muslim American youth leads to conversions not just in their own telling. William, a South Dakotan transplanted to southwest Florida for high school, is a white man who has gone from curious religious seeker to devout spokesperson for Islam. He begins the story of his conversion when he went off to college in north Florida, where friendships and organizations drew him in: “In 2008 and 2009, I was mainly atheist, agnostic...Then I came to college in 2010, and
I started learning Arabic, and that’s when I joined the Arabic club. And then I met other friends in [Muslim Student Association].” He eloquently expressed to me his own internal journey and choices, but also clear in his telling is how hevalues these relationships as part of the development: “a positive influence because they were friendly. People weren’t really trying to force me to do anything. They knew I was going around to the mosque and treated me like any other person. They didn’t treat me as an outcast.” Muslims on campus facilitated the welcome of non-Muslims within their community in a way which provided space for conversion without coercion. They were willing spokespersons for William when prompted: “It was mainly through all sorts of different people, asking them questions, getting their answers, and doing my own thinking.” In this respect, William neatly illustrates the balance Muslim American youth strike in proselytization between persuasion and the individualism which pervades American religious culture.

One relational impact he downplays, perhaps more so than justified, is the voice of his mother, who converted to Islam six months before. He insists, “Her journey to Islam was separate than mine just because of the stagnation of the relationship.” Yet, though they were somewhat estranged and he had not lived with her in 7 years, he was speaking on the phone with her during the time she was going through conversion. She told him about starting to go to a mosque, and reading a book about Islam.

After converting, William enthusiastically embraced speaking for Islam. He embodies the various purposes and positions of Muslim American youth speaking for Islam. He did so publicly through the Muslim Student Association on his campus, particularly through a leadership role in “tabling”. Setting up a table by a busy building
on campus, William and his volunteers speak internally and externally: "What they want
to do is provide resources for Muslims of all kinds…as well as reach out to people who
are not Muslims." He identifies the purpose of this outreach and other events as helping
to “promote a positive image of Islam to people” and to “explain all kinds of things for
Islam, so people can walk by and become educated.” I asked him to what extent tabling
is about trying to get people to convert, and he reflected back his own experience:

The way I do it at least, I don’t try to convert people…I just try to answer
their questions and I ask them what questions they have. It’s good to let
the person do the thinking, because…people don’t like being told to think
one way or being forced…so you just let them think, answer their
questions, and hopefully they’ll, if they don’t accept Islam, like convert, at
least they’ll understand it. That’s my goal, to get them to understand Islam,
and then after that, it’s the own person’s thought process of whether to
accept it or not.

William understands the importance of both informing and proselytizing, and sees them
in the context of individualistic tolerance. He also continues, on his southern college
campus, the mission of speaking into reality a place for Islam in America.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have examined how Muslim youth speak for Islam in ways which
stand in a long tradition of establishing a place of Islam in America, but also map new
possibilities for asserting the goodness of Islam through strong and intimate speaking.
Speaking for Islam expands the space of American Islam, gently guiding new converts
into the fold, but also making room for interfaith friends to accompany Muslim youth. It is
to the pillar of interfaith friendships that I will turn in the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4
INTERFAITH FRIENDSHIPS

Salma is an enthusiastic and positive young Muslim American who immigrated from Morocco with her mother when she was 5 years old. They had been in the U.S. for several years when the 9/11 attacks occurred, ushering in a new stage of their American life. It did not go well. Salma’s family received threats of harm. One of her teachers spoke incorrectly about Islam, “getting everything wrong”, and her relationships suffered too: “Everything changed. Friends were not friends, looked at me like I committed murder.” This is an unfortunately common account for Muslim youth in the wake of 9/11. It is no surprise, then, that the literature on Muslim American youth presents their intersectional relationships as sites of discrimination and education, not generally friendship. Yet, for Salma, the future was malleable, not fixed in that mold. After a fondly remembered respite to Islamic school soon after the attacks, she returned to public schools for high school, where her world and perspective became larger and more inclusive: “Most friends weren’t Muslim…atheist, agnostic, Southern Baptist, Catholic. Pretty cool, a learning experience. Experiences outside my family and community opened my eyes…they are probably why I was able to cross the religious hurdle.” In this new world, Salma had a Jewish best friend, and the two of them got quite a different response from a teacher: “If only the world would use you as an example.” While she still hears “stupid crap” that she corrects, Salma also lives an American Islam deeply and positively influenced by her interfaith friendships.

Interfaith friendships have become a pillar of Muslim American youth experience. They create space where youth practice tolerance and speak for Islam. Often, the friendships predate an articulated belief in tolerance and are valued because they do
not pressure them to speak for Islam. However, through the friendships, Muslim youth do indeed end up speaking for Islam. They also describe the friendships as significant influences on their understanding of tolerance. Entering into the friendships in the first place indicates an embodied tolerance of difference. Public or diverse private schooling impacts this tolerance, while parents and religious communities tend to teach a philosophy of tolerance but exhibit some anxiety about interfaith friendships. Likewise, strands of American civil religion foster Islamophobic anxiety on the part of peers. Despite these stressors, Muslim American youth describe generous and close friendships with people of different faith perspectives.

In this chapter, I will analyze and offer thick description of these friendships. I will first briefly consider the absence of interfaith friendships in the existing literature on Muslim American youth. Then, I will contextualize interfaith friendships in relation to the pillars of tolerance and speaking for Islam. Next, I will analyze the differing ways that young men and young women describe interfaith friendships, showing how they challenge the findings of previous research on Muslim American youth and youth religion in America. Finally, I will analyze the importance of school as a place of common ground and common cause and one of the major forces in forging interfaith friendships.

Absence of Friendships in the Literature

Though interfaith friendships appear to be common and valued in the lives of Muslim American youth, the existing literature pays very little attention to such relationships. Given the focus Maira and Sirin and Fine give to the oppressive superstructures pressing into the lives of Muslim youth, it is unsurprising that most of
the interfaith relationships they highlight are fraught with tension. Maira finds that even
the most common friendships she observed were infected by the prejudices of Empire:

Muslim immigrant youth sense a connection with other youth of color...in
the city, based in common social and political experiences of cultural
citizenship, but after 9/11 it also became apparent that minority groups
who had traditionally borne the brunt of racial profiling were not completely
resistant to the anti-Arab and anti-Muslim suspicion and paranoia of the
War on Terror.¹

Maira is also writing in the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks, when interfaith
friendships between Muslims and non-Muslims would have felt much riskier.

Sirin and Fine, writing several years later, speak of interactions with people of
different religious perspective as “contact zones”, a useful, if sterile, term. Their findings
about young women echo Maira’s finding about common ground with other people of
color in America, a relationship they describe as “ally”.² Their findings about young men
also echo the conflict reported in Maira’s study, an experience of contact zones as
“contentious...potentially dangerous, offensive, engulfing, or annihilating.”³ Such a
frame gives fair attention to the difficulty of being a Muslim American and especially in
the vulnerable stage of adolescent development. However, friendship receives little
attention. In an earlier chapter, they note that most Muslim youth they interviewed would
not confide in non-Muslim friends: “They’re afraid that their peers would not be willing to
listen to them about ‘certain political things’ and ‘discrimination things.”⁴ Whether the

¹ Maira, Missing, 181.
² Sirin and Fine, Muslim American Youth, 170.
³ Ibid., 171.
⁴ Ibid., 109.
students do not regard interfaith friendships as significant or whether the researchers simply did not pursue the question is unclear.

Though Nahid Kabir does shift the focus of identity formation away from the oppressive forces of Empire and moral exclusion in her research a decade after 9/11, nonetheless, she also fails to detail interfaith friendships in any significant fashion. This sustained oversight in the literature suggests several possibilities to me. The most obvious is the power of the interpretive models to crowd out discussion of interfaith friendships. When researchers focus on the impact of superstructures on individual identity formation or citizenship or “contact zones”, friendship will naturally not receive priority treatment. To be fair, it is not essential to the arguments made by previous researchers. However, it may skew the research away from accurately portraying the integral importance of interfaith friendships. Another possibility is that regional focus on the American South sheds light on unique circumstances in Muslim American life. Regardless, my research provides a needed corrective in showing the prominence of interfaith friendships in the lives of Muslim American youth.

**Friendships, Speaking for Islam, and Tolerance**

Just as beliefs in tolerance and roles as spokespeople for Islam have created a space in which Muslim American youth gather with each other and non-Muslims, their interfaith friendships function in the same complex, providing another entry point and more common ground. For most of the youth I interviewed, interfaith interactions and construction of the complex of pillars begins early in their life with schooling. Their most intimate interfaith friendships naturally develop later, in adolescence, and in some cases, not until their college years. College seems to usher in a new stage of interfaith discussion and awareness of how these friendships shape their practice of Islam.
Layla, born and raised in a northern Florida town, experienced the complex of tolerance, speaking for Islam, and interfaith friendship at her private school, starting in preschool and continuing through 8th grade. Though it was not very diverse, Layla remembers it as a welcoming place, teaching “core principles of equality and kindness”. She was the only Muslim student in the school, and so during the holiday Eid, her mother was invited to speak about the importance of the holiday. She remembers the same happening at Hannukah. The school opened an interfaith space for them, though the learning did not yet lead to speaking in their earlier years: “We were well exposed to each other, our different religions. We were all young, so religion was not a priority. Did not become too religious until my latter attendance of the school.” Through the years, their knowledge grew from the exposure they received through school, to knowledge of each other’s burgeoning religious lives: “I knew for Christian friends, Wednesday was youth group night. When Jewish friends were preparing for Bar and Bat Mitzvah, they would bring Torah to lunch. Selective moments in our development when we would be religious.” When Layla began covering with hijab, the tolerance the school taught and the interfaith friendships she had formed began to be put to the test, and she found it necessary to take on the role of spokesperson:

When I did start [covering], 7th and 8th grade, I was patient but some didn’t understand at first…Some people thought I started wearing hijab because of a lice breakout. People forget the Middle East exists and thought I was Hispanic. One time Ramadan coincided with Hispanic Heritage Month, that’s why they thought I was wearing hijab. Definitely got to explain myself a bunch of times.

