

FOR LOVE OF NEIGHBOR: ENGAGING  
NARRATIVE AS A MODEL FOR INTERFAITH  
PEDAGOGY

Submitted by Amy Poppinga to the University of Exeter as a  
thesis for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Theology  
In August 2018

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## Abstract

Religious literacy and relationship building between religious groups and individuals remain a crucial need in the United States. This need is particularly acute in 'diversity deserts,' such as religiously exclusive college campuses. Colleges must respond to this need and course curriculum can provide an advantageous and effective starting point. The new and emerging field of Interfaith Studies provides useful language, concepts, and methods that can be applied to research and sources within established academic disciplines to create new pedagogical models to better equip students to live well in a religiously diverse America. By demonstrating how educational objectives from the field of Interfaith Studies can be integrated into existing curricular models that utilize ethnographic narratives, an innovative model of interfaith pedagogy can be created. This method, called the *shared experience* model relies primarily on the work of Oddbjørn Leirvik and Eboo Patel, two leading thinkers in the field of what is being called Interfaith or Interreligious Studies. When applied to four ethnographic narratives of young Muslim Americans constructed from methods rooted in ethnography and narrative inquiry, the *shared experience* model can result in a reader's development of, *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*, two key capacities from Interfaith theory. Acquisition of *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* through engagement with a narrative fosters empathy and admiration - moving the reader from tolerance to appreciation. Ultimately, it results in a self-reflection that prepares the reader to begin to consider and articulate their own narrative identity.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude for everyone who assisted me in completing this project. First, to my family. Eric Poppinga, you have been so patient and there are no words for the steady support you have offered to me from the very beginning. Cole and Luke, you were so little when this all started and now you are old enough to understand why Mom gets a little crazy when a chapter deadline is approaching. You bring me such joy and I will always cherish the time we spent living in Devon, and the two little pairs of muddy boots by the gate that indicated you had another adventurous walk with Dad at the beach while Mom was typing. To my parents and in-laws, thank you for the hours of babysitting and support. Most of all to my mom-my unofficial editor, scribe, and general source of encouragement. You helped pick me up more times than I can count.

Dr. Reed, you quite genuinely, rescued me in the middle of this journey. Your commitment to me went far beyond what should be expected from a supervisor, and there is not a page in this thesis that has not benefitted from your wisdom and expertise. You have shaped me as a scholar, but also as a teacher. You have modeled an ethic for both that I can only strive to emulate in my career. I am sincerely, forever grateful.

I must thank the young Muslims who so openly shared their lives with me over the last several years. I have witnessed all of you extending endless amounts of patience and tolerance in both your personal and professional lives as you field questions and scrutiny about your identity as Muslim Americans. This work is for you. These are your stories. I am so honored to have worked with you and I never anticipated our time together would yield enduring friendships...and wedding invitations! Your love for God and family has continued to inspire my own.

So finally, I thank my Creator. Your love for me has sustained me through dark times. I believe you are the giver of all good things and may I seek to honor you with my words and deeds. "I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me." Ps. 3:5

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# FOR LOVE OF NEIGHBOR: ENGAGING NARRATIVE AS A MODEL FOR INTERFAITH PEDAGOGY

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This thesis will consider how Interfaith theory can be used to engage four self-told narratives of Muslim Americans to further scholarship in the emerging field of Interfaith Studies, and, more specifically, how narratives can be integrated into a proposed pedagogical model for application in diversity deserts - locations where religious diversity is rare to non-existent. The methodological claim in this thesis is that tools developed in the social sciences, namely, narrative inquiry, can be used to good effect by the relatively new interdisciplinary field of study that is variously called Interfaith or Interreligious Studies.<sup>1</sup> When absorbed into Interfaith or Interreligious Studies, the results of various kinds of qualitative research can be employed to help a reader (student) develop both *appreciative knowledge* and a *narrative imagination*, two key outcomes identified as central within the field.<sup>2</sup> This approach, which I refer to as the

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<sup>1</sup> The development of interfaith and interreligious studies can be observed in parallel movements in the United States and Europe. This will be discussed in the Literature Review.

<sup>2</sup> American author and activist, Eboo Patel, is at the forefront of interfaith work in the United States, and in 2013 provided a catalyst in the American context for Interfaith Studies to become an academic field with the publication of "Towards a Field of Interfaith Studies" in the *Journal of Liberal Education*. Though Patel was not the first to propose a separate field of study for interfaith engagement, he continues to be a prominent voice in both academic and civic conversations regarding interfaith efforts. In his two most recent texts, *Sacred Ground: Pluralism, Prejudice and the Promise of America* (Boston: Beacon, 2012), and *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013), Patel identifies essential components for interfaith literacy and leadership, including *appreciative knowledge* and a *narrative imagination*. Patel conceived the skill of *appreciative knowledge* as being related to the "appreciative inquiry method" of organizational development, with the goal being to seek out the "beautiful, admirable, and life-giving" when studying a religious tradition, rather than the "deficits, problems, and ugliness". See Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 113. His conception of *narrative imagination* is based on his interpretation of philosopher Martha Nussbaum's conception of *imaginative empathy*. Nussbaum's concept is articulated as necessary for global citizenship and the civic space, and Patel argues that there are practical implications for interfaith learning and engagement as a part of pluralism. See Martha Nussbaum, *The*

*shared experience* model is particularly useful in specific academic settings in the United States, where greater education and interaction regarding religion and faith is sorely needed.

### **1.1 Background and Historical Context: Religion in the United States**

The context for this study is a proliferation of negative views and misunderstandings of Islam in the United States. In a time when Muslim Americans find themselves under persistent and growing scrutiny in the years after the September of 2001, scholarship that allows Muslim voices to be heard is needed now more than ever.<sup>3</sup> In 2014, a Pew Research Center study concluded that nearly half of U.S. adults (47%) do not know a Muslim. In the wake of the election of President Donald Trump, negative perceptions of Muslims have grown mainly along partisan lines.<sup>4</sup> This combination of a lack of interaction between religious groups as well as an identified knowledge gap regarding religion is resulting in a society that does not know how to live well with religious diversity.<sup>5</sup>

2001, American professor of Religion, Robert Nash, warned that a pluralistic society will only be achieved when spirituality, faith, and religion are brought to the forefront both on college campuses and nationally.<sup>6</sup> As a potential remedy, Nash

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*New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012), as well as *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Nussbaum contends, "Literary (narrative) imagination develops compassion, compassion promotes civic responsibility, and inspires a responsibility to teach works that promote compassion." Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 100.

<sup>3</sup> In the last decade, there has been an explosion in the number of texts that offer primary introductions on Islam as well as on Muslim experiences in the United States. Simultaneously, there has been growth in the production of materials that capitalize on fear of Islam, or that offer gross misrepresentations.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, "U.S. Muslims Concerned About Their Place in Society but Continue to Live the American Dream," July 26, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 506-507. In their large survey of religion in the United States, Putnam and Campbell observe that, while America is remarkably devout and diverse, equal respect for religious traditions outside of one's own is not common. It was determined that Muslims (along with Mormons and Buddhists) were perceived the most negatively by other religious groups.

<sup>6</sup> Robert J. Nash, *Religious Pluralism in the Academy* (New York City: Peter Lang, 2001). Religious education and literacy had not, historically been a part of school curriculum. In the 1960s through to the end of the 1990s, there were strategic efforts to privatize religion and remove it from public education; this was a means to lessen conflict and prevent the stigmatization of those who held no belief, as opposed to an attempt to protect religious minorities. Though well intentioned, this wholesale erasure of religion and its influence has resulted in a general populace that lacks basic education regarding different religions,

advocated for the American university to be open to the integration of religious-spiritual issues as the proper place to further religious education and promote pluralism. While a traditional method for promoting the appreciation of religious difference has been interfaith dialogue, there has been a shift in the last two decades, and specifically the last ten years, towards reconsidering how to most effectively bring about “change.”<sup>7</sup> Philosopher of Education, Warren Nord, has long advised that the academy must take religion seriously and that to do so, “requires that religion is understood from the inside, studied in sufficient depth to make sense of it, treated as a live option in its most compelling forms, and allowed to contend with secular traditions, narratives, and worldviews”.<sup>8</sup> Religion and religious expression cannot be treated as if they are static.

As Nord observes, most K-12 and university students in the United States learn little about religion – except perhaps “in the context of distant history...” consequently, the great majority of students earn their high school diplomas and their undergraduate degrees without ever contending with a live religious idea.”<sup>9</sup> The aforementioned Pew study (2014), in addition to studies conducted by the Gallup research group, reveal that while prejudice and mistrust of American Muslims continues to be a growing concern, it is particularly acute in Christian communities.<sup>10</sup> A central reason for this is supported by the Pew findings previously stated; there is an acute lack of interaction between American Muslims and American Christians. There must be more intentional opportunities to know one another.

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has not been taught to consider the role of religion as a shaping force in current society, and is unaware of the ways in which a religiously diverse population has been a longstanding reality within American history.

<sup>7</sup> Scholars point to September 11, 2001 as the watershed event that brought the need for greater religious understanding to the forefront. The development in the field of Interfaith Studies over the past fifteen years will be examined in Chapter Two.

<sup>8</sup> Warren A. Nord, *Does God Make a Difference? Taking Religion Seriously in Our Schools and Universities* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 196. Nord, who passed away in 2010, was one of the foremost authorities on the intersection between religion and education. His 1998 handbook for teachers, *Taking Religion Seriously Across Curriculum*, (co-authored with Charles C. Haynes) is still highly regarded for its continued relevance.

<sup>9</sup> Nord, *Does God Make a Difference*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Pew Research Center, “How Americans feel about Religious Groups,” July 16, 2014. Available online at [www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/](http://www.pewforum.org/2014/07/16/how-americans-feel-about-religious-groups/) Last accessed February 7, 2017).

It is for these reasons that I consider communities like these to be diversity deserts. Since 2015, distrust and prejudice towards American Muslims, and towards Islam more broadly, has continued to increase. This is despite strategic efforts from within the Muslim community, both large scale and small, to increase awareness and education about life as a Muslim in the United States.<sup>11</sup> This prejudice has been compounded by the rapid spread of misinformation that dominates news outlets and other forms of media.

## 1.2 Researcher's Perspective

I teach and conduct research in a diversity desert. Though not ascribing to a label of “evangelical” Christian, my teaching and research take place within a predominantly evangelical environment.<sup>12</sup> This is my main audience. The reason that I label my environment this way is three-fold. Firstly, the institution where I teach is tied to a denomination called Converge Worldwide, an outgrowth of the Swedish-Baptist immigrant movement to the United States in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The founders of the institution traced their religious roots to the German Protestant Pietist movements of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>13</sup> The university continues to embrace this Pietist heritage, a tradition that places emphasis on transformation and intellectual inquiry.<sup>14</sup> While the

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<sup>11</sup> Examples of efforts can be seen in academia, as well as through local and national efforts by both groups and individuals, such as the development of outreach organizations, educational campaigns, films and documentaries, and even blogs.

<sup>12</sup> I recognize that evangelical is a nearly impossible term to define and that it has various expressions in the United States. I am going to refer to David Bebbington's ‘quadrilateral’ which defines evangelicals as having four shared qualities: Biblicism, a focus on Jesus Christ's crucifixion and its saving effects, the belief that humans need to be converted, and the belief that faith must be active – influence all aspects of one's life. David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1930s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989). My description of my context and my interactions with students who increasingly desire distance from any kind of label prove to me this difficulty but I know it matters. Current president of the Barna Group, David Kinnaman observes, “The way one defines ‘evangelical’ influences the story they tell about the most influential group within the most influential religion in the world's most influential country.” (*Good Faith: Being a Good Christian When Society Thinks You're Irrelevant and Extreme*, Baker, 2016)

<sup>13</sup> For more on the history of Pietism and its influence on evangelical movements, see Christian T. Collins Winn, *The Pietist Impulse in Christianity* (Cambridge: James Clarke and Co., 2012).

<sup>14</sup> See, Christopher Gehrz, *The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education: Forming Whole and Holy Persons* (Downers Grove: IL: Intervarsity Press, 2015). Gehrz offers a history of the Pietist tradition and its influence on evangelical movements and denominations. Though both Pietism and evangelicalism have often been criticized for being anti-intellectual, Gehrz argues (and my institution embraces his argument) that the historical roots of Pietism reveal a movement that was deeply committed to education,

word “evangelical” is not used anywhere in our literature, we are commonly recognized – both by those inside and outside of school – as being under the vast evangelical umbrella, as we do not fit into either a Mainline Protestant or Catholic tradition. Secondly, the majority of our students self-identify as coming from evangelical backgrounds, whether as a member of a denomination (Evangelical Covenant, Evangelical-Free) or as a category of identity. Thirdly, markers of evangelicalism shape our campus culture in both formal and informal ways. For example, the music and sermons that form weekly chapels, the texts used for student Bible studies, and the phrases used to define institutional mission and campus community life all signal the evangelical influence. I identify “markers” as language that tend to over-emphasize individual expression and relational aspects of religious commitment. This has created a comfortable environment for some, but potential discomfort for those visiting our campus. Recall the earlier Pew survey which concluded that nearly half of U.S. adults do not know a Muslim. Our campus does not have any students who identify as Muslim, and, consequently, many of the students at our institution leave college without ever having encountered Islam in any capacity.

This thesis addresses the question of the responsibility of Christian scholars who teach at institutions like mine to help address some of these issues. Drawing upon scholarship that evidences the need for applications of interfaith theory, I assume a working imperative that scholars operating in predominantly Christian contexts should provide both voluntary and intentional encounters between Christians and Muslims that allow Muslims to speak for themselves. If these crucial moments of encounter are not going to happen organically in dormitories or on athletic teams, then I argue it is the responsibility of the school and instructor to make certain that they occur in the space where we do have authority - the classroom. Muslims must be invited into the spaces and places where they are either not present, or not historically welcome. For my own teaching, these invitations are a means to model and practice hospitality. I interpret

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which can, at minimum, be observed in the number of higher learning institutions that were founded by Pietist groups in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Much of the language used by the university describes this approach to education – for example the subtitle of Gehrz’s text – are inspired by the Pietist emphasis on heart and mind working together. Note the mission statement of the university: “Boldly informed and motivated by the Christian faith, Bethel University educates and energizes men and women for excellence in leadership, scholarship, and service.” See, “*Mission, Vision, and Values*,” *Bethel University*. Available online at [www.bethel.edu/about/mission-vision](http://www.bethel.edu/about/mission-vision). Accessed January 26, 2017.

them as an expression of the biblical commandment to love thy neighbor.<sup>15</sup> For my students, religiously isolated in a classroom, one of the most instrumental teaching tools I have used thus far to equip my students as educated and empathetic neighbors is self-told narratives.<sup>16</sup>

When considering my end of the semester evaluations, I have determined that lying beneath the surface of many student comments in my classes, particularly in the first few weeks of class, is a real, even if unfounded, fear of Islam.<sup>17</sup> This is not something that can be ignored, and it should not be treated as immature or ignorant. It takes time for students to recognize that their fear often represents deeper dynamics. From their own reflections, I have identified two key dynamics. Firstly, this fear of Islam is often the result of having little to no interaction with Muslims. Secondly, Christians must be honest that these fears have resulted in a general reluctance to study Islam from a fair and balanced perspective. In my experience, this is not because Christians truly think they are guarding our hearts by avoiding evil, though that is often a first response. Much of the hostility directed towards Muslims in the United States is the result of ignorance, biased coverage by the media, and the spreading of false information. At the time of the terrorist attacks against the US on September 11, 2001, I was two weeks into my M.A. program in Islamic Studies. My five fellow students and I were often asked to give seminars on Islam to churches and other civic groups. On one particular phone call, I confessed to the pastor that I had only been in school for two weeks and was certainly not an expert. He replied, “Two weeks has given you far more than any of us know or understand.” I realized that, sadly, faith communities in particular were in bad shape when it came to education regarding other religions. Perhaps even more sad is the lucrative cottage industry that has emerged in the United States for mainly Christian authors and speakers to spread false information about Islam that only serves to further inaccurate stereotypes and foster unfounded fear.

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<sup>15</sup> Mark 12:31 reads, “the second commandment is this, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”

<sup>16</sup> Throughout the narratives in Chapters Four, Five, and Six, I will demonstrate how to apply my *shared* experience model. In the final chapter, I will detail how I use narratives to good effect in the classroom.

<sup>17</sup> I use the description of ‘fear’ here as this is the word often used by students in their end of the semester evaluations when asked to consider how their impressions and attitudes have changed over the course of the class. As I discuss the roots of the fear, I am drawing on comments from these evaluations and our final discussion which is required as a component of end the semester assessment.

Instead of combating fear by seeking knowledge, it is my observation that within my school community it is often more comfortable to remain ignorant, mainly because of the insecurity it can cause to one's own Christian belief. This approach not only results in destructive relationships with Muslim neighbors – it often prevents relationships altogether.

This is why I have come to the conclusion that, in addition to teaching history, my work with students is enriched by a pedagogical application of interfaith engagement. Interfaith theory provides me with a framework with which to work towards both the intellectual inquiry and personal transformation that my university identifies as the central objectives of education. Students in this unique setting, devoid of broader religious diversity, must have academic opportunities to develop interfaith skills and competency. The classroom can be an effective location to develop skills such as *appreciative knowledge* and a *narrative imagination* in order to help students become more productive and inclusive members of society. This will make them better neighbors. While there is great potential for these skills to be obtained, I argue that reading and critical engagement with ethnographic narratives through my own interpretation of what scholar and leading interfaith theorist Oddbjørn Leirvik calls a “relational” model of interfaith theory can provide one such opportunity for these students to encounter, and begin to appreciate, religious perspectives that are not present in their school community.<sup>18</sup> I have seen this work in action. I would like to use an example from my own teaching experience that served as a starting point for my increased interest in a more formal and academic inquiry into interfaith theory.

### **1.3. An Example from My Own Teaching Context**

In 2011, I was teaching a course on the history of Islam and Muslims in the United States, at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota. I had reached out to the Muslim Student Association chapter at the large public university nearby to inquire if any students would like to come and speak in the class, and Kasim was one of the first to

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<sup>18</sup> Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?*, 196. Nord proposes that to gain such knowledge – “inside understanding” – religion must be “studied in some depth, using primary sources that enable students to get inside the hearts and minds of people within a religious tradition” and to help students gain some sense of the “implications of that religion for how to make sense of the world here and now.” (p.83).

respond. His goals were to discuss the role religion played in his daily life on a campus where, as a Muslim, he is the religious minority, and to tell students about the work of the MSA. He was an engaging speaker, and what ensued was a respectful encounter, with some back-and-forth questioning and shared laughter between Christians and Muslims, who discovered they were quite connected through their common challenges as young people trying to balance the influences of religion, culture, and family expectations as they paved their way into adulthood.

After the class was over, a few students lingered to exchange their email address with Kasim, and one of the students commented that she had not realized that dating, relationships, and marriage were just as challenging for young Muslims as she perceived them to be for young Christians. Kasim nodded in agreement and offered an example of his own experience through a recent conversation with his parents regarding his reluctance to make marriage a priority. He noted the dilemma he faced as he and his parents were not exactly on the same page, and they did not think delaying marriage was a wise plan.<sup>19</sup>

The preceding account serves as a fitting example of successful interfaith interaction. The conversation between Kasim and my students provides a snapshot of the objective of this thesis. In the initial hour of Kasim's time with my class, we became involved in what could be characterized as a more traditional form of interfaith dialogue. Kasim told the students about his religion, and about how he lives out his belief and practice. A few outspoken students asked questions, and Kasim would often respond by rooting his answer in verses from the Qur'an or other sources from the Islamic Tradition.<sup>20</sup> Some of my students would respond by referencing scriptures from the Bible. It was a positive interaction, and students certainly gained new knowledge.

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<sup>19</sup>Kasim's parents had married when Kasim's father was twenty-two and his mother just nineteen. By the time Kasim's Palestinian father was thirty, he had moved his family of six to three different countries and had finished two degrees. Kasim recalled telling his parents, "Your twenty-two is not my twenty-two" implying that Kasim's life in Minnesota was starkly different than his parents had been when they married in Palestine in the 1980s. For Kasim, though he stated he wanted to get married at some point, in 2011 he did not regard marriage as the start of his adult life. Instead, he perceived marriage as something for which he would be ready after he proved to himself that he could make it as a single, educated Muslim man in the United States. Kasim was determined that he needed to answer the question of-"Who am I?" before joining his life with another.

<sup>20</sup> Kasim would also reference specific *hadith*, the recorded "sayings" of the Prophet Muhammad, based on his teachings through his words and sermons.



While this interaction was clearly a positive learning experience, what took place more informally after the class was over was markedly different. The students who stayed to speak more casually with Kasim were not those who asked questions during the more formal session. A few were students who rarely ever spoke in class. Yet, they were now involved in a different form of interaction as the topic had changed from foundational religious beliefs to marriage and family relationships; they were now having a conversation. Both Kasim and the Christian students were speaking with vulnerability. No one seemed concerned with defending their faith or presenting it pristinely – instead they were having a candid discussion around a challenging topic of common interest. Using Patel’s language, the students were considering how “others who orient around religion differently” come together around a shared concern.<sup>21</sup> This more thoughtful conversation had come closer to what I would define as interfaith engagement. The students were observably affected by Kasim’s story and his willingness to share openly. What most captivated them was not something dramatic or dynamic, but rather the “ordinary” and the every-day relatability they found with Kasim as they discussed the crossroads between religion and relationships.<sup>22</sup>

### **1.3.a Applying My Experience**

Recalling that day, I remember trying to determine what made that interaction so successful. Did the academic setting of a classroom make students who would otherwise never come within a mile of an interfaith event more comfortable? Had it helped that the students already had a base level of historical and theological knowledge about Islam? Was it that Kasim, who has an infectious personality, quickly disarmed most of the class with his humor and self-deprecation? Or was it that, in the topic of marriage and relationships, we had found something that many young Christians and Muslims mutually like to talk about?

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<sup>21</sup> Eboo Patel, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2013)

<sup>22</sup> Robert J. Nash, “A Faculty Member’s View on Moral Conversations from the Classroom”, in *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation*, eds. Robert J. Nash, DeMethra LaSha Bradley, and Arthur W. Chickering (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 65-97. Nash observes that students are often more willing and able to talk about religion when “we are able to de-emphasize the revelational, doctrinal, and corporate-institutional elements of religion.” He does not propose those be avoided altogether, but rather suggests that starting here results in a continued defensiveness, particularly for students who feel insecure in their own beliefs.

I contend it was a combination of all of these elements. The unique learning moment that I had witnessed happened at the intersection between the academic and the relational. This thesis reflects language and concepts that helped better articulate what was informally taking place in my classroom. Each of the aspects just mentioned can potentially move students toward a higher level of *appreciative knowledge*. Furthermore, the interaction with Kasim had moved into transformative territory as part of developing a *narrative identity* is listening to/reading how others have done so. The observation that gave rise to this thesis is that listening to Kasim voice his own views on faith and religion made it easier for my students to begin to articulate their own. Ultimately, at the most basic level, I have found in twelve years of teaching that students respond well to stories. Robert Nash advises that learning to regard a narrative as a story, as opposed to an argument, creates an openness in the student for findings strengths as well as weaknesses.<sup>23</sup> I witnessed this with my students that day.

Interfaith theory proposes that I can help my students to be self-reflective through demonstrating self-reflection and critique as an ongoing part of my own identity as a scholar, teacher, and a religious being. Interfaith theory calls for the teacher or researcher to be, in Leirvik's words, an "agent in the space between," fully acknowledging that I am a "potential agent for change in the study of religion in today's world."<sup>24</sup> This is "relational" interfaith theory in action, and a recognition of my own intersectionality. Leirvik defines the relational perspective as necessitating, "an awareness of how religions relate not only to each other, but also to internal plurality and to other social systems and society at large."<sup>25</sup> This relational perspective cannot be separated from how I conduct a course in History or Religious Studies – nor, argue

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<sup>23</sup> Robert J. Nash, *Faith, Hype, and Clarity: Teaching about Religion in American Schools and Colleges* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999) 32-33. This text has been invaluable in my teaching. Nash presents innovative pedagogical strategies for teaching religion, based on the core commitment that each idea "has the right to be heard and understood." Nash proposes specific questions for students to consider when engaging stories "at the level of narrative," suggesting the reader ask things like: "Does the story touch our lives in some ways? Does it hold together? Does it help us to see the 'real world' of the subject in a more imaginative way? What do you think of the author's religious language?" See also, Nash, Bradley, and Chickering (eds.) *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation*.

<sup>24</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

<sup>25</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 5.

Interfaith Studies scholars, does it need to be. Interfaith theory becomes another key implement in the tool kit.

The field of Interfaith Studies provides a postmodern way of doing scholarship that centers on religion and religious experiences, recognizing them not as separate, but rather as entwined in one's learning process. In the case of Interreligious Studies, it is hard to see how any scholar could say that he or she is not a part of the studied field. I live and operate in a space between religion, culture, and my secular world. There is no location to conduct the academic research I am drawn to that would allow me to separate myself from that reality. Interfaith Studies has afforded me a legitimate position to recognize all of these spaces and their influences. So, as Leirvik argues, "interreligious studies thus become studies of conflicts that you are already a part of."<sup>26</sup>

#### **1.4 Statement of Research Problem, and Aims of the Thesis**

Building primarily on the work of two key scholars in the field of Interfaith Studies, Oddbjorn Leirvik and Eboo Patel, this thesis demonstrates how utilizing a *relational* model (Leirvik) from interfaith theory to approach an ethnographic narrative can move the reader beyond information gathering and analysis to a level which allows for the acquisition of *appreciative knowledge* and the cultivation of a *narrative imagination*. Leirvik defines a "relational approach to the study of religion as a defining feature of 'interreligious' studies. The relational perspective necessitates an awareness of how religions relate not only to each other, but also to internal plurality and to other social systems and societies at large."<sup>27</sup> Patel defines *appreciative knowledge* as occurring when individuals hold correct and positive knowledge about a worldview, as opposed to incorrect or selective knowledge.<sup>28</sup> Patel also calls for the active cultivation of what ethicist Martha Nussbaum coined a *narrative imagination*. Nussbaum defines narrative imagination as developing when one begins to develop compassion towards the "other". This compassion promotes civic responsibility and inspires a responsibility to

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<sup>26</sup> Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies* 1.

<sup>28</sup> Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer, "The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities", *Journal of College and Character* 12, no.1 (February 2001): 1-9.

teach works that promote compassion.<sup>29</sup> These concepts will be further discussed in Chapter Two.

Against the backdrop of the emerging field of Interfaith Studies, this thesis claims that more narratives of Muslim Americans are needed to bring in new voices and stories that counter existing stereotypes. Ethnographic narratives provide two crucial ways for Muslim voices to be brought into the spaces where they have been, and may continue to be, historically silent. Firstly, narratives play a crucial role in the telling of Muslim American history – a history that, while not new, has been both neglected and ignored.<sup>30</sup> The use of individual narratives can work to both educate and illuminate the reader, while also celebrating the “other” who has now been given a voice. These personal encounters add to other types of evidence being used to create a more developed picture of Muslim American life, both past and present. Secondly, narratives have value as a meaningful contribution within the new and emerging field of Interfaith/Interreligious Studies, as they assist the reader with the development of *appreciative knowledge* and a *narrative imagination*, two core interfaith competencies.

I contend Interfaith Studies has the potential to be an innovative discipline when it actively pursues research and scholarship that integrates existing and established methodologies with identifiable procedures for telling human stories. This type of research is desperately needed for two crucial reasons: (1) to build and expand the innovative work being accomplished in the emerging field of Interfaith Studies, and (2) to provide effective pedagogical models for utilizing interfaith theory within the classroom. Ethnographic narratives provide one such example of how this fusion can take place, as the emerging practices of Interfaith Studies offer the reader a lens or framework through which to approach ethnographic narratives. Though face-to-face interaction is essential, the reading of narratives can provide a productive starting place for audiences who may be less willing to engage religious diversity.<sup>31</sup> As Martin Marty

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<sup>29</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 100.

<sup>30</sup> See Edward Curtis, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009)

<sup>31</sup> Burton Visotzky, “It Begins with a Text”, in *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation*, eds. Jennifer Howe Peace, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2012),40. Visotzky observes that “Interfaith dialogue takes place on all levels: local, national, and international. In each venue we start with our own traditions, our own teachings, our own

observes, engaging in story results in interactions that are, “more open-ended than are dogmas, doctrines, creeds, and tenets. Through stories, the stranger becomes a person.”<sup>32</sup> Marshall Ganz argues stories are what allow us to communicate our values to one another.<sup>33</sup>

Despite a growing body of literature on Interfaith theory, key scholars in the field of Interfaith Studies are actively seeking examples of disciplinary integration, but the problem is that few have yet to be produced. Existing work on Interfaith Studies is concerned primarily with developmental theory, rationale for the existence of this new field, and stories of encounter between established religious or academic leaders. As of yet, there are no published texts that provide in the same volume both narratives and a pedagogy for how to approach them. What I have tried to achieve here is to provide both the stories (narratives) and a pedagogical model for engaging them in the same space. Current anthologies, such as *My Neighbor’s Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation* (2012), by Jennifer Howe Peace, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley tend to favor the stories and experiences of high-profile individuals that, while compelling, can be hard to relate to for the average college student. As essential as self-authored stories can be, narratives that have been constructed over time and according to established models of ethnography can create powerful teaching tools, while still maintaining the integrity of the individual at the center of the story.

## 1.5 Conceptual Framework

Based on my own teaching experience, I propose narratives can enhance the curriculum of a scholar working with a predominantly Christian audience in two distinct ways. Firstly, narratives have the capacity to create commonality, which functions as a seed to foster both empathy and compassion – the two characteristics Nussbaum identifies as necessary for practicing *imaginative capacity*. For Nussbaum, this means, “developing the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person

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texts and interpretations. And in turn, we learn those of our partners. Text is a way in, a place where we can meet and study, learn, and be inspired.”

<sup>32</sup> Martin E. Marty, *When Faiths Collide* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 145.

<sup>33</sup> Marshall Ganz, “Why Stories Matter”, *Sojourners* (March 2009): 16-21.

different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person's story, and to understand the emotions, wishes, and desires that someone in that place might have."<sup>34</sup> In addition to a common characteristic such as gender or race, more essential is the association of having what historical anthropologist of Islam, Zareena Grewal, identifies as a *shared experience*. That is, a point of connection revolving around a common experience or crisis.<sup>35</sup> Identifying a *shared experience*, or "common ground", allows the reader to have their mind – and possibly their heart – opened.<sup>36</sup> It is for this reason I will refer to my pedagogical approach as the *shared experience* method.

This thesis includes the ethnographic narratives of four young Muslims in the state of Minnesota. Though each was initially interviewed because of their interest in talking about the subject of marriage, over time the interviews and interactions revealed far more about each interview participant's identity, role within their family, religious commitment and expression, and how they view themselves as an American. These all can create *shared experiences* between the reader and subject of the narrative.<sup>37</sup> While

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<sup>34</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*

<sup>35</sup> Zareena Grewal, "Imagined Cartographies: Crisis, Development, and Islam in America." (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006), 15. Grewal contends that research on Muslim Americans can successfully be framed around common experiences or crises. This is what Grewal refers to as *shared experience*. Much of Grewal's research centers on questions related to religion, race, and identity in American Muslim communities. Grewal's work builds on that of ground-breaking anthropologist, Talal Asad, who addresses the differences between universal and local conceptions of Islam. Asad argued that, "the most urgent need for an anthropology of Islam is a matter not so much of finding the right scale but of formulating the right concept." The influential concept Asad put forth was the idea of a "discursive tradition", as Islam is constantly being negotiated, and this must be acknowledged and reflected in representations of Muslims. I will further discuss *shared experience* in the Literature Review.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2008), 96. Cornille suggests that common ground can be found in things like, "secularization, world peace, human suffering, or the damages visited upon the environment."

<sup>37</sup> In 2010, as I began my initial dissertation research, I was a part of a committee overseeing interfaith service work between a group of Muslim and Christian high school and college students. A somewhat heated debate had taken place one evening over the topic of the Christian Trinity and the Islamic view of the "oneness" (*tawhid*) of God. The conversation came to an awkward standstill. The moderator, Faruq – a young African American convert from Christianity to Islam – asked the group if perhaps they should explore a topic they could agree upon. Someone shouted out, "dating!" Laughter erupted on both sides of the room, which was separated not by faith, but rather by gender. A young Somali woman, aged eighteen, bravely became the first to speak, saying quietly, "relationships are hard." Heads all over the room nodded. This simple statement launched a candid conversation that lasted for an hour, covering topics such as sexual temptation, struggles with school, parents, peer pressure, and, ultimately, marriage. Verbal contributions came from all demographic groups present. There were comments from seventy-year-old community elders as frequently as from the college-age students. When time was up, it was determined there was still much left to be discussed at the next meeting. While agreement could not be

each individual reader may identify a new and different *shared experience* in the narratives presented here, thoughts on marriage and individual religious expression are noteworthy as they both speak directly to wider debates within Muslim American circles while also resonating with Christian Americans at the same stage of young adulthood.

The inclusion of narratives also helps educators move beyond blatant course outcomes to the often unspoken, but crucial, aspects of learning that are – inopportune – referred to as “soft skills” such as *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*. In both our marketing materials and our core values, my university regards these as skills necessary for personal *transformation*. To pursue these educational goals, I rely on Catherine Cornille’s five “essential conditions” for interreligious dialogue: humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality.<sup>38</sup> While narratives do not bring a reader into direct dialogue with another, they provide the reader with the opportunity to practice each of Cornille’s conditions. In my own use of narratives in the classroom, students often remark that stories attach something “real” to the class. I have been told by many students that the reading of a narrative has provided their first genuine encounter with a Muslim. My responsibility is to set the stage for narrative and teach my students how to take on the primary role of “listener”. Narratives can push the reader to begin from this position of listener in a way other elements of curriculum do not. This posture gives power to the voice in the text; as the reader is firmly in the position of listener, there is an element of protection over the voice speaking, and the interaction has structure and intention. Reading a narrative does not easily deteriorate into debates over theology or defense of one’s belief, which, all too often, is what many of my students think engagement with religious difference has to mean.<sup>39</sup>

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reached regarding the nature of God, there was consensus that young, religiously devout Americans face major challenges in both their experiences with and expectations regarding the opposite sex.

<sup>38</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2008)

<sup>39</sup> This is why Christian students tend to avoid it, or, why the students that do tend to show up at interfaith events are those looking for a debate. When my committee on interfaith engagement surveys students on why they do not participate, the number one response is that students are afraid they do not know enough about Christianity to be able to “defend” it when talking to others from different faith traditions. One of the most successful strategies that we have employed is to carefully construct events around topics or service opportunities that can provide clear common ground. For example, one of our most recent events centered around community gardening. After the students engaged in service together, we shared a meal and discussed how our religious traditions motivate our care for the environment. This event led to another which was centered on poetry and spoken word in Muslim and Christian traditions, which then gave way to an event on women’s experiences in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. While each

Narratives can provide a whole and holistic approach to engaging religious diversity. The goal is to use the narratives to supply the reader with greater intellectual understanding, but also to give them the opportunity to “know” and “connect” with the subject. This relational focus is what differentiates Interfaith Studies from other disciplines. Interfaith asks the reader to move beyond understanding and knowing to the objective of *caring*. To successfully achieve this, the reader needs to be willing to find themselves in the story. As Darrell Fasching explains, “to see life through a story which requires us to welcome the stranger is to be forced to recognize the dignity of the stranger who does not share our story.”<sup>40</sup> This requires vulnerability, another skill that is elevated in Interfaith Studies.

### **1.6. Assumptions and Limitations of the Study**

My purpose is not to provide an overview of the current state of interfaith engagement in the United States, or of what interfaith dialogue in the US looks like. Rather, my goal is to demonstrate how ethnographic narratives can be approached to fit within the new academic field of Interfaith Studies, answering the call for research and writing that applies theory to existing pieces of research. The role of culture (both American and one’s ethnic heritage), age, gender, and religiosity must all be examined in terms of their connection to both the identity negotiation process and attitudes about marriage, which was the initial topic for interview conversations. While these factors all emerge in larger studies, variables such as personal history, family dynamics, and personality traits are essential to crafting a more accurate picture.<sup>41</sup> These variables take time to

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of these events may draw only a select group of students, they provide a place to start. If a student initially attends because they are an environmental science major, but they leave having learned about how a young Muslim is articulating her own ethic of care for the earth, then the event was a success.

<sup>40</sup> Darrell Fasching, *The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996). In anticipation of the impending millennium, Fasching, a religious studies scholar of comparative ethics, made the argument that Christian communities need to abandon a traditional view of “mission” and instead consider the value of “hospitality” towards religious others for Christianity to thrive. Hospitality is often mentioned by interfaith scholars and ethicists as a necessary virtue for pluralism and global citizenship.

<sup>41</sup> Ethnographic methods and Erik Erikson’s psychosocial theory work well together precisely because Erikson’s eight stages of psychosocial development are constructed to build upon one another over time. To better understand the current state of each interview participant (young adulthood), one should look back to their early life and history. Each narrative chapter in this thesis traces the roots and significant experiences of the participants, based on their stories and recollections.



emerge, as familiarity and trust are established between the researcher and the interview participant over the duration of years. Individuals change their minds as their circumstances change, and the researcher working with human subjects must be committed to both negotiating the ups and downs of real life, as well as determining what values interview participants remain committed to in the abstract, even if it is not their present reality.<sup>42</sup>

Though I am interested in oral history, and continue to build my skill in this area, I have chosen to ground my methodology for this research in narrative inquiry and other ethnographic procedures. Oral historians are concerned primarily with collection and preservation of story. Though no less exhaustive, this is a more hands-off role that does not evade responsibility-but rather is a kind of work that requires integrity. Narrative ethnography, though, is in the business of construction, surrounding the voice of the participant with other details from their world. As their narratives unfold, analysis and observations are interwoven. Further explication of the decision to use ethnography and narrative inquiry, as well as the methodological limitations, will be further discussed in chapter three.

While choosing Nadia, Kasim, Amina, and Mohammed may be perceived as further privileging of immigrant Muslim's experiences, which is a consideration in academia, the value of their stories supersedes these apprehensions. I do not frame these as "immigrant" stories but rather a collection of narratives held together by mutual concerns and desires. In turn, approaching the narratives through the lens of interfaith theory adds to the richness of what each has to teach and offer the reader. This decision to acknowledge religion as a primary shaper of one's identity is one that must be respected by academic research, and this is why Interfaith Studies is an appropriate home for this thesis.

This thesis represents only four stories, and, as such, does not seek to represent any Muslim community or ethnic/gender experience as monolithic. As noted, the Muslim community in the United States is a microcosm of the global *ummah*, one that is incredibly diverse. Adding to that diversity are important American voices that contribute to the uniqueness of the *ummah* in the United States including African Americans,

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<sup>42</sup> I will comment on specific challenges in Chapter Three.

converts, and those that identify as LGBTQAI+. The individuals chosen here were all born in other countries and do not have ties to the generational legacy of Islam in the United States. However, all are worthy representatives of Muslim life in the state of Minnesota, which has its own unique culture and personality.

This is not a work of theology, and there is no attempt to draw conclusions about Islam or Islamic belief from the narratives included. The objective is not to uncover new insights or offer detailed analysis related to Muslim views on gender, race, ethnicity, or Islam but rather to hear from a selection of young Muslims regarding how they navigate the intersectionality of their identities, and to consider how a reader can find points of relation. Their comments and observations can certainly be related to existing findings, and this will be reflected in both the narrative chapters and the conclusion. However, my intention here is not to present as an expert on any of these subjects. This is a small study, and, as such, it would be unwise to make determinations about the experiences of the four individuals as being representative of any specific marker of their identity.

This is not a thesis regarding the history of Muslim-Christian interaction or the factors that prevent more Christians, evangelical or otherwise, from participating in interfaith engagement, although some observations are offered. The context for my research is related to both of these issues, but they are not the focus of this study. While I do ascertain narratives are effective for teaching Christian audiences, I do not go into detail about how evangelical audiences can better interact with Muslims. I have tried to establish the context for my research, and throughout the thesis I will be appropriately forthcoming about my own identity as a scholar. However, this thesis is not attempting to provide a model for how a Christian scholar can approach the study of Islam. Rather, the intention of this thesis is to demonstrate how ethnographic narratives can be presented and engaged pedagogically as an example of scholarship that incorporates theory from Interfaith Studies. Describing my context and demonstrating awareness that my own religious identity impact my scholarship are essential requirements within both Interfaith Studies and ethnographic study. Further limitations to the research process will be discussed in chapter three.

## 1.7 Conclusion

In the coming pages I have constructed four dynamic representations of Muslims in Minnesota. These narratives are by no means exhaustive or absolute. This is an initial inquiry into how narratives that reveal common issues related to Muslim Americans in one environment can be approached through a pedagogical model grounded in interfaith theory. The individuals whose stories are “cemented” here reflect small but vibrant pieces in the mosaic of the local Muslim *ummah* in Minnesota.<sup>43</sup> However, while it is centered on the lives of young singles in Minnesota, it addresses issues facing young Christians as well, and the reading of these narratives can result in the development of both *appreciative knowledge* and a *narrative imagination*.<sup>44</sup>

As was discussed in the preceding pages, this research is not without challenges. And yet, recognizing these challenges is not a call for despair. Rather, it presents the opportunity to probe the assumptions and interpretations upon which both young Muslims and Christians attempt to navigate and celebrate their lived realities.<sup>45</sup> Muslim American lawyer and playwright, Wajahat Ali, observed, “If Muslim Americans can learn from the struggles of minority groups before them, we will realize the best ways to escape “our shadow” are by finally telling our own stories in our own voices...The future of Islam in America has to be written by Muslim Americans who boldly grab hold of the conch and become heroes of our narratives.”<sup>46</sup> Scholars Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi have determined that “by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new generation of scholars have begun to challenge the journalistic and older scholarly accounts that cast Muslim Americans as victims of a

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<sup>43</sup> One of my favorite moments was when I asked Mohammed to sign the official letter of ethical approval. As I slid it across the table, I said, “This essentially allows me tell your story.” He smiled and joked good-naturedly, “As you long as you know when to be quiet and let me do the talking.” We have since agreed, in the spirit of GhaneaBassiri, to share the responsibility.

<sup>44</sup> Certainly, this would extend beyond just Christians to any young religious American. I focus primarily on points of connections for Christians because of the student population I work with daily.

<sup>45</sup> In the words of Omid Safi, “I am tired of always being spoken for, but never speaking.”

<sup>46</sup> Wajahat Ali, “The Power of Storytelling: Creating a New Future for Muslim Americans,” *Patheos*, August 17, 2010. Available online at <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Power-of-Storytelling-Creating-a-New-Future-for-American-Muslims.html> Last accessed January 20, 2015.

conflict between Islamic and American values.”<sup>47</sup> Now the additional responsibility is for scholars across disciplines to make room for these accounts to be heard.

There is no school that will present students with a perfect picture of American diversity. Students choosing to attend schools that have strong religious foundations or active religious identities often do so because they themselves embrace religion as a leading aspect of identity, and they are concerned that their religious commitment may result in marginalization.<sup>48</sup> While attending a private religious college may offer the benefit of having one’s religious identity be respected and welcomed in their academic experience, this self-selection often means students spend four or more years at a critical stage of life development without the benefit of exposure to and encounter with religious difference. This results in a body of graduates that are ill-prepared to enter a workforce and a broader American society that looks very different than their campus. This lack of preparedness for entering into a diverse society is detrimental not only for the American community, but also for the Christian community and the Christian individual. As Warred Nord warns, “If students are to understand different cultures, intellectual traditions, and academic disciplines they must be able to get inside them. They must acquire some sense of how their members or advocates understand them, not how we understand them given our preconceptions and values.”<sup>49</sup>

The methods of interfaith engagement provide a reader with a lens or framework through which to approach ethnographic narratives. The aim is not to pigeon-hole the interview participant’s identity, but to allow them the space to explore their identity as they move through life. In the words of Patel, “Nobody is defined entirely by his or her

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<sup>47</sup> Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi, “American Islam, Muslim Americans, and the American Experiment”, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew J. Mayhew, Nicholas A. Bowman, and Alyssa Bryant Rockenbach, ‘Silencing Whom?: Linking Campus Climates for Religious, Spiritual, and Worldview Diversity to Student Worldviews’, *Journal of Higher Education* 85, no. 2 (Mar/Apr 2014): 219-245. In the results gained through conducting a large, longitudinal study of students on American college campuses (Campus Religion and Spiritual Climate Survey, or CRSCS), Mayhew, Bowman, and Rockenbach found that “although students in the religious majority may enjoy privileges associated with growing up in a country where the prevailing narrative normalizes the Christian experience, these students perceive and experience the campus climate as more negative than students from other faith traditions and non-religious students. Such findings place these students in a distinctive developmental location that forces them to reconcile feelings or privilege born from exposure to and participation in a privileged narrative with those of isolation and hostility brought on from openly aligning with that narrative.” 240.