Despite this challenging time and her understandable exasperation at these cultural misunderstandings, she remembers her eight plus years at the private school without hostility: “No one made me feel like the enemy.” Perhaps because of the strength of the
values taught, the friendships formed, and her willingness and ability to step into the role of spokesperson, she does not remember these friendships fracturing.

In contrast, if her earlier years of schooling required a more proactive approach of Layla, she remembers her public high school as a formative place that had not only a culture of acceptance but friends who spoke on her behalf:

High School was not where I learned, but where I confirmed my faith. IB [International Baccalaureate] said, ‘Difference enhances’…Friends would act on my defense, in general terms: ‘My pastor said this and I told him this.’ Our friendship was tested by their protection of my principles of faith.

Here again, the belief in tolerance works together with interfaith friendships to create a space where Layla not only feels safe, but confirms her faith in Islam. Several other Muslim youth described their International Baccalaureate programs at public high schools as places where diversity was encouraged and interfaith friendships flourished.

Interfaith friendships can influence the faith of Muslim American youth without requiring them to speak for Islam and without active dialogue on tolerance. Ibrahim, who grew up from his pre-teen years in a large city in North Florida, describes college friendships in the same city as creating space to hear different viewpoints:

I guess I would have to meet an atheist…I have a few Buddhist and Hindu friends and that’s where my perspective really changed…A college friend is Buddhist. He doesn’t mention religion, but we just know…He is really open-minded, really curious to learn…The impact was big because I didn’t know anything about Buddhism and my mindset changed. I applied that openness to any other religion.

This interfaith friendship leads Ibrahim apply what he sees as a new posture of openness. It creates new space for diverse people to enter into his life, and transform his view. His Buddhist friend served as the model for this enacted belief in tolerance. Ibrahim does not describe speaking for Islam in this friendship, though he does note
that this friend came to Masjid with him. Likewise, his friend apparently does not mention religion, but Ibrahim feels he has learned about Buddhism because of him, and realizes that he cannot religiously condemn his friend, which he thought he had to do before. So a friendship becomes a pillar from which Ibrahim extends his view of tolerance and ends up speaking to more people of other religions or no religion.

**Friendships and Gender**

Discourse on gender is common in the literature on Muslim youth in America, typically covering topics like the different treatment of sons and daughters within families, life as a hijabi, profiling Muslim young men as terrorists, and the accusation that Islam oppress women. All of these dynamics appeared at some point in my interviews. A new dynamic which emerged consistently throughout my cohort was different trends in interfaith friendships for Muslim young men and young women. I found that young men tended to identify their friendships in diverse groups, whereas young women tended to identify a best friend relationship, most commonly identifying a Catholic friend.

These findings challenge significant findings in the existing literature about Muslim youth and youth religion. Sirin and Fine summarize their findings about young Muslim American men in contact zones with non-Muslims as hostile: “typically these are situations in which they are confronting men, often white men, in authority.” My findings show a significantly different picture of Muslim young men growing up in the American South. Not only do they report few personal experiences of discrimination or conflict, the primary contact zones they speak about are interfaith friendships.

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Muslim males did experience profiling among peers, yet most seem to have developed strategies to cope with and dismiss the stereotype. Sayid, an immigrant from Syria, had a typically breezy attitude toward friends who lobbed offensive labels: “I was called ‘terrorist’ by friends in a joking manner, never in a hostile manner. I laugh if it’s just a one-time thing. If it’s to the point where it’s getting irritating, but never got that way with friends.” His response to friends is forgiving and disarming, for it undermines the deeply embedded narrative of Islamophobia which his friends have learned to parrot. His laugh is an efficient pacification, though not a killing blow, to vitriolic strands of American civil religion which would pit he and his friends against each other. Humor is a response I heard from other young Muslim males, as in the opening story of this thesis, where Ibrahim was called a terrorist and sniped back at his friends that they were racist. Rather than confrontation, these interactions read as reassurance. From another angle, these interactions speak to a common ground of masculine bravado, which Sirin and Fine acknowledge is a common observation from in the broader literature on men’s focus groups, but which did not show up in their cohort: “Here there is almost an admission of politically induced retreat.”

In contrast, the young Muslim men I interviewed embodied a confidence in their sense of belonging in America and among their non-Muslim friends.

For Sayid, this confidence moves him beyond the stereotypes, undeterred. In his public magnet schools, IB in high school, he made a diverse and welcoming group of friends:

Most of my friends are from different backgrounds, different religious ideologies, different faiths. I got to know them personally, multiple times

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6 Ibid., 171.
seeing their religion practice. They invited me to Bar Mitzvahs, Yom Kippur parties, Christmas parties, Diwali. Students are very diverse at my high school. Head scarfs, turban, can easily say who is what religion. Utmost respect there. It’s a community thing.

Though Sayid attended a magnet school more diverse than most schools in his district, and studied in the concentrated diversity of the school’s IB program, the population of the school nevertheless is dominated by white students, and sits in the heart of the Deep South. Yet, he reports “utmost respect”. The invites to diverse religious celebrations indicates the level to which his Muslim identity did not get him banned from his friend’s holy spaces and places. Though he does not describe any of the friendships in great detail, the invites to these celebrations confirm his description of the friendships as “personal”. This integration stands in contrast to the grim picture Sirin and Fine uncovered, encapsulated by a youth who said, “We’re isolated, we’re getting isolated from the mainstream America.”

Integration through friendships, though, seems to be a common thread among some young Muslim American men. Tariq, a Pakistani-American, reiterates how friendship does not require him to speak for Islam, but does impact his understanding of the world:

I don’t talk too much with friends about religion, but have a wide circle of friends, many beliefs…with a classmate, in high school, attended a Christian service, my friend’s congregation. I don’t remember anything about it. Also had an Indian friend, went to Hindu temple with them. It didn’t feel too different than me going to my own Mosque, a lot of people gathered around a common purpose.

Like Sayid, he does not describe a close friendship in detail, but Tariq shows how his view of tolerance is influenced by observing another religious practice personally,

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7 Ibid., 182.
coming about through the friendship. The peer influences Tariq and Sayid report do not fit easily into any categories examined by Christian Smith in his National Study of Youth and Religion. Neither the purportedly parasitic interfaith dogma of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism nor the more positively described same-religion peer groups, these friendships are deeply humanizing experiences of other religions. Furthermore, the friendships create a geographical sense of belonging, in the United States and in the American south, once again challenging the existing literature. Sirin and Fine found young men to be willing themselves elsewhere: “We heard in our young men another imaginative geography, about a place far away where thy had brothers and could find peace and a sense of personal integrity and power.” Sayid and all the young men I interviewed stand in contrast, not imagining themselves to another place, but assuming and asserting their belonging as Americans in the south. Indeed, when asked about whether he experienced the American South as a place particularly hostile for Muslims, he said he believed it but, “I personally have not experienced it.”

While young Muslim men described few friendships in detail, the two African-American converts I interviewed found brothers and empowerment across religious boundaries in the South. Both described intimate friendships with men of other religions, challenging findings of Sirin and Fine on confrontation between Muslim males and white males. Ali, who converted with his mother as a young teenager, speaks of two close interfaith friendships, though he contradicts himself by saying he only makes Muslims his friends. The first friend was a Christian man who helped him when he was homeless and stands as an example for him of why tolerance is important: “Goes to show you, in

8 Ibid., 186.
the end, it is the heart that matters the most. You shouldn't judge a person by their faith
...because he's Christian, I'm Muslim. He didn't know. I didn't tell him that either.” The
other friendship is with a white Catholic man, who Ali describes as possibly an angel.
This friend also helped him get on his feet when he was struggling with homelessness.
He described such lavish gifts from his friend that he felt the need to add a caveat:

No, Islam frowns on any kind of Homosexuality. No Homo, wanna say that, include that. We're not like that. Because he takes me out to eat, he bought me a car, I don't want people to think, are you guys married or something? He is a really kind hearted person. Never seen no one with his heart, ever in my life like that.

Here is a male friendship that goes beyond bravado and beyond camaraderie to an
intimacy which makes men uncomfortable. Ali carried some of that discomfort, but could
not deny the tenderness of his affection for his Catholic friend. The kindest heart he has
met belonged to someone of a different religion and a white man at that. Nothing as dry
“contact zones” or as cynical as “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” can adequately describe
such a poignant transgression of boundaries.

Jeremiah converted to Islam at 19 after an extended period of religious
searching. In the midst of that search, a Jewish friend had a significant impact on his
path. They were surprisingly alike and their contrasts became fruitful for Jeremiah:

Jewish friend was also a Jeremiah. Families alike. Parents. Grandfathers passed away in proximity...We met freshman year of high school, summer football conditioning, both on O-line. For a while there, I was on the fence, and we would talk a lot. He has kabbalist view: this is all apparitions, it doesn't mean anything, we are all going to heaven...I pitted his arbitrary carelessness against my hard core beliefs, strong convictions, and that is how I got here as a Muslim. He countered what I already was, complete antithesis. He helped me indirectly along the path.

This friendship was always interfaith. It provided Jeremiah with a mirror image of
himself, in personal details, in the brotherhood of sports, and perhaps because both
belong to minority groups. Observing their similarities across difference allowed him to see the differences more clearly. Through it all, he does not appear to judge his friend. In fact, he says at another point that he told his friend to go become a rabbi and wants to start an interfaith center with him. He sees his friend as authentic in his expression of Judaism. Commitment on one side bred commitment on the other. Jeremiah and Ali both found themselves brothers across religious boundaries who empowered them. The joint work of the friendships created space for these Muslim young men in the American South.

Young Muslim women I interviewed stood in contrast to most of the young men by describing, in detail, relationships with best friends of other religions, with half describing a Catholic friend. This particular frequency shows up nowhere else in the existing literature. Maira notes the connection between Muslim youth and youth of color in the community she profiled.9 Aisha, the cancer survivor who followed her hospitalized years in Texas with college in Florida, was the sole member of my cohort to describe Catholic friends who fit this description, one of mixed Arab and Venezuelan descent and another Nigerian. Sirin and Fine also noted this common ground10, while focusing most of their attention on how young women act as educators of Islam in the public square: “Relentlessly committed to educating others…these young women launch personal campaigns to correct social stereotypes.”11 As I have shown, young Muslim women in the South do this as well. However, the intimate friendships they described suggest the

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9 Maira, Missing, 180.
10 Sirin and Fine, Muslim American Youth, 184.
11 Ibid., 163.
importance of relationships largely unburdened by the obligation to be a spokesperson. Though friendships with fellow Muslims might be the most logical solution to that problem, these young women also strike up interfaith friendships where they do not have to speak for Islam or the speaking is experienced as an organic, unimposed part of the friendship. That the friends they most commonly found are Catholic young women suggests relational dynamics which facilitate this particular pairing.

Young women describe interfaith friendships of mutual care and safe space. Aida, a Bosnian-American who describes herself as very religious, characterized her 5-year friendship with her Catholic best friend from high school by highlighting their mutual consideration:

I never keep it a secret. She knows if I'm fasting, if its Ramadan. We text, 'Happy Eid' or 'Merry Christmas'...I talk about my religion openly, she talks about hers openly. If its Palm Sunday...If I'm fasting, she won't eat in front of me...Never ask specifics. If there's a holiday or if something is going on, know that we both believe in God. She knows that I'm pretty religious. I go to mosque; she goes to church. We don't talk about who's right, who's wrong.

Their friendship is marked by open sharing and acts of kindness and mutual celebration, while also keeping a boundary of not prying or debating. The acts of speaking appear to be about what is going on in their lives, rather than being required or obligated for explanation. Aida feels no shame or need to hide her Muslim identity in the presence of her Catholic friend. This reflects Christian Smith’s finding that Catholic youth were more likely than any other Christian sub-group (including Conservative Protestant, Mainline Protestant, Black Protestant, and Mormon) to believe that “Many religions are true” and “Everyone should leave everyone else alone” and least likely to believe that “Only one
religion is true.”¹² There may be a common ground between Catholic and Muslim young women in being open to other religions. They certainly are careful to avoid confrontation.

Christian Smith postulates that the lack of religious conflict between teenagers uncovered in the National Study of Youth and Religion is rooted in the shared interfaith beliefs of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.¹³ While this is reflected in some aspects of these friendships, I contend it must share explanatory power with tender and extraordinary acts of friendship. Rabia, a Shia who grew up in South Florida, had a best friend who helped her develop an open view congruent with MTD: “She opened my eyes about the similarities between every religion in the world: we believe in the same thing, yet we are fighting over the same thing.” However, she did not arrive at this conclusion by her friend leaving her alone or letting her be. Quite the opposite:

In high school, I did not have any negative experiences for being Muslim. Once in high school, a playful event. I told them I was from Pakistan (they thought I was Hispanic). Then they said, ‘Oh, you're a terrorist?’ I was offended, that's not something you should say to anyone. My Catholic friend got really mad on my behalf.

In fact, religious conflict happens frequently, at least in small ways, especially for morally excluded others like Rabia and other Muslim American youth. To stand up for her takes a dose of social courage from her friend, and is hardly the product of a conflict-avoidant interfaith laissez-faire attitude. Instead, moral courage and solidarity forge this friendship and impact Rabia’s acceptance of people different than herself.

¹² Smith, Soul Searching, 74.
¹³ Ibid., 166.
Smith notes religious inarticulacy\(^\text{14}\) and lack of practice on the part of Catholic youth: “compared to both official Catholic norms of faithfulness and to other types of Christian teens in the United States, contemporary U.S. Catholic teens are faring rather badly.”\(^\text{15}\) Muslim young women tell a different story about their Catholic friends, who present as moral beacons, able to cross religious boundaries perhaps because they are not socialized into the rigidly-walled faith of Conservative Christianity.

Because Catholic youth tend to be open to other religions and are less likely than other American Christian youth to think it is “Okay for religious people to try to convert others”\(^\text{16}\), they are also a safe place for Muslim youth to ask about Christianity. In the previous chapter, I noted the interfaith friendship of Yesenia which helped her gain the “guts” to be curious about other religions. In an inversion of the usual order, she first went to her friend as a spokesperson for religion:

Senior year, my friend, she is Catholic. I was asking her questions about Christianity. I was like, “I don’t really understand how Jesus can be the Son of God. Can you explain that to me?” It’s not, I don’t understand. I was very curious senior year. I wanted to learn and understand their perspective and their point of view. Obviously, I respect what they believe in. I would want them to respect what I believe in. Very positive experience. I never really asked, had the guts to ask questions…I think age, and I was more knowledgeable and the person I was talking to, we were pretty close. I was able to ask her anything and same thing, she could ask me anything.

She co-credits the closeness of the relationship with creating space for her to ask questions and in turn for her friend to ask her questions. There is a permission they grant each other in this exchange which is not simply a philosophical tolerance but a

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 132.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 216.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 74.
deeply felt safety, a place they can ask anything. Growing up in a large town in the deep south of North Florida, Yesenia and her friend probably knew Christians who were more likely to bludgeon people with “the truth” and perhaps critique Islam. In friendship, they step outside the dominant structures of competing Civil religions, neither in service to a tolerance project or an Islamophobic project, to what the poet Rumi called a field beyond right and wrong.

**Friendships on the Common Ground of School**

Nearly all of the interfaith friendships described by the Muslim American youth in my study originated in school. This is not surprising, given that all of them spent time in public schools, whether at the elementary, secondary, or college level, and for some, all three. The impact of public schooling on Muslim American youth has not been widely studied for an experience so common in the population.

Schooling receives close attention only in Sunaina Maira’s ethnographic study in *Missing* of a single American Northeast community and high school. Her findings shed some light on how friendships are wrapped up with different political discourses: “These young immigrants simultaneously invoked a multiculturalist discourse of pluralist coexistence and a polyculturalist notion of boundary crossing and affiliation.”¹⁷ Using language of the operative levels of religion, Multiculturalism provides a place for Islam (and diverse ethnicities and countries of origin) in a diverse order but assumes allegiance to actions of a liberal democratic government. Polyculturalism, on the other hand, sees allegiances crossing subculture and national borders, leading to challenges to government injustices, internal and abroad. Interfaith friendships are allowed within

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the former, but in the latter create more combustible and controversial political alliances. A contemporary example I recently observed at a University in north Florida: Black youth and Palestinian-American youth become friends at school, and subsequently decide to mutually participate in activism for Black Lives Matter and for Palestinian statehood.\textsuperscript{18} I collected some evidence of joint action, but more research needs to be done in this area.

On the whole, my study provides quite a different view of schooling by focusing on the American South. Maira speaks of “the high school’s liberal multiculturalism” and “the school’s politically liberal cultural.”\textsuperscript{19} Though pockets or programs at public schools could be liberal, schools in the south simply are not crawling with liberalism. What they are saturated with is conservative Christianity. This is even true, though somewhat less so, of college campuses. Faculty at many public campuses may skew more liberal than public schools, but student bodies still reflect the cultural dominance of Christianity. Sirin and Fine included Florida in their study of Muslim American youth, with the overall cohort across regions reporting significant challenges in school: “About 60 percent of the participants reported that they experienced discrimination at school, the setting where they were mistreated the most…”\textsuperscript{20} Schooling receives little more attention in their study, and nothing particular to the South. Though I did not press for details about discrimination, I was told of few experiences of severe harassment, and a fairly limited catalogue of minor harassments. Various challenges could include figuring out where to

\textsuperscript{18} Such alliances have been chronicled elsewhere also: Anna Isaacs, “How the Black Lives Matter and Palestinian Movements Converged”, \textit{Moment Magazine}, http://www.momentmag.com/22800-2/.

\textsuperscript{19} Maira, \textit{Missing}, 175.

\textsuperscript{20} Sirin and Fine, \textit{Muslim American Youth}, 86.
pray or how to maintain a Muslim identity among non-Muslims. However, my main finding about public schooling in the American South for Muslim youth is that it is generally a positive experience where they make diverse friends, including good friends of different religious views. Schools provide a common ground for these transformative interfaith friendships.