<sup>49</sup> Nord, *Does God Make a Difference?* 110.

religious identity” and, instead, a reader must recognize the intersectional identity of the subject of the narratives.<sup>50</sup> These interview participants all identify as Muslims, but their religious identity is always “intersecting with other identities like race, class, gender, geography, politics, ethnicity, nationality, and sexuality.”<sup>51</sup> These are all at work in an individual’s pattern of “being, believing, and belonging.”<sup>52</sup>

Ultimately, narratives offer the reader a chance to practice engagement with a religious other by entering into their world for a time. While it cannot be proved that reading the narrative of Nadia will result in the reader actively fighting intolerance, as Catherine Cornille argues, the willingness to try “to enter into the religious worldview and experience of the other may widen one’s religious horizon.”<sup>53</sup> That is, the thoughtful reading of another’s story becomes a worthy place to start.

## 1.8 Thesis Structure

Organized into seven chapters, this thesis is centered around the narratives of four Muslim Americans. A series of personal exchanges with young adult Muslims from Muslim Student Associations in Minnesota, combined with continued research on gaps in the literature as well as expertise from respected scholars and members of the Muslim *ummah*, solidified the decision to center this study on the perspectives of single Muslims in Minnesota who are beginning to think more seriously about marriage.<sup>54</sup> As the proposal for the project began to take shape it became evident that conversations around marriage revealed greater issues for the young Muslims interviewed.

As I have been involved in the Interfaith Studies movement in my community and on a national scale, I have chosen to situate this research within the American context. More specifically, I will focus on Interfaith Studies as it has come to be understood in the past

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<sup>50</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 79.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*, 214.

<sup>54</sup> Two years were spent conducting a preliminary investigation on the topic of marriage in Islam ,starting with a historical inquiry into details such as ceremonies, contracts, rights and responsibilities, etc. Then, the focus then shifted to Muslim marriages in the United States, both in form and function, as my interest in the topic of marriage began to expand and change mainly from the influence of personal conversations with Muslim friends and acquaintances. Marriage became a launching point for further conversation, as opposed to central topic of my research agenda.

decade. Following this introduction, the second chapter offers an overview of the historical development of the field of Interfaith Studies, a discussion of key leaders in the movement and how I have synthesized their work to create my own pedagogical application, a review of related literature, a discussion of present challenges facing Interfaith Studies, and a consideration of how I use narratives to define core competencies and concepts. While I will briefly introduce some methodological approaches in the second chapter, the third chapter provides a more thorough description of my methodology, beginning with an explanation and rationale for research methods, and the ways in which those methods have been employed in multiple stages over several years. The narratives will be relayed in chapters four, five, and six. Throughout each narrative chapter, I will identify and discuss how interfaith theory can be applied into a pedagogical model I call the *shared experience* method. The seventh and final chapter will present key findings and conclusions, and consideration for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The objectives of this chapter are threefold. First, I will provide a review of the emerging field of Interfaith Studies by detailing the background against which the field developed and offer a historical summary of the central thinkers who created a space for Interfaith Studies to take root and grow. I will provide descriptions of contemporary key players in the field, specifically Eboo Patel and Oddbjørn Leirvik, identify their similarities and differences, and make an argument for why their methods can be effectively synthesized. I will then briefly discuss the direction the field is taking and consider the work yet to be done, by addressing developing questions and tensions, focusing specifically on those relevant to my research. Next, I will provide an overview of scholarship related to the key concepts and themes emerging from the field relevant to this project, from within the context of using ethnography as a pedagogical tool. More specifically, I will discuss the concepts of *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* and how they can be acquired through the reading of narratives. As my own work takes place in a primarily evangelical environment, I will also briefly discuss literature from authors working with evangelical audiences. Additionally, given that the narratives included in this thesis are from young Muslim Americans, I will detail similar contributions that highlight Muslim American experiences.

Finally, I will provide a review of what I seek to achieve with my research and how it fits within this body of literature. I will briefly address some of the scholarship and themes in Interfaith Studies and American Islam that, while not addressed in my own research, are in need of mentioning. I will present how approaching ethnographic narratives through a methodology rooted in narrative inquiry provides a unique and needed contribution to the field of Interfaith Studies.

#### **2.1. The Emerging field of Interfaith Studies**

In this section, I will offer a more detailed account of how Interfaith Studies has developed over the last ten years as an academic field in the context of the United

States, with some attention being given to parallel movements in Europe. To do so, I will first offer a historical summary of authors and thinkers whose work in moral philosophy and religious studies laid a foundation for interfaith dialogue, and eventually a new field of Interfaith Studies. I will focus primarily on the writings of Martin Buber, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. After providing an overview of the expansion of Interfaith Studies, I will examine the key scholarship presented by those who have developed the models and methods for interfaith engagement that are shaping the field in the last decade. As my research is influenced by the methods proposed by two fundamental scholars, Oddbjørn Leirvik and Eboo Patel, I will provide a detailed overview of their contributions and a rationale for why I have chosen to synthesize their approaches to create my own pedagogical model.

### **2.1.a Historical Roots**

Evolving from the study of traditional modes of dialogue, Interfaith Studies is committed to producing scholarship that explores the junction between teaching, learning, and application. It takes theory seriously but remains committed to theory as a primary means to train “practitioners”. As Interfaith scholar Kusumita Pedersen observes, “over a century of interfaith activity has provided a reservoir of established methods, well-known organizational patterns, and acquaintance with the issues.”<sup>55</sup>

Despite the growing interest and investment in interfaith dialogue over the past twenty years, the concept of interfaith stems back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Regardless of geographic location, scholars active in interfaith circles often reference the World’s Parliament of Religions in 1893 as the beginning of the interfaith movement.<sup>56</sup> Occurring as a part of the World’s Fair, leaders from ten religious traditions came together in

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<sup>55</sup> Kusumita P. Pedersen, "The Interfaith Movement: An Incomplete Assessment", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 41, no. 1 (2004): 74-92. Pedersen, a practicing Buddhist, is Professor Emeritus in Religious Studies at St. Francis University and a member of the Council for a Parliament of the World’s Religions. In 2008, Pedersen contributed to *The World’s Religions after September 11*, a volume documenting the changes in relationships amongst faith groups in the United States in the 21st century.

<sup>56</sup> The *Sourcebook of the World’s Religions: An Interfaith Guide to Religion and Spirituality* was produced as a result of the gathering. In 1993, Leonard Swidler (along with Hans Kung) authored *Toward A Global Ethic: A Declaration of the Parliament of World Religions*, which served to lead people of all faiths to see that there is a common ethical core in all religious traditions, including humanism. This realization should encourage religious groups to participate in genuine interfaith dialogue. The document was signed by two hundred world religious leaders at the 1993 World Parliament of Religions.



Chicago, Illinois, for dialogue and discussion around religion as a factor in shaping global peace and cooperation. This event is regarded as having created an opening in the academy for further exploration of world religions and comparative studies of religion.

Interfaith dialogue in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was centered on concepts of dialogue and relational encounters. This discourse was largely influenced by the life and work of figures such as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas, Hans Georg-Gadamer, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Central to nearly every framing of dialogue was philosopher Buber's notion of "life as meeting". In the following sections, I expound this phrase, and its influence on the work of these other important theorists".

### **2.1.b Martin Buber (1878-1965) *The Space Between, I-Thou***

Though interfaith engagement was never Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's main objective in his work, his lived context of seeking to form genuine communities between Jews, Muslims, and Christians in Israel and Palestine can be regarded as an early example of interfaith work. Contemporary scholars embrace Buber's framing of dialogue as lying at the heart of productive interfaith interaction. Buber established a foundation for how to engage in productive dialogue, with the objective being to move the participants to a place different to that from which they may have entered. He argued that *dialogue results in transformation* – a change in one's mindset towards the "other." Buber emphasized the need to examine *how* people treat one another, and that true dialogue emerges only through the *relationship* that is established between participants.<sup>57</sup>

By identifying ways for human beings to encounter each other fully, Buber's focus became the "space between" humans, identified as the back and forth that occurs in conversation with one another.<sup>58</sup> It is only through the recognition and appreciation for what takes places in this "space" that one can grow and develop. Buber viewed dialogue not as a discipline, but as a way of life. Dialogue allows us to become more

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<sup>57</sup> Aubrey Hodes, *Encounter with Martin Buber* (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1972).

<sup>58</sup>At the heart of this concept of the "space between" is the notion that self-perfection can only be achieved when in relationship with others. In order for self-knowledge to occur, an individual must view themselves as always in relationship with the rest of nature.

human by treating others as human. According to Steven Kepnes, for Buber it is “the *middle* of the plot that is most central and not the end. The middle of the story relates the event of I-Thou as it breaks in upon the ordinary span of time, the time of beginning and end, which the narrative establishes”.<sup>59</sup>

Buber’s notion of the space between was not only formulated as an interpretation of the dynamics of spiritual dialogue, but also as a *cultural critique* against any kind of self-centered philosophy. Buber argued that dialogue requires three kinds of relation: relation to self, relation to other(s), and relation to all forms of created being.<sup>60</sup> He articulated the components of ethical dialogue as – openness, appreciation of difference, acceptance of conflict, mutual respect and trust, sincerity, honesty, and a willingness to admit errors.<sup>61</sup>

Buber’s philosophy of dialogue is woven throughout contemporary interfaith scholarship. Oddbjørn Leirvik utilizes Buber to articulate his own categories of dialogue – *spiritual* dialogues and *necessary* dialogues. His entire conception of interreligious studies as being, first, *relational* reveals his commitment to Buber’s early framings. Interreligious Studies scholar, Leonard Swidler relies on Buber to craft a comprehensive definition of dialogue, calling it a “conversation between two or more persons with differing views, the primary purpose of which is for each participant to learn from the other so that he or she can change and grow...We enter into dialogue...primarily so that we can learn, change and grow, not so that we can force change on the *other*.”<sup>62</sup>

### **2.1.c Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002): *Transformative Dialogue***

German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer furthered Buber’s work by proposing that “understanding in dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but of being transformed into a

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<sup>59</sup> Steven Kepnes, *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber’s Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 97.

<sup>60</sup> Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Kegan Paul, 1947).

<sup>61</sup> Ronald C. Amett, *Communication and Community: Implications of Martin Buber’s Dialogue* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986), 96.

<sup>62</sup> Leonard Swidler, *After the Absolute* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 3.

communion in which we do not remain what we were.”<sup>63</sup> By engaging in dialogue, for Gadamer, participants work to strengthen each other’s arguments through communal understanding. Gadamer believed that by utilizing hermeneutics dialogue could become a means for reaching deeper meaning, which he called “the phenomenon of understanding”.<sup>64</sup>

#### **2.1.d Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995): *Vulnerability and Responsibility***

French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas critiques Buber by articulating an alternative between ‘I’ and ‘Thou’, replacing the term ‘Thou’ with ‘the Other.’ Lévinas does this to underscore his principal argument that humans have an obligation toward others that always supersedes a responsibility to self. He contends that this is our primary responsibility.<sup>65</sup> Ryan Urbano observes that, for Lévinas, “every religion must be considered an Other, a face. This is so because its adherents are persons.”<sup>66</sup> Lévinas claimed dialogue is best understood as an ‘asymmetrical interpersonal’ relationship. He was more concerned with what was necessary for dialogue than with determining its purpose or objective.

This obligation towards others does not become a choice over time, but rather is at the core of who we are as humans. When the ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ come together in meeting, the ‘I’ already has an obligation to ‘the Other.’ In Lévinas’ words, “the approach to others is not originally in my speaking out to the other, but in my responsibility for him or her. That is the original ethical relation.”<sup>67</sup> According to Urbano, “responsibility for the Other precedes the understanding of the Other.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1975), 379.

<sup>64</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p., xxi.

<sup>65</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being, or, Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA.: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

<sup>66</sup> Ryan C. Urbano, “Lévinas and Interfaith Dialogue”, *Heythrop Journal* 53 (2012): 148-161, esp. 153.

<sup>67</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Outside the Subject*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Stanford: CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 43-44.

<sup>68</sup> Urbano, “Lévinas and Interfaith Dialogue”: 154. Urbano suggests that, for Lévinas, the ethical encounter precedes understanding. “It is in the primordial encounter that genuine dialogue can occur and proceed.”

Leirvik determines, “whereas Buber’s reasoning on the encounter between I and Thou is marked by the intimate language of love, Lévinas’ meditation on the Other’s face is focused on vulnerability and responsibility.”<sup>69</sup> “By such insights,” Leirvik suggests, “Lévinas strikes a firm bridge from spirituality to ethics, and, thus, to the necessity of dialogue.”<sup>70</sup> I contend that Buber offers us the motivation for dialogue and that Lévinas moves us to obligation to participate. According to Leirvik, it is “Buberian reciprocity and Lévinasian vulnerability and responsibility” that are at work in his own *relational* approach to interfaith dialogue and study.<sup>71</sup>

Critical of traditional Theology, Lévinas determined that in the face of the ‘Other’ we encounter a “trace” of the Divine.<sup>72</sup> Lévinas argued that ethics and religion are intimately tied, but that a religion or religious practice that absolves itself of concern or care for the other is left with no substance. In the absence of ethics, Urbano claims, “religion becomes an empty discourse and a meaningless ritual.”<sup>73</sup> For Lévinas, reducing religion to totality nearly always results in war and violence. Instead, Lévinas proposed a religious philosophy that rejects rigid creeds or persuasion in favor of common ethical commitments to peace and dialogue.

### **2.1.e Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916-2000) *Individual Experience***

Like Lévinas, Canadian scholar Wilfred Cantwell Smith rigorously questioned the validity of treating religion as a fixed concept. He, too, considered this to be an outdated approach, and a distinctly western categorization. Instead, Smith suggested that religious identity and experience be treated as “the dynamic dialectic between *cumulative tradition* (all historically observable rituals, art, music, theologies, etc.) and *personal faith*.”<sup>74</sup> In his seminal text, *The Meaning and End of Religion: A New*

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<sup>69</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 91

<sup>73</sup> Ryan C. Urbano, “Lévinas and Interfaith Dialogue”, 152. According to Urbano, Lévinas considered any religion which is destructive to ethical relation as ‘primitive.’ He suggests that in a contemporary context, this could manifest in a religion that prioritizes “religious rules, dogmas and rituals” at the expense of the “rights and freedom of members”.

<sup>74</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1991 (reprint), 194.

*Approach to the Religious Traditions of Mankind* (1962), Smith proposed that religion in the postmodern world can be conceived of in four, distinct senses: a notion of personal piety; an observable system of beliefs, practices and values specific to a particular community to which one can belong and try to understand as the most salient expression of a specific religion; an observable system of beliefs, practices and values specific to a particular community that can be studied from a historical and sociological perspective; a generic or universal understanding of religion or belief. Smith determined that a religious individual can only achieve an adequate understanding of their faith when he/she is willing to “extricate himself from a concern as to the essence or nature” of their chosen religion, seeking a ‘true’ definition.<sup>75</sup>

Anthropologist Talal Asad appreciates Smith, but is concerned Smith practiced the same essentialism he strongly advocated against. Smith’s definition of faith, Asad argues, is also limited as it disregards the influence of ‘materialities’ (images, music, texts, sacred sites, and rituals) on personal faith.<sup>76</sup> Such a view prevents one from considering how faith and Smith’s ‘cumulative tradition’ continuously shape each other.

Like Lévinas, Smith was troubled by strict adherence to religious doctrine that resulted in violence and oppression. His definition of religion elevates the individual experience of the believer above historical tradition or daily practices, in part because he identifies the latter as all too prone to rigidity and intolerance. Asad counters this claim, arguing that Smith’s framing ignores the reality that “many polytheist or atheist societies have been highly intolerant of certain forms of behavioral transgression while monotheist polities have often tolerated varieties of belief.”<sup>77</sup>

### **2.1.f Leonard Swidler (1929-present): *Necessary Dialogue***

In his text *After the Absolute*, Leonard Swidler (1990) argues that in a postmodern world dialogue is possible, and – as the notion of absolute truth has been debunked – necessary. Truth as it relates to religion, (scripture and doctrine) cannot be defined in

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<sup>75</sup> Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, 12.

<sup>76</sup> Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic: W. C. Smith's 'The Meaning and End of Religion'", *History of Religions* 40, no. 3 (2001): 205-22, 206.

<sup>77</sup> Talal Asad, "Reading a Modern Classic", 212.

such a way that it has universal meanings.<sup>78</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin argued that dialogue is rooted in context and history, and that it must reflect the experiences of people.<sup>79</sup> Like Bakhtin, and in agreement with Asad, Swidler contends that religion is always subject to its historical context, as well as social and cultural context.<sup>80</sup> Swidler observes that one of the key values of interreligious dialogue is that it provides what he calls an “open” method, free of “fixed content.” He goes on to state that, “the only “content” is the core value of the individual person standing in the midst of her or his community.”<sup>81</sup> Like Swidler, contemporary interfaith movement scholar and Catholic priest Raimon Panikkar argues that engagement is defined as what occurs *between* people in dialogue, rather than in the content of their conversation.<sup>82</sup>

## 2.2 Key Leaders in the Modern Interfaith Movement

In the decade since 9/11, what has emerged in the United States and throughout Europe has been movement in the call for a new academic field, being designated as either Interfaith or Interreligious Studies. This field is developing at a noteworthy pace, as evidenced in the establishment of new academic programs (including majors, minors, and certificates) at esteemed institutions in the United States and throughout the United Kingdom and Europe.<sup>83</sup> Vigorous discussions are taking place within

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<sup>78</sup> Swidler, *After the Absolute*, 13.

<sup>79</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: University of Texas Press, 1981).

<sup>80</sup> Influenced by living through the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican council and the creation of *Nostra Aetate* (1965), Leonard Swidler, professor of Catholic Thought and Interreligious Dialogue at Temple University, has served as a leader in providing a model for interfaith engagement within a Christian tradition. In the 1960's, the Catholic Church encouraged dialogue and shared study between Catholics and Jews. Additionally, through the *Nostra Aetate*, the Church acknowledged the possibility that other religious traditions contain “rays of Truth”, and asked Catholics to engage “prudently and lovingly” in “dialogue and collaboration” with religious others, for the sake of “shared values and societal wellbeing.” *Nostra Aetate*, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decl\\_19651028\\_nostra-aetate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html) Last accessed December 28, 2016

<sup>81</sup> Leonard Swidler, “Response to the Dialogue Institute's Evaluation of Swidler's Dialogue Thought/Work”, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 2 (2012), 272.

<sup>82</sup> Raimon Panikkar, *The Interreligious Dialogue*, revised edn (New York: Paulist Press, 1999).

<sup>83</sup> Though not exhaustive, the following is a sampling of schools that now offer program tracks in Interfaith or Interreligious Studies: Temple University, (PA), Claremont School of Theology (CA), Hartford Seminary (CT), Andover Newton Seminary (MA), University of Birmingham (UK), University of Oslo (Norway).

academic circles such as the American Academy of Religion, which now recognizes Interfaith and Interreligious Studies as a new discipline.<sup>84</sup>

Though conceived within Religious Studies and Theology circles, Interfaith Studies offers signatory approaches, asks different questions of religion and religious experiences, and defines the role of the researcher in ways that are distinct from both Theology and Religious Studies. It is not an exclusively American conception, but has been shaped by influential voices from Europe (Oddbjørn Leirvik) and the United Kingdom (David Cheetham), in addition to many from America (Diana Eck, Martha Nussbaum, Eboo Patel, Leonard Swidler, and Paul Tillich). Interfaith Studies relates to the praxis field of interfaith (or interreligious) dialogue by examining the experiences of individuals as they encounter interfaith engagement. That is it recognizes the “living” aspect of religious identity. As articulated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, “yes, religion is about systems, but our primary concern should be with religious persons.”<sup>85</sup> Interfaith Studies does not treat religions as fixed entities or as monolithic.

Swedish scholar Oddbjørn Leirvik and American writer and activist Eboo Patel have already featured significantly in this thesis thus far. This is because these two influential figures are actively shaping the foundation of the current field. More specifically, I have chosen to focus on Patel and Leirvik for three particular reasons. The first is that each offers a comprehensive model of Interfaith Studies that has been formed by foundational scholars in the field, from the aforementioned Martin Buber and Emmanuel Lévinas in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to Catherine Cornille, Martha Nussbaum, and David Cheetham in 21<sup>st</sup>. Second, both Patel and Leirvik are committed to translating interfaith theory into pedagogical practice. The third reason is that the models proposed by Leirvik and Patel each have valuable insights to offer to the other. Moreover, I will be utilizing portions of Patel’s suggested framework for how to develop a *narrative*

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<sup>84</sup> In 2012, the American Academy of Religion approved a new working group called “Interfaith or Interreligious Studies”, organized by Jennifer Howe Peace and Homayra Ziad. The objectives of the group are to “expand and enrich the modalities of interreligious and interfaith discourses that have emerged in a diverse set of academic disciplines that have grappled with religious pluralism”, and to “give voice to what has already been happening for years at the cutting edge of institutional and pedagogical innovation, and at the intersection of the academy and civic engagement in many disciplines.” See *American Academy of Religion*, <https://papers.aarweb.org/content/interreligious-and-interfaith-studies-unit> Last accessed February 28, 2017.

<sup>85</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Patterns of Faith Around the World* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oneworld Publications, 1962).

*imagination* (Nussbaum) and *appreciative knowledge* (Patel) as means of approaching the ethnographic narratives in subsequent chapters. I will now offer an overview of each scholar, and then offer my rationale for why I have chosen to synthesize their work.

### **2.2.a Oddbjørn Leirvik: A Relational Model for Interreligious Studies**

Currently a professor of Interreligious Studies at the University of Oslo, Oddbjørn Leirvik has a long history of professional and academic involvement in the development of Interreligious Studies as a field, in addition to his own ongoing personal involvement in interfaith dialogue. This involvement has primarily been with Christian-Muslim dialogue in Norway and throughout Europe. Leirvik's work emphasizes the cruciality of *context*, and, as of the time of this writing, he has offered one of the most developed and cogent academic arguments for the need for a separate field of study. He offers a definition and framing of Interreligious Studies that provides clear differentiation from Theology and Religious studies. Relying on Scott Daniel Dunbar and David Cheetham, Leirvik argues that Interreligious Studies has evolved first from Theology, as opposed to Religious Studies, primarily because of the agency of the researcher, and that it has an emphasis on research that is not just descriptive but also "experiential" and "prescriptive."<sup>86</sup> Leirvik argues that Interreligious Studies has the potential to bring aspects from Theology and Religious Studies together, but it must be recognized as doing something different.

Perhaps due to his European context, Leirvik's writing reveals an emphasis on a global inclusivity, often incorporating the work of scholars from non-western backgrounds such as Indian social-scientist Homi Bhabha, and Brazilian philosopher philosopher Paolo Freire. Leirvik utilizes Bhabha's articulation of a "third space," arguing it has added valuable insight to the understanding of multi-cultural interaction.<sup>87</sup> In Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed" he argues for the value of dialogue in the classroom as a form of instruction that allows for the teacher and student to move away

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<sup>86</sup> See Scott Daniel Dunbar, "The Place of Interreligious Dialogue in the Academic Study of Religion", *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35 (3-4) 1998: 455-70. See also David Cheetham, "The University and Interfaith Education", *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15, no.1 2005: 16-35. Cheetham makes the case for the need for religious studies to offer a critical outsider perspective.

<sup>87</sup> See Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).



from knowledge dispensation and acquisition, and towards interactive communication that can result in “change.”<sup>88</sup>

Leirvik offers three defining features of Interreligious Studies. Firstly, he argues that Interreligious Studies is *essentially relational*, with the focus being on what takes place between religious traditions and their living representatives. Secondly, he recognizes the researcher’s, the teacher’s, and the student’s role as *agents* in the spaces between. Here, we see again the influence of Buber and Bhabha. For Leirvik, *agency* means recognizing one’s own authority in negotiations of power. This occurs both within the religious traditions and between them. As a result, critical self-reflection on one’s own agency is essential. As previously stated in the Introduction, Leirvik asks, “who is not a potential agent of change in the study of religion in today’s world?”<sup>89</sup> Thirdly, Leirvik recognizes that one’s role as an agent means also to tackle the issue of *normativity* in a transparent way. Leirvik suggests that the “normative aspect” of religion relates to the “contemporary relevance of religious traditions and how they can be meaningfully translated into new contexts.”<sup>90</sup> Ultimately, Leirvik adopts a Lévinasian view of responsibility, and places shared responsibility on the shoulders of each individual involved.

Leirvik’s context is Norway, a global leader in instituting religious education at the elementary and secondary levels. According to Leirvik, religious education in Norway is regarded as imperative, not just for furthering intellectual knowledge but for fostering respect for religious values, and for cultivating pluralistic attitudes. Leirvik has been at the forefront of religious education in Europe at all levels and considers it to be among his primary interests.<sup>91</sup> In Norway, the primary and post-secondary schools are developing partnerships and sharing resources for interreligious dialogue. By contrast,

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<sup>88</sup> See Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

<sup>89</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*, 11.

<sup>90</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 11-12. Leirvik observes that the, “search for meaning and obligation across traditions through what we conventionally call *interreligious dialogue*.”

<sup>91</sup> Leirvik has been a part of “public debates about religious education and in continuing education of teachers in dialogue didactics.” Religion in school is part of the field of practice that has “triggered” his “theoretical interest.” Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 28.

the United States has yet to develop their own model.<sup>92</sup> This places even greater responsibility on the academy to shape and implement curriculum at the university level that seeks to equip students to function in a multi-faith world. But first, the American academy – beyond Religion and Theology departments – must be willing to recognize that religion and faith are an active part of a student’s identity, not just static subjects of study. As Leirvik observes, “the school can only contribute to creating good citizens if pupils are also allowed to communicate freely and critically about religion and ethics.”<sup>93</sup>

Leirvik’s attention to context in his writing, and his personal modelling of a Christian scholar who moves back and forth in a variety of religious environments, are both relevant to my work. His own involvement in Interreligious Studies and interreligious dialogue have primarily been centered on Muslims and Christians within a secular society. His main area of expertise is Christian-Muslim relations, and his academic work is integrated into his own activism. As my research and teaching are also situated between Islam and Christianity, and the narratives in subsequent chapters were conducted between a Christian scholar and Muslim participants, there is much to be gained from close engagement with Leirvik’s contributions.

### **2.2.b Eboo Patel: A *Practical* Model for Interfaith Action**

In 2013, in an article published in the journal *Liberal Education*, American sociologist of religion Eboo Patel made the argument that there is a need for a new academic field of inquiry in the United States that should be called “Interfaith Studies.” A long-time interfaith activist, Patel observed that interfaith dialogue and engagement needed to be anchored in more formal systems of study. Patel determined that interfaith work and the academy would have much to contribute to one another that could be distinct from the existing fields of Religious Studies and Theology.

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<sup>92</sup> As noted previously, the separation of Church and state in the U.S. has resulted in religious education that is either non-existent, or outdated. For example, a one semester “world religions” course. In the United States, it is entirely possible that a student will not have any exposure to a religion beyond their own (if they have one) until they reach college.

<sup>93</sup> Leirvik has been a part of “public debates about religious education and in continuing education of teachers in dialogue didactics, religion in school is part of the field of practice that has triggered my theoretical interest.” Leirvik, Oddbjørn. *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 31.

Since 2013, Patel has remained at the forefront in the United States of defining a trajectory for the field of Interfaith Studies – a position that has initially involved determining what effective practice and curriculum sequencing would look like. Patel is primarily concerned with preparing civic interfaith “leaders”, defined as individuals possessing the “framework, knowledge base, and skill set needed to help individuals and communities who orient around religion differently in civil society and politics build mutual respect, positive relationships, and a commitment to the common good.”<sup>94</sup> Building on the thought of comparative religion professor Diana Eck, Patel argues that an effective interfaith leader is one that can “work with diversity to build pluralism.”<sup>95</sup>

Patel believes this work can best be achieved via the creation of a new field of study, and a framework for curriculum that would serve as a foundation for new academic programs in Interfaith Studies. Admittedly influenced by political theory, initially Patel separated individual religious expressions or identity from his proposed curriculum, explaining that “it is about the civic and political more than the personal. The emphasis is on the public dimension of religion – how its narratives promote conflict or cooperation, how its social capital can be mobilized toward violence or community building.”<sup>96</sup> In his initial sequencing, the starting point is religious diversity and its influence on civil society and world politics, addressing broad questions such as “is religious conflict inevitable?”<sup>97</sup> This would then be followed by a course which is framed around case studies in religious violence and interfaith peacebuilding, where differing religious groups interactions result in either conflict or cooperation. Students are to identify and analyze the role of leaders in the case studies. Next comes a course on perspectives in religion, which Patel describes as being very similar to traditional Religious Studies courses on the nature of religion.<sup>98</sup> Finally, a course on “Theologies of Interfaith Cooperation” would focus on reading ethicists and theologians across religious

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<sup>94</sup> Eboo Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies”, *Liberal Education* 99, no. 4 (Fall, 2013): 38-43, 40.

<sup>95</sup> Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies”, 40. Patel defines the goals of civic pluralism as: (1) showing respect for people’s religious identity, (2) cultivating positive relationships between persons from different religious traditions, an (3) pursuing common action for the common good.

<sup>96</sup> Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies”, 43.

<sup>97</sup> This course would include a close reading of Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilizations*

<sup>98</sup> Patel centers the course around foundational authors in Religious Studies such as Jose Casanova, Talal Asad, Clifford Geertz, Mircea Eliade, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Marshall Hodgson, Peter Berger, Rudolph Otto, Paul Tillich, Huston Smith, Stephen Prothero, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim)

traditions, and would consider how each has “stitched together interpretations of scripture, stories, heroes, and historical moments from their key sources in order to articulate a coherent narrative of positive relationship with the religious other.”<sup>99</sup>

Patel has offered a straightforward, multi-disciplinary curriculum strategy that includes actual course titles, required readings, and suggested sequencing. He identifies three disciplines as being at the core of the model: History, Political Science, and Sociology. History, Patel states, is essential because “simply reading about instances where diversity has become coexistence or cooperation” provides a foundation for students.<sup>100</sup> This is valuable, but I argue there are more nuanced ways in which history can be used. Historical accounts beyond those that center around “coexistence and cooperation” should be included. Studying the actual history of a religious community can work against prejudice and assumption. For example, learning about the long tradition of Muslims in the United States gives Islam a “right of place” that is often overlooked in traditional historical accounts of the United States. These stories can challenge student presumptions and biases about what it means to be “American.” Other potential inclusions could involve stories of responses by religious communities in times of historical crises, or stories of discrimination - both individual and communal.

Patel’s most basic argument for the necessity of interfaith interaction is that all members of a society have the responsibility to learn how to live well together. He finds tools from political science useful as “political theory raises the hardest and most important question when it comes to religious diversity, namely, under what political and social conditions can communities who have very different ideas of what is good and lawful on Earth, based on a set of cosmic convictions, live together in the same society?”<sup>101</sup>

Finally, Patel suggests that Sociology makes room for empirical work, both ethnographic and quantitative, so that we can study “how communities who orient differently around religion might get along?”<sup>102</sup> On the surface the narratives in this thesis reveal much about gender dynamics, family values, and ethnic and cultural

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<sup>99</sup> Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies”, 42

<sup>100</sup> Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies”, 41

<sup>101</sup> Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies”, 41

<sup>102</sup> Patel, “Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies”, 41.

heritage. Yet a deeper reading reveals the experience of the interview participant as an individual trying to navigate their religious identity and these life challenges in their American community.

Patel remarks that most of the current interest in interfaith cooperation is rooted in the personal, the pastoral, and the spiritual. Questions about one's own religious or spiritual identity in relation to others are always highly salient at interfaith gatherings and in much of the literature about interfaith work."<sup>103</sup> Yet, it must be noted that the structure and sequencing of the potential curriculum Patel suggested in 2013 does not acknowledge or include these driving interests as a part of his framing. The personal appears to have been removed, not as oversight, but as a strategy – and this is a perplexing move. In 2007, Patel published his first book, *Acts of Faith: The Story of An American Muslim in the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation*. This personal memoir recounts how Patel's life experiences and encounters with individuals and communities from a variety of religious backgrounds shaped his own religious identity and his personal and professional commitment to interfaith advocacy. It is a powerful text, and one that resonates with students, as much of the book centers on Patel's college years and his search for direction after.<sup>104</sup> These experiences build towards Patel's conclusions that his life's work should be centered on interfaith engagement and that this will most effectively be achieved through working with young people, and leads to the creation of his non-profit organization 'Interfaith Youth Core'.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Patel, "Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies", 43.

<sup>104</sup> Eboo Patel, *Acts of Faith* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007). I have used this text in history courses that include consideration of Muslim American's experiences since 2008. It is universally well received by male and female students. At the conclusion of the semester, students have the option of choosing an extra credit assignment, which asks them to make an argument for the continued use of a particular text, tying the text to course goals and outcomes. *Acts of Faith* is always a popular choice.

<sup>105</sup> Interfaith Youth Core was founded by Patel in 2002 around the idea that "religion should be bridge of cooperation rather than a barrier of division." Since 2002, the organization has become a leading American model for interfaith programming and service. Initially organized around service events for college and high school students, Interfaith Youth Core now has many national partners and provides training and resources for students and their institutions through annual seminars, institutes, and grant funding. All aspects of the organization elevate the mission of the organization, which is articulated in what is called the Interfaith Triangle. Describing "the Science of Interfaith", the points of the triangle represent Knowledge, Attitudes, and Relationships. The IFYC website states, "effective interfaith programs facilitate positive meaningful relationships between people from different backgrounds and increase appreciative knowledge of other traditions. Social science data tell us that knowledge and relationships are the primary drivers of positive attitudes. And people with positive attitudes toward religious diversity will seek more appreciative knowledge and meaningful relationships." See Interfaith

Considering the influence of *Acts of Faith* as a gateway for readers into the world of interfaith awareness, and the rapid growth of his organization as a result, it is not clear why Patel would intentionally downplay the role of personal experience. It is not that he does not recognize their value, as he states, "I have no doubt that people who want to reflect upon their personal spiritual journeys would find much of interest in this program, but it leans towards preparation for leadership in a world of religious diversity. It would, I believe, be good training for a range of professional paths."<sup>106</sup> So Patel has missed an opportunity here. The question for Eboo Patel is why personal spiritual journeys would need to be set aside in order for interfaith leadership preparation to be achieved? It appears he disregards the reality that the audiences he seeks to educate and train will themselves most likely be individuals who are orienting around religion differently. Patel is in danger of neglecting the potential of human interaction and connection amongst the audience in his initial framing. Where is the room for the possibility that one's personal spiritual journey can resonate with or inspire others? Certainly this would be connected to one's role as a leader?

Patel's early model also does not appear to make room for the spiritual experiences and potential relationships between the students themselves. He also discounts the role of the teacher, both in terms of the relationship with students as well as their own experience. There is no observable recognition in his writing of the role of the educator as, in Leirvik's definition, an 'agent for change.' In addition, an academic inquiry of interfaith engagement must include the stories of everyday life, not just historical narratives as relayed or interpreted by ethicists or theologians. This is one of my chief critiques of current literature in the field. Learning about the history of cooperation between Muslims, Jews, and Christians is, indeed, inspiring.<sup>107</sup> These are encounters rooted in the historical traditions of three religious communities, and are

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Youth Core, "The Science of Interfaith". Available online at <https://www.ifyc.org/about> Last accessed October 1, 2017.

<sup>106</sup> Patel, "Toward a Field of Interfaith Studies", 43. Patel's argument that training in interfaith leadership is useful for those entering the professional world is both sound and strategic. Pre-professional majors have rapidly outpaced the traditional humanities in the past decade in American schools and universities. A recession in 2008, combined with continuously rising costs for post-secondary education, has left many students (and with pressure from their parents) with the feeling that they must choose a major that directly translates into a job.

<sup>107</sup> One of Patel's suggested required readings would be *Peace be Upon You: Fourteen Centuries of Muslim, Christian and Jewish Conflict* by Zachary Karabell. New York, Vintage, 2008.

facts. I agree that these are essential to build knowledge – one of Patel’s key requirements. Yet, there is absence of attention to context, as Leirvik calls attention to in his work, and Asad and Smith before him. Patel is extremely well-known and connected in both religious and political circles in the United States. This may explain why Patel’s approach continues to elevate privileged voices only. Where are the voices from the margins? As one example, where are the stories of *shared experience* from individuals who “orient around religion differently” but who may have become friends because both were mothers of children with special needs? I argue there is as much opportunity to find common ground around daily living as there is around broader shared philosophical or political concerns. The narratives in the coming chapters provide multiple points of connection and commonality over what could be considered the mundane or unremarkable.

### **2.3 Synthesizing Patel and Leirvik: *Creating an Interfaith Pedagogy***

By placing Leirvik and Patel in conversation, I have established a model for how to approach narratives that is based in historical epistemology and methods established in ethnography and narrative inquiry. To be clear, nothing in Patel’s work stands in opposition to Leirvik’s defining features of a *relational* approach to Interreligious Studies. Taking pieces from both only strengthens this project. Leirvik offers insights that come from a long teaching career, personal investment in interreligious work inside academia and national education, and his professional and personal life as a pastor. Leirvik writes as someone who has been creating, testing, and solidifying curriculum. He speaks as a teacher as much as he does a seasoned researcher. He has been involved in interfaith work for a stretch of time that permits him to write as someone influenced as much by the failures as the successes. Patel has a different past. His experience in grassroots activism and volunteerism inspire his commitment to providing models that are relevant and applicable – models that will draw people into engagement. There is value in both framings, and Leirvik and Patel benefit from interaction with one another’s work. Leirvik’s careful articulation of Interreligious Studies, his definitions, the questions he is asking, and his argument for the necessity of the field all validate his experience and understanding of the academy. He knows what will be required in order for Interreligious

Studies to be accepted as legitimate. His cogent characterization of what a *relational* approach to religion can look like serves as a necessary foundation from which to launch Patel's *application* of interfaith work, specifically in the "frameworks" Patel proposes for developing interfaith literacy. In short, Leirvik continues the work of foundational thinkers like Buber, Gadamer, and Lévinas, to provide theory and define the primary outcome of Interfaith Studies – that is, to create *change*. Patel, deeply influenced by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Paul Ricoeur, and Paul Tillich, but also relying on contemporary ethicists like Cornille and Nussbaum, offers concrete models for how to put Leirvik's work into practice, thus inspiring *action*.

Leirvik and Patel both direct their work towards ongoing interaction with college and university students. Patel has long argued that colleges and universities are "uniquely situated to create real change" because "campuses exist to promote knowledge with an eye to civic engagement, even as they work to foster meaningful encounters among student groups."<sup>108</sup> This notion of "change" is consistent with how Leirvik defines it. Leirvik reasons that the university should be a model for "inclusive learning". This would mean not just "learning about religion but also 'learning from' religion in a perspective which includes a joint search for meaning and a common ethical investigation".<sup>109</sup> He points again to Panikkar, who observed it is all but impossible to disregard personal religious beliefs in order to empathize with another culture.<sup>110</sup>

While Leirvik is more adept at articulating "change," for Patel there is no significant change unless it is followed up with *action*. This is one of the great strengths of Patel's work. He and his organization, Interfaith Youth Core, have intentionally worked with "teaching" academics (in addition to engaging with sound research) to consider how to best connect with student populations, provide skills and training, and offer resources. They have developed a clearly defined outcome: the preparation of

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<sup>108</sup> Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer, "The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities", *Journal of College and Character* 12, no. 1 (Feb 2011): 1-9.

<sup>109</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 14.

<sup>110</sup> See Panikkar, *The Interreligious Dialogue*.



interfaith leaders who “have the ability to lead individuals and communities that orient around religion differently toward understanding and cooperation.”<sup>111</sup>

One particularly important identified issue is that while Patel and Leirvik consistently call for greater interdisciplinarity in the field of Interfaith/Interreligious Studies, it has yet to be fully evidenced in their own work. Leirvik relies on his own case studies of Christian-Muslim dialogue. The edited volumes Patel has produced primarily include the work of known scholars in Religious Studies or ethics, or religious authorities from varying faith traditions that are recognized at the national level in the United States. Neither Patel nor Leirvik has meaningfully incorporated existing methodologies from disciplines such as Literature, History, or Sociology, despite their expressed appreciation for the value of interdisciplinarity as a central aspect of the direction the field of Interfaith Studies is headed. There is, essentially, a shortage of scholarship that demonstrates how interfaith theory can be applied and integrated into existing disciplines.

However, as an intentional part of their design, the pedagogical frameworks Patel proposes are at least accessible for integration into coursework in disciplines outside of Religious Studies, Theology, and Interfaith Studies. This is evidenced through the resources (conferences, grants, trainings, curriculum, case studies etc.) that are offered at low cost or free via the hub of all of Patel’s efforts – the Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) website. The resources have been developed in cooperation by scholars from multiple disciplines (though still predominantly from religion-oriented fields) and perspectives across political spectrums, religious traditions, and gender and ethnic diversity, with the mutual aim of creating materials that are classroom-ready.<sup>112</sup> This serves as evidence that there is movement in the direction of interdisciplinarity and also demonstrates there is a home for the research and application presented in this thesis.

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<sup>111</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 4.

<sup>112</sup> See Interfaith Youth Core, available online at <https://www.ifyc.org/> Last accessed November 7, 2017. Despite my own courses being centered on the discipline of history, I have used Patel’s texts – both his autobiography, *Acts of Faith* (2007), and one of his most recent works, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer* (2016) – in my classes. Students have responded well to these texts, both to Patel’s use of his own story, and to the language he uses to define interfaith skills and competencies.

## 2.4 Naming the Field: Challenges, Emerging Questions, and ‘Interreligious’ vs ‘Interfaith’

There is a central debate (though not contentious) in interfaith networks as to whether to use the term “Interreligious” or “Interfaith.” Often used interchangeably, there are no significant elements of practice or key philosophical differences to be noted between them.<sup>113</sup> Leirvik continues to use “Interreligious”, as is more common in general throughout Europe.<sup>114</sup> In the United States, Patel prefers “Interfaith” as he contends that the word “faith” creates a sharper distinction between the characteristics of this new academic field and the recognized fields of Religious Studies, Religion, and Theology. Bud Heckman notes that “Interfaith” also makes room for the increasing number of people in the United States who claim more than one religious identity.<sup>115</sup> I would contend that “Interfaith” holds a broader appeal for the many Americans who reject the term, “religious” but are comfortable with embracing “spirituality”.<sup>116</sup>

Discussion regarding the language and meaning of “Interfaith” is ongoing. Interfaith is hard to define, just as “religion” and “belief” are hard to define. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith asserted, while religion is best understood as cumulative historical traditions, the term “faith” is best defined as the relationship that individuals and communities have with various dimensions of that tradition. Though they use different language, Patel and Leirvik both rely on Smith to offer complementary visions for the field and objectives of Interfaith/Interreligious study. Patel argues “faith” elevates the

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<sup>113</sup> Though rare in the literature I have examined, some scholars (for example Roland Faber, professor of Process Studies at Claremont School of Theology) are using the term ‘transreligious’ to more accurately describe the shifting that occurs in religious identity over time and location. This emphasis on the “changing” nature of religions and religious identity is universal in all conceptions of Interreligious or Interfaith Studies, though not as explicit in these prevalent names. Leirvik prefers the prefix “inter,” arguing that it “more clearly points at the dynamic encounters that take place *between* people of complex belongings.” See Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 5

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Bud Heckmann and Rori Picker Neiss, *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Pub, 2008).

<sup>116</sup> I find this to be consistent with my student population. Despite being in an exclusively Christian environment, many are reluctant to embrace “religion” or formal religious affiliation. I noticed a few years ago that it became increasingly common for my students to use the term, “Christ-Follower” instead of Christian when discussing their faith in papers or discussions, or labeling their identity on social media sites.

“inner quality of an individual believer.”<sup>117</sup> This is not to disregard a more academic study of religion. As Talal Asad argued, “in order to pay serious attention to religious experience in a comparative context, we must examine carefully the part played by religious practices in the formation experiences.”<sup>118</sup> This is why I prefer a curriculum model that integrates interfaith theory into existing disciplines. A student who is reading the narratives in the coming chapter will gain *appreciative knowledge* and develop a *narrative imagination*, but I contend these acquisitions are enriched when the student has also been learning about the historical and social development of Islam and religious practice in different contexts over time. Patel may be heeding the warnings of Asad when he suggests the goal is to examine “the relationship between the two, the manner in which the individual emphasized and interacts with various parts of the religious system.”<sup>119</sup>

Patel advocates the term *interfaith* by articulating four key essentials of interfaith study as inspired by Smith and others. He has determined that Interfaith Studies can distinguish itself from other disciplines via four main components: Separating the “outward system of a religious tradition from the inner qualities that characterize the individual adherents”<sup>120</sup> ; Seeking to gain insight into the “inner quality of an individual believer” (this requires contemplation of how the believer interacts with their own religious system – what they choose to emphasize, avoid, question, etc...) <sup>121</sup> ; Considering how individuals engage religion or belief in daily contexts, i.e. how does one “live it out” throughout the day? ; Placing emphasis on “social context”, i.e. how does belief work in a particular time and place?

Leirvik agrees in particular that context matters. Relationships and encounters between religious individuals and communities are always shaped by geography, culture, language, and what is taking place in society at the time. Leirvik observes, “one

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<sup>117</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 70.

<sup>118</sup> Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic”, 206.

<sup>119</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 70-71.

<sup>120</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 70.

<sup>121</sup> Here Patel is incorporating Cantwell Smith, who refers to this relationship between the believer and their belief system as “faith”.

could reserve the term ‘interfaith’ for relationships and dialogues that rely on personal motivation and, to a lesser extent, institutional motivation.”<sup>122</sup>

I find value in the concept of “faith” when it is clearly defined in the manner of Smith. Yet, in an American context, “faith” can be hard to separate from an evangelical understanding of the term. For example, what Smith (and Patel) describe as “faith” might be described as “deen” or “taqwa” by some of the Muslim narrative participants. Religious Studies, from which the field of Interfaith Studies emerged, was itself primarily shaped and defined by Christian and Jewish scholars. This is why the voices of figures like Talal Asad and Homi Babha are so vital.

Scholars active in Interfaith Studies must be vigilant about the tendency to entitle one religion, and its terminology, over another. Asad argues that “any view of religious life that requires separation of what is observable from what is not observable fits comfortably with the modern liberal separation between the public spaces and the private.”<sup>123</sup> This can be problematic. The separation between church and state in America during the 20<sup>th</sup> century increasingly relegated religion to the private sphere. Requiring a distinction between our civic and religious selves, as was the norm from the 1960s until September 11, 2001, has created a privileging of religions like Christianity and Judaism that more easily lend themselves to this type of separation. Also, because of the historic dominance of Christianity in America, civic culture heavily reflects Christian values and norms. It is fairly easy for Christians in America to divide their individual life as a Christian from the religion itself. This creates a significant challenge for many Muslims, however, because Islam is not easily divided into secular and religious categories. Islam is often therefore viewed or framed as incongruent with American values and civic life. It then becomes difficult for American Muslims to be recognized as being committed to both Islam and America.

In summary, I will continue to use the term “interfaith” in this work, because it is the dominant term used in the context in which this scholarship is being produced and its inclusivity resonates with the religious experiences of college students with whom I

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<sup>122</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 5

<sup>123</sup> Talal Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic”, 214.

interact. However, one of the continuing challenges for scholars working in Interfaith Studies will be to make sure that this term does not marginalize the narrative experience of many of the voices and perspectives that need to be reflected in the field. We must continue to find means of articulating and expressing the variety of ways in which religion is practiced and experienced, including in both public and private contexts.

## **2.5 Related Scholarship in the Field Relevant to Research**

While the outcomes and characteristics of interfaith work have remained remarkably consistent for over a century, in a post 9/11 world there is a growing awareness of the acute need for new methods of interfaith engagement. This energy can be observed in the growth of interfaith work that has manifested around the globe, though it takes on different forms according to geographic context.

Despite the rapid growth of the field of Interfaith Studies, at the time of this writing there is no existing foundational text that provides a historical overview, an articulation of theories, or a mapping of best practices for interfaith study. There is, therefore, a clear need for models of instruction that combine interfaith theory with applications in established disciplines and methodologies. Here, I will highlight three examples of existing texts that have proven useful, but that do not include the examples of interdisciplinary synthesis or practical application that are needed to develop a working interfaith pedagogy.

### **2.5.a Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook: *God Beyond Borders*, and ‘Interreligious Learning’**

In *God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities*, practical theologian Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook has combined her theological training with a desire to provide practical pathways for communities to engage in interfaith work. She refers to the academic field as Interreligious Learning, and provides the most comprehensive definition that I have encountered, stating it is “an emerging discipline with the aim to help all participants to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to interact, understand, and communicate with persons from diverse religious traditions; to function

effectively in the midst of religious pluralism; and to create pluralistic democratic communities that work for the common good.”<sup>124</sup> Kujawa-Holbrook makes the argument that Interreligious Learning should not just be found in the realm of specialized education or an optional activity for interested parties.<sup>125</sup> Instead, she argues that this discipline is vital to the “vocation of faith communities.”

Kujawa-Holbrook regards her text as evidence of her commitment to interreligious communities in multiple contexts. She uses her academic background in education to investigate the connection between interreligious learning and cultural competency, providing basic definitions for both categories, including terms such as assimilation, linguicism, and cultural identity. She provides a useful distinction between “interreligious” and “interfaith”, identifying the former as a “broader and more inclusive” approach to engagement, seeking to “include those who are adherents of groups that do not consider themselves “faith” groups.”<sup>126</sup>

Much of Kujawa-Holbrook’s language (congregations) and many of the examples she provides (celebrating Pluralism Sundays) reflect her experience as an ordained Episcopal minister. Though she never identifies a specific audience for *God Beyond Borders*, in the introduction she addresses Christian privilege and the history of Christianity and religious pluralism. These are useful inclusions, particularly in my teaching environment, but in the absence of any additional coverage of other religious systems’ varied histories with pluralism, the sections ultimately frame the text as being most useful for other Christians. This does not negate the value of what Kujawa-Holbrook offers, but the text would be more coherent if the intention of who the reader should be was to be made more definite. Kujawa-Holbrook does, however, address how to engage young people in interreligious learning by highlighting the work of Eboo Patel and the Interfaith Youth Core as well as the Interfaith Action’s Youth Leadership

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<sup>124</sup> Sheryl, Kujawa-Holbrook, *God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014). Published as a part of the Horizons in Religious Education, series 3.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. I appreciate the direction Kujawa-Holbrook is heading with this distinction, but, as I noted previously, the term “interreligious” can have the isolating effect of excluding those who do not identify with an established religious tradition. Though she argues it is more inclusive of those not in faith groups, I find it to be the opposite.

Program.<sup>127</sup> She identifies action as the most effective way to draw in youth. The great strength of her work is found in the constructive resources (reflection questions, suggestions for interreligious gatherings, peacemaking initiatives) she has provided.<sup>128</sup> Despite Kujawa-Holbrook's Christian background, one of the most valuable components of her text is the inclusion of voices from various religious communities around the world. Building on Martin Buber and influenced by scholar Karen Armstrong, and peace activists Gene Knudsen Hoffman and Thich Nhat Hanh, Kujawa-Holbrook coined what she calls *compassionate action*, determining that while all religions vary in terms of the degree of pluralism they embrace, "all make the point of directing adherence to show compassion to others neighbors strangers and even enemies."<sup>129</sup>

### **2.5.b Bud Heckmann and Rori Picker Neiss: *InterActive Faith***

In their book, *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook* (2008), Bud Heckmann and Rori Picker Neiss provide a three-part manual on how to use various forms of media to foster interfaith dialogue, methods and ideas for how to engage in service and advocacy, and a brief overview of major religious traditions. An ordained Methodist minister, Heckmann's own involvement with interfaith engagement is primarily in congregational and community contexts, while Picker Neiss studies Judaism and is a director of community engagement at a synagogue. They rely both on their own stories and those from whom Heckmann has identified as the "best in the field," such as Rev. Dr. Francis Tiso, Rev. Susan Teegen-Case, and Rabbi Carol Harris-Shapiro.

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<sup>127</sup> Interfaith Action Youth Leadership Program is now called Youth-Lead. See <http://www.youthleadonline.org/about-us> Last accessed September 26, 17. Eboo Patel also wrote the foreword for *God Beyond Borders*.

<sup>128</sup> As another example, regarding the suggestion of shared prayer with another faith community, Kujawa-Holbrook instructs participants to "be clear about the meaning of doing so for you and for them; avoid participation that violates your integrity or that of the other communities, and at the same time maintain a respectful presence; always allow all participants to choose their own level of participation." Kujawa-Holbrook, *God Beyond Borders*, 95.

<sup>129</sup> Kujawa-Holbrook, *God Beyond Borders*, 108. Kujawa-Holbrook's conception of *compassionate action* is based on the work of Quaker peace activist Gene Knudsen Hoffman and the teachings of Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh. She also utilizes Karen Armstrong, whose own work reflects a life and scholarship agenda committed to the value of bringing varying religious traditions into conversation with each other.

Early in the text, Heckmann and Neiss perform the diligent work of “getting on the same page” by describing their context and offering clear definitions for key terms related to interfaith work.<sup>130</sup> They make a distinction between “interfaith” and “interreligious” by suggesting an anomalous definition I have not come across elsewhere: they identify interreligious as referring to “formal encounters between religious representatives” while interfaith refers to interactions between “persons of different faith traditions or broader religious families.”<sup>131</sup> I can see how this characterization between formal and informal may be useful, but without wider traction it only has meaning in this text alone. Secondly, religious representatives are also members of broader religious families, and the formal encounter between two authorities is surely still influenced by other possible parts of their identity - mother, wife, daughter, neighbor. This lack of the wider traction appears in several forms. Firstly, while *InterActive Faith* offers a significant amount of content in one place, as was the case with Kujawa-Holbrook the audience for the text is not clearly defined, but rather intended for “anyone” who wants to become involved in interfaith dialogue. Heckmann and Neiss consistently refer to the “field”, but never offer evidence of exactly how that field is to be defined. Secondly – and relatedly – Heckmann and Neiss consistently mention the need for inclusivity amongst religious traditions and non-religious groups, but the included authors are primarily from Christian and Jewish perspectives. There are no secular voices and there is only one Muslim voice included via a chapter by Eboo Patel in cooperation with April Kunze and Noah Silverman.<sup>132</sup> Heckmann praises Eboo Patel as someone who successfully “sidesteps language hang-ups...by focusing on religious cooperation as a centering idea.” Heckmann contends this approach has broad appeal for secular audiences and can more easily avoid the “theological wrangling” that can be a central roadblock to productive dialogue. It is curious then that Heckmann and Neiss do not follow Patel’s model in the text itself as the distinctions between vocabulary terms and their meanings are woven throughout.

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<sup>130</sup> Bud Heckmann (ed.) and Rori Picker Neiss (contributor), *InterActive Faith: The Essential Interreligious Community-Building Handbook* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publications, 2008), 5. While Eboo Patel, who ascribes as an Ismaili Muslim, is undoubtedly one of the leading advocates in interfaith work in the U.S., the field needs the inclusion of far more voices from the American Muslim community.

<sup>131</sup> Heckmann and Neiss, *InterActive Faith*, 6.

<sup>132</sup> Kunze is a self-identified Christian, and Silverman is Jewish.



### **2.5.c Jennifer Howe Peace, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley: *My Neighbor's Faith – and the Field of Literature in General***

*My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation* (2012), by Jennifer Howe Peace, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley, is a compilation of forty-six individual narratives that recount the influence of interfaith dialogue on the lives of community leaders, activists, and religious educators.<sup>133</sup> Several of the authors of the narratives – such as Paul Knitter, Paul Raushenbush, and Judith Plaskow – are widely recognized in academic circles beyond their own faith communities. There is also a strategic inclusion of narratives by well-respected, active contributors in the field of Islamic Studies such as Ali Asani, Kecia Ali, and Najeeba Syeed-Miller.

Notably, Peace, Rose, and Mobley have been thoughtful to include diverse voices within the represented faith traditions. Native American educator, Richard Twiss offers the perspective of a Christian who is also a member of the Lakota tribe, and an account of the struggle to claim a Christian identity that runs counter to Euro-American norms. Islamic Studies scholar Sherman Jackson recounts the impact of lasting friendships he established with fellow African-Americans, who were predominantly Christian, during his adolescent years in Philadelphia. A few of the narratives, such as the inclusion of South Asian Studies expert Laurie Patton do not even make mention of the author's own faith identity, but rather focus on the lasting impressions made by exposure to religious communities or cultures.

Peace, Rose, and Mobley suggest there is not a single “right” way to read their text. They do not use specific terms like *appreciative knowledge*, but they do invite the reader to approach the narratives with “curiosity” and suggest that one should seek to “recognize something of your own story” in the narratives.<sup>134</sup> The chapters are

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<sup>133</sup> Jennifer Howe Peace, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley, *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2012). This work is an outgrowth of a national conference on Interfaith education in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim seminaries in the United States, held at Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College in April 2010.

<sup>134</sup> Peace, Rose, and Mobley, *My Neighbor's Faith*, xviii.

organized thematically, around such topics as encounter, cooperation, education, and activism.<sup>135</sup>

The central strength of this text is that the narratives are not written from the perspective of the authors as religious authorities, but rather from the life experiences that have shaped their identities. All religions have legacies of dysfunction, missed opportunities, and unresolved differences, and that the included narratives don't avoid the hard issues is a strength of the text. Though not addressed directly, this inclusion of the hard and the difficult reflects a key component of interfaith theory - the assertion that personal story is on-going, and there does not have to be a tidy conclusion, or a central triumph to have value. Listening to someone thoughtfully critique or hold accountable their own community, as does Richard Twiss in his story, can result in a moment of self-reflection regarding one's own religious tradition.

While the aforementioned volumes rely primarily on the "usual suspects", a notable aspect of *My Neighbor's Faith* is the inclusion of voices from Buddhist and Hindu backgrounds.<sup>136</sup> A limitation of this text, however, is found in the role of practitioners in the narratives. Although *My Neighbor's Faith* is full of diverse stories of struggle and discrimination, again the authors of the narratives all hold prominent positions in academia, public policy, or religious institutions. Stories from leaders are essential, but this singular focus reinforces the argument being made in this dissertation that voices from the lay population need more representation in the emerging field of Interfaith Studies.

This elevation of privileged voices is evidenced throughout the literature in general. Many of the recent (and not so recent) collections or anthologies contain stories authored by religious authorities (priests, rabbis, pastors) or academic authorities (religious scholars, community activists). While these are certainly valuable, how well do they really resonate with student populations? Diving deeply into theological questions can be productive, but they are not the most advantageous

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<sup>135</sup> The themes are not quite as explicit in the text. While the themes of education and shared activism hold the narratives together, they are organized under sections entitled "Stepping Across the Line", and "Finding Fellow Travelers."

<sup>136</sup> Christian, Jewish, and, increasingly, Muslim individuals who hold prominent positions dominate both interfaith civic engagement and academic circles in the United States.

starting point. If I were to ask my own students if they would prefer to discuss the topic of God's existence, or marriage, I guarantee the majority would choose marriage. As illustrated with the story of Kasim and my students in the first chapter, a conversation around marriage might actually result in a conversation about God's existence – but that is not where we started.

Another limitation of the preceding edited volumes is a lack of detailed instructions or suggestions for how readers should approach the motivating stories they contain. While leaving them open to the reader's interpretation may be by design, offering more concrete suggestions, or a "guide" of sorts, would enhance their effectiveness, particularly as all of the authors mention the desire that these texts be used for instructional purposes. There are means to provide sophisticated guidance through the narratives without drawing conclusions for the reader. This thesis seeks to offer one model as evidence. Additionally, there remains a need for texts that more cohesively define theory. That is, ones that bring theory and application together. There are, at times, multiple competing definitions for terms (see Heckmann and Niess vs. Kujawa-Holbrook, for example) while some prefer to avoid definitions at all (Peace, Rose, Mobley). It would be difficult to cohesively use multiple texts with multiple definitions in one course for students who are just beginning to be introduced to interfaith theory.

## **2.6 Defining Praxis for Interfaith Studies**

As Interfaith Studies as a field becomes solidified, key questions and considerations have emerged. Foremost, what core competencies should define the field? Second, what pedagogical models are offered for instruction and learning about interfaith? Scholarship in Interfaith Studies must move from advocating and calling for interdisciplinary applications to actually providing them. An essential aim of interfaith engagement is to move beyond (though not abandon) dialogue between religious leaders to meaningful encounters between religious individuals in everyday life. This thesis serves as a model for just such an application.

Again, this is why a synthesis of authors is pragmatic. While Patel's framing is observably American, Leirvik articulates a definition and model of Interreligious Studies

that is more globally inclusive, relying on key authors and thinkers in Africa, the Middle East, South East Asia, Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States primarily in Theology, Religious Studies, and ethics. This is noteworthy, as there have been critiques that Interfaith Studies in the United States is already falling victim to American exceptionalism. Najeeba Syeed-Miller warns, “If this American-based movement promotes a form of pluralism that is grounded in a fulfillment of rhetoric that implies the United States is the yardstick by which pluralism is performed at its highest level, this will blind the transnational theological educational model from gleaning lessons and practices that demonstrate multiple ways of managing and developing pluralistic resources across and within diverse traditions.”<sup>137</sup>

With a stated concern for the further development of religious curriculum at all levels of education in Norwegian schools, Leirvik has thus far, in writing, made a more advanced argument for why interreligious dialogue is a necessary component of education. Like Patel, he has proposed a model for what this can look like. In contrast to Patel’s specific disciplines, Leirvik’s model is centered around themes and outcomes. He does suggest topics of study such as ‘philosophy of dialogue’, ‘interreligious hermeneutics’, and ‘religious figures and modern identity’ that could be incorporated into existing courses and programs. Leirvik is more explicit in his explanation for what distinguishes Interreligious Studies from coursework in comparative religion by articulating a *third element*, which can be understood as approaching the content *relationally* through identified shared challenges, or as Grewal and I call them – *shared experiences*.<sup>138</sup> His intention is to place religions in academic conversation with each other, as opposed to presenting them as comparable options. I find this to be a more useful model, which allows for a flexibility that takes context – essential for Leirvik – into greater consideration. It also equips me to more thoughtfully articulate for Christian audiences what I mean when I use the term, pluralism. Though both Patel and Leirvik

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<sup>137</sup> Najeeba Syeed-Miller, “The Politics of Interreligious Education”, *Spotlight on Theological Education* (March, 2004).

<sup>138</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 13-14. One example Leirvik uses to demonstrate this third element is in a course entitled “Islam, Christianity and the West”. While the course would still retain the critical and descriptive components, it would also (as a part of Interreligious Studies curriculum) include consideration of how Christianity and Islam “respond to shared challenges in contemporary Western societies (including a modern critique of religion)”. See Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 14. Here again Leirvik is relying on d Babha’s articulation of a “third space.”

are influenced by the same authors (Buber, Lévinas, and to some extent, Ricoeur and Cornille), it is easier to identify these influences in Leirvik's model and his writing. Most significantly, Leirvik fleshes out his *relational approach* to Interreligious Studies that has been shaped by his commitment to pedagogy that has the potential to be transformative (see Buber and Gadamer), as well as informative.

## **2.7 Using Narratives to Help Define Core Competencies and Concepts for Productive Interfaith Engagement**

Given this broad overview of the emerging field of Interfaith Studies, it is helpful to dig deeper into some of the current relevant research being done in the field that influences my interfaith theory-based approach to narratives. While important work has been done to identify the outcomes necessary for cultivating healthy interfaith engagement, I will argue there is still a need to focus more specifically on the ways in which utilizing ethnographic narratives can help build a foundation of core competencies and concepts from which students can develop a capacity for deeper interfaith understanding.

### **2.7.a Eboo Patel: *Appreciative Knowledge***

I propose that as the reader engages a narrative in a structured and intentional way they can begin to develop what Patel defines as *appreciative knowledge*.<sup>139</sup> While Patel agrees there is a critical need for even base level education about religious diversity in the United States, he argues the academy has an obligation to move beyond the “basics”.<sup>140</sup> *Appreciative knowledge* is obtained when an individual can recognize the contributions of other traditions, have a sympathetic understanding of the distinctive

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<sup>139</sup> Patel's work is influenced by Paul Ricoeur's claim that all knowledge is interpreted knowledge. To gain knowledge of something requires recognition of a back and forth process of questioning and reconfiguring. It is this desire to both investigate and identify what happens to individuals in this space of “understanding” and “relationship”, resulting in “transformation” that motivates scholars who are calling for a separate field of interfaith study. In short, Interfaith Studies moves beyond calling for dialogue and encounter to the study of what occurs in the midst of Buber's “meeting” (Kepnes, *The Text as Thou*, 97.)

<sup>140</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 112. Referring to a conversation with Religion Professor Steven Prothero, Patel describes Prothero's call for a “neutral approach” in teaching religion, asking teachers to stick to the fundamentals of a religion's history and belief, while “leaving it up to the students to make judgments about the virtues and vices” of religion and religious expression. Patel agrees students need the basics, but he does not consider this to be enough to equip students to learn to engage well with each other. For more on Prothero, see Steven Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know – And Doesn't* (New York: Harper One, 2007).

history and commitments of other traditions, and develop ways of working with and serving other communities.<sup>141</sup> This knowledge is comprised of the following five components, as attributed to Patel; Developing both a “general orientation and substantive knowledge base”<sup>142</sup> : Being willing to seek “the admirable, and the life giving rather than the deficits, the problems, and the ugliness”<sup>143</sup> : Recognizing the contributions of traditions and highlighting exemplary figures<sup>144</sup> : Developing a “sympathetic understanding of where a differing religious view is coming from”<sup>145</sup> : Building a knowledge base that allows you to work effectively with a different community.<sup>146</sup> The objective of *appreciative knowledge* as related to interfaith theory is to move beyond mere tolerance to a place of appreciation for faith difference. I consider *Appreciative knowledge* to be a valuable pedagogical concept. By introducing and identifying *appreciative knowledge* as a lens through which students can approach a story, the student enters into the relationship with the story’s author with a more open stance, which I characterize as, “I am ready to learn from you”. Though valuable, *appreciative knowledge* is not limited to face-to-face encounters. It can be successfully used with historical sources or narratives, films, podcasts, and even works of art. This creates the exciting opportunity for endless multidisciplinary applications.

### **2.7.b Narrative Imagination: Martha Nussbaum**

In her text *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age*, Martha Nussbaum explains that by actively attempting to see how the world is viewed and experienced by someone with a different set of religious beliefs, we create a “sympathetic imagination”.<sup>147</sup> For Nussbaum, this means developing the ability to consider “what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions, wishes,

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<sup>141</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 114.

<sup>142</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 113.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 114.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 117.

<sup>147</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2012), 99-100.

and desires that someone in that place might have.”<sup>148</sup> As we do this work, we begin to better understand our own story.

Paul Ricoeur says that narration requires “continuous effort”, as we are always in the “process of revising the text, the narrative of our lives”. The narrative imagination, as a key requirement for citizenship, can be cultivated through the reading of and interaction with ethnographic narratives. Practicing a narrative imagination can assist the reader with developing their own “narrative identity”.

In her seminal text, *Cultivating Empathy*, Nussbaum offers three interrelated capacities that are essential for producing citizens that can thrive not only in local contexts but in a “complex interlocking world”.<sup>149</sup> First, she suggests that one must be prepared to critically examine their own beliefs. Second, people must see themselves not just as individuals but as “human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern.”<sup>150</sup> Finally, Nussbaum argues individuals must develop a *narrative imagination*, which requires one to cultivate an imagination which gives the “ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.”<sup>151</sup> In essence, while we should start from considering what we can learn from you (*appreciative knowledge*), we can develop a more nuanced position of being ready to, in my words, “imagine what life is like for you” (*narrative imagination*).

While some argue that reading about the “Other” in a book, or hearing a guest speaker, does not hold the value of getting to know or working alongside another who is different, I maintain that the reading and study of ethnographic narratives provide a starting point to engage in all three of Nussbaum’s capacities as it gives time to pause.<sup>152</sup> We can take our time, process together, and reflect on that processing, thus preparing students to move successfully into direct engagement with others. What

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<sup>148</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 10-11.

<sup>149</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 6.

<sup>150</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 10.

<sup>151</sup> Nussbaum *Cultivating Humanity*, 11.

<sup>152</sup> Marion Larson and Sara Shady, *From Bubble to Bridge: Educating Christians for a Multi-faith World*. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2017).

distinguishes the use of narratives as valuable is that the reading of narratives requires the reader to be – first – a listener. Listening to another’s story is an essential first step in recognizing another’s humanity and it requires intentional practice.

### **2.7.c Shared Experience: Zareena Grewal**

Drawing theoretically from the writings of historical anthropologist Zareena Grewal, my work continues the argument that research on Muslim Americans can successfully be framed around common experiences or crises. This is what Grewal refers to as *shared experience*.<sup>153</sup> Grewal’s work builds on that of groundbreaking anthropologist Talal Asad, who addresses the differences between universal and local conceptions of Islam. Asad argued that “the most urgent need for an anthropology of Islam is a matter not so much of finding the right scale but of formulating the right concept”. The influential concept Asad put forth was the idea of a “discursive tradition”, as Islam is constantly being negotiated.<sup>154</sup> Grewal argues that scholars who work in Muslim American communities rely too heavily on demographic material, and wind up with *artificial, isolated communities* that reveal more about ethnic dynamics than about offering insight into communal Muslim experiences in the United States.<sup>155</sup> Though not directly addressed in her writing, here Grewal offers an understanding of religious experience and identity that echoes Wilfred Cantwell Smith, while also taking into account Asad’s critique.<sup>156</sup>

Robert Nash argues students are more willing to talk about religion “when we are able to de-emphasize the revelational, doctrinal, and corporate-institutional elements of

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<sup>153</sup> Zareena Grewal’s own ethnographic research focuses on the transnational Muslim networks that link U.S. mosques to Islamic movements in the post-colonial Middle East. Her intention was to allow her subjects’ self-determined identity, in this case one’s religiosity, to be the link that ties her subjects together. Grewal is concerned with “detailing the essences of a particular set of crises for Muslim American communities as well as putting them into their historical contexts”.

<sup>154</sup> Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986), 14-15. I rely on Asad because of his emphasis on the humanness of religious practice and his treatment of the diversity between Muslims on what defines “correct” religious practice. In Grewal’s words, Asad allows us to “recuperate the category of orthodoxy without turning academics into theologians”.

<sup>155</sup> Zareena Grewal, “Imagined Cartographies: Crisis, Development, and Islam in America” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2006), 15.

<sup>156</sup> As one who closely studied and often quotes Asad, I assume Grewal is influenced by Asad’s own appreciation for Smith. See, Asad, “Reading a Modern Classic”, 205-222.



religion” and instead focus on common concerns for daily life.<sup>157</sup> Young people want to relate to others and seek to find something of themselves in the story. The *shared experiences* within the narratives of Nadia, Kasim, Amina, and Mohammed provide key points of connection for the reader that move beyond theological differences. *Shared experience* starts more from human commonalities than it does from those theological differences. This exposes another limitation of existing Interfaith Studies volumes – that they often contain only the stories of people who have already “arrived”. What may prove less intimidating and more powerful, particularly for students, is connecting over the *shared experiences* of struggle, of tough questions, and through the comfort of being transparent about what we don’t know or understand. As Asad suggests, stories that reflect faith as constantly being negotiated.

## **2.8 Pluralism, Evangelicals, and my Classroom**

My work considers how narratives can be approached through a framework grounded in interfaith theory, regardless of who the reader/listener may be. However, as my university environment is rooted in an evangelical tradition, and the vast majority of the students I teach come from evangelical backgrounds, it is imperative to address what I mean when I use the term ‘evangelical.’ As a result of my context, I am always evaluating interreligious or interfaith theory through a lens of consideration for what will immediately resonate with a majority evangelical audience, what may be risky but worth reward – or what may be rejected at the outset, thus putting up roadblocks that would undermine my work.

A misunderstanding of pluralism is one such roadblock. Pluralism is a word and concept that requires careful distinction in a Christian environment, as it is often interpreted to imply relativism. David Cheetham notes, “Interfaith relations can be studied as multidimensional ‘ways of meeting’ but hard-nosed clashes as well.”<sup>158</sup> Robert Nash, DeMethra Bradley, and Arthur Chickering argue that pluralism is “morally

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<sup>157</sup> Robert J. Nash, “A Faculty Member’s View on Moral Conversations from the Classroom”, 65-97. A few select *shared experiences* will be further discussed in the final chapter. Emphasis on marriage as an individual and communal/family responsibility is just one example of a common concern for young Muslims and Christians.

<sup>158</sup> David Cheetham, “The University and Interfaith Education”, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 15, no.1 (2005): 16-35.

thicker...than tolerance and diversity.”<sup>159</sup> I rely on a definition of pluralism articulated by founder of the Harvard Pluralism Project (1991), Diana Eck, who identifies four key components for understanding and practicing pluralism.<sup>160</sup> These are; energetic engagement with diversity, active seeking of understanding across lines of difference, the encounter of commitments, and based on dialogue. Eck’s intention is not to suggest a theological pluralism, with all roads leading to the same destination. Instead, she argues that religious pluralism is about determining how we can not only live together, but be in relationship with one another across our religious differences. Eck’s understanding of pluralism is thus essential for this thesis, and to interfaith work more broadly. Pluralism is concerned with learning to live well together. In my own understanding, tolerance is passive while pluralism is active, and this is how I explain the difference to students. Pluralism requires something of me; a willingness to listen and acceptance that the “other” has something to teach me. An embrace of pluralism is essential in order to both love thy neighbor and live well with them.

I have found, in both the Interfaith Youth Core and Eboo Patel’s broader body of work, not only a recognition of the challenges facing those working with evangelicals, but a commitment to respecting evangelicalism instead of denigrating the beliefs or the people who ascribe to them.<sup>161</sup> As Patel’s frameworks have been primarily informed by the American conception of Interfaith Studies, they have immediate relevance to my own teaching and personal context, which I described in the Introduction. I have attended IFYC trainings, and co-led workshops with IFYC staff members on engaging

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<sup>159</sup> Nash, et.al., *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation*.

<sup>160</sup> While there are several places to find Eck’s work on pluralism, the most accessible can be found at <http://pluralism.org/what-is-pluralism/> Last accessed August 13, 2016.

<sup>161</sup> This is key. In 2015, I attended a conference for campus leaders assisting students with interfaith efforts, along with two colleagues. We each attended a separate parallel session where leaders were asked to share their main struggles as they related to certain student organizations. In my own group, a leader spoke openly of her disdain for working with students from the organization Campus Crusade for Christ. Her “openness” paved the way for others to join in, and the session, bizarrely, took on a confessional quality as multiple participants spoke of their blatant dislike of groups that are evangelicals. When I reconvened with my colleagues, they – not coincidentally – offered similar stories. This is troubling, but not unusual. I continue to be in interfaith settings where a shared aversion for evangelicals almost becomes a point of connection or bonding. While I am certainly not trying to argue that evangelicals are discriminated against or marginalized, this aversion is an unhealthy reality that undermines the ethos of Interfaith Studies. It has been recognized and addressed by Patel and is reflected in the curriculum Interfaith Youth Core produces.

evangelicals on American college campuses.<sup>162</sup> Patel understands, and seeks to include, American evangelical audiences. Patel has worked intentionally to include evangelical voices in his more recent collaborative writing, has provided platforms for interfaith advocates who either identify as evangelical or work with evangelical audiences, and has intentionally tried to establish relationships with American evangelicals. He is becoming a known entity in evangelical circles.

Ultimately, Eboo Patel is actively attempting to connect to American audiences that have either been reluctant (Evangelical Christians) to come to the table, or those that have not been invited (atheists, agnostics, “nones”). This is not an oversight on Leirvik’s part, but rather the reality of Patel’s American context. Patel has prioritized strategic relationships with both organizations and individuals that know how to speak to evangelical audiences.<sup>163</sup> One such relationship is with Richard Mouw, the widely-recognized evangelical and longtime president of Fuller Theological Seminary. In 2004, Mouw received intense criticism within evangelical circles for his public comments that the Christian community was guilty of “bearing false witness” against Mormons.<sup>164</sup> Undeterred, this led Mouw to further consider the relationship between American evangelical Christians and other religions. He has since become an outspoken supporter of interfaith engagement that is characterized by a shared civic responsibility and has most recently published *Adventures in Evangelical Civility: A Lifelong Quest for Common Ground*.<sup>165</sup> In the last four years, Mouw and Patel have become a part of the

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<sup>162</sup> In 2015, I was invited, along with two colleagues, to participate in an IFYC training weekend with the express purpose of “seeing” through evangelical eyes, and was then asked for observations and formal feedback.

<sup>163</sup> I recently learned that Patel will be speaking on the topic of pluralism at the 2017 annual Presidents conference for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities. This is noteworthy. Patel’s organization, Interfaith Youth Core, maintains the largest network of colleges and universities involved in interfaith work. While many Catholic and Lutheran schools have long been involved in Interfaith Youth Core, only one predominantly evangelical school, Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota (where I teach), has been connected with and invested in interfaith partnerships. This is but one example of the lack of evangelical voices in prominent interfaith circles. Interfaith Youth Core has recognized this absence, and Patel and others within his organization are making deliberate efforts to reach out. His presence at this influential conference marks a shift. For more, see the conference website at <http://www.cccu.org/ConferencesAndEvents/CalendarOfEvents/2017/1/PresConf>. Last accessed January 20, 2017.

<sup>164</sup> Despite the backlash, Mouw prioritized building relationships with Mormons, and published *Talking with Mormons: An Invitation to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans) in 2012.

<sup>165</sup> Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016.

same interfaith circle. In 2013, both Patel and Mouw, along with Diana Eck, were contributors for “Principled Pluralism: Report of the Inclusive America Project”, an initiative led by former U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright, and Harvard Professor David Gergen, with the objective of bringing together influential religious thinkers to consider the state of pluralism in America.<sup>166</sup>

There have, as yet, been few identifiable evangelicals beyond Mouw to enter into conversations regarding interfaith efforts or pluralism on a national scale.<sup>167</sup> While prominent authors and speakers such as Brian McLaren and Miroslav Volf are also linked to Patel and broader interfaith work, they are not always widely embraced by conservative evangelicals. However, their work still provides important insight for engaging evangelicals in interfaith dialogue.<sup>168</sup> Theologian and pastor Brian McLaren’s recent work has grown out of his own personal narrative of building friendships with persons from other faith traditions. He uses these narratives as a springboard from which to argue for Christian involvement in interfaith engagement as being an expression of Jesus’ fundamental command to love both God and neighbor.<sup>169</sup> Theologian Miroslav Volf has written extensively on religious and civic reasons for interfaith engagement. Most notably, his work has focused on extending Christian hospitality toward Muslims in America, and emphasizes the ways in which both Christians and Muslims benefit from interfaith engagement.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> The report from the weeklong conference can be found on the website of The Aspen Institute, who served as the organizer for the event: <https://assets.aspeninstitute.org/content/uploads/files/content/docs/jsp/Principled-Pluralism.pdf> Last accessed January 23, 2017.

<sup>167</sup> John A. Azumah, “Evangelical Christian Views and Attitudes Towards Christian-Muslim Dialogue.” *Transformation* 29.2 (2012): 128-138. Azumah observes, “Evangelicals have generally perceived interfaith dialogue as the religious bodies equivalent of the United Nations whose ultimate aim is a ‘United Religions’ through negotiations.

<sup>168</sup> Larson and Shady’s aforementioned work *From Bubble to Bridge* engages both McLaren and Volf (along with Buber, Cornielle, and Nussbaum) to make both theological and civic arguments for more evangelical involvement in interfaith efforts.

<sup>169</sup> Brian McLaren, *Why Did Jesus, Moses, the Buddha, and Mohammed Cross the Road?: Christian Identity in a Multi-faith World* (Nashville, TN: Jericho Books, 2012).

<sup>170</sup> Volf’s most relevant works on this topic include: *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2013), *Allah: A Christian Response* (New York: Harper, 2012), and *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996).

The lack of evangelicals active in interfaith work is partially due to the current crisis of identity within evangelical circles in the United States; who or what it means to be “evangelical” is contested.<sup>171</sup> This uncertainty of identity, as well as the reluctance of evangelicals to broadly embrace interfaith efforts, are crucial questions that are being investigated within the academy.<sup>172</sup> While these questions are related to this thesis, namely because younger evangelicals are potentially more open to interfaith efforts, they are not guiding questions and will not be addressed in detail. What is important for this thesis, however, is the need for additional scholarship on how to best encourage Christian participation in interfaith engagement. David Cheetham proposes that the goal of interreligious ethics should be to create a “space of creative responsibility between people” as opposed to establishing a definitive “code of ethics.”<sup>173</sup> The current lack of a strong body of literature on this topic reveals the importance of utilizing ethnographic narratives as a way to cultivate imagination, empathy, and understanding of religious others as a foundation for forging constructive academic and civic partnerships between persons of different religions.

## 2.9 Muslim Americans

I use the term “Muslim American” to describe the narrative participants in my research study because it starts with the broader category of Americans then locates the group marked as Muslim as a subfamily within that category. Muslim American places emphasis on the *shared experience* of being Muslim first, and finding common threads throughout the Muslim experience regardless of gender, age, ethnic or cultural

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<sup>171</sup> For example, McLaren refers to the internal challenges of evangelical identity as “Conflicted Religious Identity Syndrome” and attempts to pave a path forward that allows committed Christians to take both their religious beliefs and mandate to love neighbors of different faith traditions very seriously. Other scholarship focuses on the contested definitions of evangelicalism itself. See for example: Wesley Wildman, “When Narrative Identities Clash: Liberals versus Evangelicals”, *Congregations* (Fall 2005): 30, and Thomas S. Kidd, “Polls Show Evangelicals Support Trump. But the Term Evangelical Has Become Meaningless”, *Washington Post*, July 22, 2016.

<sup>172</sup> In addition to Larson and Shady’s book *From Bubble to Bridge*, see Marion Larson and Sara Shady, “Confronting the Complexities of Christian Privilege Through Interfaith Dialogue”, *Journal of College and Character* 13 (May 2012): 2.

<sup>173</sup> David Cheetham, “The University and Interfaith Education”: 16-35.

background.<sup>174</sup> It is imperative to be cautious when using the term “Muslim Americans” because it may suggest that the group is homogeneous. Research suggests that the Muslim community in the United States represents over fifty different nations.<sup>175</sup> The largest ethnic population is from South East Asia, making up 35-40%. The second largest, comprising roughly 30%, is African-American.<sup>176</sup> The third largest group at 20 % is Arab. The remaining 10% comes from Africa, Turkey, Central Asia, and Europe.<sup>177</sup> These statistics explicate that there is no singular ethnic or cultural expression of Islam in the United States. As Edward Curtis observes, the American Muslim community is a “microcosm” of the Islamic world.<sup>178</sup>

As this thesis is framed around individual narratives, I will now address related literature in the field of American Islam that incorporates the use of narrative to bring diverse voices into the academy. The methodology utilized to construct the narratives will be discussed in Chapter Three.

## 2.10 Muslims as Americans

Islam is often framed as being at odds with American values.<sup>179</sup> This thesis allows Muslim Americans to stake their claim as fully American. In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> This approach takes into account religiosity and religious expression as additional categories of identity, such as race or gender. In her work, scholar of Islam, gender, and race Jamillah Karim identifies religion as the lens through which she constructs sameness, but race as the lens through which she constructs difference. In this thesis the characteristics of singleness, cultural influence, and religion are identified as ways to construct sameness, while difference is determined by gender and, at times, ethnicity or race. While the narratives in this thesis support one of Karim’s conclusions that the bond of religious affiliation can and does supersede ethnicity, the reader will also recognize points of difference in these narratives that may be due to gender, ethnicity, and family heritage.

<sup>175</sup> Gallup Inc., “Muslim Americans: A National Portrait; An In-Depth Analysis of America’s Most Diverse Religious Community” (Washington, D.C., 2009)

<sup>176</sup> The percentage of African-American Muslims is in dispute. Edward Curtis contends the number is closer to 40%.

<sup>177</sup> Population statistics used in this thesis are from the Pew Forum. The Pew Forum has conducted several useful studies on Muslims in the United States over the past five years. Population statistics are fraught with controversy. I have seen low numbers used to suggest that religious accommodations afforded Muslims in the U.S. are “ridiculous” when they form such a small segment of the population. I have also seen the higher numbers used to incite fear that “Muslims are rapidly growing and radicalizing en masse”. See The Pew Forum. Available online at <http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx?loc=interstitialskip> Last accessed February 9, 2012.

<sup>178</sup> Edward Curtis, “Introduction to an American Muslim Panorama”, in *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*, ed. Edward E. Curtis IV (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), xii.

<sup>179</sup> Edward Curtis, *Muslims in America: A Short History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xi.

century, scholarship in the field of American Islam was shaped by innovative approaches in scholarship. One of the most significant examples is new research that solidifies Muslim Americans as having an active and long-standing role in narrative of United States history. According to Edward Curtis, this approach “shows how larger political and social forces shaped and even constrained their behavior and how Muslim American protest and dissent (as much as Muslim American patriotism and consent) adopted American cultural forms”.<sup>180</sup> The objective has been to demonstrate that the roots of Islam in the United States run deep, and that finding evidence to support this claim does not require a reframing of history.

The narratives presented here serve to reinforce the reality that Islam and America are not exclusive; that one can embrace an identity that is both Muslim and American. The nature of these identities, as well as other identity markers are, as Hammer and Safi suggest, “intertwined.”<sup>181</sup> The histories of both immigrant and native Muslims in the United States have never existed in isolation, and a few of the narratives demonstrate how they are connected. However, it would be negligent to ignore other identity markers. As Hammer and Safi argue, “any topic in regard to the study of American Muslims needs to take into account the interplay between domestic and localized dynamics and transnational ties, connections, and exchanges.”<sup>182</sup> While the stories in this thesis are distinctively American, they also evince the interview subject’s ties to Palestine, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Somalia. As Edward Curtis has remarked, “American Muslim identity and culture are not delimited by the political borders of the United States”, and all of the participants in this study proudly embrace their ethnicity and acknowledge the role it plays in their identity.<sup>183</sup>

In addition, scholars over the past decade have accentuated how Muslim Americans identify as U.S. nationals in both a legal and ideological sense while also

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<sup>180</sup> Edward Curtis, “The Study of American Muslims: A History” in the *Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (New York, N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 25.

<sup>181</sup> Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi, “American Islam, Muslim Americans, and the American Experiment”, 9

<sup>182</sup> Hammer and Safi, “American Islam, Muslim Americans, and the American Experiment”, 11

<sup>183</sup> Curtis, Edward, “Introduction to an American Muslim Panorama,” in *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* ed. Edward E. Curtis IV (Columbia University Press, 2008) pg. xiv.

celebrating their ethnic heritage.<sup>184</sup> Curtis argues that “such multiple identifications were seen as Americanization, not alienation”.<sup>185</sup> The narratives presented in this thesis make room for the interview participant to negotiate various aspects of their identity, never being forced to speak on behalf of their religion or community.

I return here to my use of Grewal’s concept of *shared experience*. *Shared experience* also allows the research participants in this study to stake their rightful claim as *Americans*, while still fully embracing their religious and ethnic identities. Emphasizing *shared experience* allows new research to confront existing stereotypes facing the American Muslim community.<sup>186</sup> Muslims from across the U.S. have expressed collective frustration at the insinuation that they are somehow not “American enough”. New and existing organizations, such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR), two widely recognized institutions whose primary goals were advocacy and internal communal health, broadened their mission and objectives in response to 9/11 to include external education about Islam for the American public.<sup>187 188</sup>

## 2.11 Religious Identity, not Ethnicity

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<sup>184</sup> See Curtis, 2009, 2011; Bayoumi, 2008; Dirks and Parlove, 2003; Grewal, 2006, 2010; Hammer, 2012, 2013.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>186</sup> In his compilation of narratives on Arab-Americans (both Muslim and non-Muslim) Columbia University English Professor Moustafa Bayoumi confronts the stereotype that Arab=Muslim while also acknowledging that Arab Americans and Muslim Americans remain the most feared groups in the United States. He notes that while there is no shortage of both media and academic coverage of these groups, what is still lacking is insight into the “human dimension of how Arab and Muslim Americans live their lives” and specifically how they “understand the meanings of their religion, the passions of their sorrow, and the struggle of their souls.” Bayoumi also uses *shared experience* in his research with Arab and Muslim Americans and identifies the main character as “youth”. He conducted his interviews within his own geographic community in Brooklyn, New York.

<sup>187</sup> See, Islamic Society of North America (1982), available online at [www.isna.org](http://www.isna.org), and The Council for American Islamic Relations (1994), available online at [www.cair.org](http://www.cair.org)

<sup>188</sup> These organizations’ efforts to engage more intentionally in the public sphere have also resulted in greater scrutiny, which has had both positive and negative results. Women’s health advocate and obstetrician-gynecologist Dr. Layla Al-Marayati observed that increased attention on Muslim charitable organizations has resulted in better business practices, increasing accountability and transparency. However, heightened inquiry by the U.S. government has had continued negative consequences. Al-Marayati has concluded that “only a few new Muslim American humanitarian organizations have emerged since 9/11, meaning that, in this country, fewer than a dozen groups exist that provide assistance abroad on behalf of the American community”. As a result, the actions of the government impact the “already small” contribution of American Muslims giving to international aid.



The frustration over the framing of Islam and America as always being at odds has been acknowledged and addressed by many in the American academic community.<sup>189</sup> In the decade after 9/11, “a new generation of scholars arose to analyze Islam as an American religious tradition and to narrate the lives of Muslims as mundane Americans.”<sup>190</sup> Some of the first to shift away from ethnicity as a starting point have done so because they are personally vested in finding an alternative, more timely, more accurate replacement. As leading American intellectual Omid Safi noted, “We American Muslims want our faith back, as a spiritually powerful means of transforming ourselves and our world.”<sup>191</sup> Scholars like Zareena Grewal, Shabana Mir, Jamillah Karim, and Edward Curtis identify as Muslim Americans who, while they respect and celebrate their family’s ethnic heritage, do not regard it as the primary factor shaping their identity.<sup>192</sup>

This decision to lead with religion as the primary shaper of one’s identity is one that must be respected by academic research. This is one of the strengths of Interfaith Studies. When young single Muslims feel the freedom to distance themselves from ethnicity by what they perceive as Islam’s emphasis on equality among people regardless of their heritage, their “Muslim” world gets bigger.<sup>193</sup> In turn, when my students encounter their stories, their world gets bigger. For many young Muslims, it is living in the United States that has allowed them to blaze a new trail towards an identity that is shaped by American values such as individual achievement and self-expression. As Curtis notes, “In most cases, according to the new historiography, the symbolic and embodied presence of Muslim Americans has played a key role in inscribing religious, racial, ethnic, class, and gender norms in American life.”<sup>194</sup>

The Muslims whose stories are documented in this thesis all reveal their individuality – yet a mutual element found in each was the firm commitment to the idea

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<sup>189</sup> See Curtis, 2009, 2013; GhaneaBassiri, 2010, 2013; Hammer, 2013; Safi, 2013.