Two spaces of school which provide a chance for interfaith friendships to flourish are the lunchroom and after school gathering spaces such as the parking lot. These gathering spaces provide youth, especially high schoolers, with an opportunity to speak freely and without urgent time constraints. Khalid identified these two spaces as forums for theological discussion with about four friends, two of them Muslim, two Christian, and one Hindu. He said he had a strong connection with some of these friends: “I consider them, to me, my brothers, even though I have my own brothers. Similar ideas, similar beliefs. At the end of the day, saw them as fellow men.” Whether or not this feeling predated their theological conversations is unclear, but the liveliness of the conversations does indicate a level of comfort and commitment:

Lunch time would be a lot of joking about what we believe. After school discussions in the parking lot, understanding their take on various forms of God but one God. Explain to them what the term Jihad means. Getting rid of the 72 virgins thing; people don’t understand that’s something people have mistranslated…Differences between Catholics and Protestants, what Protestants say about the Bible…For Muslims, dating is an issue. We’d talk about interaction with women, because we were all guys hanging out…Talked about, because we were learning European and American history, the Protestant Reformation, ideas about what really sparked it. My friend would tell me some of what Catholics say was away from what true Christianity was…

Like Ibrahim with his Arab friends, Khalid enthusiastically engages in informal dialogue with his interfaith friends. He does not fit Sirin and Fine’s conclusion about young
Muslim men in America: “dialogue does not seem like an option, not necessarily by choice, but simply because they are not asked many inviting questions.” However or by whomever the dialogues were initiated, they appear to be sustained by commonality in the midst of difference. The young men share a belief in God while acknowledging different forms. They share a desire to correct misconceptions. They all are interested in discussing girls but have distinct practices. Finally, they all share a common school curriculum, which further stimulates discussion of their diverse traditions. Their ability to dialogue about these matters with each other seems to be appealing, perhaps what kept them coming back to each other, cementing their bond. It is an interfaith brotherhood forged in the downtimes of a public school.

Even for Sarah, a hijabi for whom school was not as positive an experience, an interfaith friendship peaked out through the clouds. It was not the first thing she thought of regarding her schooling: “I didn’t have any friends in high school. I had one, maybe two…people use to stay away from me, like it wasn’t, ‘Oh, let’s talk about religion.’” However, later in the interview, she revealed that one of her friendships was interfaith:

One really, really good friend in high school, all 4 years, Korean Christian. She doesn’t consider herself a hardcore Christian. But she goes to church, services, goes with church out to places. Doesn’t strictly follow it completely…Recently had conversation with her about Christianity and Islam because she took a world religions class and I guess I was her only Muslim friend. So when she came to the Islam part, she kind of attributed everything to me because I’m the only person, exposure she's had. A couple weeks ago, asking me about stuff with Islam. Trying to compare to Christianity, first time I’d ever had a conversation with her about that.

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21 Ibid., 184.
Sustained friendship over the course of 4 years of high school is not insignificant. If the friend was in the IB program with Sarah, then they likely had a number of classes together. Though they had never asked each other about their religions or compared them, they did apparently share enough about their lives that Sarah knew the frequency and level of devotion that her friend practiced. It was high school where this friendship grew, and then it was college schooling that triggered a new stage of their friendship, and a transformation for Sarah. Sarah not only gained a new way of engaging, but also was empowered to reimagine herself in her school years not as an outcast but as an exemplar.

**Conclusion**

Interfaith friendships like those described in this chapter create new spaces for Muslim youth. Some were just realizing those spaces in college near in time to when I interviewed them. Others had thrived in these friendships for years, developing their views of tolerance and speaking for Islam in the midst of them. The friendships expand the American space for Muslim youth along with those other pillars.

In this chapter, I illuminated the heretofore neglected subject of interfaith friendships for Muslim American youth. First, I showed how interfaith friendships take part in a complex of pillars with the belief in tolerance and the act of speaking for Islam. Second, I distinguished male and female youth experiences of friendships. Finally, I shed light on the ways schools bring friends together.

In the final chapter, I will argue that a final pillar, their experience of America, brings the pillars together in a place where they and their friends of different religious views can gather together in the welcoming and relational space of American Islam.
In the first 13 years of her life, Amina, a child of Tibetan parents, lived in Nepal, Pakistan, the United Kingdom, Illinois, New Jersey, Qatar and Canada. As a 13-year-old, on her first day at an Islamic private school in west Florida, she was shocked:

It was a culture shock. Through all the places my family lived, we were in small towns and weren’t close to many Muslim families. Even in Qatar, it was an American school system, so a huge mix of students…[at the school in Florida] the uniform code for girls was abaya, a long black dress and head scarf. I was intimidated…I took one look and left, I was so scared. A school with so many Muslims was new to me.

Raised by Muslim parents and having lived in Pakistan and in Qatar for four and a half years, still it was in America and specifically the American South, Florida, where Amina plunged into Islam as never before. Florida also provided an Islamic community for her family to belong to, which they had not experienced in her memory, not even in Qatar, where only her father attended mosque.

Several years later, Amina began to wear hijab, and soon experienced the prejudice all too commonly expressed toward Muslim women when they begin covering:

We had gone on vacation in Tennessee, and I was taking a picture of my parents, when someone drove by and yelled, “Terrorist!” This was right after I decided permanently to wear hijab. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure I wanted to go through with it before. This was right after. I felt scared…put a little bit of fear into my heart. On that vacation, because I was so scared, I took it off, for that vacation.

Yet when she came home, she began wearing the hijab again, and said of her own neighborhood community, which was predominantly non-Muslim: “[T]o be honest, I would never have noticed. I never had an encounter where someone made it known I was so different.” It seems she did not only judge this as local acceptance, but saw it writ large, despite her experience in Tennessee: “My experience here in America is that
I’ve had very few bad relations with people of other religions.” She said all of this to me, wearing hijab, sitting in a public space on a very large, public college.

A final pillar of emerging American Islam for Muslim youth is America itself, the place they or their parents have come to, or in the case of converts the place they have come to Islam, and a place where they are increasingly united with Muslim and non-Muslim peers. It is a place, or rather, places to practice their religion, both in Muslim community and among people of other religious perspectives. In this way, it is a pluralistic analogue to the pilgrimage to Mecca, a place to gather as Muslims and to practice Islam, in the midst of great diversity.

In this chapter, I will give shape to this pillar through the idea of the relational practice of Islam among Muslim youth in America. This approach is influenced by the historical work of Kambiz Ghaneasbassiri on Islam in America. Just as he offers an alternative frame to the common approach in the literature focusing on identity formation for Muslims, I also choose not to focus on that aspect of the Muslim American youth identity, but rather focus on “the communal relations they formed and the institutions they developed.”¹ I will first examine the development of Muslim youth religious practice in relation to Muslim communities and diverse Muslim populations in America. I will then illuminate how Muslim youth take their religious practice into public America, especially through the act of daily prayers. Finally, I will offer several thick ethnographic descriptions for the heretofore unexamined phenomenon of Muslim youth growing up in the American South, showing how their relational practice of Islam in these American

¹ GhaneaBassiri, A History of Islam in America, 3.
places intersects with the other pillars I have discussed, bringing together a varied and yet still particular experience that I call emerging American Islam.

**Gathering Together in America**

The diversity of the American Muslim population may be the closest approximation in the world to the panoply present in Mecca for the hajj: “Muslims in the United States represent the most diverse racial and ethnic community of Muslims in the world, with racial, ethnic, and religious groups from more than one hundred countries.” Sirin and Fine and Nahid Kabir found this range in their large, nationwide studies of Muslim youth. My own study found similar diversity specifically in the American South. Of the twenty-three Muslim American youth I interviewed, ten immigrated to the United States, most with their families, and ten were born in the United States. The other three were American converts with long family histories in the United States. These young people represent ten different nationalities or ethnicities which they had to negotiate in conjunction with their American and Muslim identities, including Arab, Syrian, Palestinian, Moroccan, Pakistani, Bosnian, Tibetan, Indian, African-American, and White American.

The existing literature on Muslim youth in America rightly critiques simplistic and monolithic characterizations of “American Islam” or “Muslim” identity amidst this diversity. However, Sirin and Fine take a puzzling step further by reducing a unified “Muslim” identity to American political coercion: “the contemporary politics of the United States and the globe, after 9/11 and after the war on terror, have amalgamated a set of

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2 Sirin and Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 44.
extremely disparate groups under the generic, politically induced, category of ‘Muslim’.”

Likewise, Maira centers a similar analysis in her study:

This research is a small step in showing that the construction of ‘Muslimness’ is produced by state policies and cultural discourses that tend to frame these youth as ‘Muslim’ actors—ignoring that they may also be working-class, male or female, urban, Indian or Pakistani, Gujarati or Pathan—and give primacy to religion as the key explanatory rubric for the War on Terror, thus evading larger historical and political processes embedded in the U.S. empire.

There is no doubt that state and cultural discourses, which I have spoken of in terms of American civil religion and moral exclusion in this thesis, have shaped the idea of ‘Muslimness’. I have shown the impact of this coercive complex on Muslim youth views of tolerance and experience of speaking for Islam.

However, what these scholars seem to be discounting is the organizational and lived religion agency of Muslim youth, who claim their own “Muslim” identity within these circumstances. Furthermore, unified Muslim identity is not a political category created solely in post-9/11 America, or even in the historical discourse of Orientalism, but has early roots in the history of Islam. The concept of Ummah, the global community of Muslim faith, while always disputed, debated, and played out in contentious settings, offers a historical way for Muslims to unite. This is embodied locally for Muslim youth in mosques, Islamic schools, and Muslim Student Associations, as well as in a common discourse they are developing about the unity of Islam, particularly as it relates to their American context. Muslim youth practice Islam on physical and conceptual common ground in relation to a diverse Muslim population in America.

3 Maira, Missing, 204.

4 Ibid., 283.
Almost all of my cohort spoke to the significance of growing up in mosques or other Muslim communities, learning to practice Islam alongside other Muslims there. Khalid grew up from birth in west Florida, and remembers having both ethnic and diverse Muslim experiences. He was shaped in part by his development from student to teacher in one community:

On Sunday, my parents took me to the Pakistani Muslim community... basically be teaching about your religion. I started around age seven or eight... went to learn. Around 14 or 15, I started helping: teacher assistant, design lesson plans, help kids whenever they’re hanging out. In high school, I volunteered to teach a few classes, for experience, to give back as I got something from them.