<sup>190</sup> Curtis, “Introduction to an American Muslim Panorama”, 15.

<sup>191</sup> Omid Safi, “Being Muslim, Being American After 9/11”, in *Taking Back Islam: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith* ed. Michael Wolfe (Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, 2002), 67-76.

<sup>192</sup> Especially significant is the work of Edward Curtis. As an African-American Muslim, Curtis has been vocal about the limitations of “immigrant” narratives to understand Islam in America as it specifically excludes the indigenous experience of African-American Muslims.

<sup>193</sup> Ali S. Asani, “‘So that you may know one another’: A Muslim American Reflects on Pluralism and Islam”, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003): 26-36.

<sup>194</sup> Curtis, “The Study of American Muslims: A History”, 26.

that being American does not detract from their Muslim identity but rather allows them to define Islam for themselves.<sup>195</sup> It may be that embracing individuality is a means to benefit the community, and this should not be perceived as selfish or as a move away from tradition. Instead, healthy and stable *individuals* are the backbone of healthy communities.<sup>196</sup> Again, Interfaith Studies supports and embraces this framing. This is why narratives are essential. Self-told narratives counter texts and scholarship that present Islam as universal. Historically, books on “Islam” often do not include individual stories or experiences. All too often, the narratives of Muslims are categorized according to ethnic and cultural background, and are reduced to immigrant stories. While immigrant stories are useful, their relegation can undermine the power of these stories to illuminate the rich and complex religious experience of the individual. There are exceptions, however, and these will be discussed in both the third chapter and the conclusion.

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<sup>195</sup> Mohammed, one of the interview subject’s whose story will be told in Chapter 4 made the comment in an interview that, “America allows me to be my best-Muslim-self.” (April 2012)

<sup>196</sup> Talal-Yousseff Eid, “Marriage, Divorce and Child Custody as Experienced by American Muslims: Religious, Social and Legal Considerations.” D. Th. dissertation, Harvard University, 2005.

## 2.12. Original Contribution

I regard the universal objective of Interfaith Studies to be study and pursuit in *the commitment to not only consider how to learn to live well together with others of differing faith/religious traditions, but to actively seek to appreciate one another.*

Interfaith Studies respects the value of religion as a shaper of individual and communal identity. Interfaith theory models how to recognize and accept difference, by starting from common ground and *shared experience.*

Over the last three years, Eboo Patel's views on the purpose of Interfaith Studies have changed significantly. In his latest text, *Interfaith Leadership: A Primer*, published in 2016, Patel has redefined his conception of "interfaith" to be closely tied to one's personal identity. Though never explicit in print as to why he chose to not only reintroduce a more individual, personal approach to Interfaith Studies, but also elevate it to first position, Patel's more recent works reflect the influence of a widened circle. His vision has now been shaped by scholars from a variety of disciplines, as well as by key figures (both in academia and in the civic arena) who were already invested in interreligious dialogue. Inspired by ethical philosophers like Martin Buber and Paul Ricoeur, Patel uses noticeably new language that reflects this transition to an approach that values the centrality of self and one's own story as essential components of preparation for interfaith work. Patel embraces Ricoeur's concept of narrative identity, making the argument that we understand ourselves, and define who we are, by the stories we tell to ourselves about ourselves.<sup>197</sup> Most essential for Patel in Ricoeur's narrative identity is the observation that "key moments in our lives almost always involve other people."<sup>198</sup> In contrast to his framing in 2013, Patel now elevates personal experience and personal identity development to a place of essential importance. As a part of developing a narrative identity, Patel defines five types of personal experiences the interfaith leader should consider:

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<sup>197</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 28. Patel notes that we all do this work of telling ourselves our own stories on a regular basis. Specifically, as Ricoeur proposes, we elevate certain events or moments into particular places of importance, and cement ties of connection between these events and who we are. See Kathleen Blamey, trans. *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: Univ of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>198</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 28.

- Moments of inspiration or enrichment from people or ideas of other traditions.
- Moments of connection or relationship with people or ideas of other traditions.
- Moments of prejudice or conflict with people or ideas of other traditions.
- Moments of action or appreciation with people or ideas of other traditions.
- Moments of recognizing difference with other religious people or ideas, yet feeling admiration.

For Patel, these moments can happen over time, are not mutually exclusive, and do not all need to be achieved in order to develop a narrative identity.<sup>199</sup> Creation of a narrative identity becomes an act of “intentional interpretation and meaning making.”<sup>200</sup> These “moments” Patel now deems as essential demonstrate a substantial departure from his original goals for interfaith competency in 2013. While Patel is speaking here of training leaders, I see these essential moments and the cultivation of narrative identity as fitting within an academic course that incorporates Interfaith Studies.

I am primarily interested in investigating how these *moments*, as defined by Patel, can potentially occur in an academic exercise such as reading ethnographic narratives. A careful reading of the narratives through an interfaith lens reminds the reader, as Ricoeur proposes and Patel articulates, that engaging the presence of the other serves to remind us that we are not only responsible for ourselves, we also have a responsibility for others.<sup>201</sup> One can have these kinds of powerful encounters with a text. This matters, partially, because it gives Interfaith Studies educators some kind of common ground. Consistent use of certain texts help drive future research and continue to shape the field. This is not to downplay the impact of individual encounters, but they are disparate. I recognize that some of the most fruitful discussions that have occurred in my classroom happened organically, rather than strategically. Yet, examining the elements of what factors were present, as I did with my students and Kasim, allows me to generate observations and guidelines that can make this essential learning more likely to occur. Having students share their experiences in engaging with a common text

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<sup>199</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 36. Patel comments that a narrative identity is not a random list of events. Instead, it is comprised of a “careful selection and stringing together of the moments and events that matter for a particular purpose.”

<sup>200</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 36

<sup>201</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 36

is an effective teaching tool. The instructor can facilitate discussions and demonstrate for students how they are doing the work of interfaith engagement. Lessons can be taken away that can be replicated, and better analyzed for research and future teaching.

One of the challenges with interfaith engagement can be that individuals feel required to clearly define what they believe and how they identify – for example, to present their “best Muslim or Christian self” as an ambassador for Islam or Christianity. Where can you share your moments of insecurity? Part of Interfaith Studies must involve creating spaces to share one’s insecurities or struggles regarding what they believe. A student’s own “faith” development has a meaningful impact on their ability to engage religious diversity and move towards religious pluralism.

Preservation of narratives is a way to make certain that the story *remains* the story. This forces the reader of the story to regard the subject as ‘Thou’ (Buber). Ethnographic narratives create a space and a place for demonstrating the fluidity of religious experience over time. They illustrate the “change” component of Interfaith Studies that both Patel and Leirvik elevate as essential. The goal is not to wait to engage until we have “arrived” at some enlightened destination before we begin to construct our stories. We are constantly changing based on experiences, relationships, trials and triumphs. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook observes, “Interreligious learning begins with stories and identifying shared values.” In the chapters to come, the reader will encounter the narratives of four Muslim Americans who are in the midst of their own transformational journeys. However, I will first detail the methodology utilized to construct my pedagogical model for how to engage their stories.

## CHAPTER 3

### **METHODOLOGY: *Developing an Interfaith Pedagogy***

The intention of this thesis is to demonstrate how ethnographic narratives can be presented and engaged through a pedagogical model inspired by interfaith theory. The outcome will be an example of scholarship that contributes to the discipline of Interfaith Studies. By demonstrating how educational objectives from the field of Interfaith Studies can be integrated into existing curricular models that utilize narratives, an innovative model of interfaith pedagogy can be created. Examples of Interfaith theory application are needed for two crucial reasons: (1) to build and expand the innovative work being accomplished in the emerging field of Interfaith Studies, and (2) to provide effective pedagogical models for utilizing interfaith theory within the classroom. Ethnographic narratives provide one such example of how this fusion can take place, as the emerging practices of Interfaith Studies offer the reader a lens or framework through which to approach individual stories. In the coming chapters, four narratives about life as young, single Muslims in Minnesota will be presented. The stories are the result of over four years of ethnographic research. Narrative participants were invited to consider the influence of marriage and marital expectations at their current stage of life development as a starting point for conversation. In each narrative, the stories shared illuminate the personal history, central beliefs, and convictions and motivations that have shaped the individual's identity as Muslims and as Americans.

Given that a defining feature of Interfaith Studies is the value of multidisciplinary integration, my thesis is structured around a multi-method framework for research and writing. I have chosen to combine narrative inquiry and oral history to produce four ethnographic narratives and then consider how they can be utilized to further practical scholarship in the field of Interfaith Studies. Interfaith Studies has multiple audiences, and there is a need for texts that serve a pragmatic function. This is why my thesis is designed to not only provide solid stories in the form of narratives, but also a lens through which to read and engage these stories. As outlined in previous chapters, *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* are both skills that can be developed

through the reading of narratives, and I have chosen to demonstrate this by considering how the narratives of Nadia, Kasim, Amina, and Mohammed, can be approached through a constructed lens I call the *shared experience* model.

In this chapter I will provide an overview of how my research was initially conceived, how the structure evolved over time, and how the results demonstrate a successful synthesis of Interfaith Studies with existing modes of research for gathering human stories. Research methods will be presented, along with the limitations of each method. The main sources of data gathered, and the means by which they were obtained, will be outlined. While the thrust of this thesis does not lie with what the stories contribute to research on Muslim American experiences, it is essential to discuss and present the methods by which the stories were gathered and to explicate why I chose to work with Muslim Americans. This is to demonstrate that existing methods of the collection of narratives can be useful for offering insight into religious expression. Second, the stories were not initially gathered for the sake of educating the listener, though that has certainly become an outcome. They were collected to allow the participant's autonomy in their own narratives. This approach allows the stories to first come to forefront, while the intentional approach to how one can engage the story is where the integration of Interfaith Studies is demonstrated.

### **3.1 Initial Conception of Research: Working with Muslim Americans**

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri claims that scholars of Islam, like scholars of practice and ritual in general, have debated whether religion is best understood through its textual sources (scriptures, legal, and theological writings) or through its practice in local contexts.<sup>202</sup> Interfaith Studies recognizes that it is a combination of all of the above. My initial conception for this project relied primarily on the work of sociologists and anthropologists to identify useful models for working with Muslim young adults to create ethnographic accounts. It then became necessary and beneficial to expand my inquiry to include models from the field of Religious Studies in order to better define my

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<sup>202</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, "Religious Normativity and Praxis Among American Muslims", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge University Press, 2013) 209. GhaneaBassiri contends that the regional and cultural diversity encompassed by the "Islamic World" has historically resulted in a variety of understandings about Islam.

research questions and to understand what themes are being explored in existing narratives of young Muslim Americans. The influence of these existing studies broadened and yet defined the scope of this project. The research now required an investigation of existing scholarship on theories such as acculturation, identity/self-actualization, ethnicity, gender, and religiosity. In addition, historical research was needed in order to include the Muslim American diaspora, both immigrant and indigenous, patterns of immigration and settlement, and the impact of September 11, 2001. By considering all of these categories, in addition to Interfaith Studies, the narratives in this thesis may find an additional place in what is now being called the field of American Islam. Defined by scholar Juliane Hammer, American Islam seeks to identify and engage the “creative ways in which American Muslims have responded to the serious challenges that they have faced and continue to face in constructing a religious praxis and complex identities that are grounded in both a universal tradition,” and, as stated earlier, “the particularities of their local context.”<sup>203</sup>

As the initial “door opener” for conversations with my participants was the topic of marriage, I also decided to investigate key studies related to Muslim marriage. There is no shortage of both academic and informal studies on contemporary marriage in the United States. While Muslim marriage is a topic that is widely covered in a variety of disciplines, for my purposes I primarily identified studies from the fields of history and even social work as they focused on individual, first-person accounts, as opposed to broad surveys.<sup>204</sup> Though the goal of my research is not to offer new insights related to Muslim views on marriage, my conversations with the participants support much of the existing research on marriage and singleness as a central concern for young Muslims (and the broader Muslim American community) and are a popular topic for discussion regardless of age, gender, ethnic or cultural background, etc. Though the purpose is not to draw conclusions, these narratives may be useful for further research around the

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<sup>203</sup> Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi, “Introduction: American Islam, Muslim Americans, and the American Experiment” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge University Press, 2013) 3.

<sup>204</sup> Noha Alshugairi, “Marital Trends in the American Muslim Community: A Pilot Study.” *Journal of Muslim Mental Health* 5.3: (2010): 256–277. Debra Majeed, “Sexual Identity, Marriage, and Family.” *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*. Eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi. Cambridge UP, 2013: 319. Nadia Shah. “Religiosity and Marital Satisfaction Among Muslims.” M.S.W. thesis, California State University, Long Beach, 2007.



subjects of marriage and singleness within Muslim American communities, and I have included my observations and findings related to these topics in the Appendix.

### **3.2 Utilizing Narratives as a Pedagogical Tool: Framing a Narrative Around One's Religious Identity and Commitment**

As discussed in previous chapters, the United States has historically demonstrated respect for religious diversity and general appreciation for religion and the role it plays in society. Despite predictions to the contrary, religion has not died out and religious identity and the willingness to embrace that identity in the public sphere has only become stronger. Post September 11th, American society has been challenged to recognize that religion is not something that can be ignored, nor can it be segmented or compartmentalized. One of the intentions of the field of Interfaith Studies is to push the academy to catch up to this reality. Religion and spirituality matter to students as a part of their identity and many, as evidenced by my Christian students and my Muslim narrative participants, desire to 'live their faith out loud,' rejecting a dualist framework that expects them to take their religious identity off like an accessory when it is deemed not appropriate or relevant. While most authors acknowledge the need for sound religious education as a component of interfaith competency, this often does not receive the attention it deserves in the wider academy, particularly as general religious education in the United States is often lacking prior to college. While there are many appropriate places to integrate religious literacy, one value of narratives is they allow the narrative participant to teach us about their religion as they tell us about their life without needing to be in a designated religion course.

### **3.3 Methods: Choosing Ethnography and Narrative Inquiry**

Influenced by studies on Muslim Americans within the fields of anthropology, sociology, psychology, and religious studies I determined that a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods for research and analysis would be most useful. Specifically, this thesis is an exploratory ethnographic study that relies on narrative inquiry to engage how young adult Muslims a) navigate their identity, and b) how their attitudes and perceptions towards marriage inform and shape identity. The narratives are then

considered for how they can help a reader develop *appreciative knowledge* and cultivate a *narrative imagination*. Ethnography and narrative inquiry will now be defined. A rationale for why each was chosen will be offered, and limitations for each will also be addressed.

### 3.3.a Ethnography

With historical roots in anthropology, ethnography is defined as both a qualitative research process, and a method and product whose aim is cultural interpretation.<sup>205</sup> Ethnographers commit to presenting their findings, as best they can, from an “insider’s point of view.”<sup>206</sup> Ethnography requires the researcher to be a participant observer. Living in close proximity to the research subjects, the participant observer both engages with the community, and also can detach or withdraw in order to “observe.” This approach fit with both my research objectives and my ongoing training in the collection of oral histories.

Two ethnographic studies, completed over thirty years apart by anthropologists Elizabeth Warnock Fernea and Linda Walbridge, inspired my work. Fernea’s research resulted from two years of investment in a small, rural village in Iraq in the 1960s.<sup>207</sup> Walbridge lived and worked with the Lebanese Shia community in the heart of Dearborn, Michigan, for over a decade.<sup>208</sup> Both conducted traditional, large scale ethnography, living in the heart of the community they were studying. Both functioned as participant observers, combining personal interviews with observations and field work conducted as a part of living in community with their research subjects. At first glance, reading the intense and prolonged immersion experiences of anthropologists

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<sup>205</sup> Brian A Hoey, "A Simple Introduction to the Practice of Ethnography and Guide to Ethnographic Fieldnotes" *Marshall University Digital Scholar* (2014). Available at: [http://works.bepress.com/brian\\_hoey/12/](http://works.bepress.com/brian_hoey/12/). Last accessed on July 7, 2016

<sup>206</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Culture*, (New York, N.Y.: Basic Books, 1973).

<sup>207</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *Guests of the Sheik: An Ethnography of an Iraqi Village* (New York, N.Y.: Anchor Books, 1969.)

<sup>208</sup> Anthropologist Linda Walbridge’s underappreciated text, *Without Forgetting the Imam*, was the product of more than a decade of research on the Shiite-Lebanese community in Dearborn, Michigan. It has been an essential aid in providing a frame to assist me with how to conduct research when I am not a “native” insider and am not a member of the religious community I am researching. See Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shiism in an American Community* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1999).

like Linda Walbridge and Elizabeth Warnock Fernea was a formidable task. These were immersive studies, requiring proficient Arabic language skills in order to interact. In my case, funds were limited, and my family and career circumstances were not conducive to a move. However, ethnography does not require one to leave their home environment, and the potential for smaller, in-country studies has often been overlooked.<sup>209</sup> In ten years of teaching, I had already established professional and personal relationships with the Muslim community, and it made sense to build on these connections.

At its core, ethnography provides a researcher with the means to express a “shared interest” among scholars for “telling stories.”<sup>210</sup> According to anthropologist Brian Hoey, good ethnography has the power to be “transformative,” for both the research participants and the researcher.<sup>211</sup> Ethnography can only be successful if the researcher is interested in establishing relationships and making a long-term investment in the community. Ethnography was determined to provide the most appropriate methods because of my existing personal investment in the community, the intention to pursue further research locally, and the similarities identified between the aims of ethnography and interfaith theory as related to the value of story. Establishing long-term connections, as continuously noted, is imperative to maintaining a positive relationship with Muslim individuals and families that have been the subject of scrutiny for the past decade. Credibility was enhanced when participants realized, “I was not going anywhere.” Commitment and time are foundational for ethnographic work and this project was designed to allow for both.

Opting to research Muslims in Minnesota was not an obscure choice. The combined cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul in Minnesota have become remarkably religiously diverse, and the Muslim community continues to grow in both size and

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<sup>209</sup> Hoey, “A Simple Introduction.”

<sup>210</sup> Brian A. Hoey, “A Simple Introduction to the Practice of Ethnography and Guide to Ethnographic Fieldnotes” *Marshall University Digital Scholar* (2014). Available at: [http://works.bepress.com/brian\\_hoey/12/](http://works.bepress.com/brian_hoey/12/). Last accessed July 7, 2016. Hoey observes that the motivation of the ethnographer is to tell stories that speak across difference to identify what it means to be human.

<sup>211</sup> Hoey, “A Simple Introduction”

variegation.<sup>212</sup> Working in Minnesota has provided me with the opportunity to be on the forefront of a research “zone” that has yet to be fully probed. The influence of the Muslim community only continues to grow, and it will be argued that the findings in this thesis are more robust precisely because of the geographic location and the diversity that exists therein.

Yet, ethnography has its limitations. It can be exhausting and discouraging work. One cannot refrain from being personally invested, and must be willing to answer any questions the research participants may wish to turn back. It is hard to establish firm end-dates for writing and research as observations and interactions have become a part of daily life. Writing took place throughout the entire research process, and it was imperative to engage in continuous, active re-reading of the narratives as while they are individual stories, they needed to ‘live’ together.<sup>213</sup> This approach required time and commitment, as each narrative chapter draft was initiated as soon as preliminary details about interview participants were gathered. As interviews took place, chapters began to take shape, but all had to be continuously rearranged up until after the final interviews. As one interview participant’s story would suddenly seem to speak to another, if not all, then changes and adjustments needed to be made. It was not uncommon for a narrative participant to relay a particular memory or quote a particular author that required a return to reading and further investigation in order to frame the story or detail more fully. The narratives are organized to build on each other, but I also wanted each to be able to stand on its own. This meant that analysis and re-construction were ongoing as new information was frequently being accrued. This was the first project I had undertaken that was dependent upon in-depth interviews. While this project demonstrates that the necessary time and attention to conduct quality ethnographic work did occur, the amount of time was underestimated and one central challenge was

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<sup>212</sup> When I expressed my worry over my ability to engage in ethnography on the scale of Walbridge and Fernea, one of my research participants scolded me and remarked, “Amy! We suggested the same coffee shop as a place to meet. We live two miles from each other. We know a dozen of the same people. We shop at the same Target. This is where WE live. I think you’re good!” Interview with Nadia (11.3.13)

<sup>213</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, “Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology”, *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no.2 (2006): 77-101.

determining when to “end”.<sup>214</sup> This absence of a definitive ending better represents how Interfaith Studies approaches story and faith commitment - as something that is on-going, frequently changing as individual’s and their beliefs and values are not static. Religion, faith, and belief are constantly being shaped and challenged by the circumstances of everyday life.<sup>215</sup> Ultimately, ethnography is an established form of study that lends itself to multidisciplinary inquiry. A well composed ethnography can effectively be engaged using the type of interfaith theory- based model I am suggesting.

### **3.3.b Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative Inquiry provides a canopy that takes into consideration the personal and human dimensions of experience over time, paying attention to the relationship between individual experience and other factors such as cultural context, I argue, religious commitment, and even geographic context.<sup>216</sup> When practicing narrative inquiry the author is required to represent individual’s stories as told by them, a move away from traditional ethnography which historically has framed the ‘other’ as an object of study and hands-off observation.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> What I mean by this is that it was not uncommon that I would have just finished writing a chapter or section about one of the interview participants, and something would come across my Facebook or Instagram feed that would require me to consider if it was significant enough that it needed to be investigated and included.

<sup>215</sup> I have found that many of Christian students I work with, find this idea that their story is on-going, quite freeing. Our evangelical community places great emphasis on what I would anecdotally call one’s ‘testimony,’ a brief personal story of how they came to committed belief in Jesus Christ. These testimonies often follow the same pattern: beginning problem (what was going wrong in my life), middle crisis (what brought me to my knees), end solution (how finding faith in Christianity turned things around). Testimonies are constructed after the fact, once the author has ‘arrived’ - once things are fixed. This leaves little room for the reality that religious commitment is often a constant negotiation. It does not have an end. Certainly this is why it is called, faith. The value of the methods embedded in ethnography and narrative inquiry is the idea that stories can be told from the position of the middle, as opposed to the notion we can only construct them once the end has been identified and we can look back and assess the meaning of what we have been through. This writing from the middle is, admittedly, hard for students as it requires a different level of vulnerability. However, it far better reflects their life stage and processing. I believe it can assist them to be honest about their doubts and insecurities, recognizing these thoughts and emotions do not undermine, but rather, help stretch and grow their faith and belief.

<sup>216</sup> D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connolly. *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).

<sup>217</sup> Vera Caine, Andrew Estefan, and D. Jean Clandinin. “A Return to Methodological Commitment: Reflections on Narrative Inquiry,” *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 2013 iJ Routledge Vol. 57, No. 6, 574-586. The authors contend that narrative inquiry “allows us to understand experience beyond the lens of the researcher; we see experience as lived in the midst, as always unfolding over time, in diverse social contexts and in place, and as co-composed in relation. We also see the

Narrative inquiry is a strategic and natural place to start. It provides a qualitative research strategy that moves beyond thinking about religion comparatively or summatively. While narrative inquiry often includes thematic analysis, I have decided to use caution in placing too much emphasis on trying to explicate themes. Identifying themes was a part of my own coding process and used for organizational purposes, primarily to help create connections between the narratives. However, thematic analysis has limitations in terms of its usefulness when trying to construct a pedagogical model. The objective is to prepare the reader to draw from their own experience when engaging the narrative, and discover points of connection, as well as empathy. Overemphasis on isolating 'themes' or drawing conclusions based on certain factors, such as gender, can lead to conclusions that are stereotypical or just plain inaccurate. This is whether themes have already been defined by the instructor, or the isolation of themes is an outcome of the assignment.

By contrast, my conception of Interfaith pedagogy allows the reader to simultaneously recognize diversity and individuality while finding commonality with shared human experiences (isolation, parental expectation, desire for relationship) as opposed to contrasts such as gender, ethnicity, or language. As previously mentioned, there are few texts that tell the stories of women and men together. Interweaving stories decreases the likelihood that a reader may make an automatic assumption that they will find little to relate to as they are not (fill-in-the-blank) "like the author." While it is necessary to engage cultural and ethnic distinctions, Interfaith Studies seeks to move away from them as the common denominator.

Narrative inquiry speaks to the findings in quantitative studies, but moves beyond findings to elucidate real, individual experiences. Narratives saturate black and white with grey. As significant as the points of agreement are between participants in this study, I have had to pay even closer attention to some of the incongruities, even if they seem small. When answering questions on a survey, respondents often speak to their idealized self. This is more common if the respondent represents a group/perspective/category that is a minority or marginalized. Quantitative studies often

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pedagogical possibilities and long-term commitment to those we work alongside that come from this interweaving of a narrative view of experience with narrative inquiry as methodology."

overlook geographic and regional contexts. These distinctions matter. Life for a young Muslim woman in a large, urban center like Washington D.C. is completely different than for another young Muslim woman in rural Cold Spring, Minnesota. These divergences not only come out in narratives, they become a more central part of the story. This does not mean we should disregard quantitative studies. They can provide an essential base to build from, and a needed place to return as the narratives unfold and are constructed. There are times when statistics are able to speak quickly and unemotionally. However, in order to really understand the “why?” we have to be willing to get to know the “who.” Narratives allow the reader to focus on one human being at a time, allowing them to be themselves instead of determining their beliefs and opinions according to categories or scales. They share their truth as they know it.

The blessing and curse of narratives is that they take time. There is more space to experience the ups and downs of human life with the participant. People’s perceptions and opinions change as their circumstances change. The time narratives require is what makes room for trust and transparency. The interview participants knew my intentions because I had to continue to articulate them over time. Narratives gave the participants the freedom to critique their community, without losing the ability to express love for it simultaneously. Most significantly, narratives bring in underrepresented voices, and in the case of these Muslim Americans, voices from the margins of American society. As evidenced in all of the narratives presented here, it is living in the United States that has allowed each to blaze a new trail towards identity that is shaped by American values such as individual achievement and self-expression. As Edward Curtis notes, “In most cases, according to the new historiography, the symbolic and embodied presence of Muslim Americans has played a key role in inscribing religious, racial, ethnic, class, and gender norms in American life.”<sup>218</sup> The Muslims whose stories are documented in this thesis all reveal their individuality, yet a mutual element found in each was the firm commitment to the idea that being American

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<sup>218</sup> Edward Curtis, “The Study of American Muslims: A History”, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 26.

does not detract from their Muslim identity. On the contrary, each contested America allows them to be their best Muslim-self.<sup>219</sup>

### 3.4 Applying Interfaith Theory: Thinking Across Disciplinary Boundaries

When Interfaith theory and ethnographic narratives are synthesized, they can reach a different audience beyond the “usual suspects” - those that are already interested, engaged, and confident regarding religious diversity. I contend narratives allow the reader to both cultivate a *narrative imagination*, develop *appreciative knowledge*, as well as begin to consider their own narrative identity. In order to understand why I place such high value on the use of narrative before face-to-face interaction when working with my Christian student population, I will reference my own use of the *shared experience* model to engage narrative in my classroom. When I introduce narratives to students, I have them do a first read with no further instructions. We then spend time discussing their initial impressions in class. We collectively consider what ‘information we have gathered.’<sup>220</sup> I then assign them the task of re-reading the narrative, but this time I have introduced them to the lenses of *narrative imagination* and *appreciative knowledge*. I fully explain both concepts, provide them with a guide that explicates the definitions of the concepts as well as the history behind them. Most important, the guide includes a set of questions to consider and respond to as they re-read the narrative. These questions are framed around Eboo Patel’s suggested five types of personal experience:

- Moments of inspiration or enrichment from people or ideas of other traditions
- Moments of connection or relationship with people or ideas of other traditions

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<sup>219</sup> Mohammed, one of the interview subject’s whose story will be told in Chapter 4, made the comment in an interview that “America allows me to be my best-Muslim-self.” (April 2012) It may be that being one’s best self is a means to benefit the community, and this should not be perceived as selfish or as a move away from tradition. Instead, healthy and stable *individuals* are the backbone of healthy communities.

<sup>220</sup> When I first tried to incorporate Interfaith theory into my assignments for reading narratives, I found it left students a bit overwhelmed. They became too focused on trying to find the ‘right’ answers in the material, and were frustrated by the reality that the types of questions I was asking do not have right answers. Instead, assigning a first read, with no real blueprint other than to come back to class with general notes, has proven to be a much better approach. We discuss and create a communal document of general facts. This significantly improves the second reading as now we have familiarity with the material, but now are revisiting it with more of a guide. This second read, with the use of the Interfaith lenses, now stands in contrast to the first read. Students are better able to recognize that their experience, and what we are now taking from the reading, is something new - it can be compared to our first experience. I have found this especially useful in General Education or 200 level courses that have students from many different disciplines or students of differing ages.



- Moments of prejudice or conflict with people or ideas of other traditions
- Moments of action or appreciation with people or ideas of other traditions
- Moments of recognizing difference with other religious people or ideas, yet feeling admiration.

Each of these “moments” can be experiences that occur for the reader when encountering the ethnographic narratives presented in this thesis.<sup>221</sup> All are tied to the ethos of how Interfaith Studies seeks to approach faith commitment. As I argued in the first and second chapter, many of the existing published works (both compilations and autobiographies) within the field of Interfaith Studies present the stories of well-known religious figures who hold positions of authority in their religious communities or interfaith circles. These are valuable, but may prove difficult to relate to for many students. All too often, these are stories of ‘arrival,’ reinforcing the idea that a story can only be told once it’s seen as finished. As crucial as completely self-authored stories are, narratives that have been created over time utilizing ethnographic procedures create powerful teaching tools that can be applied across disciplines, while still allowing the individual whose story is being told to have authority.

### **3.4.a Why Narratives And Not Face to Face Encounters?**

Narrative offers a controlled starting place before we engage face-to-face. I can provide historical and cultural context and build infrastructure prior to a reading. In the case of Muslim-Christian relations, I am concerned with the well-being of both the interview participant and my reader. I have witnessed the damage inflicted by comments or questions that are, no matter if well-intended, insensitive, ill-informed, and inappropriate. Upon meeting a young Muslim woman for the first time, after general introductions, the next question should not be “Why does Islam oppress women?” but I have been in numerous settings where this occurs. Many of the Muslims I know professionally and personally are not surprised or offended, but rather ready with a response as these types of questions are now common. Yet, why should they have to? While they don’t need my ‘protection’, I have an obligation to care for the humanity of those I have

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<sup>221</sup> I have included an example of how I teach students to approach a particular text that includes narratives in the appendix. It is titled, “How to Read Growing Up Muslim.”

brought into my community, my classroom. This is a part of my own belief of what it means to be a good neighbor to my Muslim guests.

It is also my responsibility to teach students how to engage in respectful dialogue and how to model both literal hospitality and what I call “intellectual” and “spiritual” hospitality.<sup>222</sup> I define exercising intellectual hospitality as a willingness to fully engage our intellect when listening to others (this is applied to reading their words as well), and a commitment to acknowledge that we all have biases and opinions that influence the way we process information. As a result, we must actively try and distinguish our bias and set it to the side when we are being hospitable. Spiritual hospitality means that we recognize that any voice we encounter (whether from the past, in a text, in a film, or in person) is made in the image of God, accepting that they are equally loved by God, and open to the possibility that God may have something to teach us through them. Borrowing from American historian John Fea, I also argue that “all human beings have inherent dignity and worth independent of their actions or behaviors.”<sup>223</sup> Intellectual and spiritual hospitality are intertwined in the one “rule” I do articulate: we should not ask questions we would not be comfortable answering if they were posed back to us.<sup>224</sup> While I certainly cannot force or require students to practice all of these, I do present them as expectations.

### **3.5 Narrative Participants**

After completing a first initial round of interviews, the final narrative participants were narrowed down to four; Nadia, Kasim, Amina, and Mohammed. This was a strategic decision, and the final candidates were chosen with great intention. The specific criteria

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<sup>222</sup> We have a discussion in the first week of class, as well as before we encounter our first primary source reading or speaker, on how to practice hospitality. Literal hospitality means we show up on time, don't use our phones or laptops, and don't fall asleep; we give our speakers (whether live or in writing) our full attention. If we have a live guest, we always extend a gift of welcome and a card we have all signed thanking the speaker for their time and willingness to share their story.

<sup>223</sup> Fea, J. *Why Study History? Reflecting on the Importance of the Past* Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013. 85.

<sup>224</sup> This does not mean that we are not going to be allowed to ask tough questions. After ten years and upwards of twenty speakers, I have yet to have one not begin by telling students something along the lines of “Don't be afraid to ask me anything. Believe me, there's nothing I haven't been asked!” This openness often sets a comfortable tone for us all, and the honesty and vulnerability that has passed between speaker and students is not something I can take any kind of credit for.

for selection will first be discussed, followed by the justification for relying on four, qualitative narratives as opposed to a larger, quantitative sample.

First, none of the four final participants were married, or were in relationships that were headed towards marriage at the time interviews started.<sup>225</sup> Yet, all vocalized a strong desire to get married, and even agreed that marriage is viewed in their religious community, as interview participant, Amina, would state, “not optional.” Everyone testified to their mutual concerns regarding finding a potential partner that will please their families.

Second, while there was a variance in the religious beliefs, ideology, and practices of the four interviewees, all identified religion as a dominant influence on their daily choices and general framework for life, though each considered religious devotion to be up to individual interpretation.

Third, all self-identified as Muslim American, and all consistently vocalized the view that ‘Muslim’ and ‘American’ are not mutually exclusive terms.<sup>226</sup> All of the interview participants were born outside of the United States, but came to the U.S. at young ages (the youngest at four, the oldest at twelve) and have spent significant time in American schools and neighborhoods. The ethnicity and parent culture of the interviewees is representative of the demographics of the Muslim community in Minneapolis and St. Paul, Minnesota. The interviewees have ethnic ties to Somalia, the Sudan, Palestine, and Lebanon. This diversity is crucial. While the Somali population is the fastest growing “Muslim” population in Minnesota, this is a relatively recent development. To focus solely on the Somali experience, despite their growing numbers, would be to discount the long history Muslims have in the state, and would only reinforce the concerns that too many studies are “immigrant” studies that fail to focus on

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<sup>225</sup> One potential interview participant was removed from consideration as she had just become engaged and was shortly getting married.

<sup>226</sup> In 2011 the Pew Research Center published a national public opinion survey of Muslim Americans. The report revealed that nearly half of all Muslims in the United States considered themselves Muslim first and American second. Eighteen percent described themselves as equally Muslim and American. The Pew Forum. URL: <http://www.pewforum.org/The-Future-of-the-Global-Muslim-Population.aspx?loc=interstitialskip> Last accessed September 9, 2012.

*shared experiences.*<sup>227</sup> While all four of the interviewees come from first generation families, the stories of Nadia (Palestine/Arab), Kasim (Palestine/Arab) and Mohammed (Sudan) allow for research which delves deeper into the history of the Islamic community in Minnesota, dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>228</sup>

Finally, I had pragmatic concerns. It was imperative to select individuals who were willing to commit to meeting several times over the course of a few years. All four were either in graduate school or indicated that life circumstances were going to keep them in Minnesota. Two males and two females were intentionally chosen to provide a gender balance. This was done to address earlier concerns regarding prior research which tends towards separating Muslim women's stories from those of men. It will be evident to the reader that the narratives of Nadia, Kasim, Mohammed, and Amina are intertwined, and while this is done deliberately in the structure of this paper, it also signifies the interconnectedness in their real lives. An example of this can be found in the narratives of Nadia and Kasim, who are brother and sister. They grew up in the same home, and are extremely close. Despite always being interviewed separately, they told many of the same stories. It is both fascinating and insightful to explore their different perceptions and experiences, mainly because though their experiences and perceptions differ, they tend to arrive at several mutual conclusions.

### **3.6 Procedure**

Initial interviews took place in the summer and fall of 2012. Subsequent interviews took place throughout 2013 – 2014, with the final interview occurring in January of 2015, although follow up communication has been exchanged through emails and Facebook messaging. All interviews took place at public coffee shops of the interview participant's choosing. All interview participants were asked to schedule two-hour periods of time for

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<sup>227</sup> Zareena Grewal. "Imagined Cartographies: Crisis, Development, and Islam in America." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 2006. Karen Leonard. *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003.

<sup>228</sup> A second potential participant was not pursued as he was also of Arab heritage. Given that one of the trends I noticed in research on Muslims in America is that there are dominant voices from Arab-Americans, I wanted to be sure to work with individuals who reflected the diversity of the Muslim community in Minnesota.

each interview. There were no time limitations set for interviews, and some lasted several hours.<sup>229</sup>

Selecting a small group of interview participants was a strategic choice that strengthens the value of this thesis. Choosing to work with four individuals allowed for the emergence of underlying dynamics that may not reveal themselves in larger studies. In the words of sociologist Scott Thumma, the goal of in-depth interviewing is to “go deeper, not broader.” My objective was not to gather information, but rather to use intimate profiles in order to uncover common ground for readers across religious affiliation. Camaraderie and productive “working-relationships” were created over time, and as a result conversations were enriched over years. Trust was established, and as time went on—I found that increasingly challenging and personal follow-up questions were appropriate. This would not have been possible with a larger sample size.

Creating an intimate narrative is time consuming and this is more difficult to achieve in quantitative studies. As a part of my research process I conducted an initial large scale survey. In the results, I found participants would answer questions one way, and then, if given the space, tell me what they either “really meant” or why they felt compelled to answer one way when they actually feel another. When you are responding from a religious point of view, especially if your religion is one that you feel is misunderstood, marginalized, or even parodied by others, it may be that you respond with what you determine is the “right” answer for the sake of your community.<sup>230</sup>

### **3.6.a Field Work**

I divided my fieldwork into two categories: Face-to-Face and Virtual. On a typical day of face-to-face fieldwork, I would meet the interview participant at a place of their

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<sup>229</sup> Anna Davidson Bremborg, “Interviewing”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2014) pp. 310-322. Davidson-Bremborg’s article on interviewing methods and procedures was an essential tool. She provides clear instructions and models for ethical interviewing procedures as well as helpful guides for how to create transcriptions. Coding of surveys and interviews was done manually, utilizing a color system for categories. One the advantages of narrative inquiry is the versatility it provides. The stories of lived experiences cannot be easily quantified, and instead must be constructed in a way that reflects the on-going, complex, and continuously changing nature of an individual just trying to live their life.

<sup>230</sup> This is not to suggest we don’t need quantitative studies. They provide a base to build from and a needed place to return to as the narratives unfold and are constructed. Statistics offer an accessibility and efficiency that qualitative studies do not.

choosing. Each participant was interviewed between three and five times, with each meeting lasting anywhere from two to four hours. The interviews followed a similar structure, with the first interview centering on autobiographical details and family history. The second, third, and in some cases fourth and fifth interviews, focused on questions related to religion, identity, and initial views regarding the topic of marriage. In each case, I let the participant take their story wherever they wanted it to go. At times, their narratives include 'remembrances,' representations of experiences from the past as best they recall. The goal is not to dissect their reconstructions for historical accuracy but to allow them to reconnect with the memory in terms of the meaning it has for them. In other instances, their narratives contain 'real-time' descriptions - their current life station, a problem that is on-going, or even an encounter that may have taken place the day of the interview. Narrative inquiry makes room for all of these experiences as "subjective meanings and sense of self and identity are negotiated as the stories unfold."<sup>231</sup>

Further insight into the lives of participants was gained by visiting their communities. I visited former schools and residences, occasionally meeting family members and friends, attending events, and touring workplaces or other sites mentioned by the participants. Occasionally, I have included observations from these encounters in the narrative chapters to provide the reader with better context, and to help paint a visual picture.

### **3.6.b Virtual Fieldwork**

The internet offers "an ideal space for the proliferation of alternative Muslim voices."<sup>232</sup> These narratives support the view of existing research that online media is a primary tool used by young Muslim Americans as they engage in self-interpretation. The vast majority of Muslims between the ages of 18 and 40 participate in social networking, personal web pages for scholars or bloggers, and institutional or group debates, which includes consulting online *fatwas* (legal rulings) for questions about Islamic sexual

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<sup>231</sup> Kim Etherington & Nell Bridges (2011) Narrative case study research: On endings and six session reviews, *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 11:1, 11-22.

<sup>232</sup> Nabil Echchaibi, "American Muslims in the Media", in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (New York, N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 2013),129.

mores, dating, raising children, *halal* (permissible) job choices, sports, diets, and Islamic financing.<sup>233</sup> As Edward Curtis has remarked, “One need not be a trained *‘alim*, a religious scholar, or hold a prestigious position at an Islamic university to publish one’s opinion; one only needs access to the World Wide Web.”<sup>234</sup>

These new sources affirm the vibrant diversity that exists within American Islam and suggest that the Muslim Americans in this study have relied on these new, online spaces to create new spaces in order to gain a sense of acceptance within the larger American body politic. An examination of Islamic media can allow one to “understand not only how Muslims react to their marginalization but also how they imagine and define the terms of their assimilation and belonging in a sociocultural context that is not readily embracing their differences.”<sup>235</sup> This reality made it necessary to move my supporting secondary research beyond the traditional means of texts, journals, and interviews to include a significant amount of time spent on the internet, reading blogs and online magazines, visiting matrimony websites, listening to sermons and lectures, and scrolling through years of Facebook postings.<sup>236</sup> In addition, I spent considerable time reading or investigating “links” sent to me by the participants.<sup>237</sup> These are the virtual “spaces” where Amina, Nadia, Mohammed, and Kasim spend much of their time. The investigation of these sources offered compelling insight into their world.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Zain Abdullah, “American Muslims in the Contemporary World: 1965 to the Present”, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (New York, N.Y: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 78.

<sup>234</sup> Edward Curtis, “American Muslim Spirituality and Religious Life”, in *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* ed. Edward E. Curtis IV (New York, N.Y: Columbia University Press, 2008), 339.

<sup>235</sup> Echchaibi, “American Muslims in the Media,” 133.

<sup>236</sup> While I am personally not a fan of Facebook as it so often projects an artificial reality of a person’s world, it was a tremendously useful source as it allowed me to investigate how research participants were connected to one another through various circles of community, what their interests were, and provided a greater window into their family and friend dynamics, as well as insight into their views on social, political, and religious issues.

<sup>237</sup> After conducting a face-to-face interview, a few participants would occasionally email or text a link to an article or website that was relevant to the most recent discussion. This still happens now, four years later.

<sup>238</sup> The following, written by an anonymous youth, presents an example of the, at times, dichotomous relationship young Muslims have with their virtual environment: “We are inhabitants of a digital world. We are navigating our way through tweets and statuses, through profiles and articles and newsfeeds, essentially scrolling our lives away. Because this is how we live: gazing out of monitors instead of windows, choosing the hum of a laptop over the thrum of the trees, taking pictures of thousands of brilliant sunsets that we’ve never really seen. We make wishes on blinking lights instead of shooting stars.

In the appendix, I have included a detailed expansion of the methodology and procedures followed for my field-work. I have chosen not to include it here for the sake of creating a coherent structure that does not stray from the intentions of the thesis or distract from the stories themselves.

### **3.6.c Marriage as an Initial Topic for Interviews**

Most people don't think they have a story to tell. I have found that marriage is a subject that gets young people talking. The most productive place to start is not "why are you a Muslim?" This doesn't open doors. Rather, using marriage and marital expectations as a starting point created an invitation to come and discuss something that was of both interest and concern for the interview participants.

Though not unique, marriage is a topic that is deeply connected to who one is as a person. Questions about marriage provided insight into how the interviewee is living out their religious identity in a way that is less intrusive than a direct theological question. Theology may, however, come up in their response. Marriage is also a useful topic for Interfaith Studies, as many people who orient around religion differently have thoughts or views on marriage that are connected to their belief system. Though certainly not a universal religious requirement, marriage has a universal significance. Finally, opinions and perspectives on marriage do change over time, and ethnography that takes place over years better reveals those notable shifts in perspective and opinion.

### **3.7 Limitations**

Limitations to this thesis project have been identified and I will present them in two ways. First, I will discuss comprehensive limitations that had the potential to impact the project as a whole. These include the research fatigue felt by many Muslim Americans, my own status as an "outsider," and the general challenges of working with humans.

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We ignore the glorious earth that we are destined to become a part of. Don't let the only light in our eyes be reflections of the screens that surround us. Don't let the last fleeting thought before we reluctantly put our phones down to go to sleep be the profound feeling of missing something we've never really known." *"From the Youth"* VirtualMosque, January 13, 2015, <http://www.virtualmosque.com/ummah/youth/from-the-youth/> Last accessed January 20, 2015.



Second, following the broader limitations, I will consider the specific limitations of my chosen research methods.

### 3.7.a Research Fatigue

The Muslim community in Minnesota is experiencing significant “research fatigue.” According to sociologist Tom Clark, when communities or individuals have either been repeatedly asked to participate in research, or perceive that their community is under increased scrutiny, they become increasingly reluctant to participate.<sup>239</sup> Clark is careful to note that this does not mean groups are apathetic about the research, but rather that they become unwilling to engage because they “never see the results” of their efforts.<sup>240</sup> This dynamic of fatigue was evidenced at points throughout my research process. As a recent Muslim acquaintance confessed, “everyone wants something *from* us but few actually want to be *with* us. They come in promising to do all this research but they never stick around to share the results of that work. What I mean is, they are not really concerned with helping us...our community...be better. It’s not about us at all.”<sup>241</sup>

There was concern expressed at the outset that a suitable number of participants may not be able to be identified. I found, however, that there is more appeal when participants are asked if they are interested in “telling their story” as opposed to participating in research. Framing of the question was thus essential. For young Muslims, telling their stories and having the chance to articulate and sift through these critical issues seemed to be a welcome opportunity. I was able collect a suitable number of initial survey responses, and the difficulty in selecting interview participants from those responses rested more with logistics than availability. The positive response to requests was consistent regardless of gender, ethnicity, perceived personality traits, etc. I’ve determined this can be attributed to the creative mechanisms used to reach out to young adults, which were mentioned earlier in “Procedures.”

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<sup>239</sup> See Tom Clark, “We’re Over-Researched Here! Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue with Qualitative Research Engagements” in *Sociology* 42, no.5 (2008): 953-970. In this empirical study conducted with researchers in the United Kingdom, Clark determined that research fatigue is a topic which needs further exploration.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 956.

<sup>241</sup> Conversation with Muneer Karcher-Ramos, community activist in St. Paul, Minnesota. June 26, 2012.

### 3.7.b “Insider” vs Outsider” Status

This project is not being conducted by a “native insider,” as is the case with many of those whose work has influenced the scope and shape of my study as it relates to working with Muslim Americans (i.e. Grewal, Karim, and Asad long before them). I consider a native insider to be one who shares the “characteristics, role, or experience under the study with the participants.”<sup>242</sup> There are various benefits to being an “insider.” One may have greater access to a wider base of potential participants. Being an insider can potentially result in more “rapid and complete” acceptance by participants.<sup>243</sup> The research may be perceived by the academic community as having a greater degree of relatability. But, while being an insider can allow the researcher a certain form of privilege, I argue it does not necessarily elevate the quality of the results. While being an outsider may present disadvantages in regards to how this thesis is received by the academy in the field of American Islam, I contend that it actually strengthens the work as a contribution to Interfaith Studies. Zareena Grewal and Kambiz GhaneaBassiri both note that research regarding the history of the Muslim American experience must be treated as a “history of both Muslim and non-Muslim exchanges and experiences.”<sup>244</sup> I recognize that this work needs to ask different questions because I am not a member of the religious community I am studying.<sup>245</sup> Quality ethnography reveals that an observer can still have a say through the voices of the stories being told, whether the observer is indigenous to the community or not. The reality of being an “outsider” allowed me to build a rapport and trust with the interview participants that may not have been achieved otherwise. Secondly, the participants do not dwell in just one community. We may not share the same religion, but we do share a city, many of the same values, and even at times the same tastes in film, music, and restaurants. These shared experiences resulted in trust that could only be built over

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<sup>242</sup> Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Jennifer Buckle, “The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research”, in *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 8, no.1 (2009): 54-63.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid, 54-63.

<sup>244</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (New York, N.Y.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>245</sup> However, there is much I can relate to in the experiences of my interviewees and I think this enhances my work.

time, which provides further rationale for in-depth interviews with four participants only, as opposed to a larger sample size.

I respectfully argue that not being Muslim may have given me a few further primary advantages. Firstly, my own marital status, and the fact that I am not Muslim, made it acceptable for a female to work publicly and privately with male participants, something that can hinder the work of some female Muslim researchers, specifically when it relates to face-to-face, one on one interaction.<sup>246</sup> In turn, both female participants expressed they would not have agreed to meet with a male researcher.

Secondly, while the research subjects and I share a geographic community, we do not share a religious one. I was in no position to judge interviewee's actions or thought processes from a standpoint of religious "accuracy."<sup>247</sup> Participants and interviewees, both anonymously and in person, expressed that they often hold back on expressing certain opinions or decisions within Muslim circles because they do not want to engage in a debate over interpretation of a particular text or school of law.<sup>248</sup> No one's "reputation" was at stake.

Thirdly, the work itself became active interfaith engagement. A "researcher's personal and/or social identity may provide common ground on which a dialogue can take place with members of religions to which they do not belong."<sup>249</sup> The interview subjects knew that I identify as a Protestant Christian. This also established trust, as they knew that I could relate to many of the challenges that emerge when religion and

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<sup>246</sup> See, Denise Al-Johar, "Muslim Marriages in America: Reflecting New Identities." *The Muslim World* 95.4 (2005): 557-74. Zareena Grewal also addresses the limitations of being a Muslim female researching single Muslims in her dissertation research in 2006.

<sup>247</sup> This is not to imply by any means that I am suggesting this "judgment" can be found in the work of Muslim scholars. It was the comments and conversations I had with interview participants that led me to consider that there were some potential advantages to not being of the same religious background.

<sup>248</sup> In a few of the free response sections on the survey, both males and females (they did have to note their gender) commented that if they were being surveyed by a Muslim, they would have been more careful with their critiques of their own community, particularly their frustrations with the opposite sex. It is also noted by Nadia in Chapter Four that the Muslim community in St. Paul/Minneapolis, despite the fact that it is relatively spread out geographically, feels small, with, in her words, "An everybody knows somebody who knows so and so" dynamic.

<sup>249</sup> Graham Harvey. "Field Research: Participant Observation", in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (New York, N.Y.: Routledge, 2014): 226.

culture intersect.<sup>250</sup> Those who participated in this study were aware that the purpose of this work is not to disdain or disregard the choices of committed religious individuals, which historically have too often been dismissed in the academic world. The struggle at the very soul of a religious individual to live a life that pleases both God and their families is not regarded in this thesis as naïve or unenlightened. Instead, it is my hope that the respect and esteem I have for those who participated can be seen to underpin the entire thesis.

### **3.7.c Humans are “human”**

One of the obstacles that emerged when working with young adults was their busy schedules - the positive tradeoff of being successful, active members of their communities. Interview participants often had to be chased down, and in some cases, scheduled interviews had to be rescheduled at the last moment - with it sometimes being weeks before a new date was determined. As all are in the early years of establishing careers, and of managing friendships and family responsibilities, their free time is limited. While this was not a factor for selection as participants, all are also deeply committed to social justice issues and volunteer their time in various capacities in Minnesota. These constraints contributed to a longer research timeframe than had been initially designed and presented hurdles that I had not anticipated in the project's initial development.

Furthermore, the life stages of the interview participants continued to evolve throughout the duration of this project, and as result their opinions and ideas occasionally changed dramatically enough that it altered the trajectory of their story. For one interviewee, Amina, her life circumstances changed significantly in the course of the study and it became necessary to make certain that the telling of her story reflected these transitions and how it impacted her views on religion and identity. Upon our first meeting, Kasim expressed no interest in being in a relationship anytime soon. Then, he “fell in love.” The writing needed to be revisited to document these changes accordingly.

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<sup>250</sup> I, too, identify with religion as a key influence in my life choices, and many of the interview participants, through our interactions, came to know this and would often turn questions back on me.

Nadia fell ill and was hospitalized, and was not able to receive visitors for long stretches of time based on her weakened immune system.

In the same regard, this study is influenced by its own time and context. This thesis is framed around important individual voices and stories, but it is critical to remember the admonishment of GhaneaBassiri that “while individual Muslims may have different understandings of Islam, not all individual understandings of Islam affect communal norms or reshape how individuals participate in their communities religiously.”<sup>251</sup> Too much weight should not be given to any one individual’s experience, nor can their story be representative of their entire community, gender, ethnicity, etc. They contribute to a mosaic of life in Minnesota as a Muslim. This is why the data gathered from the online survey continued to be useful. While it was designed and implemented to serve only as a starting point for later research, as opposed to functioning as the foundation for this thesis, it served as a requisite barometer. If an interview participant made the assertion that an experience or perspective was primarily due to a factor such as culture or religion, it was useful to compare their view against other data sets. This does not mean it was invalidated, instead it just provided some greater context and potential further consideration for how it should be framed in the story.

Narrative participants demonstrated an admirable vulnerability in our conversations. While their stories are full of lighthearted and genuine laughter inducing moments, there were also plenty of topics and memories that were difficult for them to share, at times even painful. Feeling caught between two worlds, fear over disappointing family, concluding that you don’t meet certain standards, worrying that your religion may have let you down - these themes came out consistently, and the conversations were often heavy. At times, the writing represents great internal conflict, knowing as I listened and wrote that the story I was hearing may only serve to reinforce for a reader the very prejudices I know exist in my Christian environment.<sup>252</sup> This

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<sup>251</sup> Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, “Religious Normativity and Praxis Among American Muslims”, 216.

<sup>252</sup> The reality for all who choose to research Islam in the United States is the awareness that some who may be reading your work are not approaching it with noble intentions. They are often sifting out any details or findings that can reinforce a stereotype, can be misinterpreted to confirm a suspicion, or twisted to incite fear.

potential presents a serious dilemma for the researcher of *real* communities, made up of flawed human beings. Nowhere was this tension more acute in this writing than in the narrative of Amina, presented in Chapter Five.<sup>253</sup>

Yet, Amina's story needs to be told, despite the discomfort it might cause to the reader or the optimistic naiveté it forced me to confront. Anyone who engages in the work of narrative construction or conducts interviews must be hyper-vigilant about letting their findings reveal reality, even when they do not like what they see. Celebrating Amina's bravery through allowing her story - the beautiful and the ugly - to be told is a tangible way to empower her on her journey. This is where Interfaith Studies trains the listener to use *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* allow to lend their support. This has been one of the most difficult parts of the research process, and there is much to be learned in the moments of tragedy and heartbreak that can be found in this thesis. However, these honest moments reveal the complexity of living out one's story. There is much work to be done in the future regarding religious adherence and how it works in daily life in an increasingly pluralistic society like the United States.<sup>254</sup>

Existing approaches to the use of narratives are theoretically useful, but there is an absence of lived stories framed around religious identity and lived experience. The narratives in the coming chapters evidence the power of story, and how stories can be powerful teaching tools when approached with intention. They prove that religious identity matters and that the role of religion in American life is not fading, but instead becoming stronger. In the years after 9/11, American society has been challenged to cease ignoring religion or pretending it can be segmented or compartmentalized. The academy needs to recognize this as well. While most authors acknowledge the need for sound religious education as a component of interfaith competency, this often does not receive the attention it deserves, particularly as general religious education is not

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<sup>253</sup> The more visceral Amina's story became, the more expressionless I had to become as I recorded and wrote. Internally, I was cringing as her account became increasingly sorrowful, both for her to tell and for me to hear. I knew that her reality would only serve to reinforce stereotypes of the Somali community in Minnesota.

<sup>254</sup> It is my hope that I have treated the narratives of my interviewees with delicacy and respect and that it is evident to the reader how central faith and family are to each of the individuals whose stories are shared. This is part of what makes these "American" stories.

occurring prior to college.<sup>255</sup> The narratives included here allow the narrative participants to teach us about their religion even if that is not their primary intention.

### 3.8 Conclusion: The Result and the Potential

21<sup>st</sup> century American millennials are remarkably transparent. When presented with a subject that resonates, such as marriage and relationships, they like to talk. They interpret self-disclosure in a very different way than previous generations.<sup>256</sup> When an ethnographer interviews young people, who are comfortable posting their current location, political opinions, and even what they are eating for dinner on social media daily, their level of disclosure requires the researcher to treat their responses with even greater care.

When well-constructed narratives are approached with intention the result is increased religious literacy, development of *appreciative knowledge*, cultivation of a *narrative imagination*, and beginning steps towards helping the reader consider what it might mean to develop their own narrative identity. Narratives allow the reader to sit for a while with their prejudice, their misgivings, their convictions, their self-reflection. While there are many points of commonality and overlap to be found in the narratives, this thesis responds to the identified need for stories that prove there is no singular expression of Islam, and that challenges and disagreements need not be hidden, but rather investigated, as they provide evidence of the vibrant diversity within the Muslim American community. These narratives ‘protect’ the “Other,” who, all too often, is subjected to harm through comments and micro-aggressions. Each story is unique, and none represent a “right” or more “true” practice of Islam. Below I have provided an overview of the proceeding narrative chapters.

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<sup>255</sup> For further research, see, Ali Asani, “Enhancing Religious Literacy in a Liberal Arts Education through the study of Islam and Muslim Societies” in Shephard, Jennifer M., Kosslyn, Stephen Michael, and Hammonds, Evelyn Maxine. *The Harvard Sampler: Liberal Education for the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge, US: Harvard University Press, 2011. Another useful article, Susan L. Douglass, and Ross E. Dunn, “Interpreting Islam in American Schools.” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 588 (2003): 52-72.

<sup>256</sup> This appears to be regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, etc...

### 3.9 Overview of Narrative Chapters

Kasim, whose story is found in Chapter Four, may not have thought he was ready for marriage but when his “dream girl” came along, he knew he had to act fast. Kasim spoke eloquently of what he hoped to eventually find in a marriage partner. It was clear the bar had been set fairly high. Kasim agreed but remarked in all seriousness that pursuit of an exceptional marriage is... in his interpretation, a means to honor Allah in addition to a search for personal fulfillment.

For Nadia, whose story is interwoven with her brother, Kasim, in Chapter Four, the topic of marriage is very personal. Nadia is outgoing, funny, intelligent, and a staunch advocate for social justice in her personal and professional life. She regards her life as “extremely successful.” However, Nadia’s attempts at finding a marriage partner have been anything but successful. Nadia is questioning if her very identity, which in her perception is the result of her devout commitment to Islam, the encouragement of her beloved parents, and her American education, has actually made her less suitable as a marriage partner? Does culture, in her case Arab culture, still hold more influence than faith? Where do suitability and compatibility enhance one another and where do they create conflict for Nadia as she tries to please Allah in both her daily life choices and long-term plans for the future? If Islam calls for Nadia to be married in order to better practice her faith, will she have to compromise on her personal desire for a fulfilling marriage to get there?

In Chapter Five, Amina feels like she is daily caught in a game of tug of war between her native culture (Somalia) and her current home (Minnesota). The tension created between her goals for her life, which she believes are rooted in and supported by Islam, and the “traditional” life her mother and immediate family want for her has become difficult to bear. Amina sees little hope for a quality of life that will please both herself and her mother. Both parties would define a quality marriage differently, and both make the argument that Islam is the basis for their definitions. If Islam thrives in community, how can Amina maintain her religion if she fears she may need to leave her community behind in order to preserve her soul?

In Chapter Six, we meet Mohammed. He has lived a very full life for only being twenty-five. Raised in Saudi Arabia and the Sudan before coming to the United States,



he has seen his share of heartache and turmoil, things many of his friends in Minnesota could never begin to understand. Islam has always been Mohammed's source of strength and one of the few constants in his life. He believes that all of his experiences and opportunities are part of Allah's plan for working out his own destiny. He sees marriage as a part of his future but he is cautious and wants to have his life in order before he finds a spouse. He is convinced that the better he knows himself, the better future he is able to create; the easier the search for a quality marriage will be when he is ready. He believes that this plan will benefit his future spouse as well as him. Like Amina, Mohammed wants to please his Sudanese family but believes he has found his home in the United States. He is not sure if the girl with the right qualities can be someone from the U.S. It may be that his search for a spouse leads him back to Sudan.

As described, these narratives raise multiple questions related to individual choice, identity, responsibility towards family and community, and religious commitment to name a few. Nadia, Kasim, Amina, and Mohammed will be speaking about their lives through their own words, and while all identified with larger trends and issues, each was careful to point out that they did not want their own voice to take away from someone else. By applying an interfaith lens to their reading, the narratives become a teaching tool for the reader, allowing for critical engagement. The reader not only begins to relate to the subjects through *shared experience*, but also potentially develops a greater level of empathy (*narrative imagination*) and understanding (*appreciative knowledge*).

## CHAPTER 4

### KASIM AND NADIA: A TALE OF TWO SIBLINGS

#### 4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the stories of Kasim and Nadia offer the reader exposure into the lives of two young American Muslims who strongly desire to get married, and into how their experiences reflect their commitments to self-fulfillment and community obligation. Kasim's story relays how a young Muslim man navigates the actual path to marriage. Kasim has found, in his words, his "dream girl." He is recently engaged and his family is currently working through the process of getting to know his fiancée's family and taking the necessary steps towards what his father calls, "an upright marriage." Nadia, Kasim's sister, is happy for Kasim, but admits his impending marriage is bittersweet. She also would like to marry, and, as the eldest child in her family, having younger siblings marry before she does place greater pressure on her singleness. Yet, Nadia is not willing to compromise on what she believes she deserves in a spouse. With each year that passes, she is having further doubts that anyone will find value in what she has to offer as a wife.

The narratives of Kasim and Nadia each consider how factors such as gender, religiosity, culture, family, and community shape and challenge not only perceptions of marriage, but also their concepts of identity. How does being female affect Nadia's prospects for marriage? Has Nadia's own personal success, which she attributes to the role of Islam in her life combined with the encouragement of her family, actually made her less suitable as a marriage partner? Does culture, in her case Arab culture, still hold more influence in her community than religion? As Nadia ages, does her single state isolate her from becoming an active member of her local *ummah*?<sup>257</sup>

Has Kasim found love because his gender allows him certain privileges not enjoyed by his sister Nadia? Can he have higher standards for a partner because he is male? If he claims his relationship with his sisters is the most influential factor in his spouse selection, and that he wanted to marry a girl of whom Nadia would approve,

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<sup>257</sup> Ummah- Muslim community of believers.

then why are Nadia's challenges so much greater than Kasim's? If Nadia holds that her religion calls for her to be married in order to better practice her faith, will she have to compromise on her personal desires and preferences to get there? As thought-provoking as the questions facing Nadia and Kasim may be for the reader, I contend exploring these questions through the *shared experience* model, a constructed pedagogical lens grounded in Interfaith theory, will potentially allow the reader to grow in the core Interfaith competencies I have chosen to emphasize - *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*.

## **4.2 Chapter Structure**

This chapter is structured by interweaving Nadia and Kasim's stories as told through their interviews, email exchanges, text exchanges, and other forms of expression most often involving social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram. This is the most structured of the narratives, with more explicit headings and sub-headings placed throughout. This is the first narrative the reader will engage through the *shared experience* model, and blatant sign-posting will better orient the reader when they revisit the stories a second time with guided intention.

Though Nadia and Kasim were never interviewed together, their shared history and their differing perspectives on the same significant life events creates a more complete picture and allows for more accurate analysis when combined at integral moments. Both were interviewed in person, sitting for semi-structured interviews three or four times over the course of three years between 2010 and 2013. Subsequent emails were exchanged in 2014. Each interview took place at one of three local coffee shops they frequent for the purposes of studying, social interactions, and business meetings. As much as possible, the objective here is to allow them to be heard through their own words, taking into account their expressions or other physical actions that give the reader further insight into their perspectives.

First, Nadia and Kasim will be introduced with a brief biography. Then, background on their early years, arrival in America, and initial years of transition will be presented. Following this, their perspectives and experiences are explored by considering the ways in which they have been influenced by family, culture, gender,

religiosity, and community. At the end of the chapter I will provide the reader with specific questions relevant to the narratives to consider related to Interfaith competencies. The questions are not included throughout the main content of the chapter as the goal is to allow the reader to come to their own conclusions and self reflection. There is no right or wrong answer.

The intent is not to relay their stories in total but to use portions to accentuate both the prevalent and distinct experiences and dynamics at work for Nadia and Kasim who are balancing various aspects of identity as they seek to carve out their futures. In the conclusion, I will briefly analyze and discuss integral observations and findings from Kasim and Nadia's experiences that are supported by the existing research, including those pertaining to the role of the mosque in the lives of young Muslims, the use of the internet and other forms of technology to pursue relationships, and the influences of family and culture on a young Muslim's identity development. Further findings have been placed in appendix so they do not distract from the narratives themselves.

### **4.3 The Abaza Siblings**

#### **4.3.a Kasim (Background)**

**NADIA [to Kasim in a Facebook post on his 24<sup>th</sup> birthday]:** "I am grateful for your affection and proud of your ability to express your care and love for people in your life. You're my favorite, and I hope for a long life of reading each other's minds."

It is difficult to connect with Kasim. With many commitments and an active social life, it is a challenge to find dates that work in his busy schedule.<sup>258</sup> Kasim is twenty-three years old and a recent graduate from the Carlson Business School at the University of Minnesota. He has just secured a job at one of the most prestigious global consulting

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<sup>258</sup> I first met Kasim in January of 2010. I had invited a group of students from the Muslim Student Association at the University of Minnesota to come into my classroom and share their stories with the students in my course on Islamic history. This was not the first time I had invited young Muslims to come and speak with my students, but it was the particular group that came with Kasim that first shaped my ideas and interests regarding the topic of marriage in the Muslim community. Before I finalized the proposal for this thesis, I made certain that Kasim would be willing to work with me. Though I had anticipated that he would cooperate, his enthusiasm for participating came as a great encouragement.

firms headquartered in the United States. On this day however, he still looks the part of a typical American college student. He is dressed in a hooded sweatshirt and jeans. He has neatly cropped hair and fashionable Armani eyeglasses, and his muscular physique reveals that even though his days of playing American football are over, he pays careful attention to his appearance. Kasim is easy to work with as a research participant, despite the fact that he cannot refrain from checking his cell phone every few minutes. He is very thoughtful, and tends to process out loud. Outgoing and funny, he is a gifted storyteller and communicator. Kasim's Facebook page serves as a rich resource to see how big he has made his world. Comments and "pokes" from friends in multiple countries dominate his feed, with Kasim's own frequent comments and status updates. It is clear he has spent quite a bit of time traveling internationally, both for work and with his family. He loves to socialize, most often over meals with friends and family. If you witness him in a group of friends, it is easy to tell that he often functions in the role of the leader, and seems comfortable there.

Kasim identifies himself as a Muslim American with strong ties to his Arab roots, and a deep love for his family. Kasim claims "his religion and his family" as being the most precious parts of his life. Kasim is the third of the four Abaza children, and the youngest son. Despite the fact that many of his friends have found their own apartments after graduating from college, Kasim, like many of his close male Muslim friends, continues to live with his family, settled on the east side of St. Paul. He liked growing up on the east side of St. Paul and while there are a significant number of Muslims living near his family, there are no distinguishable Muslim neighborhoods.<sup>259</sup> He is very clear that this is just how he wants it. As he is recently engaged, living at home has now provided the added bonus of helping him save money as he prepares for marriage. He considers himself to be a progressive Muslim, one who, "always thinks the text has relevance, but that the relevance changes based on time and context," and Kasim says Islam is a part of every aspect of his daily life.

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<sup>259</sup> Originally, East St. Paul was home to the city's Irish and Swedish immigrants. Since the mid 1960s it has evolved into a diverse mix of Caucasian, Hispanic, Somali, and Hmong families, and Kasim notes this is why the Abaza's continue to be so comfortable there.

#### 4.3.b Nadia (Background)

**KASIM [to Nadia in a Facebook post accompanied by a picture of the four Abaza siblings from a family trip to Syria]:** “Wow! Best friends then (2010) Best friends now (2015), and inshallah for another 50 years. Love you.”<sup>260</sup>

During his first interview, Kasim so often responded with “You should hear what Nadia has to say about that!” that it became clear it would be advantageous to pursue Nadia and determine if she would be willing to participate and be interviewed as well. Even before meeting Nadia, her enthusiastic texts and emails sent to coordinate her first interview were full of capitalizations and exclamation points, indicating that she shared her brother’s outgoing nature. When she arrives for her first interview, wearing a bright white hijab and a lavender dress, she is easily recognizable because of how much she looks like Kasim, down to fashionable glasses accentuating large brown eyes. Nadia settles into conversation easily, both willing and eager to talk about the things that interest her as well as her thoughts and views regarding marriage and her single-state.

Nadia had just recently turned twenty-six. She is the oldest of the four Abaza children. She also graduated from the University of Minnesota, but with a degree in sociology and social justice, and was well into her career as an education equity specialist for a local school district when she first agreed to be interviewed. Nadia is passionate about social justice issues, and serves on the board of a local non-profit organization that specializes in combating racial, gender, and socio-economic inequality. Nadia also loves to socialize, and feels most comfortable with a tight circle of female Muslim friends. Her Facebook page and Instagram feed are dominated by daily comments and postings from the same group of women, and the occasional post from Kasim. She, too, lives at home with her parents and for the most part is also pleased with the arrangement.<sup>261</sup>

Nadia is many things. She is funny, quick-witted, and intelligent. These traits are all revealed within moments of initiating a conversation with her. She has plenty to say,

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<sup>260</sup> *Inshallah*—“If Allah wills it.”

<sup>261</sup> The challenges Nadia confronts by living at home will be discussed throughout the chapter.

but she is a good listener. She demonstrates tremendous self-awareness. You can tell she is a fierce and loyal friend, and again, social media seems to confirm this label. She can laugh at herself easily. Nadia identifies herself as a Muslim feminist who works within the *Tradition*. She explains this as meaning that she does not see any inherent issues with the *Qur'an*, *hadith* or *sunnah* themselves in regards to women's treatment.<sup>262</sup> Rather, she identifies text interpretation by a predominantly male authoritative body as being to blame for the horrific treatment of women throughout certain parts of the global *ummah*. Nadia and Kasim claim that they both consider the other to be their closest friend of the opposite gender. They both attribute this friendship to the bond they developed through their shared experience as children growing up within an immigrant family in the United States.

#### **4.4 Life in the Abaza Family**

Nadia and Kasim have few memories of their life before they moved to the United States but both hold on to them dearly. They were born in Jenin, Palestine; Nadia in 1986 and Kasim in 1989. Fiercely proud of their Palestinian roots and Arab heritage, Nadia and Kasim both feel a sense of connection to a place in which they have physically spent relatively little time. Jobs in Palestine were hard to come by in the 1980s, and shortly after Kasim's birth the Abaza family moved to Kuwait, where their father found employment with an oil company. Nadia recalls:

We lived with my paternal grandparents' family. It was a refugee situation. There was a small minority of Palestinians seeking work and refuge from the Palestinian occupation by Israel. The main thing I can remember is the sense of family and community that is drastically different than what we would have when we moved to America. We were surrounded by family all-the-time.

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<sup>262</sup> Nadia and I have gone on to have many personal conversations about religion and women's roles. We have found common ground over the tension that exists in both our communities, mainly between women, regarding proper roles for wives and mothers. We also discussed what feminism means in each of our religious contexts.

Nadia and Kasim's parents, along with several members of their extended family, lived comfortably in Kuwait, and many had been there for nearly a decade. They had good jobs, housing, and a community of support through extended families and friends. However, their time there would be short-lived. When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, with the backing of the PLO,<sup>263</sup> Palestinian families were told by the Kuwaiti government that they had to leave, immediately. By the end of March in 1991, it is estimated between 400,000-450,000 Palestinians were forced from Kuwait.<sup>264</sup> The extended Abaza family, like thousands of others, literally scattered across the world to wherever would take them. Several aunts, uncles, and grandparents made their way to Jordan, some cousins went to Canada, and Nadia's family decided to come to the United States. Nadia was only five years old, and Kasim three, when their parents moved the family from Kuwait to the mid-western state of Minnesota in 1991.

Nadia and Kasim's father had a brother who was living and working in the city of St. Paul, the second largest city in Minnesota. When Nadia's father informed the family where they would be moving he had virtually no knowledge or details to share with them regarding their future home. Nadia laughs. "He said to my mother, 'I'm sure you will like it there. It's cooler'." Nadia's eyes get big behind her glasses, as she pointed outside the coffee shop, where it was currently snowing. "We had no idea what we were in for!"<sup>265</sup>

Life in Minnesota was drastically different than life in Kuwait, in almost every way. The Abaza's were very young, twenty-six and twenty-three, but they already had three children; Nadia, middle brother Ali, and Kasim.<sup>266</sup> Nadia's mother was pregnant with their fourth child, sister Eman, at the time of their move. The first thing Nadia remembers about their new living situation in the United States was the absence of

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<sup>263</sup> In December of 2004, Mahmoud Abbas would officially apologize for his support of Saddam Hussein during the invasion of Kuwait. British Broadcasting Service. See [http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/4089961.stm](http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk/mpapps/pagetools/print/news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4089961.stm) Last accessed January 1, 2013.

<sup>264</sup> Palestinians were regarded by the Kuwaiti government as *bidoon*, stateless Arabs who are permitted to live in Kuwait but do not have the rights of citizens. U.S. Committee for Refugees World Survey, 2001. See <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,USCRI,,KWT,,3b31e16514,0.html> Last accessed January 26, 2013.

<sup>265</sup> While Kuwait experiences temperature averages of around 48 degrees Fahrenheit in their colder months, the average temperature in January in Minnesota is 7 degrees Fahrenheit.

<sup>266</sup> In addition to Nadia and Kasim, all members of the Abaza family have been given an alias to protect their privacy.



family. Nadia explains it was as if you took the main characters from one book (her immediate family) and dropped them into a new novel. Nothing was the same except for the people. Her father, an engineer by training, supported the family by working at local gas stations that were within walking distance of their first apartment in Maplewood, a suburb of St. Paul with about 40,000 people.<sup>267</sup> At one point, he worked at three stations simultaneously, only coming home to eat or sleep for a few hours.

This grueling schedule meant that Nadia's mother, only twenty-three and now with four children under the age of four, was almost always alone. Nadia's demeanor and body language change as the topic shifts to her mother. She recalls that looking back now she can see how unhappy her mother was in their first year in Minnesota. Though she has no memories of her mother articulating or verbally expressing feelings of loneliness or disappointment, Nadia now knows the only thing keeping her mother going was the knowledge that her children would benefit from being in this new country.

Nadia's assessment of her mother's experience mirrors existing research regarding the reality that young immigrant mothers often try to maintain a brave face on the home front for both their children's security and their spouse's happiness.<sup>268</sup> Nadia attributes this to her Arab culture and suggests that it would not have been acceptable for her mother to voice those frustrations aloud to her children or to her spouse. As long as her mother presented the perception of happiness, then her family would be happy. Mothers, in Nadia's view, often take on the burden of responsibility for making everyone else as "happy" as possible. Pouring themselves into this happiness through a clean house, elaborate meals that offer a sense of the familiar, and a physical presence to be "at the ready," mothers suppress their own needs.<sup>269</sup>

Nadia is quick to point out that, in her estimation, it is not the case that women's concerns and emotions do not matter and cannot be voiced. Rather, she has deduced it

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<sup>267</sup> Maplewood, Minnesota Residents Guide. Available online at <http://www.ci.maplewood.mn.us/index.aspx?NID=523> Last accessed January 26, 2013.

<sup>268</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Smith, Jane, and Kathleen Moore. *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2006.

<sup>269</sup> Rumaya Jahari, "Marital Quality as a Function of Gender-Role Egalitarianism Among the Malay-Muslim Student Couples in the Midwest Region of the United States". Ph.D. dissertation, Michigan State, 1997. In coming pages, the reader will be offered further insight into the ways in which the example set for Nadia by her mother has shaped Nadia's complicated views of what it means to be a "good" wife and mother.

was the absence of the right audience. Nadia contends that in Arab culture women have every right to vocalize their opinions, but you direct your comments towards other female family members or close friends because you spend so much of your time with the same gender. Her mother had left behind significant female familial support in Kuwait.

Which is what you need when you are twenty-three with three kids. Family help to just keep us bathed and fed. Yes, my uncle was here in America but he had two kids and his wife was also pregnant. To ease my mom's transition, and to save money, we eventually all ended up moving in together into a two-bedroom apartment. Each family had their own bedroom. As awful as that may sound, this helped. My mom and my aunt are sisters!<sup>270</sup>

Because of the shared living situation, not to mention the tight quarters, the Abaza children and their cousins spent two years growing up as siblings; eating together, playing together, attending school together, fighting together... During this time, space and privacy were deemed appropriate and financially necessary sacrifices to combat the loneliness Nadia's family, particularly her mother, would have experienced otherwise.<sup>271</sup>

Nadia can pinpoint a memory when her mother's life, and as a result her own life, improved dramatically. The first day that Nadia was accompanied by her mother to the bus stop for school, they met another Muslim woman while waiting for the bus to arrive. The two young mothers sized one another up and then began speaking rapidly in Arabic at the same time. Nadia recalls this as a moment that will always stand out in her memory.

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<sup>270</sup> Nadia's father and uncle happen to be brothers. They even got married on the same day. I would later see a video Nadia posted on Facebook that provided a window into this time in her life. In the brief home movie, she is in a small bedroom (her family's) and she is the center of attention because it is her birthday. She is in a party dress and is dancing, but she keeps bumping into the knees of her adult family members, who have all squeezed into the room, which is already tight with three beds. It is simultaneously chaotic and comforting.

<sup>271</sup> By the time Nadia entered elementary school, her cousins would move to Iowa, several hours south, in order for Nadia's uncle to pursue a job.

It was like they could not get their words out fast enough. As if my mom had been keeping secrets for months and finally found someone to tell them to. It was like the first time it occurred to me that my mom was a person too. She has her own needs. It really showed me the power of female friendship. It was instantaneous. They've now been close friends for over twenty years.

Nadia's mother had found a worthy audience with whom to share her bottled up hopes, frustrations, and disappointments that came along with her new life in America.

#### **4.5 Religion and Family Life**

Admittedly, Kasim's memories from his family's early years in Minnesota are much less detailed than those of his older sister, and his, as he calls her "hero," Nadia.<sup>272</sup> He agrees with her assessment that the first few years were not easy, but Kasim states that he does remember how hard he believes his parents worked to make a life for their family. Kasim says that while his parents did not want his siblings to lose their ties to their Palestinian background, it was important that their children be accepted in their new environment. Nadia affirms this. While maintaining a sense of Arab identity was imperative, her parents made a conscious decision that solidifying an Islamic identity was the top priority.

Islam, in Nadia and Kasim's life, would not function as it had for their parents who grew up in a society where their religion was shared by the majority, permeating every aspect of life, from the government down to the toothpaste.<sup>273</sup> Now, Islam became like a family business, something the Abaza siblings would be taught by their parents, through both example and direction. The Abaza kids would need to take ownership of their Islam, assuring its viability into the future. Upon arrival in the United States, Nadia recalls that even at the age of four, she could sense her parents' nervous mix of fear and optimism. She notes that looking back now she can point to a growth in her parents'

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<sup>272</sup> Kasim in a Facebook post to Nadia in August of 2014.

<sup>273</sup> Nadia notes that her mother is partial to a type of toothpaste widely available in Arab countries that contains traces of siwak, a type of twig the Prophet Muhammad was known to use to clean his teeth.

maturity, that moving to Minnesota marked a change in her parents, forcing them to grow up and reinvent their attitudes about parenting.

You notice a parental shift. Kuwait was comfortable. The jobs were stable and it was a stable family situation so it allowed our parents to focus on the external. My parents always had family around to help out with us. I guess this is why there are jokes about Arab families having so many kids. You kind of all just run around together and there are plenty of aunties and grandmothers to keep you in line. We focused more on the luxuries in life in Kuwait as opposed to when we moved here and the focus shifted to preserving our heritage, instilling values, etc...In Kuwait, my parents were adults, yes, but they were also still kids, you know? There were always their own older siblings or their own uncles, or whatever. All of a sudden, here in Minnesota, they were at the top of the chain and their responsibility increased.

When asked to describe this parenting shift, Nadia leans in, smiles, and states, “INTENTIONAL.” While she doesn’t feel her parents beat them over the head with constant teaching about their Palestinian heritage, their Arab culture, or their Islam, she felt that, whether she could have verbally articulated it or not, she and her siblings understood, despite their youth, that they were being tasked with a serious life goal. She says the goal could be summed up as, “*Don’t forget who you are and where you came from.*” Nadia pauses and then laughs, “Oh! But also...*Fit in and don’t make us look or seem weird.*” The Abaza parents, without the support of extended family or of elders in their religious community, realized that they were now solely responsible for solidifying both religion and ethnic tradition in their children. “My parents kind of had to mourn the loss of the reality that we were not going to grow up to have the same kinds of memories that they did...running around with cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents everywhere we went.” Nadia and Kasim’s parents, forced by circumstances, would now be raising their children in more of a typical American setting, a nuclear family living on

their own, like other “American” families, as opposed to living as a family in a community united by religion or ethnicity.<sup>274</sup>

At first, the Abaza’s strategy was to achieve this through emphasizing the broad basics of Islam instead of all the details. They integrated things slowly when they felt their children were ready. Nadia and Kasim’s father is a planner, and he perceived the work of instilling Islamic values in his children as an ongoing task - something that would be spread over the course of their childhood and adolescence. As Kasim says, “our Dad always takes the long view.” Nadia recalls that as a child she would have defined the first stage of learning Islam as, “no pork, no dating, occasional fasting, and daily prayers. Very practical.” She ticks these off with her fingers as she relays them. Kasim would later come up with the same list, but would also add, “No dancing! Well...American dancing.”

Kasim recalls a time early on when his parents, in an effort towards finding Muslim community, did consider the possibility of private, Islamic school when they made friends with a few families who sent their children there.<sup>275</sup> In the wake of 9/11, many Muslim Americans became more guarded about charitable giving in the increasingly contentious political climate, and chose instead to support Islamic schools because they are perceived to be relatively “safe” and “apolitical” institutions.<sup>276</sup> The Abazas felt compelled to support the school and its mission. Some parents hope to shelter their children from racial and religious discrimination and other social ills in public schools while others see Islamic schools as sources of behavioral reform.<sup>277</sup> Most

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<sup>274</sup> I contend that that result of this more intentional parenting has resulted in a more self-aware young Muslim population. Nadia grew up in a home where she was encouraged to see her own religious education and practice as an individual journey, as well as part of the broader Muslim family and community experience. While comparing identity across nations is not an aspect of this thesis, the research that exists suggests that this parental approach is distinct within minority communities and may likely not have happened in Kuwait or Jordan.

<sup>275</sup> In the case of primary and secondary education, Islamic schools in the United States are increasingly modeled closely on American public schools and faith based private schools. What makes many Islamic schools “Islamic” is simply that Islamic studies and sometimes Arabic are additional courses and that the Muslim majority school environment creates an Islamic ethos that normalizes Islamic practices and cultivates pride and a strong “Muslim-first” identity in students. See, Zareena Grewal and David Coolidge, “Islamic Education in the United States”, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 251.

<sup>276</sup> Grewal and Coolidge, “Islamic Education in the United States,” 253.

<sup>277</sup> Grewal and Coolidge, “Islamic Education in the United States,” 246.

Muslim American families do not send their children to full-time Islamic schools, and after an initial investigation involving a few visits to the school and some conversations with families who had children attending, the Abazas quickly ruled it out, too.<sup>278</sup>

According to Kasim,

My parents perceived that there was quite a bit of dysfunction, and they feared our opportunities and quality of education would be limited. The impression I get is that my parents always felt that religious teaching was *their* primary responsibility as parents. So, if the school was lacking in the areas of education and extracurricular stuff...to them, this was not the best choice. When they talked about us having 'every advantage' that always related to academic opportunity. They did not perceive the school as necessary to help my siblings and I to have an Islamic identity.<sup>279</sup>

Nadia was completely supportive of her parent's choice, despite the pressure they were receiving from some friends:

Private schools create a vacuum. The goal in Islam is not to go through life untested. Then there is no confidence for future tests. If you live in a vacuum how can you argue that you passed the test?

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<sup>278</sup> Karen Keyworth, "Islamic Schools of America: Data-Based Profiles," in *Educating the Muslims of America*, eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad et al, (Oxford, 2009), 21-38. According to Karen Keyworth, slightly less than 4 percent of Muslim American youth attend full-time Islamic schools. Islamic schools often reflect far more racial, ethnic, class, and even sectarian diversity than the congregations of the mosque communities that founded them. My own Masters thesis research found that Muslim educators hold firmly to their conviction that Islamic education remains a unique and important alternative in the pedagogical landscape of the United States.

<sup>279</sup> Kasim's parents' choice is consistent with that of the majority of Muslim families in Minnesota. I conducted my Master's thesis research on education options for Muslim families in the metropolitan area of Minneapolis and St. Paul. Though there has been an increase in both the number of private Islamic schools and the students choosing them, over 80 percent of Muslim families in Minnesota choose public schools. The most common reasons offered are also in keeping with those of Kasim's parents: extracurricular opportunities and academic rigor. However, I also found that many Muslim families support Islamic schools financially, even if they do not send their children there.

Instead, the Abaza's would enroll all of their children in various public schools. Nadia was the first to attend a local Montessori preschool because, "that is where my cousins went."<sup>280</sup>

That was how we made decisions. Whatever my uncle's family did, we did. As if their two years in America made them experts. It took time, though. After a few weeks, I could spell my cousin's name in English but not my own, and my mom said that about broke both my parents' heart. Then I went to ESL classes for about six months and after that I was just soaking English in.<sup>281</sup> However, then it was like we were learning it too quickly. My mom and dad both wanted all of us kids to retain our Arabic. Sometimes, when we would speak to them in English at home, they would just completely ignore us.

Nadia notes that her mother remarked to her years later that she both anticipated and dreaded her children starting school. On the one hand, she would get a bit of a break, as the two oldest would be out of the house for part of the day.<sup>282</sup> On the other hand, it meant her children would be starting something new of which she would not be a part; it would create a separation between them. Inevitably, her children would learn English and the customs of their new "home." While their parents might be able to ignore the new language of their children in an attempt to preserve their native tongue, it was clear the same strategy would not work when it came to the new cultural influences that school would bring to the Abaza household. Their mother tried to welcome these things, and desperately wanted her children to fit in, but she also knew they would quickly outpace her, surpass her limited English skills, and begin to engage in experiences she had no frame of reference for understanding.

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<sup>280</sup> The Montessori Method of education utilizes a concept called the "Learning Triangle," between the teacher, child, and environment. The classroom is prepared to "encourage independence, freedom within limits, and a sense of order." There is emphasis placed on "individual choice." See, American Montessori Society, available online at [www.amshq.com](http://www.amshq.com). Nadia also commented that since Montessori schools encourage multi-age classrooms, her mother liked that she would be able to be with her cousins, despite the fact that she was older.

<sup>281</sup> ESL refers to 'English as a Second Language'.

<sup>282</sup> Another factor Rumaya Jahari found related to marital satisfaction was number of children. The more children a mother had to take care of, particularly young children, the lower her rates of marital satisfaction. Again, Jahari found the opposite to be true for husbands. The more children a father had, the higher his marital satisfaction, regardless of the children's ages or gender.

Nadia regards herself - and her siblings affirm this - as the guinea pig for her parents deciding upon what was and what was not okay in America. She paved the way for her siblings, and it was not easy. The extent of her social life outside of the family in her adolescent years was birthday parties. She attended very few.

I often had to say no to things. I would say it was because of my religion. Kids commented (not always kindly) that was a lame excuse and I came to see that many times it really was kind of a lame excuse. In hindsight, it had more to do with culture than religion. But at the time, that was the easiest thing for me to say and I guess that was also how I perceived it. I always think about sleepovers, or slumber-parties. Sleepovers were an absolute no-no for my parents. Staying the night in a house with a strange dad or strange brothers, are you kidding? We didn't understand yet that sleepovers are cultural. If my mom had been able to talk to the other moms, I think a lot of misconceptions could have been cleared up. Bottom line, it's hard to build trust when you can't even speak the language.

Things were different for Kasim. He lights up when asked about his years in public school. He participated in almost everything his parents would allow, and it was often the case that the Abaza family's exposure to many American "firsts" happened because Kasim brought it to their dinner table.

Student council, choir, American football! I loved being involved. And my parents had to figure out how to help me navigate all these things we weren't familiar with. I think it frustrated them at times. My parents were like, 'Why can't you just play *our* football (as in American soccer)? That we understand!' I'm told I would get this look on my face at dinner when I wanted to try something new. Before I could even say anything, my mom would be like, 'What now?'

But both parents came to enjoy being involved in Kasim's varied activities. Kasim recalls being nine or ten years old when he had his own first run-in between religion and culture. His class was preparing for their winter concert and they were going to be singing a variety of songs.



I was allowed to sing with my peers if the song was “winter-esque” but the choir director had to position me at the end of the riser so that I could step off and exit the stage when we came to an overtly religious song. A ‘*Christmas*’ song. Say for example, *Silent Night*. On-off. On-off. Away I would go. It did not exactly look smooth.

This is only one of the many examples Kasim is able to remember that illustrate the Abaza family’s maneuvering their way through American culture. Nadia recalls that it was at school that she realized that other people were looking out for her too. She remembers that the women who ran her middle school cafeteria provided alternative, *halal*-friendly meals for her and her siblings without being asked.<sup>283</sup>

When my parents found out they were shocked that the school would make this kind of accommodation for us. It was one of the first times we experienced what you could say was American religious tolerance. It was totally unexpected. My mom couldn’t get over that we weren’t in a Muslim country and they would do this for us. We weren’t the majority but it didn’t matter. It may sound like something really simple, but in a weird way it made me feel like I didn’t have to hide, you know? Like I didn’t have to be quite so concerned with “toning” my (Muslim) self down.<sup>284</sup>

However, there were moments of discrimination and unkindness. Nadia recalls that fellow classmates, particularly boys, were the worst offenders. They would often make hurtful comments. Nadia remembers being self-conscious all day when another

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<sup>283</sup> Nadia’s family observes *halal* (permissible) dietary guidelines as dictated by Islamic tradition. While this can vary widely, for Nadia’s family it means no pork, no products with certain animal proteins, no bottom feeders, and no alcohol. Nadia comments, and this is consistent with many of my Muslim friends, that it is easier to just avoid meat altogether unless it is prepared in your own home.