He learned in an ethnic community, but Khalid emphasizes it was Muslim identity he learned. Like most of his peers in my study, his role in Islam as a child was that of a student. The community provided a track for him whereby he later, as a teenager, took on a teaching apprenticeship before becoming a teacher himself. So he formed his practice of Islam in relation to the teachers, fellow students, and then his own students. The ethic of this approach was ingrained by his family: “My parents taught me the seeking of knowledge is an obligation upon Muslims. They put on me the importance of education.” He stated this ethic in relation to his public schooling, and it clearly applies to his Islamic schooling as well.

Khalid’s family also attended a large Mosque in the major nearby city. It was “very diverse”: “Pakistanis, Indians, Arabs, even African-Americans, a few white Americans. Slightly tilted toward South Asians.” This was a place where he had peers and observed a full range of lifespan development in the community: “There are lot of children. A lot of older, young adults, and elderly adults. Always eight to fifteen people around my age to interact, hang out with. A few became very close friends. One went to
high school with me.” His experience of ethnic and generational diversity gifted Khalid with both a vision of how his life could develop within the religion and a sense of togetherness as Muslims across people groups. Just before his teenage years, a new Arabic mosque opened nearby, but the khutba there was delivered in Arabic, so the other populations stayed together, united by language: “Those of us who don’t speak Arabic would go to [the same mosque] because the khutba is in English.” This sense of unity is by no means a given in the American Muslim community. Sirin and Fine found cultural tensions among youth: “The Pakistanis in our sample were not ‘supposed’ to identify with the Indians, any more than Sunnis and Shi’as were ‘supposed’ to see themselves as brothers and sisters.”

Though his community certainly may have embodied this struggle as well, Khalid remembered how the English language unified them and experienced how America could bring together disparate cultures together through the only language they all shared. Later, I will analyze how Muslim youth also perceived unification with other sects, particularly Shia.

Like Khalid, many of the communities of Muslim youth in America have a specific dominant ethnic group. However, they still identify diversity within the community, and convey the teaching of the community primarily as about Islam rather than a particular culture. Aida first began attending Mosque in the United States with her Aunt, who took her to what Aida calls “the Arabic mosque” in the large northern Florida city where they live. But she did not feel these were her people, so she followed her Aunt around but was going through the motions until she found the Bosnian mosque in town: “When they

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5 Sirin and Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 204.
prayed, I prayer, but I never learned to pray until I went to the Bosnian mosque.” There, starting in 8th grade, her proper Islamic education began:

We had teachers who would come every weekend...teach you history of Islam, culture, things that are proper, Suras, what you say while praying. Once you get older, you start learning how to read Arabic so you can read the Qur’an.

Though she did not bring up whether this could reflect a particularly Bosnian view of Islam, it may be because she experienced a diversity at “the Bosnian mosque” she did not recognize at “the Arabic mosque”: “The girls’ teachers were Turkish...At the Bosnian mosque, also a lot of Arabs. When the Imam gets sick, an Arab imam helps. Turkish people come, some African, mix of people, mainly Bosnian.” This culturally intersectional mosque showed Aida how Muslims could live as one and cooperate to make Islamic education and worship happen. Diversity in Muslim relationships and Islamic practice go together for Muslim youth.

Other youth experience their Islamic communities seeking interreligious diversity. Salma grew up in the same city as Aida, and had a different view of “the Arabic mosque”: “Dude, it’s really diverse.” She got her start as a Muslim leader there, serving on the board of trustees. She also learned from mentors and exemplars within the community, including a prominent Muslim professor at her university, that seeking diversity was a part of “Muslim” identity: “Dr. Hafez did a great job of showing there’s nothing wrong with going to learn more about other religions. The way you know Islam is by knowing other religions.” With this simple dialectical relation of Islam to other religions, Salma echoes Ghaneabassiri’s construction of Muslim American history: “These encounters and exchanges highlight how Islam and ‘the West,’ far from being mutually exclusive categories, are lived traditions that have been varyingly thought and
re-thought in relation to one another and to their respective historical contexts.” She uses just such language when she later describes the unique Imam of her mosque, a white male convert from this northern Florida city who was educated in Saudi Arabia: “Imam Pete showed you the other side of Islam, not the traditional side, the western, moderate yet conservative, what Islam should be. He was rational. This is Islam, this is your culture.” The Imam embodied for Salma her understanding of how Islam makes an authentic way in America, critiquing both the traditional in Islam, which she seems to identify with “culture”, and the western, in emphasizing the value of the “conservative”.

Several Muslim youth from the same mosque fondly remember similar lessons from Imam Pete. As mentees and mentor, the youth and the Imam are like other religious youth in America: “Religious congregations appear to be important sites for U.S. teenagers to make significant contact with adults of other than family members. Most attending U.S. teens have adults in their congregations whom they enjoy talking to and who encourage them…” However, in the details, they stand out for a practice not highlighted anywhere in Smith’s study of youth religion:

Imam Pete was a key role for the youth. It influenced us because it’s the person you go if you have questions or trouble. Imam would hold interfaith dialogues and bring the youth with him…built relationships between religions, and between youth and other religions…After Imam Pete left, we have tried, as youth coordinators, to keep them going, because we have experience that they are good and very beneficial.

In Smith’s study, interfaith relationships barely register other than as a product of culturally transmitted Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, which Smith characterizes as a

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6 Ghaneabassiri, A History of Islam in America, 8.
7 Smith, Soul Searching, 69.
parasitic interfaith religion, colonizing religions with values from the outside. In strong contrast, these Muslim youth learned from the Imam that interfaith interaction is something which they can initiate authentically as Muslims and take up as an Islamic practice. More than speaking about this practice, he became a bridge by taking Muslim youth into intentional intersectional relationships. In doing so, he not only established his role as a mentor in their lives, but introduced them to new mentors across religious boundaries: “Building a relationship with these leaders has had an impact on my life. Rabbi Friedman from the Jewish community and many from different faiths.” This is an example of how the religious institution of Islam in America leads Muslim youth to make American for a more pluralistic, interfaith place.

I have earlier examined the challenge of tolerance within Islam between different sects. Across the board, the Muslim youth I interviewed, mostly mainstream Sunni, dismiss divisions within Islam as illegitimate. This is not to say that their communities taught them a purely unified version of Islam. Despite exemplar leaders like Imam Pete and Dr. Hafez, the older generation were not always paragons of unity. Generational conflicts creep up throughout the interviews. Tariq speaks to the development of a new generational identity that brings more people together. He learned that some Muslims were not legitimate: “Growing up, does not matter what religion you are: Jewish, Christian, Catholic, but Shia? No, no, no. Stay away from them. These are different people, not really Muslim. Never thought about contradictions there.” It was a friendship with a Shia in college which changed his mind. He also notes that the older generation has fallen short in actually relating to America and other religions:

8 Ibid., 166.
My Dad moved, not English-speaking. Fresh off the boat, his ability to relate to American society was not great, so it’s harder to relate your religion. The older community has not been able to as good a job. But the younger generation, my age getting position, an active role, doing a better job. I hope in ten to twenty years the gap of relation will be much less.

Tariq lives at the intersection of relationships between the older generations of American Islam and the larger organs of American society. Though he confesses to not be particularly devout at this point in his life, a recent college graduate, he clearly has vision and hope that he and his peers will take what they have learned from both inside and outside their Muslim communities to shape the new emerging American Islam.

**Practicing Islam in Public**

Integrating Islamic practice with life outside their communities is a given for Muslim youth. Despite their lack of focus on religious practice, Sirin and Fine did discover in their study that the intersection of Islam and America was a point of strength for Muslim youth, based in their devotion:

We found a *positive* and significant relation between how they viewed their membership to American mainstream society and the Muslim community at large. The more that the participants saw themselves as engaged members of the Muslim community, the more likely they were to see themselves as engaged members of the mainstream U.S. society…Overall, we found that the best predictor of a Muslim identity was religiosity.9

So the development of religiosity among Muslim youth which I have described above correlates with their embrace of American identity. Contrary to those who claim Islam and America are inherently opposed, youth create not just a dual identity, but through their daily work of integration, they create an America where Islam can be practiced openly. They practice not only speaking about their religion, but living it in public. The

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9 Sirin and Fine, *Muslim American Youth*, 126, 128.
challenge of this work is not just making discursive space for Muslims but physically doing Islamic practice in a society not built to accommodate Muslims. The challenge is embodied mostly commonly for Muslim youth in the challenges of doing daily prayers outside their mosques and homes.

All of the Muslim youth spoke to the regularity or importance of daily prayers, except for one, Martina, a Bosnian-American youth, who said she did not pray except during Ramadan. She noted that she might take up the practice later in life but for now, life gets in the way: “A bad thing to say there's no time…I have a pretty busy life, school, work, volunteering. It’s my prayer time, can’t really say, ‘Oh, can I take my break early to pray?’ No, I can’t do that.” The other Bosnian-American youth mentioned above, Aida, tried to do more, but felt the same kind of pressure:

I do try in the morning, the earliest one. On weekends, I do all the ones while I am at the mosque. Tried when I could…Hard to keep up with in today’s society…at school, miss two there…Always feeling that I should, nothing more important. Hard to keep the balance. When I am back home or in Turkey, everything stops, and everyone goes to pray. Here, nothing stops. You don't even think about it because you're just in your day. Always at the back of my mind, I should do it….