<sup>284</sup> Kasim recalls the impact of this “accommodation,” a word his family did not understand. The closest Arabic equivalent he could later come up with is best translated as “gesture.” He considers this to be a significant event, which laid the seeds of his parents’ later conclusion that they are able to be “better” Muslims in America than anywhere else they have lived.

student commented that her hennaed hands looked ugly.<sup>285</sup> Kasim recalls that his parents regularly vocalized their trust in their children. As an indication of that trust, the children were often expected to communicate parental concerns to their teachers. Kasim pointed out, good-naturedly, that he now thinks this responsibility had less to do with trust and more to do with his parents' limited English language skills and his mother's shyness.

It was incredibly awkward. My parents were less involved by necessity because of the language gap. My mom could communicate...but not necessarily articulate. There is a big difference between getting through a transaction at the grocery store and expressing a concern to a teacher. Looking back now, I see that those types of incidences really helped me to grow up. The onus was on my siblings and me to take care of things at school. Not a one of us ever became a troublemaker.

While he may not have been a troublemaker, Kasim's unrelenting desire to be involved in school and community activities could be emotionally exhausting to his parents at times. Kasim and Nadia were both kids who liked to question. If either was not permitted to do something, they needed to understand the reasons why not. When Kasim was nominated to the Homecoming Court at his local high school, his parents' initial reaction was to tell him he would not be able to participate, as things associated with homecoming - dancing, intermingling with the opposite sex, secular rock music, etc - were off limits. Homecoming was, in their minds, definitely not in keeping with an Islamic lifestyle. This frustrated Kasim, and he was not ready to take "no" for an answer. He turned to the Internet to conduct his own research and "gather evidence for my argument." He found a reputable website on Islamic practice in America that he knew was used by others in his Muslim community. On this website, Muslims can submit any question they have about faith practice or theology. An answer, provided by the imam

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<sup>285</sup> Henna has a rich history in many different ethnic and religious traditions. In this instance, Nadia's mother had hennaed her hands to celebrate Nadia's birthday. In Nadia's family, henna is as sign of blessing and celebration. I must have looked distressed as I took notes on this particular part of Nadia's story: She made a motion like she was patting my hand and assured me she looks back on these incidents as things that helped build her character.

on duty, will be posted back shortly with a full explanation and cited support from the *Tradition*<sup>286</sup>. These answers are all categorized, and it is easy to do a quick search by entering in a term as simple as “Prom” or “Homecoming.” Kasim found that he was not the first to ask this question. He prepared a report, and then presented his findings to his parents. They were duly impressed. Following Kasim’s lead, Mr. Abaza suggested that all three of them reason through the pros and cons of the situation. Together they came to the agreement that Kasim could participate in many of the week’s activities as long as he did not attend the actual dance.

This 21<sup>st</sup> century Islamic approach to problem solving and negotiating is simultaneously encouraging and confounding to some parents. While they may not always like the answers their children find, many parents find it difficult to argue the merit in the exercise of their children compiling research and consulting Islamic sources in order to find the best answer or to make a difficult decision.<sup>287</sup> For Kasim, this is the first memory he has of taking steps to own his Islam for himself.

I took responsibility for finding answers. It’s not just about the fact that it worked and I was allowed to go. It’s about the fact that I did, indeed, find real answers to my questions. That had a pretty big impact on me.

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<sup>286</sup> Islamic *Tradition* represents the *Qur’an*, *Sunnah*, *hadith*, *Shar’iah* and at times, *tafsir*. The *Qur’an* is the sacred text of Islam, as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad by Allah, through the Angel Jibril (Gabriel) in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The *Sunnah* is a collection of the teachings and way of the Prophet Muhammad, and provides a framework for all Muslims on the best way to live a life that is pleasing to Allah. The *hadith* is a collection of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, as reported by transmitters who were connected to the Prophet Muhammad. *Shar’iah*, refers to law as laid down by God, and there are several schools of Islamic law, which represent human interpretations of how to live a life that is in accordance with the *Qur’an*. *Tafsir* is the body of Islamic exegesis and can apply to any of the aspects of the *Tradition* previously mentioned.

<sup>287</sup> Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*) contains within it 5 five principle guidelines for how a Muslim determines if an action is right or wrong. Certain things fall neatly into either *fard* (obligatory) or *haram* (forbidden). However, most of life falls into the three categories representing in between: *mustahab* (recommended), *mubah* (neutral) or *makruh* (discouraged). When making a decision that falls into the middle categories, what matters most is the intention of the individual. If the potential for benefit (*masalih*) outweighs the potential for harm (*marhab*) then the action should be done. Even if it turns out badly, what matters is the intention and only Allah knows the true intention of the heart. In Kasim’s case, he and his family determined that there was potential for community benefit: a positive example of a Muslim in a position of leadership. Kasim could, in this case, reasonably participate while still avoiding the elements that were seen as *haram* or *makruh*.

Gender played a role too. There is one family memory, shared by all of the Abaza siblings, that demonstrates an interesting development in the parents' decision-making process regarding how to maintain Islamic principles in the midst of a broader culture that does not understand them. In fifth grade, Nadia had the opportunity to go with her class on a three-day, overnight camping and canoeing trip in the Minnesota Boundary Waters.<sup>288</sup> The goal of the trip was to put some of their ecology lessons into practice, but also to learn about team building and friendship. For the Abazas, this was not a difficult decision to make. One giant sleepover? With boys? In the woods? Nadia was not allowed to go. This was several years before Kasim's Homecoming event, and this case was not up for discussion.

Nadia was furious and hurt, and she let all of her family know it through her stony silence and refusal to interact with anyone at home. Nadia's dad came home one day right before the class left for the trip with a gift for Nadia. He presented her with a necklace that cost the same price of the trip. He told her it was essential for him to show that this decision was not about finances and it was not because she was a girl. Through this tangible gesture in this moment, her father was modeling Islamic principles by both explaining and demonstrating that he valued his daughters and sons equally. Nadia said that it did not make her feel any better about missing out, but it did soften her heart toward her parents, gave her some insight into their decision, and made her realize that she was not the only one who had been suffering.<sup>289</sup> She caught a glimpse of her father's struggle to make the "right" decisions for his Muslim family.

The next year, Ali was in fifth grade, and, after asking questions, the Abaza parents had a much better understanding of the nature of the ecology trip. They realized that there was nothing about the trip that would contradict their Islamic beliefs and lifestyle. In fact, they came to recognize many elements of the trip as being congruent with Islamic teachings, specifically the use of scientific principles as well as the emphasis on creating healthy relationships. As a result, both brothers, Ali and then

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<sup>288</sup> The "Boundary Waters" in Northern Minnesota is a section of Superior National Forest that covers over 1 million acres of wilderness. The land was set aside in 1926 to remain undeveloped and protected for rugged camping and canoeing. Officially protected by the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964, camping in the Boundary Waters is considered a "rite of passage" for Minnesotans.

<sup>289</sup> Kasim explained that the rest of the Abaza siblings cheered when Nadia accepted the necklace. "She was not much fun to live with in those couple of weeks," he recalls.

Kasim, got to go. By the time it was youngest sister Eman's turn, her father decided not only to let her go but he also volunteered to be one of the parent chaperones who accompanied the class on the trip.

Nadia and Kasim are in agreement regarding the more prominent role their father has always played in the family's public life. While both parents were concerned about secular influences, inevitably it was always Mr. Abaza who had to be the bearer of bad news. Kasim recalls:

Based on my mom and dad's dynamic, tough issues always manifested with my dad. He was the voice of concern. They would both disappear into a room behind a closed door. My dad would emerge and deliver the verdict, and then he alone had to bear the brunt of our questions. What I didn't realize then was that my dad was very much becoming a model for me as to how to make decisions.

When Kasim is asked how his father's behavior is now mirrored in his own decision-making, he thinks for a moment. He then responds by relaying a story about a particular party he was invited to when he was thirteen. It was a Christmas party at a close friend's house and several kids from school were going to attend. Not one to miss a social gathering, Kasim wanted to go, and he assumed it would not be a problem. His parents knew this friend and there wasn't going to be anything overtly religious about the party itself. Kasim argued it just happened to be scheduled around Christmas time and was therefore being called a "Christmas" party. After much discussion and consideration, his parents said no. Naturally, Kasim was upset. His even-tempered nature, even as an adolescent, meant that Kasim didn't totally lose it with his father as one particular sister often did. However, Kasim wanted a good explanation.

My dad told me that there needs to be a line. Maybe a Christmas party doesn't seem like a big deal, but someday, what answer would I give to my own son asking to go? My dad said we kids need to be thinking ahead with our decisions. What do my decisions mean for me now, but also what will they mean for my

own kids some day? I learned that I needed to practice drawing lines, practice creating some boundaries.

Both Nadia and Kasim aspired to meet “parental” ideals and find room to live out their sense of religious identity within them.<sup>290</sup> Nadia asserts that her parents’ word was always final, but is clear that she thinks this is “how it should be.” She affirms Kasim’s earlier statements about the absence of an Abaza rebellious streak. While she agrees she asked questions, she is clear this is different than questioning her father’s authority. She didn’t challenge it growing up, nor does she now.

As Nadia explains this, she pauses for a moment, and seems to consider this lack of questioning. She then reasons that it may have been because her parents seemed willing to offer an explanation for their decisions.

Legacy is really important to Dad. What are you going to leave behind? He was always reminding us to ‘Think 20 years ahead! What do you want to have to tell your kids?’ Dad integrated religion and culture in a healthy way. It was always more my dad’s job. Mom is completely supportive of Dad. Even if she disagreed you probably would never know it.

Kasim recalls that the decision regarding his attendance at the Christmas party brought to the surface other resentments from his siblings. Kasim tells a story about Eman, the youngest Abaza sister. Eman vocalized that she wished the family could decorate their house with electric, colored, twinkle lights during December like most of their neighbors. Slyly, she pointed out that the lights do not, technically, have anything to do with a particular belief about Jesus’ divinity. No response was offered to Eman’s argument at the time. Instead her father just shrugged his shoulders, and her mother, who had been chopping vegetables in the kitchen when confronted with this issue, just kept chopping. Kasim remembers that when Eid al-Adha came around that year, Mr. Abaza produced a large box from the garage. It was full of twinkle lights in a variety of

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<sup>290</sup> Su’ad Abdul Khabeer and Maytha Alhassen, “Muslim Youth Cultures,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 299.

colors and sizes that he had purchased on “Christmas clearance.” He got out a ladder and decked the house in the lights to commemorate the act of Allah intervening and saving Ismail from death by providing a ram for the Prophet Abraham’s sacrifice. It may have thoroughly confused the neighbors, as this was late January, but it won back the heart of Eman. The whole family was moved by the tacky yet loving display. Much like the necklace Nadia had received in lieu of the camping trip, this was another example of Mr. Abaza’s desire to demonstrate to his children that their needs were seen, that he would find ways to compensate when they felt left out in a culture in which they could not always fully engage.

The intentional involvement that began with the fifth grade ecology trip would become the model for the way the Abaza family would approach school functions and extracurricular activities for the remainder of their children’s early and teen years; they decided that their religion did not need to clash with culture. Instead, their adherence to Islam would become the motivation for becoming engaged members of their school community. At times, this was to their children’s delight, and at other moments, particularly in their early teen years, to their dismay. Nadia’s father started volunteering for more school events, and both parents increasingly encouraged Kasim and Ali to participate in sports. Nadia recalls that her father never missed one of Kasim’s or Ali’s football games. However, regarding the fifth grade camping trip, Nadia claims she still desperately wants to go to this day, and her siblings continue to genially tease her about missing out. She laughs as she confesses this, but the look on her face reveals that she means it.

#### **4.6 Gender Dynamics in the Abaza Home**

Nadia continues to claim that she was never rebellious, but she does confess that “I gave my parents a run for their money.” Once she hit sixth grade, she became, in her estimation, “a monster.” She calls it an identity crisis. She did not know who she wanted to be, and she was tired of people not seeming to be able to understand who she was. Nadia is fair skinned and she used to tell people she was “mixed”, meaning that she would let them assume she had one Caucasian parent and one “fill in the blank.” Nadia was struggling with her dual identity as her preference for many aspects of American life

at school were coming into conflict with the Arab influences in her home.<sup>291</sup> Nadia remembers feeling conflicted regarding how she perceived the gender inequity in her own home as an adolescent and teenager.

Both Nadia and Kasim agree that gender roles were very clearly defined in the Abaza household. The main thing that bothers Nadia from her childhood was what she viewed as the unfair distribution of the household workload. “I didn’t like that you did not seem to be able to choose what you wanted to do.” It was a system of labor that was not divided according to who could do a job best, or what they might like to do, but rather according to what responsibilities were acceptable depending upon whether you were male or female. Like other instances of perceived injustice, Nadia questioned this approach.

Nadia did not appreciate inheriting the gender roles that she felt she was “sentenced” to as a female. She did not understand why she and her sister shared so much more of the workload at home than her brothers. “I pushed back,” she says. She recalls trying to challenge her parents with verses from the *Qur’an* in high school, which had worked for Kasim, but she got nowhere.

Chores! I would do them but I would complain all the time. My sister and I had far more responsibilities around the house than my brothers. It got worse when their (brothers) lives became busier with sports. My brothers were busier because they were allowed to be busier. Blow-ups between my dad and me were frequent. Even though my anger was really directed at my mom, most of the time. But again, he was the parent we dealt with face to face.<sup>292</sup>

Since all of the siblings still live at home, how does this work today? Nadia laughs, and notes that the distribution of labor has finally started to sort itself out in the last few

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<sup>291</sup> J.W. Berry, ‘Immigration, acculturation, and adaptation’, *Applied Psychology: An International Review* 46, no.1 (1997): 5-34. Berry defines this struggle as a “dual-identity.”

<sup>292</sup> Nadia works for her former school district as a cultural and religious liaison, spending much of her time mediating conflict between middle-school aged children. When she was reviewing the notes from our conversation about her own middle school years, she laughed and said, “I also think there is not an Arabic equivalent for *puberty*. I get that now, because of my job. An understanding of *puberty* would have really helped my family!”



years. Ironically, she attributes this to her brothers, whom she perceives as having become increasingly uncomfortable in their own dual-identities. Kasim agrees that, in hindsight, he feels, “really bad because I know I did not have to do nearly as much as she did. And I know that is simply because I was a guy. Yep, totally unfair.”

Nadia contends that this inequity has shaped her own view of marriage equality. “Why should gender inherently decide for you?” she asks rhetorically. She has not come to terms with this lingering frustration because it continues to be reinforced in many aspects of her life. She admits that while she always had to deal with her father, much of her anger was directed towards her mother. When asked to elaborate, she is seemingly reluctant. She breaks eye contact and concludes, “I just wanted my mom to be stronger. I’m not even sure what I mean, but...I just wanted her to like, stand up. Be different.”

Though the topic changes at the moment, Nadia will often return to this anger with her mother in later conversations. She will suggest that, after thinking about it, she has determined that much of her frustration came from what she now perceives as contradictions in “who my parents were raising me to be as a strong-Muslim-woman, and who my mother was in the home as a strong-Muslim-woman. These weren’t the same at all.” The Abaza parents consistently cultivated their children’s independence and encouraged them to speak up for themselves, sometimes with words, but also through their actions and decisions. Kasim recalls, “We were constantly being made aware that when we were at school, or really anywhere outside the home, we were going to be judged because we were different. Not only were we immigrants, we were Muslim immigrants.” As Nadia’s memories reveal, this was particularly difficult for Nadia’s mother, who, at times, reached her wits end with Nadia’s stubbornness and willingness to push back. Nadia felt that she was supposed to be a strong, proud, thoughtful Muslim...when she left the house.

And so... I was always being told that I had to stand up for myself, work hard, take every opportunity, realize this is America and nothing is holding me back, and yet...because you are the girl you need to do ‘these’ chores, behave ‘this

way' and do 'these' things because that's what good Arab girls do. Let me tell you. It confuses you.

#### 4.7 "Recalibration" Vacation

By the time Nadia and Kasim were in middle school, the family was feeling what Kasim described as "immigrant fatigue." The pressures of having extended family periodically stay with them for long periods of time, their father's grueling work schedule, everyone's attempt to learn English, and the constant challenges that come with acculturation had left the whole family emotionally and spiritually exhausted. They had been saving money for years to take a trip to visit family for a prolonged period of time and were finally able to spend the summer of 2000 in Jordan. Nadia reminisces about this trip as having some kind of mystical power over them. "My parents were re-calibrated and rejuvenated. It kind of fixed all of us." Kasim notes that this trip is when his love for, and sense of connection to, the Middle East began to germinate. The formative impact this trip had on Kasim and Nadia cannot be overlooked. Journeys to the "homeland" in this crucial period, as young people transition between adolescence and adulthood, are particularly significant.<sup>293</sup> For both Nadia and Kasim, this translated into a greater awareness of issues facing not only their displaced Palestinian family, but also a greater sense of connection to a global *ummah*.<sup>294</sup> Both siblings became increasingly passionate about human rights, especially related to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and both acknowledge that they tend now to be closest to those friends who share these concerns. A quick scan of both of their Facebook profile pages reveals much about their love for their heritage. Kasim created and posted a collection of photos from the family's most recent trip (2010) to Jordan, and it should be noted that he has entitled the album, "Home."<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> Edward Curtis, "American Muslim Spirituality," in *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*, ed. Edward E. Curtis IV (Columbia University Press, 2008), 338. Edward Curtis observes, "When they return [from abroad] they disseminate their knowledge in a variety of ways."

<sup>294</sup> *ummah* refers to the global Muslim community

<sup>295</sup> Later that evening I would spend nearly an hour perusing the photos on Kasim's Facebook page. After three of my four initial interviews, I went home and found a "friend" invite waiting in my Facebook inbox. While I recognize that each of my interview subjects has hundreds of Facebook friends, I welcomed those invites as reassurances that our meeting had gone well and that the interviewee did not regret sharing their story. They felt like endorsements. Being invited to look at their profiles, particularly in the case of

Upon returning to Minnesota, Nadia's parents prioritized the need to find greater community, specifically a religious community that they could invest in as well as draw strength from. Recalls Kasim,

After coming back from Jordan it was like my parents realized they really didn't have to do life alone. They could find family. It just wasn't going to be family as defined by blood. We would need to expand or definition. But this is exactly what being Muslim is all about.

#### **4.8 Leaning in to the *Ummah***

The Abazas started to become very good friends with a highly religious group of people, most of whom were Arab families who had come to Minnesota in the late 1960s and early 1970s to pursue higher education. Though Kasim and Nadia both have a group of friends that is religiously and ethnically diverse, Kasim admits that the entire Abaza family is "over-indexed" in Arab friends, particularly those that share their Palestinian roots, and that this began after their return from the vacation in 2000.

Nadia, as the oldest female child in her family's new circle, felt like she was expected to set the stage for proper female Muslim behavior. She attributes this as one of the factors influencing her decision to take hijab; the choice to begin to wear a headscarf at all times when outside the home and no longer just for religious observances. Nadia considers this a turning point in her life and tells the story with great reverence. She was thirteen years old and had attended an Iftar dinner at a friend's house.<sup>296</sup> The friend's mother, who was from Jordan, asked Nadia, "If I see you walking down the street how do I know to give you the greeting of peace?" Nadia recalls that this was such a beautiful question. It took her by total surprise. Her mother wore hijab,

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Kasim, gave me greater insight into their lives. Kasim's profile picture, which is the main photo on one's site, had him at the center with an arm around each of his parents. He has uploaded hundreds of photos, and most are of family and friends, traveling to Jordan and also to Hajj in Mecca. Though Kasim is now engaged, I could not find one photo of just Kasim and his fiancée. They all have at least one other family member, usually Nadia or Eman, or a friend in the shot as well.

<sup>296</sup> *Iftar* is the breaking of the fast every evening after sunset during Ramadan. In Minnesota, Muslim families often get together with extended family and friends in private homes as well as local restaurants to celebrate the breaking of the fast. *Iftar* can also refer the breaking of the fast of Ramadan on the first sighting of the new moon on the evening of *Eid-al-Fitr*. The fast is commonly broken with dates as this was the practice of Prophet Muhammad.

and while she assumed she would wear it someday, Nadia perceived it as something you don't consider until you are a grown woman. Yet, the question stirred something in her. Yes, it was intended to be convicting but Nadia could sense the kindness in the question's delivery. Nadia felt as though she was being invited to be a part of something.

She was asking me who I was? Did I know? If I do not know, then how can others? The way she asked? It was lovely. I didn't even really have to think about it. Hijab comes from within the heart, and that's where I made the decision. It can't start on the outside. It has to do with what is coming from inside of you. It has very little to do with the outside. Putting it on was the physical response to an internal decision. Hijab became a solidification of who I was.<sup>297</sup>

Whenever she enters a room in hijab, Nadia is choosing to reveal something about who she feels she is; exercising some level of vulnerability with perfect strangers. Her headscarf seems to say, "My faith goes wherever I go. It's not just for certain times or places." Hijab is a beautiful reminder, both literal and symbolic, of the many Muslim women whom, despite the challenges of dual identity, demonstrate that for them hijab is a conscious, personal act of volition they have made.<sup>298</sup> Hijab symbolizes that it is Islam that comes first; Islam goes before you as you enter any new space. "When considering how to best project their self-image in a sexualized culture like the United States, many Muslim women who adopt hijab in whatever version strive to direct attention to their

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<sup>297</sup> Listening to Nadia talk about hijab, one comes back to the idea of Islam being able to transcend a dual-identity. Since I had never met Nadia before this day, I knew we would have to find each other in a crowded coffee shop. I had described my physical features, and she told me simply that she would be wearing a white headscarf. I saw Nadia out the window of the coffee shop the moment she pulled up. She looked all-American, having arrived in a Honda Civic, applying lip-gloss in her rearview mirror while simultaneously chatting on a cell phone after she had parked. She got off the phone and I watched her adjust her headscarf. Despite the fact that hijab has become a common sight in Minnesota, I noticed several people around the shop staring at Nadia for a little too long as she came in the door. It made me uncomfortable but it did not seem to bother her.

<sup>298</sup> Geneive Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim life in America after 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 22. Abdo claims that the hijab is singularly the most recognized "symbol of belonging to a Muslim community" for men and women.

personality, character, and personhood, rather than to their physical shapes.”<sup>299</sup> Nadia admits that this has been a struggle at times, but it has never made her want to downplay the role Islam plays in her life. “Islam is what’s at my center. I need to push everything through my Islam for it to make sense; for me to be okay.” Nadia insists that for her, the hijab is not a conservative symbol but rather an expression of personal liberation as well as her own piety.

Nadia wanted to go into high school knowing who she was going to be, even if that meant that she was the only Muslim girl (as best she knew) in the whole high school wearing a headscarf. Her school counselor noticed her right away, complimenting her on her hijab in the hallway. This comment let Nadia know that she was cared about, that she had an advocate. She says she “felt changed walking down the hallways. I was no longer reluctant to let people know that I was Arab and Muslim.” For Nadia, “taking hijab” represented the transfer of ownership of her religious identity from her family to herself. The memory of it functions for her in a similar manner as Kasim’s own experience with Homecoming. Both were fulfilling family expectations through individual decisions that led them to greater self-awareness and fulfillment.

While she had teachers and friends that she describes as being supportive and great, Nadia notes that she started to pull back in high school too. During Nadia’s early teenage years, extended family from Jordan moved in with the Abazas. Adding to their own family of six in a three-bedroom townhome were now two uncles, one aunt, and a grandmother. Personal space was non-existent and Nadia, in a feeble attempt at privacy, attempted to move into the walk-in closet in the bedroom she shared with her sister, aunt, and grandmother. While Nadia concedes that this was just the reality of life in an immigrant family, she notes that she felt pulled between her two worlds and that she felt herself withdrawing from her “American” friends.

I started to feel weird again. Who is going to have a friend over to their house when there are ten people running around? My brothers could escape to fields and gyms for physical space. This was the most difficult time in my life. There

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<sup>299</sup>, Debra Majeed, “Sexual Identity, Marriage, and Family”, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 316.

just wasn't any emotional space. And I mean for any of us. We were all exposed to every argument, every fight...everything! I felt like coming home from school was coming home to a different country.

Nadia's immediate family struggled at times with the often not-so-subtle critiques offered by their new roommates of the Abaza family's American lifestyle. Nadia's grandmother perceived that Nadia and Eman had way too much freedom and was very vocal regarding her concern that there would be consequences at some point. Nadia recalls that this was "based on nothing" that she could discern. To most American teenagers, Nadia's life hardly looked like one with too much freedom. "I went to school. Came home. Went to my job at Book Warehouse. Came home."<sup>300</sup>

I know my parents really wrestled with how to arrive at the best decisions for us kids. And I know that they made decisions together, even if it was always my father who ultimately communicated with us. I know they wanted to honor their own parents and family, and I think they did. But I loved that they always stuck up for us with the rest of the family...always seemed to "get" that our lives were going to be totally different as kids here in America than theirs were growing up. I think my parents were kind of unique that way. But still, I couldn't wait to be done with high school by that point.

#### **4.9 College Life and the MSA**

By the time Nadia and Kasim entered college, both felt like they were coming into their own as Muslim Americans. Their experiences in public school prepared them well for their years at the University of Minnesota. With a student body of roughly 50,000

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<sup>300</sup> Shifa Podikunju. "Extent of Acculturation Experiences Among High School Muslim Students in America", Ph.D. dissertation, University of Florida, 2008. While Nadia's experiences with acculturation and the clashes that can often occur within families seem to follow the predictable patterns identified by Shifa Podikunju as typical of high school students, it is evident that Nadia was sensitive to the various perspectives represented in her home.

students, Nadia found she was no longer the only Muslim girl wearing hijab.<sup>301</sup> While Kasim had never been short on friends, he had very few who were fellow Muslims in high school. At the University of Minnesota, he “made a new Muslim friend every week.” While both still lived at home, noting that they would never have even considered living on campus, college brought a level of independence that each had never experienced, especially for Nadia. For the first time she was building relationships and finding a community that was not directly tied in any way to her family unit. Both joined the Muslim Student Association, referred to by students as MSA, and began to develop friendships with both men and women who were also interested in studying Islam and encouraging one another in their religious formation. Nadia recalls,

There’s a joke with my friends that the MSA phase is almost mandatory for young college Muslims. All of a sudden, you’re allowed to hang out with members of the opposite sex! You can do things in a group, you can form study circles, you have independence. And it’s all Islamically legit and your parents are proud of you for proving you’re not just going to forget about Allah once you leave their house. It was total community and I loved it.

Nadia observes that the MSA provided her with her first male friendships beyond her brothers. She regards this as a healthy experience and she began to consider what personality traits and behaviors she valued in males, and which drove her crazy. Yet, Nadia was in no hurry to get married.

Thinking about marriage and looking to get married are two different things. Muslim girls are thinking about marriage since they are, like thirteen. We talk about it all the time. Marriage was always in the back of my head but college kind of brought marriage into focus. I never looked at guys that way in high school. I mean, the only Muslim guys *in high school* were my brothers. Now, there were actually people I could consider. And there were a few guys that I felt really

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<sup>301</sup> See <http://www1.umn.edu/twincities/campus-facts/index.html> Last accessed January 19, 2013.

valued me for who I was. They liked that I was outspoken; that I stood up for myself. That was cool.

#### **4.10 Boy Meets Girl**

True to his character, Kasim became involved in the executive leadership of the MSA, rotating from Treasurer, to Vice-President, up to President. He helped organize outreach activities, fund-raisers, and volunteer projects. It was on one such project that he met his future fiancée, Noor. Both were attending a scholarship dinner. She was a year behind him in school. Kasim had seen Noor before but never spoken to her. He admits that he found her attractive but was reluctant to approach her because he already knew that he was drawn to her. However, she came right up to him at the dinner and introduced herself, and explained that she was interested in having the MSA's support in setting up a mentorship program. Kasim was impressed and intrigued.

I liked her right away. That actually kind of scared me. You have to understand that when you know that you are not going to pursue someone until you are ready to really be looking down the line to being married, you need to be cautious. I had nothing to offer her. I wanted to finish school, travel; maybe even get a graduate degree *before* getting married. Marriage seemed like something that was years away, and so it would not have been right to try and feel this situation out.

Kasim did not feel any pressure to be thinking about marriage, and he admits that this is a form of privilege that can be attributed to his gender. He states that the only Muslim friends he can recall who were "stressing" over marriage when he was in college were, "Pakistani and Turkish guys who were about to finish graduate school. They would get weekly phone calls from parents back home asking if they had met anyone yet." Kasim's parents had already been approached by more than one set of distant relatives inquiring about Kasim as a potential marriage partner for their daughter. He recalls that he had a few male friends who were experiencing similar inquiries. While he found this humorous more than anything else, he acknowledges that it influenced the



way he assessed his own situation. “I don’t know how to say this without sounding like a jerk...but I knew I had options.”<sup>302</sup> After determining that he was, indeed, not ready to think about a relationship, Kasim kept his distance from Noor and only encountered her four or five times over the next year when they would be attending the same event. He studied abroad for a semester, and she returned home for the summer.

#### **4.11 Kasim finds his “fit”**

When Kasim and Noor returned to campus in the fall of 2011, they had a class together and Kasim chose to sit near Noor. He continued to feel drawn to her, and he slowly began to seek out opportunities to interact with her. He also “asked around about her,” which he describes as a common informal practice within Muslim circles.<sup>303</sup>

I knew I wanted someone who took Islam seriously. As much as I saw really dedicated Muslims in my years at the U, I also saw a lot of people who treated it more like a hobby. They would say and act one way on Friday at our meetings, but then clearly not be living that out when you saw them later in the weekend. I can’t say what I think it means to be ‘devout.’ I guess that’s not how I think about it. I think about choosing to adhere to Islam day after day after day. I make that choice because I feel convicted to, but convicted because I have studied it and think it’s the best way for me to live. I want to marry someone who feels that same conviction.

Kasim recalls that Noor returned his interest and the initial stage of their friendship developed quickly. By the end of the semester, Kasim was ready to ask Noor if she had considered what it would be like to enter into a committed relationship with him. Noor affirmed that she had, indeed, thought about this and Kasim was elated.

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<sup>302</sup> Hena Zuberi, “The Muslim Marriage Crisis”, MuslimMatters.org. <http://muslimmatters.org/2013/09/27/muslim-marriage-crisis/> Last accessed January 8, 2015. In Zuberi’s research with the Surveys conducted by AIMaghrib Institute of its student body, she found that the main reasons its students were delaying marriage were parents, finances, education, fear of rejection, and commitment for men and fear of control and intimidation for women.

<sup>303</sup> Kasim describes this as simply asking friends or acquaintances what they might know or have heard about Noor. He found that the information he was gathering was consistent and that Noor was “liked and respected by everyone.” He notes that more than a few people encouraged him to pursue her.

Only a year prior, Kasim had clearly indicated that he was not interested in pursuing a relationship until he was finished with school, well into his career, and established financially. Though Noor was never interviewed, Kasim relayed that she, too, was not intending to get married until she had finished both college and medical school. When asked why he thinks they were both willing to so quickly change course, he is ready with an answer:

Things just seemed to fit. The more I got to know her...I just couldn't stop thinking about her. I had female friendships and I knew that this was different. I did not just want to be her friend. It was very important to me to do things the right way from an Islamic standpoint, which means you need to sort of get organized pretty quickly. Our community is pretty small and rumors and speculation start fast. I didn't want to give any impression that our relationship was not completely above board.

#### **4.12 Shared Roots**

After receiving confirmation from Noor that she also wanted to pursue a serious relationship, Kasim went directly to his parents to share his good news. Kasim speculates that their shared ethnic and cultural background has made the path to marriage easier for him. While Kasim defends his stance that ethnicity should not top one's list of required characteristics in partner, he admits that a look at his own situation may seem contradictory. Noor's family background was definitely something Kasim found highly "attractive."

Noor's family is also from Palestine. They came to America after being refugees in Jordan. Our family had spent much of the previous summer in Jordan and Syria. My sense of heritage was renewed and here is this beautiful person who shares that heritage. I wanted a girl who would fit in with my family. And I guess that means 'getting' our culture. I love that she can talk to my grandmas in their language. Noor is totally integrated into American life but she has clung to her

roots. The older I get, the more important Palestinian issues become to me and it's huge to me that Noor gets that.

He contends that this helped them “skip a few steps” because they already understood each other's cultural family values. For example, Kasim knew that when it came time for the families to meet, his father should meet Noor's father even before he himself did. This was done out of respect for both fathers, as is custom in Arab cultures. Then the mothers were introduced, and finally Kasim met Noor's family for the first time when her family was invited to a large dinner party in their honor, hosted by Kasim's mother and sisters. Kasim recalls that it was during this dinner that his father and Noor's discussed and established acceptable parameters for the young couple to follow as they began an “official” relationship. The families determined that the signing of the marriage contract would take place in the next six months, with an official, legal American marriage and the reception to be scheduled for the following summer.

#### **4.13 Shared Religion**

While Kasim acknowledges these parameters were influenced by Arab traditions, he notes that they reveal both families' commitment to their religion.

Islam calls for me to be the protector of Noor, even before we are married because I am now committed to her. Both of our families sort of ‘got the word out’ right away to our respective communities and friend and family networks. I would never want her reputation to be tarnished. Our reputations also reflect our family reputation; there is no separating yourself. Literally, from that dinner on, I realized that this is about bringing together two families, not just two people. Everyone's approval is important to me.

When asked if this pressure bothers him, Kasim firmly shakes his head and crosses his hands repeatedly over one another.

Not at all. When I told my Dad about Noor he actually seemed kind of indifferent and not interested. Which annoyed me. I kind of got frustrated and told him it seemed like he didn't even care. He told me, 'Because you are my son, and I believe I raised you well...I am not concerned with who you choose. If you were raised properly, it will be reflected in your choice.' I was kind of blown away by that. It wasn't indifference. It was trust. When I think about that right now I realize that, of course my Dad responded that way! It's how he's always responded.

The trust of Kasim's father enabled him to see that ultimately, this was *his* choice alone. However, because Kasim shares his father's religious and cultural values, while his choice to marry Noor may be one of individual fulfillment it is simultaneously meeting a family and community obligation. As Kasim defines his family as being a part of his very core, he sees any choice he makes as one that takes his family's needs and expectations into consideration.

For Kasim, he attributes his success with finding Noor to having the right priorities when it comes to what he wanted in a partner. The Prophet Muhammad stated that the main female influence in a man's life is his mother. Kasim agrees, but also notes that his sisters, particularly Nadia, have significantly shaped his views on the type of woman he wanted for a wife. He has been friends with females since he was in elementary school, had mainly female teachers, and now has female co-workers. "I often defer to women in business meetings or class...They're SMART!" He thinks that having close relationships with his sisters has been nothing but a benefit to him, and believes it will make him a better husband.

Again it's a trust thing. If I love my sisters, and think they are great, it would make no sense to choose someone who did not get along with them. I will admit they were a tough sell because they are protective, but they love Noor and that's a huge endorsement. I think Noor has many of the same qualities. She is intelligent and she wants to use the education she has worked hard for. She is going to medical school. She is reserved and careful, but she easily engages in conversation with anyone.

Kasim notes the importance of working on compromise and decision making before marriage. When he and Noor were working through their marriage contract and drafting their dowry, it was a process that took place over months, with multiple meetings and both fathers always present, either physically or virtually.<sup>304</sup> He recalls there were moments of contention and at one point that it was his father that became concerned things were moving too quickly. “He always wanted to discuss the big, hairy things and I just wanted him to take it down a notch.” Kasim became frustrated with both his father and mother and recalls accusing them of “not understanding because you had it much easier!” His father quickly affirmed this as true but did not relent on his stance of trying to conduct the marriage process in the right way.

At the end of the day, what impressed me the most through this whole negotiating process, was how Noor conducted herself. She always kept her cool. She showed endless patience and grace. I think those months just affirmed to me that we were making such a good choice. Noor takes Islam seriously. It’s a source of strength for her and I think both of us became better Muslims after going through this experience with our families. I feel good now knowing that our marriage contract reflects hard work. Ultimately, I’m proud that Noor is protected. Both families can be confident that we have a good plan. Noor wants to be a doctor, and we are going to make sure that happens. We know we will have a family at some point. We know I will finish graduate school and that we will make decisions together about where we live. We know we want to live near family and that we also want to make sure our own children spend significant time in Jordan. And we have a budget!

These are not the typical conversations of American twenty-three year olds. However, in the example of Kasim’s story, and particularly his description of the marriage process, one can see how an Islamic approach to marriage can provide many potential benefits.

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<sup>304</sup> Kasim remarked that Skype and email were essential tools in helping the father’s communicate, as Noor’s parents lived in another state.

Not only do Kasim and Noor attest to knowing one another better as the result of navigating the details and growing a relationship within Islamic parameters, Kasim claims that he knows himself better as well, and it is the same for Noor. Both attest that their commitment to their religion grew as a result of the process. Kasim notes, “we even discussed the ways we want to support each other’s deen.”<sup>305</sup> This is equality in action; two partners working together for the other’s benefit. The wedding was set for early June, timed to allow the couple to return from their honeymoon with a few days to prepare their new home before the start of *Ramadan*.

#### **4.14 Nadia’s Time of Transition**

While Kasim would finish college with a fiancée, Nadia would leave entering into what she calls her second identity crisis. She did not feel ready to get married, but she realized that college may have afforded her the best opportunity for finding a marriage partner. She felt like she’d “blown it.” By graduation, she had become disillusioned with many of her male Muslim friends. Without the legitimacy of the MSA, hanging out with male friends was no longer seen as acceptable by some of her peers. Nadia notes that neither she nor her parents would approve of her spending time with just one male, so many of her college male friendships disintegrated.

If you take your Islam seriously, and if you want to honor your family, when you are in your twenties and single, regardless of whether you are a male or female, the only relationship you are going to have with a person of the opposite sex (besides your family) is one that is intentionally headed towards marriage. There is no *purpose* for relationships with the opposite sex outside of one directed toward marriage. A guy who doesn’t understand that is definitely not a guy my parents would accept. Neither would I.

Complicating Nadia’s marriage crisis was her struggle to transition her religious identity from college into “real life.” She had always attended Friday prayer services on

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<sup>305</sup> Deen-Arabic word/Islamic concept meaning “way of life” for a Muslim. Often just interpreted as “religious commitment” or sometimes even just “religion.”

campus, and her weekly co-ed Qur'an study was organized through the MSA. While many alumni continued to participate in MSA activities, Nadia's work schedule and location made it too difficult to return to campus with any frequency, and many of her closest friends had also graduated. Nadia found herself feeling anchorless without a structured Muslim community.

#### **4.15 Where the Boys Are**

Nadia misses the sense of community she had in college and being surrounded by Muslim friends, both male and female. She remarks on the ease that seemed to come with gender dynamics in college. She feels like she is stuck in a strange phase, and she says her friends identify this as the "post MSA let-down", when the camp-like feeling is over. How to create a new sense of community and commitment after college can be a significant challenge for any young person at this transitory phase of life. Being a young, single female in the first few years after college especially bothered Nadia as she could not determine where she fit as a single Muslim female within her religious community. This is not without real barriers. Nadia now works for a local public school district, and before that the YWCA. She smiles and says, "I guess I just choose work environments that are dominated by women."

After college, Nadia found it hard to find a mosque that felt like home to her. Suddenly, her religious education was entirely her own responsibility. She found that she was not alone. Many of her female friends in the same predicament turned instead to self-study and occasionally all female Qur'an groups organized by friends. While she does not see this as ideal, she has found that it is what works for her in this stage of her life as a young, single Muslim woman living at home.

I don't think my belief in Allah has ever wavered. It's just that I didn't know where I belonged. I think, character wise, I am actually in a much better place now than in college. I am happier in who I am as a Muslim. It may sound hypocritical but while I admit my physical practice of my religion is lacking, I feel like my knowledge and understanding of my religion continues to grow. I have to own this. No one can do this for me.

Nadia has grown close to this small circle of female friends she gathers with weekly and admits that men and marriage are frequent topics of conversation.<sup>306</sup> There is widespread agreement that there are not many eligible partners to choose from. She deduces that this could be because she runs in a particularly exceptional circle of friends, who happen to be a little older. In her small group, all five have advanced degrees, and Nadia notes that they share similar levels of religious commitment. They encourage one another to focus on their career goals and their various interests, in addition to their religion. Nadia's home is often where the women gather which, while Nadia's preference, also reveals a sore spot.

Nadia cites a hadith from the Islamic Tradition, which states that marriage is half of your deen.<sup>307</sup> She feels there is much one cannot do as a Muslim until you are married - your life has not really started. There is the obvious such as having a family, but she is specifically referring to her own interests and gifts related to hospitality. As a single Muslim woman, Nadia feels she is expected to live with her parents as long as she remains single. She says she is fine with this expectation and notes it is the same for all of her closest female friends unless they do not have family in the area. Historically, and currently, there are many Islamic societies where it is not only accepted, but encouraged for single Muslim women to reside in their father's home until marriage. The daughter plays an important role in helping care for the family, but this is also a means to protecting her reputation. Nadia relayed the story of her aunt, who divorced when Nadia was in middle school. The aunt came to live with them until she remarried. Nadia recalls,

Certainly she received both emotional as well as actual financial support from my parents. But it was definitely more than that. My family, by living with us, offered a sort of protection...or maybe preservation of my aunt's reputation---her

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<sup>306</sup> The online survey findings revealed that while Muslim men do not seem as concerned with getting married, marriage is just as popular a topic for discussion within their male circles as it is with the women.

<sup>307</sup> The hadith referenced by Nadia is one of the most frequently cited when discussing the centrality of marriage in Islam.



integrity. No way would she have been eligible for a second marriage if she had been living on her own, in an apartment or whatever, somewhere. Unsupervised!

Islam charges the father with the obligation of caring for his daughters in the same way that he is obligated to care for his mother.<sup>308</sup> This is his responsibility for life. Mr. Abaza's welcoming of his sister into his home was certainly about protecting her reputation, but it was also about preserving the Abaza family's reputation and standing in the *ummah*. Nadia says her father has made clear, "You will always be under our protection and we will love you no matter what. If you find someone, that's great. But you will always have a room in my house. You will be safe here."<sup>309</sup>

While Nadia is grateful for this security, she grows weary of it at times. Nadia enjoys entertaining and cooking for friends. This is something she knows she would love to do frequently if she were married and have her own home, but in her family's home she feels as if she renting space when her friends do come over. "It's as if your social life does not really begin until you are married. There is always the element of asking for permission...arranging calendars." As evidenced by her relocation to the walk-in-closet when she was an adolescent, Nadia values privacy and she is very independent; she sees that there would be some advantages to having her own space in order to learn about herself, what she does well on her own and what she would want in a partner in terms of how a marriage partner would add to her life.

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<sup>308</sup> Nadia's father would often cite hadith, which illustrate the value Muhammad, who did not have any sons to live past infancy, placed on daughters. For example, "Whoever takes care of two girls until they reach adulthood - he and I will come (together) on the Day of Resurrection - and he interlaced his fingers (meaning in Paradise)." (Reported by Muslim).

<sup>309</sup> There are several hadith that refer to not only the responsibility of raising and caring for daughters, but the blessing of having daughters as well. In a well-known hadith the Prophet Muhammad stated, "Whoever has three daughters or sisters, or two daughters of two sisters, and lives along with them in a good manner, and has patience with them, and fears Allah with regard to them will enter Paradise." (Reported by Abu Dawud, Al-Tirmindi and others). It is worth considering how this works for female converts. Who protects their reputation when they are the only Muslim in their family? Perhaps this is a factor in the difficulty for converts in finding a spouse? Who will advocate for you? Who vouches for your reputation? Nadia mentioned an Arab proverb which states, "When you have a daughter, you have worry for life."

#### 4.16 Abaza Marriage Dynamics: “equitable, if not equal”

These last comments lead into a long conversation about Nadia’s parents’ marriage dynamic. She hypothesizes that had her parents met in a different time and place they would never have chosen one another. Nadia’s assessment of her parent’s relationship sounds a bit like a bumper sticker. She describes it as, “an equitable, if not equal partnership.” While she stated it with authority, it wasn’t clear if she was in agreement with this kind of arrangement or if she was just calling the situation as she sees it. When asked to further explain, she said:

Dad was really able to integrate faith and culture. Mom was his total right hand. Equitable is different than equal, though. But, you know, I’m okay with that. I guess you might think that’s backward. Well, not YOU, because I think as a Christian you get it. Or at least you might get it more than some other women I know. I think it’s possible to not be “equal” exactly but to still be respected and to know that your opinion counts. That you are partners, you know?

Nadia considers the origins of her views on equitable versus equal. She smiles but is quiet. She heaves a large sigh and then offers:

Well, you can’t argue that Arab culture totally puts more value on men. I think that’s different. That’s subjugation. THAT’S culture. The Qur’an would be, for me, how equitable is defined in a way that I think is what I want. While there are some Muslims, especially in Arab culture, that would discriminate against me, Islam doesn’t discriminate against me. And I think you see that in my dad. Yes, my dad is an Arab man. But he is not living in an Arab world. Maybe the Arab way of doing things would have been to NOT offer us explanations for why were told, ‘no’ growing up. To just say, “You’re not going on that trip, or to that party. And that’s final.” But he wasn’t saving face with his extended family. Here in Minnesota, Dad chose to do things the Islamic way. He wasn’t concerned with maintaining the same type of male role he would need to in Jordan to be

respected. He wanted to be a good Muslim father. Which means giving us explanations.<sup>310</sup>

Nadia considers her own parent's marriage and states that, based on their personalities, she would never have placed her parents together but assesses that it works because it's functional.