Though Aida incorporates prayer into her daily life, she does not make space for it outside the private and religious spaces of her life. Yet the urge to meet the obligation remains consistent. In Bosnia or Turkey, the obligation would be built into everyone’s day. In America, like Martina, she does not pray when in public spaces because she perceives it is not encouraged in that sphere. For instance, she says she never thought of praying at school. Still, she moves in public space with the nagging sense that she should be praying.
School is the most common public space where youth have to consider whether and how to pray. The odds would not seem to be in their favor to find a way, given Sirin and Fine’s finding of school as a place of frequent discrimination for Muslim American youth\textsuperscript{10}, and Smith’s finding that “for the vast majority of U.S. teens expressions of religious faith at school are kept at a minimum.”\textsuperscript{11} While most did not share stories of praying at school, some at least had experiences that showed how relationships could shift the landscape. Sayid was surprised at how these factors played out in his high school, a highly acclaimed magnet school with a diverse IB program: “It’s been easy. I don’t know why. I would imagine it would be hard. Living in [Southern City]…one prayer would coincide with school. The Administration recognized it, allowed us to leave class and pray together. We had Friday prayers.” He lives with the instinct for how outside the norm Islamic prayer is to this public space, and especially in a city like this one, probably referring to its reputation as “Southern” or “Christian”. The school employees had somehow developed an awareness and embrace of Islamic practice on the campus, likely influenced by its diverse, international curriculum and student body. For Sayid and his fellow Muslims on campus, school became an Islamic space too. Perhaps this is part of why he said of the idea of the “Christian South”: “Personally, I have not experienced it but do believe it.” He has expectations about the region but a contrasting personal experience in public school. Rather than an oppositional relationship, the Muslim youth through their devout practice and the school administration in their tolerant space-making created a different vision of Islam in America.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 86.

\textsuperscript{11} Smith, *Soul Searching*, 59.
Public university presented new challenges for Islamic practice, beyond the scope of what students experienced in secondary school, with curriculum meant to unsettle tradition and challenge social mores. At the same time, some institutions carved out special space to accommodate religious practice. Fatima experienced both of these aspects of college life at her university in a large north Florida city. The campus has an interfaith center where a meditation room is provided for student use, with footbaths. She never had prayed at school before, but this school became a place of prayer for her. She faced a significant challenge in her curriculum, however, as an Art major. Her struggle to determine what was permissible and live by her religious values became an intersection of her relationships to Islamic institutions, her relationship with her university professors, and the tensions inherent within western liberal education.

An earlier school experience may have shaped her approach, the only personal physical assault reported by my interviewees. In high school, when she was already covering with hijab, she was accosted one day in the hall by four younger male students, who pushed her backpack repeatedly and said to her, “Go back to your country. You effing Muslim, stop blowing shit up.” She went into her next class crying. She did not tell her friends what was wrong at first, but did eventually tell a teacher. Though she did not want to get anyone in trouble, the hammer came down on the boys. A police officer came in to take Fatima’s statement, and she learned that one of the boys himself was known for planting an improvised bomb. In this moment, she learned the hypocrisy of prejudice. She also learned that school authorities could sympathize with her.
Fatima acted in college as if her values were appreciated by university authorities, as they came into conflict with major parts of her Art curriculum:

I don’t draw or paint people. There is a hadith…Man would draw or paint portraits of people and images…Scholar told him, ‘You should refrain from drawing images, things with souls like humans and animals.

Rather than seeing an unresolvable conflict between this liberal education and Islam, she let her tradition shape how she approached her education as an Artist, giving her permission to not do the impermissible. She took it upon herself to study about what she could and could not do. When a class with nude models came up as a requirement, she went to the head professor of the Art department to ask for an exemption. She was surprised by the response: “She let all the professors know that I’m not allowed to paint images. So all the professors, basically they’re working with me to come up with alternative assignments…I’m so happy they are understanding.” Fatima also brought the Islamic institution into relation to the university by consulting her faith leader, the aforementioned Imam Pete, about how she could find middle ground. He suggested to her that she could draw images if she did not draw the eyes, because they give life to a person or animal, and her professors agreed to this accommodation. Here is another example of a Muslim youth creating new relationships and Muslim possibilities in America by daring to practice her religion faithfully in public.

Work also presents challenges and opportunities for Muslim youth to practice Islam. Part of the equation is the convenience of the workplace to accommodate the physical space and time needed for prayers. Salma had two jobs with different landscapes and time constraints: “Sometimes I miss when I work…can’t pray at work, no way in hell, at the Apple Store. Nowhere to go. When I worked at Puma, I prayed in a
fitting room. No big deal, people were understanding. I don’t want to be a burden, don’t want to be rude.” The tight quarters and hectic traffic flow of the Apple Store caused her to wait to make up prayers, which she did. This was her accommodation, a product of her social sensitivity in not wanting to inconvenience anyone. On the other hand, the Puma store not only gave her time and space but also supportive relationships for her practice of Islam in public.

Youth find resources within their tradition to support their practice of Islam outside their homes and communities. Layla, the child of parents who were spokespeople for Islam, remembered a saying of the Prophet: “The whole earth was a masjid for them. All of the earth is a place of prostration.” She had experienced openness at her middle school, before finding the same at her high school:

Got permission to pray in the library. It was in front of the window. Other people requested to pray, so they relocated us to a classroom. During lunch, the officer would ask me where I was going, and allow me to go, saying, ‘Pray, eh? Put one in there with the big one for me.’ The next day a superintendent at school asked where I was going, and the officer said, “Don’t worry, just ask her to put one in for you.”

This a stunning development of relationships. Layla’s positive relationship with school employees secures her not just any place to pray, but a visibly public place, which attracts more Muslims to pray with her. The formation of these devout relationships leads to a special designation of a whole space during that time for the group, also leading to a new encounter with an authority figure, the officer, who extends welcome and perhaps even an interfaith prayer request. Then, that relationship begets an act of protection and affirmation for Layla in the presence of another powerful school authority. No wonder, then, that between these experiences and her view of all the world as a place for prostration, in college, she would pray anywhere: “We can pray inside a
church or synagogue. We pray together in the Serenity Room, basement of the library. Do it outside together, in amphitheater.” Though she elsewhere says that America is not a “predominantly religious society”, it certainly is a place where she and others have been able to develop a public practice of Islam in solidarity with other Muslims, supported by non-Muslims.

**Portraits of Muslim Youth in the American South**

In this thesis, I have uncovered emerging and converging pillars of American Islam for Muslim youth. Though these findings may replicate in other regions, I focused particularly on the American South. Though the South is no monolith, there are common experiences across the region for Muslim youth, especially relating to the prevalence and dominance of Christianity. In order to show these similarities amidst geographical distinctiveness, I finish this chapter by presenting two thick descriptions of Muslim American youth life in particular places of the south, showing how they develop their practice and beliefs about their religion in the midst of relationships with Muslims and non-Muslims.

**An Oklahoma Girl**

Sabeen was born in Lebanon, her family from Damascus, Syria. After moving to California and then back to Syria, where they lived on 9/11/2001, they moved back to the American South. She lived her middle school years in South Florida and her high school years in a suburb of Oklahoma City. “I was a normal child,” she says.

Her family practiced the religion throughout her childhood. She remembers her father going to Friday prayers when they lived in California. When they lived in South Florida, they did not belong to an Islamic community but they read the Qur’an, prayed, and fasted together as a family. This was about a year after 9/11. Sabeen attended
public schools in Florida during this volatile time, when many Muslim youth found themselves targeted; yet she sheepishly explains, “To be honest, maybe I’m the wrong person to interview. I never really experienced anybody say anything.” Later in the interview, however, she recalled a time when someone did indeed challenge her place in America.

Moving to Oklahoma at the end of her middle school years, her family found a larger Muslim community, with 2 or 3 mosques locally, and became involved. At the same time, she attended public schools, where praying was hard but accommodated:

A lot more difficult in high school. There weren’t a lot of Muslims. I would always find time, after lunch, before lunch. Sometimes, I even asked teachers if I could borrow their rooms during lunch time, and they let me…Sometimes during class, I would leave, pray, and come back. Only time it was during class was in Chemistry; we had a little storage room and I went in there.

With the help of supportive relationships, she struck out on her own to practice her prayers, navigating the challenges of finding the right time and a good place, sometimes spacious and sometimes a closet. Her philosophy on prayer reflects this effort and perhaps was shaped in part by her success in fitting prayer into her public life: “I manage my life around my prayers and not the other way around.”

In Oklahoma, Sabeen was surrounded by Christians. So it came to pass that her best friends in high school were Christian, and eager to share their faith: “Quite a few of my really close friends invited me to church.” She went with them sometimes, and recalls her observations of one horizon-expanding visit:

Non-denominational church, the man lectured for a good 30 minutes. Then they worshipped. The way they worshipped was through singing. They would kind of jump, moving and jumping, trying to feel the worship. The only thing that felt weird...The first time I ever experienced people speaking through tongues. They weren’t singing the song lyrics even
though those were on the screen, but they were speaking something else. I got kind of confused, then they explained it and I understood…I tried to sit there and feel the worship…I did, but I didn’t understand the concept behind it. Where did this ritual come from?

Through interfaith friendship and her own willingness to engage difference, she saw not only the enthusiastic Evangelical worship common in the south, but also the distinctiveness of the Pentecostal tradition, which many Christians have not even observed. She also goes beyond observation to an empathetic effort to “feel” what those around her are feeling. She leaves puzzled but also with a new understanding.

The questions which such interfaith experiences raise may have been in her mother’s mind, who did not always respond positively to these invites:

And I would go to church with them a few times, but my mom did not always let me. She knew I could handle myself, knew I knew how to think. My mom is open-minded but afraid for me to maybe, not question, because of course we all go through a time of questioning, whether Muslim, Christian, Jew…I guess she knew I was going through one of these. Of course, she was afraid, she doesn’t want her daughter to lose....

Sabeen trailed off before finishing the sentence. She seems wary of finishing the thought that someone could lose their faith or religion, carrying the same anxiety as her mother, who she credits with understanding what she was going through and wanting to protect her faith. Yet, she kept investigating others’ religions despite this shared concern. Perhaps she was influenced by her mother in this way too, for she describes her as open-minded. Children learn tolerance or intolerance toward others through family systems. The boundary crossing during a time of questioning, however, created stress for her mother. Perhaps her mother thought the different perspectives were causing the questioning. Sometimes this is indeed the case, for as Peter Berger states, “Modernity pluralizes.” And in Sabeen’s own words: “I was confused about what my
religion was, why I was following that particular religion.” If a time of questioning one’s heritage is common among youth living among a diversity of different religions, certainly parental worry of a child walking away from a treasured heritage is just as universal.

During this time of questioning in her high school years, Sabeen researched about her own religion. She googled it. She consulted Wikipedia. She knew that online there would be “a whole bunch of crap” too, but she felt, “it’s the closest I could get.” She needed answers, and at the time of my interview with her, felt she had recently gone through the experience again in college, though she hesitates to attribute this questioning to the “D” word: “Not because I was doubting my faith, but because I wanted to reassure myself.” It is easier to think of a time of questioning as ultimately resulting in the reassurance of faith.

As she questioned, she also continued to practice Islam, praying at school, teaching at her Islamic school, and in her senior year, beginning to wear hijab. The response to her covering was, perhaps delightfully, underwhelming: “No one asked why.” When she was a freshman at the school, her sister, then a senior, had started covering. Her sister was well-known, which she seems to imply made space for her practice as well as opening the space for Sabeen: “They’ve seen it before. Never really got any responses.” This might be why she considers herself a bad person to ask about bad interactions for being Muslim in a region she describes as “intense about Christianity” and “church-beltsy.”

However, she also had an experience of speaking for Islam in circumstances that contradict her saying she never heard anyone say anything critical, showing that school could also be a place where authorities put her on trial for being Muslim. Sabeen was
having a one-on-one conversation one day with a teacher who was helping her write a resume, which featured a red flag for the teacher: “I mentioned that I teach Islamic Studies at the Mosque.” This led the teacher to bring up the war in Iraq, where her son was deployed. Sabeen’s response, as she faced a very personal confrontation, is remarkable for its empathy. She did not feel personally attacked because her teacher was “attacking the whole situation.” Yet she quotes her teacher as saying, “If it wasn’t for you guys, he wouldn’t be there and I wouldn’t be fearing for him,” a literally personal attack, grouping Sabeen in with the enemy. Somehow, Sabeen understood: “I wouldn’t blame her; any mother who has to go through that.” This empathy for a mother reflects her empathy for her own mother, and again shows her ability to bear the anxieties of adults and put herself in their shoes. Meanwhile, as some adults bore the anxieties of the place of Islam in American civil religion, she and her friends made a place where they lived out mutual tolerance on common ground, simply some Oklahoma kids. In conflict and friendship, Sabeen had learned what worked for her: “Being yourself and being nice to other people. Smiling. This is my motto: Be nice and smile.”

**A Florida Story**

Yasmin was born in Ohio to parents who immigrated from Pakistan several months before her birth. By the time she began elementary school, they had moved to a town in North Florida, home to a large university and a small Muslim community. At the outset of the interview she noted that her parents were not conservative, “but the mosque is a good place to meet people. They did it for the religious factor and to meet people.” At first there was a small mosque open in town, but while they lived there, an Islamic Center was opened. She remembers few families in the community at this time, but it was diverse. Though she downplays her family’s religiosity to a degree by
emphasizing they went to mosque to “meet people”, she attended Islamic Sunday School at the center and learned the religion in her home: “Grew up reading the Qur’an every day. Mom taught us, forced us to read every day in Arabic. I don’t understand it but can read decently.” Religion was next door too: they lived next to a church.

The difference between the town and the university was stark in Yasmin’s mind: “a very black and white community, not much diversity. Step off campus and go into a completely different world. If you’re not affiliated with the university, very strong feelings of religion and privilege.” This was more than a hunch; she attended all elementary school at a small Christian school in town. Her parents, both Muslims, had been educated in Pakistan at Christian schools, though not at schools like this one. Out of 100 students, she and her younger brother were the only non-Christians and among only several people of color. She felt like an outsider: “Weird school. I didn’t have any friends there. Strong community of Christians.”

The religious teaching of the school was consistent, with chapel every Wednesday. However, Yasmin found familiarity in these teachings: “I remember a lot of overlap between the Christian stories and the Muslim ones. I don’t think there was ever a point where it was blatantly different than what I have learned from my parents.” Her teachers did call on her represent a Muslim viewpoint, though they could be a bit dense, as she wryly recalled: “Always be an authority when studying Islam and Middle East. I was asked how to pronounce Riyadh. I’m Pakistani. I pronounced it wrong.” While acknowledging her difference, they were more concerned about correcting that difference, occasionally trying to convert her: “They would talk about how Jesus died on the cross for everyone, whether or not they were Christian.” They could be subtle and
friendly about it too: “We would go on socials, went skating. I was with a teacher. She was my friend. She talked to me about my family life and Christianity.”

Another attempt to convert her came from local pastors who would rotate weekly into the chapel. After their teachings, they would ask the students to put their heads down and sought to root out unbelief: “If you are questioning your faith, please raise your hand. Or if you have not accepted the way of Jesus Christ.” Yasmin did not know where she fell in this equation: “I don’t know if this applies to me because I am not Christian. I am questioning Christianity, but I am Muslim. So I never knew whether to raise my hand…” What she did know, without having to convert, were any number of Christian practices, sometimes more impressively than her Christian peers: “I learned all the Christian hymns. Used to play piano and sing…One of the two students…who actually memorized Bible verses. I was very good at it. Every year I would get the Bible recitation award.” Though she does not speak of friends at her school and her teachers created tension, she took advantage of these relationships.

There were harder times too. I recounted in chapter 3 how Yasmin was verbally assaulted by a fellow student on the day after the 9/11 attacks. She was about 8 years old. Though her mother reported the act to the school, and the offending student was made to write an apology letter, the impact on her family was done. Her parents encouraged telling people they were Indian. She took the lesson: “In the years after 9/11, I didn’t tell people I was Muslim. Something very much secret, to be ashamed of. Sometimes I still think it’s still like that.”

The persistence of this mentality to her college years for Yasmin surely was affected by events like the pastor from the town who made international news for
burning Qur’ans. He was a familiar face from a nearby church: “I lived not even a mile away…part of the local community. I used to go there for hay rides at Thanksgiving.” This harmless, innocent childhood experience transformed in her freshmen year of college, when the pastor did the burning. Her response speaks to how her life changed in the intervening years, with a new relationship to Christians: “I wasn’t too bothered by the Qur’an burning…I’ve had enough Christian friends to know that’s not what the vast majority believe.”

In middle school, Yasmin’s family moved to South Florida and she went from a small private school to enormous public schools. It came with various perks, including cultural peers: “There is a Pakistani in my math class!” She also had significant contact with Jewish students, even going to a bar mitzvah, and had a Catholic best friend. This new spectrum was welcome: “I really liked the diversity, really interested in culture.” Not all the aspects of the culture were pleasing. She spoke with dismay of how rich people were and the prevalence of youth drug use. On the other hand, she spoke positively of a school culture that recognized both Jewish and Muslim holidays, where “pretty much everyone was accepted.” She also spoke longingly about being forbidden by her parents from participating in sleepovers and her prom.

Though she confesses to not being good at connecting with people who were not Pakistani, her best friend was Catholic. This was not out of line with what she was taught at home: “My parents never were the type to put down other religions ever…went to public schools and a private Christian school, so they were supportive of me meeting people of other religions and learning about their religion.” This view was not shared by people in her South Florida mosque: “A lot in my own mosque who think public school is
of the devil.” Though school certainly presented her with new challenges of keeping her Islamic values, it also opened her up to new interfaith friendships which were educational for her. She and her Catholic friend respectively exposed each other to their religions, an impact which stayed with her. In college, a man tried to force a Bible on her, but she remembered her friend: “I would like to think it’s not what the vast majority feel. My best friend is Christian and she is completely accepting.”

She returned to her old hometown in north Florida to attend the university. Like other Muslim peers in my interview cohort, college was a hinge moment both in her religious practice and in her relationship with non-Muslims. She entered the university with a profound interfaith and intercultural diversity conference. She engaged with diversity in a brand new way: “I talked to a lot of people about other religions. The first time I talked to people who were atheist, agnostic, understanding where they were coming from. A place where we were respectful of each other.” Her categories of tolerance, expanded in secondary school to new religions, now expanded beyond religion through relationships.

She was even challenged to expand her horizons on Islam, though that may have been most difficult: “A video showed…dancing Sufis. I had never seen that before. Shocked. This is not my religion. Very offended. A misrepresentation.” She changed her mind later: “Since then, pretty glad they showed that video. It changed my view of Islam. I realized Sunni is not the only sect. People don’t realize, even I don’t realize.” Islam was becoming a bigger place for her, and continued to expand its role in her life with her involvement in the Muslim Student Association at her university.
When her family moved to South Florida, they had remained involved in Islamic community. However, it is in college that Yasmin noticed religion taken seriously. She herself noticed a change in practice of daily prayers, though she still struggled to keep up:

Fluctuates a lot. Not as I should be. Zero to two. Maybe four. But I don’t pray as much as I should. This conversation is making me realize how much I should do. Since college, a lot more adherent than in the past. Being around [Muslim Student Association], friends who are praying five times a day is influential.