When I think about their approach to marriage, it's like, 'You're a good person. I'm a good person. It fits. It works. We make it work!' I feel like that's what my Dad would say. Marriage is a means of contributing to society. You have children. You become productive. Marriage is the only legit (Islamic) way to keep the community moving forward and so you need to get on with it!

When asked if her parents would agree with her analysis, Nadia laughs and says emphatically, "Yes! Yes!" Apparently, this is an occasional topic of conversation within the family and both of her parents are good humored about it. Kasim would later affirm this as true. Nadia's assessment of her parent's relationship is also in keeping with the descriptions of Islamic marriage discussed earlier in Chapter Three. Marriage, quite literally, *moves* Islam forward. Having a fulfilling relationship is certainly an added benefit but it is not the primary goal. The primary goal is to preserve the Islamic *ummah* and, hopefully, to advance it. When the primary intention of marriage is to keep Islam and family bloodlines secure, personal preferences are set aside in order to make the marriage work - to make it practical. The way marriage was talked about in the Abaza home was, according to Nadia, "functional." Neither Nadia, Kasim, nor their parents regard this as a negative. Rather, Kasim offers it is just a "different, somewhat counter-cultural," perspective on what is valued.

While Nadia agrees with the salience of a *functional* marriage, and concedes to Kasim's assessment that their parent's marriage is "a good one," she is only willing to

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<sup>310</sup> Islam calls for all of its adherents to seek wisdom and knowledge. While there are many hadith which support this claim, among the most commonly cited is "Acquire knowledge, for he who acquires it in the way of Allah performs an act of piety; he who speaks of it, praises the Lord; he who seeks it, adores Allah; he who dispenses instruction in it, bestows alms; and he who imparts it to others, performs an act of devotion to Allah." (reported by Bukhari and Muslim)

go so far when considering marriage a personal obligation she has to her Muslim community. She says this is because her perceptions and expectations for marriage have moved beyond the functional. Nadia wants a relationship. She admits that this desire reveals a blending of her Arab heritage with her American upbringing. “My parents’ don’t quite get that because to them, it puts ALL the emphasis on the ‘relationship.’ The human part. You know? On *feelings*.” Nadia says *feelings* in a slow, exaggerated tone.

To Nadia’s parents, this “attitude” can negatively alter what marriage is supposed to accomplish; the purpose it is designed to serve in the ummah. However, Nadia does not believe her marriage framework is flawed. She argues that her conception of marriage is closer to what is called for in the Qur’an and the Tradition than her parents’ definition.<sup>311</sup> For Nadia, emphasis on relationship, which is based on a thoughtful, and genuine calculation of priorities and preferences, is how a marriage can move from functional into an achieved state of fulfillment and balance. She believes that functionality will be the outgrowth of marrying a suitable partner. “I am saying that I think I have an obligation to try and create a healthy marriage. That’s different than just getting married to please your family and community.” For Nadia, this has influenced her development of a marriage framework that she believes reflects Allah’s true intentions for marriage; one that achieves the practicality of creating a family and cementing Islam for another generation, but one that also is shared by two spouses who want a close, intimate, fulfilling relationship. “Why can’t you have both?” she asks. For Nadia, Islam calls for this and she does not believe that she needs to lower her expectations. For evidence that this type of relationship is possible, she does not have to go very far. “Look at Kasim and Noor! Don’t I deserve the same? I would rather be alone than get married for the sake of being married.”

This resignation to remain alone if necessary is something her parents do not understand and are often exasperated by. Marital expectations for Nadia’s parents emerged once they were already married. They barely knew each other before their wedding. Nadia’s expectations have been forming since she was a young girl. When her

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<sup>311</sup> This supports findings in my anonymous online survey. Overwhelmingly, the young Muslim Americans surveyed contend that their conceptions of marriage are more “Islamic” than their parents, arguing that their parents’ models are more influenced by culture and ethnicity.

parents articulate what they want in a spouse for their children, it sounds to Nadia more like a list of what would make for a good renter; “decent income, no bad credit or criminal history, good reputation.” This is quite different than Nadia’s standards for a marriage partner, and she spends, in her estimation, a great deal of time trying to get her parents and her extended family to respect their difference of opinion.

#### **4.17 Nadia’s Standards**

Nadia recalls that there has never been a time when getting married seemed like an option. “It’s never been a question of if, just when.”<sup>312</sup> For Nadia, consistent with her friend’s experiences, marriage is not only an expectation, it’s a sign of achievement; you bring honor to your family by getting married. This can place a lot of pressure on females, in particular. For some traditional Muslim families, especially - but not limited to - those of Middle Eastern origin, the strong commitment to family honor often seems to find its focus in the behavior of its girls and women.”<sup>313</sup> Nadia says that despite her frustration with traditional gender roles, and the blatant inequality she perceives around her at times, she confesses she still would like to marry a man who would be the leader and chief provider in a relationship. These are things she values, as modeled to her by her father. She knows that these were important to him because he believed Islam called him to do so, and she agrees.

Nadia’s initial framework for marriage was that you grow up, you get married, and then a relationship develops. There was nothing before marriage. This was how it had worked for her parents, her aunts and uncles, and her grandparents. You get to know one another once you have already made a formal commitment. However, Nadia and her siblings had American television. To see entire films and television shows that revolved around high school and college romances was eye-opening for Nadia and her siblings. When asked to try and recall her earliest memories of marriage in American media, Nadia does so with ease, expressing her shock at the way couples were portrayed on television, particularly in sitcoms.

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<sup>312</sup> Results from the initial online survey revealed that only 16 percent of respondents expressed that they would be content to remain single.

<sup>313</sup> Haddad, Y., Smith, J., & K. Moore, *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 86.

It was so weird to see couples in conflict. The wife getting her say! The whole idea of a man sleeping on a couch just blew my mind. That was way too personal. Television was so pervasive. It was also so interesting to see young relationships portrayed. Entire shows about romance that featured characters who were in high school or college.

Kasim, too, had his eyes opened by the programs they would watch on television.

Here are these sitcoms where the mom works and the dad stays at home with the kids. Or the mom has a “masculine” job like being a firefighter or something. We were like, “What?!”

While their parents tried to place some limits around their exposure, they also accepted that much of it would be inevitable. Consistent with their intentional approach to parenting, Nadia and Kasim recall that their parents tried to mediate the various influences competing for the Abaza children’s attention through family conversations about what it means to be Muslim in a society where Islam is not the religious majority. Upon consideration, Nadia finds it somewhat remarkable that her parents were progressive in many areas of parenting.

When it comes to what she actually wants in a spouse, Nadia suggests that her first priority is to find someone who shares her level of religious commitment. “A man who is serious about Islam is non-negotiable to me.” Nadia sees this as being directly linked to compatibility.

I want to be on the same page. This means in regards to Islam, the role it plays in our daily lives, and in the approach I want us to have when it comes to raising children. I don’t want to have to push it - to be the one driving it. I guess that’s where these two concepts you are talking about merge. It’s about finding someone who not only wants this same type of life, but actually finds value in me

because that is what I want. Then harmony is like the reward, or result of choosing somebody who also wants what you want.”

She thinks about this for a second and then amends her statement. “Well, if not on the same page...then I at least want to be in the same book.” She smiles. “That seems mature, right?” Nadia acknowledges that her, as she calls it, “I am woman, hear me roar!” complex is most definitely the result of growing up in the United States. The role of American culture in shaping Nadia’s view towards marriage is not something she perceives as negative. Because of this, she has come to conclude that many American values can be considered Islamic values as well. Nadia relays a hadith, which tells the story of the Prophet Muhammad mending his own clothes without female assistance. “He was happy to do it!” she argues. “It was not deemed work for women only. Many of the marriages I have witnessed amongst my friends have a shared division of labor. Seems ‘Islamic’ to me!”<sup>314</sup>

She acknowledges that while her parents may not understand why she requires a partner who shares her political leanings, her commitments to social justice, and her civil rights advocacy work, Allah does. She believes Allah made her this way for specific reasons. Nadia self-identifies as “politically and socially liberal,” and often finds herself on the fence when it comes to issues where religion and human rights intersect. Nadia references the current debate in Minnesota regarding the right for homosexual couples to marry. She does not see the state as being in a position to determine who can marry and who cannot. She does not want the government telling her when or how she can practice her religion. She fears a society that would not allow Muslims to marry. So, she argues, how can she deny someone else the right to marry? “No religion sanctions intolerance, racism, or discrimination” she declares. For Nadia, these are convictions a

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<sup>314</sup> There are a few hadith that reference the Prophet Muhammad’s roles in his household. The one Nadia mentioned is most likely one that was reported by Imam Ahmad in al-Musnad, 6/121 or Sahih al-Jami, 4927, which states that the Prophet Muhammad would “sew his own clothes, mend his own shoes and do whatever other work men do in their homes.” It is a widely accepted view that this observation was most likely offered by Aisha, one of the wives of the Prophet Muhammad.

marriage partner should share as they reflect the core of who she is and what she believes.<sup>315</sup> “These are the things I would want my children to understand.”

Nadia’s expectations are not anomalous. To want a fulfilling relationship does not mean that she is not being a good Muslim woman. Nadia believes that having a spouse that loves and honors her for who she is will only strengthen her commitment to both her faith and family. Is this being too picky? “No!” argues Nadia. “This is being a good Muslim.”

#### **4.18 Whom Will “fit” with Nadia?**

Nadia also knows that the person she would choose would need to be someone that “fits” the family in order for her relationship to thrive. “It will be a struggle to differentiate between what’s an Arab thing and what’s a Muslim thing related to this topic but I’ll try. But for me, that constant pull between the two is like the definition of being Muslim, so there you go.” So what fits? “Preferably, Arab,” is Nadia’s first response when asked. Nadia argues this is not a requirement, but it must be noted it is the first thing she mentioned. She pushes back and says that her heritage is important to her and she would like someone who can share this with her. “Being Arab would just make things way easier,” suggests Nadia as she gestures a smoothing out motion with both of her arms. She explains that an Arab spouse would be more likely to “get” her family - their quirks, their food preferences, their loudness, and their family drama. Nadia tells the story of one friend who is a white convert to Islam and is married to a Bangladeshi man. The wife’s family was not supportive of her conversion or her marriage. They now have two children. Nadia says she cannot fathom how hard it would be to be a wife and mother without a family support network.<sup>316</sup> While religious commitment may be the first

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<sup>315</sup> Ninety-three percent of American Muslim women voted for President Barack Obama. Muslim women are more likely to identify as Democrats than are Muslim men (52 percent to 42 percent respectively). See Pew Research Center, “Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism,” 2011, available online at <http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/muslim-americans-no-signs-of-growth-in-alienation-or-support-for-extremism/> Last accessed January 20, 2015.

<sup>316</sup> Though the initial research survey did not ask participants to identify how they came to be Muslim, a few of the respondents self-identified in open-ended questions as more recent converts to Islam. This certainly has an impact on how one views cultural heritage and ethnicity and their importance as a factor of eligibility when looking for a spouse. While there were only a handful of those who identified as “converts”, all indicated that they had no preference regarding race, ethnicity, or cultural heritage.



priority, it is clear that Nadia's desire to try and find a partner who is of the same ethnic or cultural background is something she also shares with many of her peers who are first generation Muslim Americans.<sup>317</sup> And Kasim certainly understands this desire. Recall that Noor is also Arab. When her mother was on the phone with family in Jordan to share the news that Kasim was engaged, Nadia remembers the delight she distinguished in her mother's voice as she revealed that Noor was also Palestinian and had family in Jordan. Kasim will later confirm Nadia's memory. He is seemingly reluctant as he surmises that he was aware Noor's ethnicity would be a source of pride for his parents.

Nadia grew up with stories and lore about what you did and did not do in order to present yourself as a potential marriage partner of high quality within Arab culture. From your reputation as a housekeeper to the way you maintain your appearance, Nadia suggests there is a known list of criteria that make for an appealing wife. Nadia observes,

It's a big deal to be feminine. You need to be your husband's supporter all of the time. Even this is a part of femininity. If a woman spoke her mind in front of men, it was pointed out to you that this was not 'feminine' behavior and you did not want to be like her!

One area of agreement between Nadia and her parents is the stigma surrounding remaining single in both Arab and Muslim circles. When asked to elaborate, she throws her hands up in the air:

Okay, here's the Arab teaching: If you are not one hundred percent physically appealing, then you need to spend a lot of time figuring out how to compensate for that. If you are over (age) twenty-five, in the opinion of my grandmother's generation, even something like needing glasses, cuts you off from being super-eligible. If there are things about you that are not ideal, for example you are

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<sup>317</sup> In my survey of Muslim Americans in Minnesota, 97 percent identified religiosity as being their most important quality to find in a potential spouse.

overweight, you have some kind of physical defect...Well, then here are your options: you would marry the divorced guy, the widowed guy with kids, the older guy, or the ugly guy who could be any or all of the things previously listed.

Nadia remains cynical about this paradigm. While she holds out hope that change is coming with her generation, she does not see it within her parent's circle of friends, even in Minnesota.

Nadia recounts her most recent family trip to Jordan as evidence of her concerns. She is frustrated by much of what she sees as normative in that society and the thought of having a traditional Arab marriage is, "terrifying to me." One of her frustrations is her perception that, "The women do all the work and men seem to be rewarded for every little thing that they do." She offers the example of making meals. Many of her uncles find cooking enjoyable, so on the rare days when they choose to make the family meal there is much fanfare, with constant compliments and encouragement. This is in contrast with the women in her family, who make meals every day and are rarely thanked or complimented. She also feels frustrated that younger male cousins are in a position to act as authorities over female relatives. This was not the dynamic between her and her brothers as she was growing up. Nadia acknowledges that the male/female power dynamic makes her brothers even more uncomfortable than she on their visits to Jordan. They too are frustrated, but feel helpless.

Men are not without their own set of standards to live up to, but Kasim admits there is a difference. Men are expected to be good providers and to take care of their families. "It's mostly about having a job with a good income," he states. However, he observes that as long as this criterion is met, there is little else that matters.<sup>318</sup>

Personality variables, issues with anger or depression, physical characteristics, if I'm honest, these things are all overlooked as long as a man is fulfilling his

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<sup>318</sup> This was a sentiment shared by the males I interviewed as well. One even said that they know that many of their transgressions as men will be forgivable as long as they meet the baseline criteria of being from a good family and being a stable provider.

primary function of keeping his household together. For women, the more children you have the more valued you are, and this is particularly true if you are producing sons.<sup>319</sup>

Kasim observes that Nadia does seem to be under constant scrutiny when she is in Jordan. As a single female who is considered to be “getting old,” Nadia feels that she is expected to be actively demonstrating that she is trying to find a marriage partner. She doesn’t wear much makeup, and recent health issues have resulted in her gaining weight. She perceives that she does not fit the appropriate model for Arab women. She does not consider herself to be as boisterous or as funny as she feels that she is expected to be in order to compensate for her lack of interest in highlighting her physical features. According to Kasim, “There is constant speculation from our extended family about why Nadia is still single.”

#### **4.19 Why Can’t Nadia Find Someone?**

When she first graduated from college, Nadia recalls that her parents took a very simple approach with her in regards to her future marriage prospects.

They basically said, ‘Just bring home whomever you think you like and we will work it out from there.’ Looking back now, four years later, it’s hard to believe

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<sup>319</sup> The Abaza’s have expressed to their children that they are free to be who they are while in Jordan but they are expected to be careful to not be condescending; to be sure that they do not come across as superior. Nadia’s parents are frequently in touch with their extended family in Jordan by phone. For Nadia and her siblings, the main way they stay in touch with cousins is through Facebook and Instagram. Neither of Nadia’s parents would want to return to live in Jordan permanently. They are happy with their life in America and perceive their relationship as being healthier in their current context. It is interesting to consider that while there may be evidence to suggest that American culture results in an increase in the divorce rate of Muslim couples, much of the existing research argues that couples self-identifying as being happier or having a healthier marriage attribute this to living in America, away from large family structures. It is worth considering, for future research, to consider if without the pressure, constant scrutiny and commentary of extended family, perhaps couples feel more freedom to focus on the relational side of marriage, in addition to the functional aspects. While there has been research conducted on American Muslim couples’ attitudes towards therapy and counseling, I would like to consider how American culture plays a role. Are Muslim American couples’ more likely to pursue counseling because A) they can do so privately and B) there is less stigma? Or is it just because there are far more marital counselors, especially ones who are Muslim?

they actually thought it would be that simple. I shouldn't judge because...I guess I thought it would kind of be that simple.

Over the past year, it has proven to be far more complicated. Due to her proficient organizational skills, she has been at the center of the Abaza family's preparations for Kasim and Noor's wedding. She has grown close to Noor, and appreciates that Noor respects the close bond between Kasim and Nadia. Yet, this is also a hard time. Kasim's marriage, taking place not only before Nadia's but also older brother Ali, has resulted in a barrage of questions from family and friends, and they are both tired of it.<sup>320</sup> Nadia posits that the traditional path to marriage just really isn't realistic in this day and age for someone like her. "My aunties are not going to be finding a nice boy from the village for me."

#### **4.19.a The Obstacles: *Virginity and Purity***

Nadia states that she and her female Muslim friends constantly consider how their actions and choices affect their marriage eligibility. It is not that they do not have desires or ever talk about sex. They do. However, an element of these conversations is always the potential for disaster. She has a few close friends who were,

Led on. They were in a relationship. The men would "have their fun." But then when it came time for marriage, the guy would say that his family did not want him to marry her and that he was already promised to someone else.

Nadia's conviction is that sexual intercourse, and various other expressions of intimacy between a male and female, are strictly reserved for marriage. Both she and Kasim were raised to see their virginity as gift that they would offer.<sup>321</sup> According to Khalida Saed, "A Muslim woman's virginity is the most valuable bargaining chip she can bring to

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<sup>320</sup> Ali would go on to marry a woman he met through family in Jordan in January of 2015.

<sup>321</sup> Dr. Hassan Hathout of the Islamic Center of Southern California explains that sex outside of marriage is forbidden in Islam because Islam stands for justice between women and men. Sex outside of marriage is an injustice against women as any negative consequences of such actions are almost totally shouldered by them, specifically pregnancy.

marriage. And she will get married one day as a virgin, or else it reflects badly on her entire family and ruins the chances of marriage for her younger siblings.”<sup>322</sup> Although, Asma Gull Hasan observed that “many young Muslim women I knew who had dated and had premarital sex with Muslims and non-Muslims were now marrying nice Muslim men. They became acquainted with these boys by dating them, and now they’re marrying them.”<sup>323</sup> Nadia has made these same observations. “You can’t win. I guess nice girls do sometimes finish last. Backward, huh?”

#### **4.19.b Nadia’s Health**

When asked how she perceives her own eligibility, Nadia is silent as she considers the question. Is she offended? When asked if she would prefer not to answer, she shakes her head. Nadia says she thinks it’s an important question although, “It’s painful.” She pauses. “Literally.”

Unfortunately, Nadia has a severe digestive disability. It is something that began when she was in her teens. Though most of the symptoms and effects are manageable and not immediately apparent to others, it is something that affects her quality of life and requires her time and attention daily.<sup>324</sup> Nadia considers that this is the kind of thing that may affect her value in a potential partner’s eyes. She states that if and when she finds someone she would like to pursue in a relationship or who wants to pursue her, she will choose to, in her words, “lay her cards on the table right away.” She expresses that she will need to be forthright about her health issues, to the point that she predicts it will be something her potential partner’s entire family would likely need to know.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>322</sup> Khalida Saed, “On the Edge of Belonging”, in *Living Islam Outloud: American Muslim Women Speak*, ed. Saleema Abdul-Ghafur (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 86-94.

<sup>323</sup> Asma Gull Hasan, *American Muslims: The New Generation* (New York, NY: Continuum, 2000), 133-137

<sup>324</sup> At the time of these initial interviews, Nadia’s condition had not been diagnosed and she was in the ongoing process of medical testing, diet changes, and different procedures. In the fall of 2014, Nadia was told she had ulcerative colitis. Despite the long road in front of her, she expressed relief that a diagnosis had been reached.

<sup>325</sup> Debra Majeed, “Sexual Identity, Marriage, and Family,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pg. 323. Scholar Majeed claims that Muslim women and men with reproductive or sexual dysfunctions are expected to be upfront with that information before marriage, particularly if they are in conversation with prospective husbands or wives who are not yet parents and who want to be.

When asked if she considers this level of disclosure, especially if there is no direct link to reproductive health, to be required, she responds, “perhaps not.” But she goes on to say in sad determination, “I don’t I ever want to be accused of hiding something. In a way, the more upfront I am, the more control I feel that I will have. I refuse to have my health be held against me.” While Nadia identifies these issues as having more to do with being Arab, it bleeds into what she calls her “Muslim world” as well.

#### **4.19.c Virtual Matchmaking**

When asked if she has considered using some of the more innovative avenues for finding a Muslim partner, such as internet-matrimonial websites or matrimonial retreats, Nadia shakes her head no but offers that she considers them to be “a blessing, and totally legit.”<sup>326</sup>

At the time of her second interview, Nadia had recently attended a wedding of a friend who met her partner online, and a male friend from college had just become engaged to a woman he also met online.<sup>327</sup> In both cases, it has resulted in a cross-country relationship and an eventual move for the female. At this point, Nadia is not interested in moving, despite the reality that she knows living in Minnesota presents

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<sup>326</sup> Debra Majeed. “Sexual Identity, Marriage, and Family”, in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam* eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 319. Matrimonial events such as weekend mingles, speed-“dating,” internet match-making sites, and other forms of services geared toward finding a marriage partner have increased steadily since the 1990s in the United States.

Matrimonial retreats are a more recent creation. Muslims who are serious about pursuing marriage can attend “workshops” conducted by reputable organizations such as Companionships in Alexandria, Virginia, USA which involve personality assessments, financial advisors, and professional counseling in order to allow singles to find partners that are both suitable and compatible. I conducted initial research with Companionships in the preliminary stages of this thesis. While I determined that Companionships was not going to play a central role in my work, I was impressed with the professionalism, innovation, and compassion of the work done by the organization, particularly founders, Imam Mohammed Magid and his wife.

<sup>327</sup> While this has expanded the opportunity for both men and women seeking to find a spouse, it is not without controversy or stigma. Many of the survey respondents reported that while they do not object to finding a spouse in this way, they consider it to be a last resort. Some suggested that it is probably most helpful for individuals who have already been married before, or for converts to Islam who may not have the same Muslim family network and support. One respondent wrote, “I think it’s good that they exist. But it does seem kind of desperate. At the same time, I think there are definitely folks out there whose circumstances would result in this being their only option.”

some unique challenges.<sup>328</sup> Nadia perceives that “everyone kind of knows who is out there and available.” Her closest female friends who have recently gotten married “imported guys from across state lines,” she notes with a laugh.<sup>329</sup>

While it is evident that matrimonial sites open up options, and while she says her parents would be fully in support of it, Nadia remains somewhat fearful of online dating. She knows there are far more women than men using these sites, and acknowledges she has preconceived ideas about the type of men you find on them.<sup>330</sup> She contends that men using matrimonial services are looking for a certain type of Muslim wife. “One that is just there to cook, clean, and serve,” she claims.<sup>331</sup>

She also worries about “running into” someone she knows online and is afraid there are just too many factors that would remain hidden. She concludes that for her, “family is everything” and she does not see that changing. Her desire to remain close to her family geographically outweighs her desire to broaden her options for a potential marriage partner at this point in her life.

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<sup>328</sup> Minnesota is not a particularly transient state. With a majority Swedish and Norwegian population (see Chapter 2), many families in Minnesota are third, fourth, and even fifth generation Scandinavian. This is consistent with other Mid-western states whose earliest communities were based on agriculture as opposed to industry. As a result, despite the rapid growth in the Muslim community over the past decade, Muslims make up less than one percent of the total population. Nadia does not want to live far away from her family.

<sup>329</sup> While Minnesota has a growing Muslim population, it seems minuscule when compared with other states in relatively close proximity. Nearby, Muslims make up 1.0 percent of the population in Illinois and 1.8 percent of the population in Michigan. See Gallup Inc., “Muslim Americans: A National Portrait; An In-Depth Analysis of America’s Most Diverse Religious Community” (Washington, D.C., 2009)

<sup>330</sup> Hena Zuberi, “The Muslim Marriage Crisis.” Available online at <http://muslimmatters.org/2013/09/27/muslim-marriage-crisis/> Last accessed January 8, 2015. Zuberi conducted research with a number of online matrimonial organizations and found that women overwhelmingly outnumber male clients. The Al Rahmah Marriage Bureau in Baltimore has two women for every man in its database. Zuberi attended a local marriage brunch put on by Al Rahmah and found that while the majority of the women attending were born and raised in the U.S., and were educated and articulate, most of the men were first generation immigrants, without large local networks.

<sup>331</sup> Kasim is more optimistic about using online services. He has friends that have used them but identifies a trend. He says that most of the friends are S.E. Asian Americans who are in the United States without family. “They feel incredible pressure from their parents. It’s ridiculous. Since their parents are always trying to set them up with women they have never met, pursuing stuff online allows them to have more control and kind of get a reprieve from nagging parents.”

#### 4.19.d Lack of Suitable Partners

Adding to these frustrations is the perception that a significant number of eligible American Muslim men are choosing to marry women from outside of the United States. Nadia and her friends have a name for this – “the good girl from back home” solution.

It’s like a get out of jail free card.<sup>332</sup> I know guys that can just mess around with girls here, and do whatever they want. It has zero impact on their reputation or eligibility. The fact that they are “from America” (which means good job, money, stability) trumps everything else. They know there are plenty of girls from “home” lined up waiting for a chance to be matched with them.

Author Asma Gull Hasan has observed this trend in her own Muslim circle in New York and describes it this way: “Some of the players, who were the children of immigrant Muslims usually, would eventually ask their mothers to find them nice girls from their home country, not girls like me who were already corrupted by American life.”<sup>333</sup> Nadia agrees and this makes her visibly angry.

We women being to internalize this belief that there must be something wrong with us. All these guys are going overseas to get their brides. Highly educated Muslim women right here, hello! But the guys still get wives from “back home.” Which just makes me angry. I mean, I have gone to school with these guys. They are my friends. It’s not as if there are no options here.

So why can’t Nadia and her friends use this strategy to their advantage? Why can’t the women pursue relationships with men from “back home,” as Nadia calls it? Nadia shakes her head and looks repulsed. She attributes this to skewed perspectives on gender. “The gender dynamics would make it impossible to bring a husband to America from overseas.” Nadia questions whether a man raised in Palestine, or her family’s adopted country of Jordan, would be able to accept the type of life she envisions for

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<sup>332</sup> Nadia is referring to the enduringly popular boardgame, Monopoly.

<sup>333</sup> Hasan, *American Muslims*, 214.



herself as a Muslim American woman. Nadia finds this discouraging. Staying home full-time is not the life she has envisioned for herself. This is why Nadia self-admits to being so sensitive to marriages between her male peers and women who come from outside of the U.S.

You feel like you have really made progress since your parent's generation because you have these healthy friendships with Muslim guys in college. But I have seen a few too many friends get hurt, too. The rejection is so painful. "You respect me for who I am, you like me, I am your friend." And suddenly, he determines that you work too much, you are too ambitious. And so he cuts it off. And then you find out four months later he is engaged to someone from Jordan!

Though Nadia has not been through this personally, she has felt the pain of watching her friends. In an exasperated tone she goes on to question,

I mean. Do I make myself a different person? A more 'appealing' person? Or do I sit around and wait for someone to like me the way I am. It's not just about compromising on what you want, it's kind of sad that it starts to become about compromising on what you feel you deserve...if you *want* to get married.

Nadia feels that the older she gets, the more flexible her parents become in regards to their own criteria for who will be suitable for their eldest daughter. Her father has come to realize that she is going to require a partner is who very progressive and very patient. Nadia's mother and father have both shaped her attitudes toward marriage, but the bond she has with her father is more consequential.<sup>334</sup> It is clear how fiercely Mr. Abaza loves and values Nadia, and that affection is actively returned.<sup>335</sup> His

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<sup>334</sup> Mr. Abaza's own Facebook page serves mainly as scrapbook of his children's major and minor life events. There are far more references to Nadia than to the other siblings.

<sup>335</sup> Nadia posted the following on Mr. Abaza's Facebook page in June of 2014: "It's not Father's Day yet, but I learned from (Mr. Abaza) that it's always the right time to love and appreciate people. I read this list and didn't see anything he didn't call "parenting", except for changing diapers. One time he took us fishing as kids, and we were being bratty and not having fun catching twigs. Instead of packing us up to go home, we got in the car and went to Stillwater and had ice cream by the river. He let us have our stupid

example and the relationship he has with all of Nadia's siblings has set a high bar for Nadia's own expectations of a husband. Nadia concludes that the main reason she has high standards, and she is very clear that she is perfectly justified in having them, again comes back to her foundation in Islam, the exact same Islam that she believes has "delivered" for Kasim.

#### **4.20 Conclusion/Findings**

In her final interview, nearly two years after her first, Nadia is feeling nostalgic after reading through her previous interview notes. The process has caused her to spend more time ruminating on her family dynamics, especially their early years in Minnesota. As she reflects on this time now, some twenty years later, Nadia remarks that watching her mother's support of her father and her siblings was subconsciously shaping her view of what it meant to be a good wife.

My mom is the epitome of the quality Arab mother and wife. I just don't know what that means for me because, and I don't know how to make this come out the way I want it to...in so many ways I don't think I can be like my mom. Honestly, I don't want to.

Nadia considers herself to be a strong, independent female. She credits this to the influence of Islam in her life, both through her own pursuit and the ways it has shaped her family. She reaffirms her prior statements that this is because her parents wanted her religious commitment to be an individual responsibility, something she owned. This emphasis on an individual responsibility to solidify her faith identity cannot be overlooked. While Nadia's parents' initial concern that their children would lose their religious identity in a non-majority Muslim society is certainly not unique, it is this emphasis on having an individual journey that makes it particularly intriguing -

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kid moment and saw the bigger picture - a nice day with the family that we would remember. I think about this constantly and am grateful for his endless well of love and wisdom. Happy father's weekend baba - I love you." The "list" Nadia refers to in her post was a list referenced in an article entitled, "10 Things Dads do That You Won't See in Popular Culture." Available online at <http://www.buzzfeed.com/mikespohr/things-dads-do-that-you-wont-see-in-popular-culture#.omwJmQvQv>. Last accessed June 15, 2015.

something that is distinctly “American.” While the community remains central to Islamic faith and practice, Nadia’s parents recognized that for Islam to be “real,” for it to be a powerful force in their children’s lives, it would have to be something their children experienced and nurtured independently, in their own individual ways. For Nadia, this personal approach to her religion looks and functions very differently than that of many women in the global ummah, and it is something that has remained fluid throughout her life. However, the greatest challenge remains that while she has seeming succeeded at becoming exactly the type of Muslim woman her parents and Allah have wanted her to be, she does not fit the real, often unspoken, standards of the men in her broader community, her local ummah.

Asma Gull Hasan contends that “Muslim women all over the world are being pulled in two different directions: one is to fulfill the traditional expectations for a Muslim woman, like marriage at a young age and raising a family; the other to explore the new roles for women in the modern world by being career women and community activists.”<sup>336</sup> Nadia feels this tension. She articulates that throughout her adolescent life she was raised to (in the spirit of the U.S. Army commercials she remembers seeing on television) “Be all you can be!” and that this was not only taught to her in school but also reinforced in her home by both her parents, but mainly her father. She was encouraged to take advantage of every opportunity to further herself, both academically and personally. However, she has now reached an age where she is feeling a bit disillusioned. Her “accomplishments”, in her mind, are now hindrances preventing her from achieving a place of status in her religious community. Nadia struggled to make the same types of “Islamic-ally” sound arguments that seemed to work so well for Kasim.<sup>337</sup>

Complicating matters is the question of while young women are expected to turn to their immediate family and community for help in finding a marriage partner, can

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<sup>336</sup> Hasan, *American Muslims*, 110.

<sup>337</sup> Ingrid Mattson, “Can a Woman be an Imam? Debating Form and Function in Muslim Women’s Leadership” (2005): 3,4, 8-21. Accessible online at <http://macdonald.hartsem.edu/muslimwomensleadership.pdf>. Last accessed January 10, 2012. Mattson argues that in many cases Muslim women feel that restrictions placed upon them in the name of Islam are unjust, but that they “have neither fluency in the Islamic legal discourse nor the religious authority to convincingly argue their objections.”

marriage remain a communal responsibility when the community is just not that large, and the pool of eligible partners is limited? A study conducted by the Gallup Organization on Muslim Americans in 2009 found that Muslim women are among the two most “highly educated female religious groups.”<sup>338</sup> The more upwardly mobile a Muslim woman becomes by the standards set in the United States - education, economic independence, assertiveness, civic engagement...her eligibility in her religious community seemingly decreases. It may be suggested that this is because, as is the case with similar types of research related to African American women, there are just not enough Muslim men in the United States that have achieved the same level of success as their female counterparts.

Scholar Debra Majeed contends that the road to equity for Muslim women “is often mired in tension between traditional demands and cultural norms, however, especially in regards to female autonomy and mix-gendered mingling.”<sup>339</sup> Consider Nadia’s earlier story of how her parents were heartbroken when she could not write her own name in English, but months later when her language skills had advanced, would often refuse to speak to her unless she switched to Arabic. This example reveals the tension for Nadia that appears to have only grown over time. The further she progressed towards assimilation into American life and culture, even at a young age, the more distant she felt from her mother. Certain achievements have made her feel successful and secure, and yet they rarely came without some kind of cost. She identifies that cost as the growing sense of distance she perceives between herself and her mother. In Nadia’s current life stage, she has moved into territory completely unknown by her mother. Nadia feels that her mother does not know how to be a parent to an adult, single daughter. In her mother’s experience, most twenty-six-year old single females are either divorced or have something distinguishably wrong with them.

It is different for Kasim. His achievements, whether in his youth in the classroom, or on a field, and now in his career and choice of future spouse, are all attributed as

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<sup>338</sup> Gallup Inc., “Muslim Americans: A National Portrait; An In-Depth Analysis of America’s Most Diverse Religious Community” (Washington, D.C., 2009)

<sup>339</sup> Debra Majeed, “Sexual Identity, Marriage, and Family,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 319

being influenced in some way by his parents, and their wise, admirable parenting. And they are very positive achievements, unanimously received within all of the Abaza's circles - religious, ethnic, and immigrant. Kasim is an unequivocal success. Each step towards assimilation was perceived as progress, and something that produced pride for everyone in his orbit. "Look at how well our son is doing in America, as well as any other young man." Nadia has done well, too. Nadia is also successful...but with an asterisk. When she was growing up, the asterisk would have said, "She is successful but we may be losing her. She is vulnerable." Today, this asterisk says, "Indeed, she is successful. But keep in mind she is not married. This is puzzling. It is a problem that must be solved." Kasim was always pushed forward with confidence. While Nadia was not held back, her push was tinged with concern.

Recall Nadia's earlier comments about the emphasis placed on virginity and purity. This is not the same for Muslim men, and many Muslim men, as presented in this thesis, affirm the saliency of this double standard. Kasim and later Mohammed, whose story will be told in Chapter Six, both acknowledged that many of their transgressions would be forgivable as long as they meet the baseline criteria of being from a good family and being a stable provider. However, for Kasim, conducting his relationship with his fiancée with integrity is his highest priority. Kasim is forthright about the reality that the desire to keep his and Noor's purity intact has influenced the timeline for the wedding. He states that it is not just about getting married, it is about the girl that he found and he wants to hold on to her. His perception is that he is now responsible for protecting Noor's reputation too. In Nadia's words, Kasim wants to "keep it kosher." This comes as a welcome relief to their parents. Mr. Abaza always told his children that sexual urges will not be the same temptation for the daughters as they are for the sons. He told Kasim that, "Marriage keeps a Muslim man on the right path."

Another challenge facing Muslim women in the United States comes from Islamic practice itself. Islam permits men to marry women who are *ahl-al-kitab*, people of the Book. This means a Muslim man can marry a Christian or Jewish woman and it is

accepted.<sup>340</sup> However, this is not the case for Muslim women in the United States.<sup>341</sup> For a marriage to be acceptable and honorable within the community, she must be married to a Muslim man. This has also contributed to the decreasing pool of eligible Muslim males, and it is a problem that has received national attention in Muslim circles.<sup>342 343</sup>

While lack of “suitable” partners is certainly a contributing factor, as Nadia’s story illustrates, and both the existing research and this thesis confirm, the some of the issues lie more closely at the feet of the Muslim *ummah* itself. The community must take on the shared responsibility of confronting the ways eligibility is determined. As long as Muslim men, regardless of their own achievements or cultural heritage, continue to prefer marriage partners who fit a more “traditional” model, women like Nadia will be in a position of disadvantage. As scholar Azizah al-Hibri observes, “A fulfilled woman was, in fact, viewed as one who married, served her husband well, and bore him children. This view, although less common today, continues to exist both in the West and in Muslim countries. Yet it is in total contradiction to the Islamic view of women and marriage.”<sup>344</sup> Take for example Nadia’s views on the way the community deals with divorce.

Nadia observes that when a marriage ends in a divorce, regardless of the circumstances, the woman is almost always to blame. “Even if he was a horrible person, you would often hear that maybe it was because of what she did or did not do.” Nadia asserts that living in the United States has shaped her own immediate family’s view of divorce. Nadia has two aunts that are divorced, which she says would be highly unusual

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<sup>340</sup> Nadia expressed that this is controversial in her social group. She stated that there is a perception that growing up in the U.S. means you are “Christian” and so marrying a girl who is American, even if she has no level of religiosity, makes that marriage “ok” in some Muslim circles.

<sup>341</sup> Statistics show that in Canada, roughly 40 percent of Muslim women have married non-Muslim men. In those relationships, it is estimated less than half of the males have then converted to Islam. There are no such statistics available for the United States according to Haddad, Smith, and Moore (2006).

<sup>342</sup> Haddad, Y., Smith, J., and K. Moore. *Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006), 85.

<sup>343</sup> Further research should consider if Muslim men’s marital expectations change post age-25? Do their requirements and expectations change as they mature?

<sup>344</sup> Azizah al-Hibri, “An Introduction to Muslim Women’s Rights”, in *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar Activists in North America*, ed. Gisela Webb (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 54-55, 57-60, 62-68. Al-Hibri observes, “Despite all the rights and guarantees offered by Islam to women, most men still use women as uncompensated laborers in their households.”

back in Jordan or Kuwait. “It’s not that divorce is okay, or that we don’t think it’s sad. It’s just that not being in a traditional community has allowed us to be more accepting of how hard marriage is and that there are lots of reasons it may not work out.” Nadia and Kasim both perceive that there is still a significant stigma around divorce in the *ummah* in the United States, especially related to infidelity. If a man cheats on his wife, it is condemned by the community, but Nadia perceives that the blame seems to fall equally on the husband and wife. “Why wasn’t she keeping him satisfied? Oh but if she is the one who cheats? Infidelity by the wife is inexcusable, plain and simple.”

While some Muslim American men have the option to find nice girls from “back home,” this is clearly not appealing for most Muslim American women. Where do Muslim women have left to look? As evidenced, moving beyond religion, race and ethnicity is not taken lightly. It is often viewed as a compromise, or even a failure. Even if Muslim females move outside of race or ethnicity in their spouse selection, and instead identify religiosity as their top priority, it must be noted the pool of potential spouses only grows marginally.

According to Edward Curtis, “the main challenge for Muslim women, in earlier times and today, is not only to increase their knowledge, but also to increase their authority by attaining a position in society that enables them to effectively help others.”<sup>345</sup> This is, indeed, something that Nadia has been able to achieve in the secular, professional world. And she contends her heartfelt motivations cannot be separated from her Islam.

I know that I am more ‘progressive’ in my views than many of my family members would be comfortable with. At the same time, if these are my heartfelt convictions...then surely who I am is being informed by Allah. He knows me. He made me, right Am I going against Islam? Or am I pleasing Allah?

In a way, maybe she is doing both.

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<sup>345</sup> Curtis, Edward, “American Muslim Spirituality and Religious Life” in *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* ed. Edward E. Curtis IV (Columbia University Press, 2008) pg. 254.

Nadia concludes that her choice over whom she should marry will ultimately be: first, a personal decision, and second, a functional decision that is supported by her family and friends. Nadia's expectations for marriage reveal a blend of her Arab heritage, her American upbringing, and her staunch commitment to her Islamic faith.<sup>346</sup> Nadia embraces aspects of each of these three parts of her life. For her, this creates a marriage framework that she believes reflects Allah's true intentions for marriage; one that achieves the functionality of creating a family and cementing Islam for another generation, but one that also is shared by two spouses who want a close, intimate, fulfilling relationship. For Nadia, Islam calls for both and she does not believe that she needs to lower her expectations. To want a fulfilling relationship does not mean that she is not being a good Muslim woman. Having a spouse that loves and honors her for who she is will only strengthen her commitment to both her faith and family.

While Nadia knows she could creatively find ways to have these things by not being married she is not sure she would choose to do so. In the same way, Nadia does not see an appropriate path to motherhood outside of the traditional model. Nadia has not heard of any Muslim women who have intentionally decided to raise children on their own, and she cannot imagine her parent's reaction if she were to suggest such a thing, and she is clear she would not want to.<sup>347</sup> While Nadia knows she wants to be a mother, she is firm in her belief that children need both a mother and father to thrive. To pursue children without a father in the picture would, to her "be a bit selfish, really. If Allah wills for me to have children, I believe that will be within the plan he has designed, which is within a marriage." Nadia would prefer to marry someone with whom she was first friends, but recognizes the challenges of this considering she is really only around males when her brothers are present.<sup>348</sup> She holds to the Islamic belief that fate is

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<sup>346</sup> She admits that this continues to be a struggle and that she has had to spend time working through some "serious cultural baggage."

<sup>347</sup> Adoption remains a controversial issue within Islamic communities. While care for orphaned children is not prohibited, Islamic law prescribes that it is unlawful to attribute one's adopted child to oneself. Islam places high value on protecting lineage and biological relationships. For a woman to be artificially inseminated according to Islamic guidelines, the male donor would need to be the spouse, and act as the father of the child.

<sup>348</sup> With Kasim getting married soon and moving into his own home, Nadia realizes that her home will not be a gathering location for his male friends anymore.



predestined. “As long as I do not close myself off,” she suggest, “whatever is supposed to happen, will happen.”

Is it possible that American culture, despite some of the challenges it can present for Muslims attempting to remain strong in their cultural heritage may actually strengthen their religious commitment, which in turn could offer some hope for Nadia and her friends? If American culture has served to influence Nadia’s perception of marriage can one hope it is, albeit slowly, going to do the same for her male peers over time? Are there a growing number of Muslim American men who are reinterpreting what makes for a successful Islamic marriage? For those that do, have they been able to reconcile these interpretations within their Islam? Do they see them as a fulfillment of Allah’s plan for marriage or as a stumbling block to establishing a faithful household? In the next chapter, we will meet Mohammed, who sees himself as a Muslim American man weighing these issues as he has now decided it is time for him to pursue marriage.

#### **4.21 Shared Experience Model: Approaching Nadia and Kasim through an Interfaith Pedagogy**

In the final section, I will demonstrate how I would frame this chapter for a student in one of my courses. I will offer a brief introduction of what I mean by calling this approach *relational* and how it is influenced by Grewal’s conception of *shared experience*. I will then define and explain *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*. I will conclude with the questions I would provide for the reader to consider for their second read of the narratives and a description of how I would facilitate the *shared experience* model with students.

##### **4.21.a Pedagogical Application (Guide for the Reader)**

Re-reading the previous narratives through a *relational* method requires you, the reader, to be – first – a listener.<sup>349</sup> Listening to another’s story is an essential first step in recognizing another’s humanity and it requires intentional practice. Listening does not mean that you abandon your critical thinking. Rather, I ask that as you read the narratives you be open to practicing “the golden rule of moral conversation: listen to

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<sup>349</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 13-14.

others as we would be listened to. We need to question and challenge others as we would be questioned and challenged.”<sup>350</sup> In fact, you are entering into a relationship with Nadia and Kasim as you read their story. In the following paragraphs I will provide an intentional framework/guide for you to help you connect with Nadia and Kasim through the *shared experiences* common to daily life.

The *shared experiences* within the previous narratives provide key points of connection for you that can push past differences related to culture, gender, ethnicity, and even theology. *Shared experiences* emerge from “human commonalities” like moments of joy, fear, inclusion, rejection, questioning, and peace.<sup>351</sup> As we now revisit the narrative through a constructed Interfaith lens, it is necessary to review the four main components (as defined by Patel) of Interfaith study. Separating the “outward system of a religious tradition from the inner qualities that characterize the individual adherents” ; Seeking to gain insight into the “inner quality of an individual believer” (this requires contemplation of how the believer interacts with their own religious system – what they choose to emphasize, avoid, question, etc...); Considering how individuals engage religion or belief in daily contexts, i.e. how does one “live it out” throughout the day? ; Placing emphasis on “social context”, i.e. how does belief work in a particular time and place?<sup>352</sup> These components influence the following framework for engaging Nadia and Kasim’s stories a second time. I will first define the two essential capacities of *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*, and then provide you with question prompts for a guided *relational* approach (Leirvik) to the narratives.