Even with this positive influence, her relationship to the community is not without complication. She sees tension between the religious community, which is more conservative, and the Pakistani community on campus, which is more liberal. She questions the religious motives of fellow Pakistanis, who she thinks care about showing off. She seems genuinely torn between the two, saying she is more involved with the more male/female integrated Pakistani community but also praising the genuineness of the conservative religious community: “More boundary between the sexes. Women cover. But I do have a lot of fun with them, joke around. It’s more open, less of a veneer than the Pakistani community.” Ultimately, Yasmin brings a positive and open attitude to this and the whole bundle of tensions she lives with, embodying the promise and challenge of emerging American Islam for Muslim American youth.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have shown how Muslim youth practice Islam in America, particularly the American South, making it into an Islamic space where they can gather and practice both in the presence of a diverse Muslim population and in the presence of interfaith friends, authorities, and institutions. Through this creative work, they are constructing an emerging American Islam, drawn together by pillars of tolerance,
friendship, and religious devotion, creating a space where Islam can become one and Muslims can live in vibrant relationship with their interfaith neighbors. In the final chapter, I will summarize these findings and propose areas for future study of Muslim youth in the American South.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Introduction and Summary

In this thesis, I have argued that Muslim youth in America, and particularly Muslim youth in the South, come together under four emerging pillars of American Islam, which bond them together with each other, with other Muslims, and with non-Muslims. I have shown that this particular approach to Islam is marked by a belief in tolerance, the practice of speaking for Islam, the practice of interfaith friendships, and faithfulness to the practices of Islam in the midst of other Muslims and the American public. In this chapter, I will review the main arguments of each chapter, highlight my additions to the literature, and consider horizons for further study.

In the introduction, I revealed the dearth of attention given Muslim American youth in scholarly research on Muslims in America. My literature review shed light on the concentrated focus on identity formation, especially in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. I highlighted how the few scholars doing this work have thoroughly illuminated the complexity of Muslim American youth, exposing both the powers that exercise authority in their lives and their own lived agency. I then critiqued the persistent missing perspective on the religious lives of Muslim youth, in this literature and in the literature on religious youth in America. Next, I unpacked my theoretical approach, which draws prominently on grounded theory and a lived religion approach, in order to allow the voices of Muslim youth to give some shape to an understanding of the complexities, tensions, and joys of their religious lives. My theory as also draws on the work of Christian Smith and his National Study of Youth and Religion, showing how Muslim youth participate with other youth in major currents of youth religion in America and how
they live in relation to national and organizational levels of religion and religious
discourse. Then, I shared my methodology of interviewing Muslim youth across the
region of the American South in order to consider the regional impact, and just as they
were entering young adulthood, so they could reflect on their lives as youth. Finally, I
shared a brief autobiographical sketch of how I came to be interested in doing this
research, and closed with the presentation of my thesis and an outline of my arguments.

In the first chapter, I addressed how Muslim youth express a belief in tolerance. I
began by discussing the meaning of tolerance and how Islam fits into this American
discourse. After surveying the literature, I moved on to analyzing religious meanings of
tolerance for Muslim youth. I identified five main ways youth express these meanings:
as the essence of Islam, through scripture, through reference to Allah and Muhammad,
and through their relationship with other people of the Book, Christians and Jews. Next,
I distinguished and elucidated eight different modes of tolerance expressed by Muslim
youth, broken into two categories: the inner mode and the outer modes. The four inner
modes are: Self, Internal, Against Islamic intolerance, and Isolation. The four outer
modes are: Reciprocity, Against Anti-Islamic intolerance, Universality, and Mercy.

In the second chapter, I examined how Muslim youth speak for Islam in ways
distinct from the common role of educating people about Islam. I first showed how
Muslim youth shift speaking for Islam from political to religious discourse, claiming a
place for Islam in American Civil Religion. Then, I examined how Muslim youth find a
space to speak for Islam in friendships of mutual interest and care. Next, I illuminated
the bold and gentle proselytizing undertaken by Muslim youth, especially suited to the
American South. Finally, I showed in the story of a Muslim youth convert how speaking and proselytization help lead people to Islam.

In the third chapter, I illuminated how Muslim youth come together with non-Muslims in interfaith friendships. I first exposed the dearth attention on friendships in the existing literature on Muslim American youth. Then, I mapped the connections between interfaith friendships and the pillars of speaking for Islam and the belief in tolerance. Next, I distinguished between how young women and young men form interfaith friendships. Finally, I showed how school becomes an important place for Muslim youth to form interfaith friendships.

In the fourth chapter, I argued that America is a place of relational Islamic practice for Muslim youth. I first illuminated the development of Muslim youth religious practice in relation to diverse Islamic communities. Then, I tracked how Muslim youth take their religious practice into public America. Finally, I offered several thick descriptions of life for Muslim youth in the American South, showing how the belief in tolerance, speaking for Islam, interfaith friendships, and American life come together in this distinct region.

**Making Space for Muslim Youth in the South**

This thesis has made new space in the scholarly research for Muslim youth in the American South. As I have shown, there is a lack of attention to the experience of Muslim youth in this region where Muslim population has grown by leaps and bounds over the last several decades. I have shed light on how they live out Islam in particular southern cities and places, and how they navigate their practice in school, in friendships, and public. I have begun to highlight their fascinating interplay with
Christianity in the region and their bold yet savvy assertion of the place of Islam through the act of gentle proselytization.

I have also contributed to understanding the religious lives of Muslim youth. Though scholars of the existing literature made meaningful decisions not to focus on their religious lives, this left an area of Muslim youth experience unexplored. I illuminated how Muslim youth are believing and speaking for Islam, as well as how they are living their practice in relation to interfaith friends and public America. In doing this, I have challenged the notion that “Muslim” identity is simply a political tool, and revealed the agency of Muslim youth of making their own forms of Islam in America. I have also shown how their religious lives are enacted and expressed through relationships, to other Muslims and non-Muslims.

In the field of American youth religion, my chief contribution has been to complicate the idea of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism in light of Muslim youth experience. Christian Smith’s theory of a harmonizing, individualistic, apolitical interfaith religion is not adequate to describe the religious practices and friendships emerging among Muslim youth. Muslim youth making a place to practice in the South and in America is always a political act because Islam still rests outside or on the edges of American Civil Religion, as recent events in the United States has made abundantly clear. They make this space in the context of meaningful interfaith relationships which cannot be reduced to an anemic tolerance of individualism but look like the robust tolerance of friendship. Through their practice and friendships, Muslim youth are remaking Islam, America, and the South.
**New Horizons**

This study is only the beginning of sprawling opportunities to explore the religious lives of Muslim youth in the American South. I have given snapshots of Muslim youth life in particular cities, but ethnographies of Muslim lives in particular cities and other areas of the South will provide a closer reading of how their practices and relationships unfold in intimate geographies. I also hope scholars will drill down on the experience of Muslim American youth belonging to minority Islamic sects, such as Sufi or Shia. On the other end, more extensive and larger surveys across the region and comparatively to other regions could confirm or challenge my findings on the emerging pillars of American Islam. Longitudinal studies will also widen the scope of how the religious lives of Muslim youth in the South are developing into young adulthood.

I initially planned to include another pillar, that of activism and community service. I began to see the importance of these practices in the lives of Muslim youth, but did not have enough material to justify attention at this time. Further study could follow Muslim youth through these socially engaged faith actions, drawing more light to how they forge their religious practice through relationships and in work with religious as well as secular institutions.

One fascinating thread I uncovered was the prominence of Jesus in ways Muslim youth explain and speak for Islam. Of course, Jesus is a prophet of Islam and honored in the Qur’an, but most Southern Christians do not know this. There are rich opportunities to map the intersection of devotion to Jesus in the interactions and relationships of Muslim youth. Also, in the words of Muslim youth, I began to detect a way of speaking of Muhammad similar to the way Evangelical Christians speak of
Jesus, especially through the use of language bordering on the romantic. Further study can elucidate how these theological threads are developing among youth.

As I have shown, these religious commonalities are not just experienced in dialogue and conflict, but in the intimacy of interfaith friendships also. I have only scratched the surface of these relationships, with much more complexity which can be studied. The concept of friendship is a powerful new addition to the study of Muslim youth, going beyond the sterile and politically loaded categories of contact zone and ally.

In this chapter, I have summed up how my thesis argued that, through a relational practice of Islam, Muslim youth in the American South come together with Muslims and non-Muslims. Then, I illuminated my contributions to the study of Muslim youth in America, in the South, and youth religion in general. Finally, I suggested horizons for further study in the region and in the relationships of Muslim youth. I hope to continue bringing to light to the vibrant lives of Muslim youth in this peculiar region.
APPENDIX
PERSONAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Biographical Info
1. What is your name and age?
2. Where were you born?
3. In what cities/areas have you lived, and for how long?
4. Where did you attend high school? (Area and school)
5. Do you currently belong to an Islamic community (or more than one)? If so, name and describe location, and to the best of your knowledge, its demographics (ethnicity, gender, age, etc.).
6. What other Islamic communities have you belonged to in your life?
7. Have you belonged to other, non-Islamic religious communities? If so, what tradition, what communities and where?

Core of faith.
8. Explain what Islam is.
9. Explain what a Muslim is.
10. What type of Islam do you identify with? (Sunni, Ithna Ashari Shia, Ismaili Shia, Sufi, etc.)
11. Describe your usage of the Qur’an. Where do you experience it? How often? Are you usually reading or listening?
12. How many times do you pray each day? How do you manage that in the non-Muslim sites of your life?
13. Describe the importance of the Prophet Mohammed to you.

Relation to Other Religions
14. What is the relation of Islam to other religions?
15. How is this reflected in your relationships?
16. Describe some experiences you have had of other religions.
17. Describe some friendships you have had with people of other religions.

Influences
18. What verbal sources have influenced your views of other religions? (Holy texts, Books, Magazines, Websites, Videos, Audio recordings etc.). Describe their influence.
19. Are there passages of the Qur’an, other holy texts, or other verbal or visual sources which are important to you in how you related to other religions? Describe their influence.
20. What people have influenced your view of other religions? Describe their influence.
21. What religious communities have influenced your view of other religions? Describe their influence.
22. What events, local, national and international, have influenced your view of other religions? Describe their influence.
LIST OF REFERENCES


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