#### **4.21.b Appreciative Knowledge**

Eboo Patel defines *appreciative knowledge* as occurring when individuals hold correct and positive knowledge about a worldview, as opposed to incorrect or selective knowledge.<sup>353</sup> *Appreciative knowledge* asks you to recognize the contributions of other

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<sup>350</sup> Robert J. Nash, DeMethra LaSha Bradley, and Arthur W. Chickering (eds.) *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 20.

<sup>351</sup> Grewal, *Imagined Cartographies*, 15.

<sup>352</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 70.

<sup>353</sup> Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer, “The Civic Relevance of Interfaith Cooperation for Colleges and Universities”, *Journal of College and Character* 12, no.1 (February 2001): 1-9.

traditions, have a sympathetic understanding of the distinctive history and commitments of other traditions, and develop ways of working with and serving other communities.<sup>354</sup> As you re-read, I will ask you to consider how the stories of Nadia and Kasim assist you with developing both a “general orientation and substantive knowledge base?” Are you willing to seek “the admirable, and the life giving rather than the deficits, the problems, and the ugliness?” How have these stories allowed you to “recognize the contributions of traditions and/or highlighting of exemplary figures” How have the stories helped you to develop a “sympathetic understanding of where a differing religious view is coming from?” Finally, how could appreciative knowledge help to you to build a base “that allows you to work effectively with a different community?”

#### **4.21.c Narrative Imagination**

Martha Nussbaum defines narrative imagination as developing when one begins to develops compassion towards the “other”.<sup>355</sup> This compassion promotes civic responsibility, and inspires a responsibility to teach works that promote compassion. *Narrative Imagination* asks you to cultivate an imagination which gives the “ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.”<sup>356</sup> As you re-read these narratives, please start from considering what you can learn from Nadia and Kasim (*appreciative knowledge*), and then how you can develop a more thoughtful position of what life would be like if you were to imagine being in their shoes. This is practicing a *narrative imagination*. I ask that you be prepared to critically examine your own beliefs. This is not meant to be a hostile interrogation but rather a reminder to ask yourself the same questions you may have for Nadia and Kasim. Read again the golden rule of moral conversation stated above. Second, be reminded that individuals - Nadia, Kasim, and

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<sup>354</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 114.

<sup>355</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 100.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid*, 11

you - tend to see themselves not just as individuals but as “human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern.”<sup>357</sup> In short, as you read, try and regard Nadia and Kasim as your new neighbors.

#### **4.21.d Questions for Consideration: Identity**

1. Both Nadia and Kasim self-describe as “Muslim-American.” Have you ever described yourself with a hyphen? If you were to do so, what would it be? Why do Nadia and Kasim feel the the need to self-describe this way?
2. What can you determine from Kasim and Nadia’s relationship with each other and the rest of the Abaza family? How would you describe their family to a friend who asked you what they are like?
3. Both Nadia and Kasim state they feel a “connection” to Palestine and their Arab roots. Why do you feel this matters to them? Does this relate at all to the first question regarding how one describes themselves?
4. Nadia and Kasim each strive to live up to “parental ideals.” What role do you think religion, culture, and heritage play in defining these ideals? What do Kasim and Nadia think? Do you admire their desire to please their parents?
5. Nadia struggles in her relationship with her mother. She partially attributes this to the contradiction she perceived in her family’s variations of what it means to be a “strong Muslim woman.” What factors or authorities define what it means to be a “strong \_\_\_\_\_ person” in relation to your own religious or spiritual tradition? If the definition were solely up to you to define, how might it be different?
6. Kasim describes himself as “over-indexed” in Arab friends. How would you describe your own friend group if Kasim were to to ask you? What do you think it would suggest to him about you?
7. Nadia notes that it has been difficult to transition her religious identity from college into “real life.” What is missing from her college experience? What role does your community have on your faith? Do you see this changing after college?

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid, 11

8. If you were to see Nadia walking down the street in her hijab, what would your immediate reaction be? Why does Nadia choose to wear a hijab? How does she describe it?
9. Anywhere Nadia goes, it is clear she is a Muslim. Are elements of your faith observable? How might a typical day in your life be different if your religious identity was immediately obvious to all around you?
10. Nadia and Kasim both claim American culture, overall, has had a positive benefit on their religious life and values. Can you identify examples from your own life where your approach to your faith has been influenced by American culture? Are there negatives to be identified in these narratives related to cultural influence? In your own life?

#### **4.21.e Questions for Consideration: Family Life and Community Obligation**

1. How did the Abaza family's move to Minnesota impact the Abaza's approach to religious teaching and how to model Islam for their children? How did religious teaching manifest in your own home?
2. What role does having extended family or an established community play in your life? How might it look different if you did not have these?
3. The Abaza family entertained the idea of sending the children to a religious school. What do you see as the benefits and harms of educational environments that are comprised of one main religious group?
4. What can be learned about the Abaza family from the way they navigated each child's experience with the "ecology trip?"
5. Nadia's mother described the conflict she felt as her children became educated and invested in their American lives. Do you think this is something your parents or whomever raised you could relate to? How do Nadia and Kasim respond to this pressure?
6. How do Nadia and Kasim's experiences in school in Minnesota compare? What could be considered a *shared experience*? What contrasts occurred? What factors play a role in those contrasts?

7. As you recount their experiences from their school years, what kindnesses were offered to them? How did they face discrimination?
8. When Kasim was told he could not attend Homecoming festivities, he turned to his own research to find a solution and relied on his own interpretation of his religious Tradition in order to make his case. What did you think of this approach? Would this be something that would work for you if you were in the same position?

#### **4.21.f Questions for Consideration: Gender**

1. Gender roles were clearly defined in the Abaza home. What influence do you perceive religion, culture, and individual personality had to play in these definitions?
2. What do you think of Nadia's framing of her parent's relationship as "equitable, if not equal"?
3. How do Kasim and Nadia perceive each other's roles in regards to their gender? How was telling their stories in tandem helpful?
4. College life meant big changes for Nadia and Kasim in relation to interactions with the opposite gender. In regards to relationships between men and women, what role do you think religion or faith plays in your own environment? What real and artificial boundaries do you observe?
5. What obstacles does Nadia perceive stand in her way regarding marriage eligibility as a female? Do any of these barriers exist within your own community or environment? What do you attribute these barriers to? Are there any additional barriers or limitations?

#### **4.21.g Questions for Consideration: Marriage**

1. Marriage is important to the Abaza family. What expectations and viewpoints do Nadia and Kasim share? Where do they differ?
2. Kasim would describe his impending marriage to Noor as "arranged." What did you learn about arranged marriage through his descriptions? Did you find anything admirable or relatable about the process?

3. What role does individual choice play in arranged marriage?
4. Nadia and Kasim both agree that marrying someone with the same ethnic and cultural background would make life easier for them. Do you feel the same? How would you describe your own version of “roots?”
5. What influences has American culture had on Nadia and Kasim’s perceptions of marriage? What influence do you think it has on your own?
6. Do you think there are double standards for men and women in your community?

#### **4.21.h Broader Thematic Questions**

1. Can you identify any stereotypes related to Muslims or Islam that were challenged in reading the stories of Nadia and Kasim?
2. While this is not an immigrant narrative, how might it function to help others better understand immigrant experiences in Minnesota? Consider taking on one of the following roles; teacher, social worker, co-worker, neighbor. Sunday school teacher. How would reading the Abaza family story potentially help someone in this particular role to understand immigrant experiences?
3. Now consider the same role from the perspective of how it could function to educate about Islam or Muslims? What, if anything, changes?
4. What do you think you will remember from these narratives? Is there a favorite story told by Nadia or Kasim? A moment that stuck out to you? As you consider your selection, is there a personal observation or lesson you would connect to it if you were to be telling the story to another person?
5. If you were to meet with Nadia or Kasim for coffee after reading their stories, what would you want to discuss with them?

#### **4.21.i Pedagogical Application (Instruction)**

The previous set of questions is a large, though not exhaustive list. When using these narratives in the classroom, I would first assign a “cold” reading, asking for the students to do an initial reading without any guidance or expectation. During the next class session, I would spend time introducing them to the concepts of *shared experience*,

*appreciative knowledge*, and *narrative imagination* and present what it means to approach stories through an Interfaith lens.

The students would then be assigned a second reading for homework, this time re-reading and responding in writing to a sample of twenty of the above questions. As this is the first of the narratives, more questions would be assigned than with subsequent narratives. As a part of this first portion of the assignment, I would ask students to review their written response and rank the five questions they found to be the most compelling and would be willing to openly share.

Students would return to the next class session prepared to share their responses in pre-assigned small groups. While I have delineated the questions by category (identity, family life, gender, etc...) for clarity in this thesis, I would not do so for academic instruction.<sup>358</sup> Instead, after sharing initial responses with one another, they would then work together to categorize the questions by perceived themes based on their responses. They would isolate themes in their own words. My objective would be for them to recognize that each of the questions could have more than one potential category of theme. A question that appears to be broadly about gender can also speak to something more subtle, like family dynamics. Please note I did not categorize any of the questions under the theme of 'religion.' This is intentional as one of the objectives is to help the reader conclude that all of these questions can teach us something about Amina's relationship with Islam. The groups would then discuss the broader thematic questions together.

After this discussion, the students would participate in another, more in-depth level of categorization. They would be asked to revisit their personal responses to the initial set of questions and denote whether they think the question relates to *appreciative knowledge (AK)* or *narrative imagination (NI)*. Again, there is no right answer and this approach requires students to critically engage their own perceptions. The final instruction would be to summarize their categorized responses into two bullet lists under the headings *appreciative knowledge and narrative imagination* to form the basis of our final, large group discussion on the assigned narrative. We would then

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<sup>358</sup> See section 3.3b Narrative Inquiry in the previous chapter (Methodology) for further explanation on how I approach themes.



consider our findings when compared to other forms of course content. I would then inform the students our next narrative, Amina's Future, is constructed to follow the narrative of Nadia and Kasim.

## CHAPTER 5

### AMINA'S FUTURE

#### 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the reader will be introduced to Amina, a young Somali-American woman who, like Nadia and Kasim, is having difficulty balancing her life aspirations with the expectations she perceives have been placed upon her by her Somali community and family. Amina describes her life as a “constant game of tug-of-war,” being pulled between the demands of her native culture of Somalia and her current location, Minnesota. For Amina, “home” is difficult to define. She considers the United States to be her home, but she has not reconciled that this conclusion is viewed as a genuine, in her words, “betrayal” by many of her family members. The tension that has been created between the goals Amina has for her own life, which she argues are rooted in and supported by Islamic teaching, and the “traditional” life her family wants her to have, is becoming near impossible to bear. Amina is in a serious romantic relationship; one that she hopes will culminate in marriage. While Amina will profess there is nothing her mother would like more than for Amina to “settle down” she knows that her boyfriend will not meet her family’s approval. Amina contends that while she and her family would all be able to agree on the value of high standards in regards to one’s expectations for marriage, they would certainly define these standards differently. The greater challenge is that both parties make the argument that Islam is the source for their position. Amina’s boyfriend is not Somali and he is not Muslim. However, Amina feels that she is loved, fully accepted, and celebrated within the relationship and they are all aspects of a relationship that her religion not only encourages, but teaches her she is entitled to expect. While she is not willing to end her relationship with her boyfriend, Amina is deeply burdened that a choice she has made for her own self-fulfillment is not regarded as being in the best interests of her family or community.

If Islam thrives in community, if a relationship with the *ummah* is considered essential to the health and well-being of any young Muslim, especially one who is hoping to be married, how can Amina maintain her religious commitment if she fears

she may have to leave her native community behind in order to find marital satisfaction? Is she really disregarding community obligation if she marries outside of her ethnic and religious group? Amina questions if Islam will continue to be a central part of her life if she further distances herself from the only Muslim community she has belonged to.

Amina's story offers another perspective into the life of a young Muslim who is navigating the influences of her ethnicity, her religion, and her own ambitions as she tries to determine how she can be a confident individual, who feels good about the direction her life is headed. She has a bright future. She is college-educated, is extremely intelligent, has an outgoing personality, an infectious laugh, and is the type of person to whom others are instantly drawn. She is outspoken about her feminist ideology, her commitment to multi-cultural engagement, and social justice. All of these aspects of her identity present themselves when in conversation with her, either through learning of the organizations she is involved in, or peppered throughout her comments when she is explaining how she makes sense of her world. In the two years since she has graduated from college, Amina has already established herself in a well-paying job, has started a non-profit organization with her boyfriend, and is currently considering her options for graduate school.

However, much of Amina's life experience appears to stand in sharp contrast to that of Nadia and Kasim. While Nadia and Kasim were forthcoming about moments of disagreement with their parents or other family members, a shared spirit of respect and confidence was always discernible in the midst of these conflicts. For Amina, disagreements and difference of opinion regarding how a young Muslim is to conduct herself in a non-Muslim society is genuinely a daily battle. This is most evident when considering Amina's attempts to continue relationships with both her boyfriend and her family.

Amina's commitment and love for her family flows out of her. As will be revealed, she cannot speak about her mother, or the hardships her mother endured in bringing Amina's family to the United States without shedding tears. There is much emotion brought to the surface for Amina, both when she recalls her past and also when she thoughtfully considers her present situation. Amina knows that the life she has created is one that, on the surface, cannot be described as anything but "successful" by

American societal standards. Yet, for Amina, her greatest challenge comes in reconciling her conclusion that her life is viewed as *anything but* successful by her mother, extended family, and the greater Somali community she is a part of in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her achievements in her estimation, do not hold value with either her family or her Somali/Muslim community. Amina's attempts to try and justify her lifestyle as being supported by Islam have fallen on deaf ears. This has caused Amina to grow not only more distant from her family for her own self-preservation, but also to begin to question if she can envision a life for herself where Islam is something she practices outside of her Somali community. She does not feel she knows "how to be Muslim if it's not with my family." Amina sees little hope for a quality of life that will both please her family and will leave her fulfilled. Her struggle with her own self-preservation has resulted in her self-determined need to keep her family at arm's length, especially now that she is preparing to get engaged.

There will be much for the reader to relate to and learn from in Amina's story and a re-reading of the narrative with a focused Interfaith lens will continue to build on the skills of *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*. Amina's story varies considerably from the previous narratives of Nadia and Kasim, but the construction of Amina's narrative combined with the structure provided through the *shared experience* model will allow the reader to see how the combination of individual stories can enrich one another.

## **5.2 Chapter Structure**

This chapter is structured by telling Amina's story through the transcripts collected through face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that took place between 2012 and 2014. Amina is very expressive, speaks quickly, and processes her thoughts aloud. She would often ask to re-state or reframe something she had said once it was read back to her. Though her interviews were conducted using the same initial set of questions and methods as all other interviews, notes and recordings from her interviews had to be reviewed multiple times in order to ensure accurate transcription, and also to include later forms of correspondence, such as emails and texts. Amina is very busy, and she would often reschedule at the last moment. She would communicate primarily through

text messaging and always preferred to meet at a time when she had no other commitments so that conversations could stretch for long periods of time if need be. More so than any of the others, Amina was very careful about anonymity. It was important to her that meetings took place on the opposite side of the city from where her family lives, and she always requested that no other interview participants be scheduled before or after the time she had chosen to meet. Amina always preferred to meet on the east side of St. Paul and, though never asked, she never offered her specific address. Even her family does not know where her apartment is located. She would often comment that “In the Somali community, everybody knows everybody,” but she also concluded that she felt quite isolated from other Muslims in the Twin Cities. Amina always expressed a willingness to discuss any subject, but there were clearly moments when the conversation touched upon memories or experiences that were uncomfortable or even traumatic for Amina. During one interview, when the questions were centered on family relationships, Amina became very emotional and requested that the interview be finished for the day. In the midst of packing up, she changed her mind and said she preferred to proceed.

As was disclosed in the first chapter, it was both the research and the writing related to Amina that proved to be the most daunting. Having to ask questions that cause emotional distress or even mild discomfort makes for an awkward conversation, and can caused me to question if the methods being utilized were correct or if the outcomes will justify the challenges of the process. Though the informed consent forms and other materials provided for participants did explain the potential for emotional discomfort, it is hard to prepare as a researcher for when discomfort clearly is occurring, and interactions with Amina often required a flexibility and adaptability that were not utilized with other interviews. At the conclusion of a few interviews with Amina, I was left wondering if that would be the last interaction. What if Amina decided to withdraw from the research? Ultimately, however, Amina always wanted to continue. Her willingness to engage the difficult experience of not only discussing but probing the challenges in her life related to the individualism, ethnicity, gender, culture, and religion often served as encouragement in the late stages of research when fatigue was setting in. Amina continually committed to being vulnerable, and to speaking with transparency, even

when she knew her ongoing identity development and relationship with both her family and her religious commitment were not going to line up with the experiences of others in this thesis. To not finish this chapter would, in theory, be the breaking of an obligation made to Amina. She has completed her work here. The remaining responsibility is now for me to honor her by handling her life story with care and telling it well.

As with the other narratives, the intention is to allow Amina to do the talking, but to frame her responses within the broader themes her experiences and perspectives illuminate. This will later help the reader as they re-engage the narrative through the Interfaith lens of *shared experience* that I will provide. Though marriage was the topic that brought Amina to the table, her perspectives and expectations for marriage reveal much about her ongoing identity formation. First, Amina will be introduced with a brief biography, and her memories of her early years before coming to the United States will be presented. Then, Amina's relocation to the United States, her family's initial challenges in Pennsylvania, and her eventual move to Minnesota will be relayed. These times of transition and hardship have significantly shaped Amina's identity development, and the challenges with the culture and isolation will influence Amina's middle and high school years in Minnesota. Amina's relationship with her mentor, which factors significantly into her transition from adolescence to adulthood, will be represented. Upon arriving at college, Amina's course of study would serve as the catalyst for her to both investigate and evaluate the ways her cultural, ethnic, and religious upbringing have shaped her identity. Detailing these encounters provides the reader with critical insight into Amina's continued cultural and religious acumen regarding her own experience and the impact on her life choices.

The chapter concludes with Amina's transition from college student to independent adult, a life stage that finds Amina simultaneously drawing firm and intentional boundaries with her family while further intertwining her daily life with that of her boyfriend as they continue to move towards marriage.

As with the structure established in Chapter Four, I will provide the reader with specific questions relevant to Amina's story that will shape the second reading through the Interfaith lens of *shared experience*. There will be much to consider related to the Interfaith competencies of *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*. Again, the

questions are not included throughout the main content of the chapter as the objective is to allow the reader to come to their own conclusions and self reflection. There is no right or wrong answer. Secondly, the reader will find fewer headings and sub-headings and titles that are less explicit. The goal is to listen to Amina, appreciate what she has to say, and be open to learning from her from trying to understand life from her position in the world. Practicing this posture will continue to prepare students to work towards the final step of beginning to develop their own narrative identity.

### **5.3 Amina**

Amina is running late. Quite late. When she arrives for her first interview she bursts through the door, surveying the crowded coffee shop frantically. She inadvertently gains the attention of two males sitting near the door who have noticed her instantly. Amina is physically stunning. She has large brown eyes framed by fields of delicate eyelashes, and she has a huge smile that shows two rows of perfect white teeth. Her face is enhanced with tasteful, yet abundant makeup and her long brown hair is thick and free, hanging nearly to her waist. If she notices the young men still staring at her, she gives no indication and instead makes a beeline for the table where she sees the laptop, the iphone, the yellow legal pad, and two cups of coffee but only one person. "Sorry I'm late!" Amina announces. "But I will warn you," she offers apologetically as she takes off her coat and sweeps her hair behind her shoulders, "this is kind of how I roll." Amina is twenty-four but could easily pass for older. This is not just related to appearance. Amina has not had an easy life. Things have not come easily to her and she is a self-described "fighter," someone who has had to work for everything she has, and who knows how to do a lot with a little. Amina is proud of her education, her college degree having been conferred by a prestigious liberal arts college. She is the first in her family to attend college, and the first to truly "sort of strike out on their own." Amina has just come from her apartment where she lives alone, a decision she says she has never regretted. She points to her "new to her" car in the parking lot outside the window and it becomes clear Amina is satisfied with how well she is doing. "I've come a long way when you consider where I came from," she remarks. Tears come into Amina's eyes as she asks what she should discuss first.

### 5.3.a Amina (Background)

Amina comments that she is often told how much she looks like her father, but she has no memory of him. He died in Somalia when Amina was only eighteen months old and everything she knows about him comes from her mother and her older siblings. Amina was born in Mogadishu, Somalia, the youngest of four children. She has two older brothers and one sister, and she relies on their memories to help create a picture of her father. She admits that the memories are all so overly positive she questions their validity at times, but admits it's easier on everyone to live with the "heroic" legacy that they have mutually created. When asked how her father died, Amina is matter of fact. "As best we know, he was beat up by government officials and then died from his injuries." She is self-conscious about her seeming lack of emotion but notes she does not have many details to offer and concludes that in the midst of the war and general turmoil that characterized Somalia in the 1990s, having few to no details about the fate of deceased or missing family members is far from an unusual experience.<sup>359</sup> Despite the matter of fact manner in which she relays the information about her father's death, Amina does consider his death to be the catalyst for the trajectory her family's life would take in their eventual exodus from Somalia.

My Father's brother and sister had already left Somalia and were living in Canada when my father was killed. When they learned of his death they contacted my mother and informed her they would sell the family estate outside of Mogadishu and would equally divide the profit from the home and the land. I guess it was a really nice place and pretty valuable. Once my mom found a place to settle our family, they would send the money. Well, that never happened. My mom, like so many others, believed the war would end quickly. She figured they were waiting to sell the property until things became more stable. We found out another family had purchased the house and land. But my mom never received

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<sup>359</sup> Somalia is a country on the eastern coast of central Africa. The government collapsed in 1991 as the result of resistance and conflict from clan-based militias. Somalis that have fled the conflict remain in refugee camps in Kenya or have been resettled as refugees throughout Europe and North America.



any money. I mean, nothing. We were left totally broke. We haven't talked to anyone from my dad's side of the family since that last phone call promising my mom my dad's share.

Left in near destitution, Amina's mother felt she had no choice but to take her children to the closest refugee camp in Kenya as she had been advised by neighbors. She had learned she could register her family with the United Nations Refugee Agency as "displaced persons."<sup>360</sup> Amina and her family would spend the next two years living in the refugee camp. Amina has foggy memories from this time but considers her life there to be "relatively normal, all things considered." She notices my physical reaction as I hear this, considering life in a refugee camp to be anything but normal, and Amina laughs. Amina remarks on the general resilience of kids and the reality that she did not have any other experience against which to compare her situation. She accepted life in the camp as "normal" life. Her older siblings were in charge of her while her mother spent her days filling out paperwork, determining how and considering where to apply for asylum, and trying to make phone calls and connections to extended family, "anywhere she could find them." Her mother's first contacts were Amina's grandfather and grandmother who, though never officially divorced, had lived apart as long as Amina could remember.

My grandmother was in Germany and my grandfather was in Dubai. Mom kept calling my grandfather day after day and he then sent us money. This made it so my mom was able to get us housing outside of the camp. The house was really small but we were all relieved. Mom opened a small shop next to our house, just

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<sup>360</sup> Though Amina kept referring to "displaced persons," the UNHRC does not have such a category. Instead, it is most likely Amina and her family were initially registered as "Internally Displaced Persons," or IDP's, which indicates that individuals are vulnerable, but that they retain all of their rights and protection under both human rights and international humanitarian law. It was difficult to verify the location or circumstances of the refugee camp Amina remembers. She describes the camp as in Kenya, and there were indeed refugee camps in the years Amina identifies that were primarily comprised of Somali refugees. However, a camp in Kenya would not have housed IDP's. For more on IDP's and the current refugee situation in Somalia, see the United Nations Human Refugee Council website at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c146.html>, last accessed on 23.1.16.

selling basics like sodas, snacks, and toiletry items, and things worked out for a while, I think we were pretty happy. I remember not really understanding how we could have so much family, but yet no one close to us. My mom explained that when most of her siblings and her parents left, she had not been married to my dad for very long. When the war started, she and my dad did not think it would last very long. He had been in the hospital and she did not feel like she could leave him. She still says, 'You don't leave your husband, no matter what.'

A few years before Amina's father's death, her grandfather had relocated her grandmother to Germany and settled her there. Her mother's ten siblings all followed because Germany offered them "the best pathway to citizenship in Europe." Amina recalls that her grandfather moved on to Dubai for work and that her aunts and uncles are now dispersed throughout all of Europe.

Amina and her immediate family had lived in Kenya for four years when her mother learned of an American organization called Lutheran Social Services. This organization, the largest statewide, non-profit social service agency in Minnesota, had signed a contract with the United States State Department as a volunteer agency committed to providing support for refugees.<sup>361</sup> Amina's mother was able to secure an interview with the agency. She was hopeful, as she had learned she might have a higher chance of resettlement because she was a single mother.<sup>362</sup> Amina recalls this process:

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<sup>361</sup> Lutheran Social Services, which has roots in the Lutheran church in Minnesota, was started in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to function as a centralized point of support for immigrants coming primarily from Scandinavia. Over the last one hundred years, both the work and clientele of Lutheran Social Services has broadened. They now serve immigrant communities in Minnesota from multiple countries but are the primary non-profit working to resettle Somali refugees. Lutheran Social Services, Catholic Charities, and World Relief have been the primary organizations involved in relocating Somalis to Minnesota. Lutheran Social Services size and influence grew in the 1970's and early 1980's as the result of the instrumental role they performed in the relocation of Hmong refugees, displaced from Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam after the United States war with Vietnam.

<sup>362</sup> Upon reviewing transcripts and notes from sessions with Amina, I noted that at one point, Amina had mentioned that her mother was married for a brief period of time in Kenya. I followed up with Amina about this but her response was vague. She stated that it was a short, volatile relationship and that her mother will not speak about it. Amina wanted to note that she considers her own memory of the relationship unreliable because she was so young.

We all had to go through health assessments; lots of testing. However, within three months we were informed we had all passed and I remember that my mom was, like, totally shocked. We would be going to America immediately, within weeks. I remember my mom telling us that she did not know where America was but that ‘it must be really great!’ because of how smoothly the process to be accepted seemed to have gone. Well, we did not know anything about America. Neither us kids, or my mom. When we asked her to explain it to us she said things like ‘There will be food. There will not be war. We will be closer to Europe!’ That satisfied us.

### **5.3.b Coming to America**

Amina’s family was resettled first in Erie, Pennsylvania, when she was seven years old.<sup>363</sup> She remembers that the only words she knew in English were “hello” and “goodbye.” The family was assigned a Somali social worker from New York City. The social worker would frequently travel to Erie, roughly a six-hour drive, which she would make in her own car. Amina recalls neither she nor her mother could wrap their minds around this concept. A woman - traveling alone - in her own car! Amina’s family was to live in a “very nice” three bedroom, furnished home. Amina remembers that the entire family was in amazement at the quality of their new surroundings.

We couldn’t believe what we were being offered. We had no idea how to use any of the appliances or even what to do with the furniture. I had never seen a couch, you know? We always sat on the floor. Our social worker took us grocery shopping and taught us how to use our food-support stamps. We couldn’t even comprehend the concept. We just had this card and we knew we could take it to

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<sup>363</sup> Amina does not know why the family was settled in Erie, a city of roughly 102,000 inhabitants that is located on Lake Erie, in the northwest corner of Pennsylvania. Erie does not have a sizable Somali community, but initial investigations led me to discover that a non-profit called the International Institute of Erie does resettlement work, and that in the 1990’s they worked with Somali refugees, though by the late 90’s they turned their efforts to refugees from Kosovo, and then eventually the resettlement of American citizens displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. For more information on the International Institute of Erie, see: <http://interinsterie.org/history>, accessed on 21.11.15.

the store and get food. It was crazy! The social worker came several times a week for a while and it was like, every time, she would show us one new thing or try and teach us one new skill. She really pushed my mom that all of us, Mom included, needed to get set up with some kind of education right away.

Amina's mother took this advice to heart. She signed up for adult education classes, and Amina and her siblings were all enrolled in the local elementary and middle schools. Amina's initial experience with her new American elementary school was not as positive as that of other narrative participants. She describes school as "traumatic."<sup>364</sup> She recalls that she did not like her teachers and that she felt they did not like her. The school she was placed in did not have a functioning ESL (English as a second language program) and she believes this was a contributing factor to her early sense of isolation. Her perception is that she was not treated with kindness and she recounts a particular memory to illustrate this:

I specifically remember being told by the teacher to go to the back of the classroom and entertain myself with blocks or other toys while the other kids in the class were working on 'learning.' There were days where it seemed all I did was play by myself. I was the only kid in my class who was not a native English speaker. I was set apart, and this was done by teacher. I don't really blame those other kids because if the teacher is not going to work to include me, why would they? Even though I was young I can clearly remember concluding, 'At least when I was in Kenya, I was learning Swahili and Qu'ran.' Yeah, first and second grade were *not* good years for me.

A new Somali family moved nearby to Amina's family in the summer before her third grade year. She contends this made things better for everyone, especially as her mother finally had some friends and a point of connection. Much to Amina's surprise, her third grade teacher was extremely kind and took it as "her personal mission" to help

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<sup>364</sup> This must not be overlooked considering how Amina casually described life in a refugee camp.

Amina catch up with the class in the areas where she was behind. While she was not an ESL teacher officially, Amina observes that the teacher functioned as Amina's personal tutor, and Amina tears up when she recalls this teacher's extra effort. She also noted that her family became more comfortable interacting with their immediate American neighbors. The neighbors brought Amina's family a pie, and while, laughing, she recalls that they had no idea what pie was or that it was a dessert, her family did recognize that bringing a gift of food was a sign of initiating friendship. Amina told this story with great detail, explaining that the family had prepared side dishes to go with the pie they had been given. They were shocked when they tasted it, a cherry pie, thrown off by both the tartness and sweetness. "Clearly not meant to be the main dish," she concluded.

### **5.3.c Where is Minnesota?**

Amina's mother was restless in Erie after three years. She still felt isolated and she had learned that there were other states that had larger Somali communities, as well as infrastructure to support those communities. Amina observes that being a single-mother is difficult in any context, but in Somali culture "going it alone" is not an easy road for a woman. Amina's family had no broader sense of community or even regular friendship. The whole family missed the foods and products that they knew were available in larger cities that were home to more Africans, such as New York City, or even Pittsburgh, the latter of which was not too far away. One night at dinner, towards the end of Amina's "much better" third grade year, her mother said, "So, I have heard of this place called Minnesota. I guess there are a lot of Somalis there." Her mother went on to tell of a woman she had met in class who told her that Minnesota was one of a few states that was known for generous social service programs. While her mother listed other states such as Texas and Arizona, and though she had briefly considered moving the family to Maine, she ultimately decided to try for Minnesota as she had learned a distant, elderly member of her family was now living there. She was able to get in touch with this relative by telephone and he had assured Amina's mother that the schools in Minnesota were friendly towards Somali children. Amina recalls this was all she really needed to know to be on board with the idea. "So my mom sold our washer and dryer to buy us

bus tickets to Minnesota. As I think about it know, I have no idea if those appliances were really ‘ours’ to sell, but that’s what she did and away we went.”

Minnesota’s Muslim community grew in size significantly between 1993 and 2008 due to the arrival of immigrants from Somalia. Minnesota has become home to the largest community of Somalis in the United States, as well as the largest community of Somalis outside of Somalia.<sup>365</sup> Amina’s family moved in with who she learned was her great uncle in the summer of 1996. He lived in an apartment in Minneapolis on Chicago Avenue, an ethnically and socio-economically diverse neighborhood in South Minneapolis with many mixed housing developments. Amina notes that all members of her family were all thrown off by the contrast with Erie. Amina recalls that she did not “get that we were still in America. I mean, there were all these stores with signs in Somali, Amharic, Arabic, Swahili, and other languages.<sup>366</sup> It was bizarre.” She also recalls finding it odd that her elderly uncle had a job. She had just assumed that refugees did not work. However, he was employed in a public library where he shelved books. She remembers being struck by how much he seemed to enjoy his work. Her uncle was welcoming to Amina’s family, but he told them they could stay for two months only and needed to be actively pursuing their own place to live.

Amina identifies this time of transition to Minnesota as one of “highs juxtaposed with lows.” Her mother now had many friends, as well as places to shop that were full of familiar foods. However, her mother was not able to hold down a job for very long. She entered into a state of depression, though Amina observes neither her mother nor she and her older siblings would have understood a mental health diagnosis at the time.

Ultimately, my mom, like many Somalis, would be diagnosed with PTSD. She stopped working altogether before I was even done with elementary school. I feel

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<sup>365</sup> There are estimated to be between 29,000 and 40,000 Somalis living in Minnesota. This figure is taken from the 2009 American Community Survey estimate; other sources have placed the number closer to 60,000. Minnesota Historical Society. <http://education.mnhs.org/immigration/communities/somali> Last accessed July 24, 2018.

<sup>366</sup> Amharic is a semitic language spoken predominantly in Ethiopia. According to the U.S. Census American Community survey (2012), roughly 14,000 Ethiopians live in Minnesota. See: <http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2014/acs/acsbr12-16.pdf>. Last accessed on September 2, 2016.

bad saying this but her not working really bothered me and my siblings. We had to move to Section 8 housing, which was such a step down from where we had lived in Erie. It was not nice at all. It was cramped, and noisy. My mom started to receive public assistance, which is a very different thing than receiving aid as a refugee. We were now living off of \$400.00 (£260.00) a month and I felt like our life just kind of stopped progressing.

Amina gets very emotional when discussing her mother. She apologizes, again, for saying something that she considers disparaging but notes she wants to “tell the truth, but I know it would hurt my mom to hear it. Understand, my mom means everything to me.”<sup>367</sup> Amina recalls that her mother’s mood seemed to be equally boosted and deflated by being in a majority-Somali apartment building. She enjoyed being able to speak freely in her own language, but she would point out fellow apartment tenants to Amina and whisper things like “that man was a doctor back in Somalia,” or, “that man held an important government position back home.” Amina recalls these comments were made in a sad tone and that her mother felt like many of the people around them had lost all of their potential in the aftermath of the ongoing war in Somalia. “It was like living with ghosts.”

#### **5.4 Teachers, Mentors, Coaches**

Despite the new difficulties the family was facing financially, Amina found that her uncle had been “absolutely correct” in his encouragement that the family would find schools in Minnesota that were welcoming and supportive. Amina attended Anne Sullivan Communication Center, a Kindergarten through eighth grade school in Minneapolis that is well known throughout the Twin Cities for its commitment to diverse student

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<sup>367</sup> Though this will continue to come across in Amina’s own descriptions of her community, it is worth noting here the amount of worry and anxiety that Amina perceives in her life, as well as her family’s that comes as the result of community judgment. She mentioned that shame is pervasive, and that it pains her to think that her mother might ever have perceived that Amina was “ashamed of her for not working,” especially as Amina now considers her mother’s mental health to be something she (Amina) has a better understanding of as an adult.

populations.<sup>368</sup> Amina’s face lights up when she talks about her experience at Anne Sullivan, and, in particular, the relationships she developed that she identifies as having impacted her life. She was no longer the only student who needed ESL services, and she became friends with many students from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. “Hmong, Hispanic, Vietnamese. It was so nice to blend in. When we lived in Erie, I honestly thought there were two kinds of people in the world; African people and white people. For the first few years in the U.S., white and American were interchangeable to me.”

I had an amazing ESL teacher who asked me if I would be interested in being tutored after school by a woman she knew. Anne Sullivan has really good tutoring programs. I said, ‘yes’ without having to give it any thought. When I first met Molly, I felt drawn to her right away. I would end up becoming very close to both Molly and her husband.<sup>369</sup> They became a constant support to me in high school, especially when I just needed a break from my family or even my neighborhood.

Amina then explains that while she would assess her transition from Anne Sullivan to Roosevelt High School as “relatively successful,” she missed the sense of connectedness and security that ended after eighth grade. She liked the diversity at Roosevelt, and she excelled academically. She was encouraged by teachers to envision a future that included college, and she remembers that one teacher took it upon herself to educate Amina about what it meant to be a “well-rounded student” that was interested in lots of things.

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<sup>368</sup> Anne Sullivan Communication Center has been in operation since 1991, and while the school is located in Minneapolis, it serves students from all over the metropolitan area. Anne Sullivan has extensive ELL (English Language Learner ) programming, after-school tutoring, and as the school is named after the much-admired tutor of deaf author, activist and scholar Helen Keller, the school offers services for students who are deaf or hard of hearing. The school has many bilingual staff members and is the only school in the area to have staff who speak all 4 dialects of Somalia. More information about the school can be found at: <http://sullivan.mpls.k12.mn.us/index>. Last accessed on November 21, 2015.

<sup>369</sup> Amina’s tutor, who went on to become more of a mentor and friend to Amina, will be referred to as “Molly” to protect her privacy.



I was encouraged to get involved in leadership opportunities. I was inducted into National Honor Society and held a position in Student Council. I was in a program called College Possible where I was assigned a “coach” whose job it was to sort of help me pursue a path to college. They made the process really clear and I keep in touch with my coaches to this day.<sup>370</sup>

While Amina had supportive teachers she notes the relationship was different than those she had with teachers in middle school. Amina perceives that with having to serve so many students, the role of her high school teachers was to support her academically, and to enrich her mind, but not necessarily to be involved in her life outside of school. She notes this is also when she felt like she began to first pull away from her family. She perceived her mother, and most of her siblings, as if they were in a holding pattern. She found she increasingly distanced herself from non-Somali friends, finding it easier to be with others who “understood my mom and why I couldn’t do certain things. I didn’t have an endless supply of money. Somali kids got this and I didn’t have to explain anything.”

Amina hid much of her world beyond her apartment complex from her family. There wasn’t much room for nuance in her conversations with her mother when she was asked “how her day went” when she would arrive back home. When immigrant families hear “problems at school” a common assumption is that there are problems related to academic achievement.<sup>371</sup> Amina found this to be true and has determined

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<sup>370</sup> College Possible is a national program that is connected to AmeriCorp, the United States government’s corporation for national and community service. The goal of College Possible is to increase the number of low-income students applying to college by providing them with preparation and support during their years in high school. Each College Possible student is assigned a “coach” who helps guide them, is available to answer questions, and even continues support one the student is in college. Amina was very positive about the College Possible program. She would go on to work for College Possible for a period of time after graduation. For more about College Possible, see: <http://www.collegepossible.org>. Last accessed on November 21, 2015. For more about AmeriCorp, see: <http://www.nationalservice.gov/programs/americorps>, Last accessed on November 21, 2015.

<sup>371</sup> Patricia S. Maloof and Fariyal Ross-Sheriff, “Challenges of Resettlement and Adaptation of Muslim Refugees,” in *Muslim Refugees in the United States: A Guide for Service Providers* (2003) in *The*

this is why her continuing relationship with her mentor Molly was so valuable to her. When asked to further describe how she became so connected to Molly, Amina's eyes fill with tears and she holds up her hand to indicate she needs a minute. She takes a deep breath and says,

Please note this is, like, good crying. It's just that I can barely think about Molly, now that I am an adult and nearly the same age she was when she met me, without getting emotional. I am not exaggerating when I say she kind of saved me. One of my most formative memories was the role Molly played in helping me to be successful in college. I had confessed to Molly one day how nervous I was about college. "You mean, getting in?" she asked me. I just lost it and started to cry. I explained that 'no,' I'd actually already been accepted. What was worrying me the most was how on earth I was actually going to move myself *to* college.

Amina explains that while her life and world expanded because of her positive school experiences, life in Minnesota for much of her family did not really look that different than it had in Erie, Pennsylvania. By the time Amina started fourth grade, her eldest brother had dropped out of high school and decided to work instead. No one in her family had a car. "In fact, no one in my family besides me had even left the city of Minneapolis in the ten years since we had moved there. Their whole lives take place within a few city blocks."<sup>372</sup>

When I told Molly I was most worried about the logistics of moving, she was dumbfounded. 'That's your biggest fear about college?' she asked me. I then explained my family did not have a car and I was choosing to go to college eighty miles away. I then confessed I had no idea how to pack or what I would need. Well, Molly and her husband are who ended up moving me to college. We made

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*Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* ed. Edward E. Curtis IV (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 333.

<sup>372</sup> After making this statement, Amina gestured to the floor. "I have come further by meeting in this coffee shop in St. Paul than many of my family members ever have. Can you even imagine?"

a checklist of what I would need and they took me shopping. They literally drove me to campus and helped me get settled. I really do not know how any of that would have worked without them.

## **5.5 Life in College**

Amina chose to attend a small, prestigious liberal arts college in rural Minnesota that is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America. With a population of just around 3,000 students, nestled within a town that, including the college students, has a population of 20,000, Amina was once again completely changing the landscape of what was familiar to her. Though she was less than two hours away from the apartment complex in Minneapolis, she describes this as another moment when she felt as if she had moved to another country. Somewhat reluctantly, Amina explains that she found a type of peacefulness in her new surroundings she had never previously experienced. "It's weird. I was anxious, yet I felt peace." Though this came as a surprise to her, she welcomed it. "I knew college would make my life better, nearly from the moment I arrived. I loved living on campus; having space to myself. There were so many ways to get involved. I liked volunteering and I eventually became a Resident Advisor for the dorm."

Amina points to her first year in college as the beginning of a slow, but steady separation from the life she had lived with her family in Minneapolis, as well as a time of questioning regarding what Islam meant in her life now that she was on her own, and separated from her Muslim-Somali community. She recalls the first major argument she had with her mother when she was at home during the summer before her second year.

I was pretty hard on myself during the first year. I had started with a pre-Nursing major, and while I was doing okay in my classes, I just knew that I did not want to be a nurse. My mom had pushed me into it because she had 'heard' that was what you should do if you were a girl. This was what I should do so I could get a job...which to my mom was the only point of college. Well, I realized that nursing wasn't the only way I could help people. I decided to change my major. The hardest part was definitely telling my mom. Her initial reaction was, 'Now you

won't be successful!' I was like, 'Mom! I will still have a college education.' Let me just say that immigrant parents *do not* understand a liberal arts education. They need to see that you are going to be, like, an engineer or doctor. It was like explaining my choice to a rock. She did not understand it at all. That was the end of our conversation.

In contrast to her mother's perception, Amina thrived at a liberal arts college.

I took Sociology and it just kind of broke my world open. It made me more passionate about social justice. I learned about race theory, class theory, etc. ... It opened my eyes to my own growing-up experience. I saw so much of myself in what I was learning. And I took Stats, which I loved. Nobody says they love Stats, but I did. Sociology and Math actually seemed like an interesting combination. I think people don't care about what you say unless you can back it up with numbers.

Amina recalled the way she began to "re-think" her life through the frameworks and methods she found in Sociology. She considered the ways in which classes in Sociology and Anthropology challenged the way she had been taught by her mother to think about the world.

My mom makes a lot of generalizations and I began to slowly challenge those assumptions. What I always found fascinating was that while her answers for why people acted the way they did no longer held up for me, her overall conclusions about human behavior would often be correct and would line up with research! She'd size people up accurately. She didn't have the most 'sophisticated' ideas, but they made sense to a certain extent.

These comments by Amina reveal a lasting dynamic that Amina is constantly engaging. It is evident after spending hours with her that she accesses multiple sources as she navigates her world, and that these sources are constantly overlapping. She has

not dismissed her experiences in her Somali community or her mother's words as having no value for her life now. Instead, she has combined this knowledge with what she has received through her education and her own experiences as an adult. She notes that she has become more adept at navigating her dual identity but that this was a sincere struggle when she arrived at college, particularly involving her religious identity.

## **5.6 Amina's Tenuous Relationship With Islam**

Just to clarify this for you. Somali Culture and Islam are totally enmeshed. Where does one end and one begin? I seriously cannot tell. In my community, I think most people would say, "I'm Muslim" before they would say, "I'm Somali. Ethnicity is important, but your religion, your connection with God is far more valued in our culture. But you have to understand that they are saying the same thing. In my experience most Somalis don't even think of other Muslims beyond Somali Muslims.

In Amina's valuation, being away from her Somali community for the first time at college was the same as being away from Islam for the first time, at least initially. Though there were only a handful of Muslims at her college, Amina would meet Muslims from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds that challenged some of her assumptions regarding both theology and behavior. Her studies would also make her re-evaluate her beliefs and practice.

I started taking a few religion courses and I began to consider the idea that I had believed in Islam for so long, that I determined I had never actually really "believed." That sounds weird. What I am trying to say is I never actively, consciously made the choice that Islam made sense for me. I never started "believing." It was the lifestyle I was born into and I never asked questions. When I was in high school I started to think about these things a little bit but I didn't say anything to anyone. There was no one to say anything to! Almost as quickly as I would think thoughts like that, a voice would jump into my head to tell me that I shouldn't be asking these questions. It wasn't appropriate. It was going against

the one thing everyone in my family, everyone in my culture values above all else. Like I'm undermining the one thing that holds us all, despite our problems, together as a community. I mean, that's just not okay to ask questions that are divisive and I knew it. It scared me to think that way.

It was during her junior year of college that Amina began to more intentionally question her beliefs. She does not consider herself to be a "good Muslim by Somali standards" because she has never been dedicated to praying five times a day and reveals, "Okay confession. I have never made it through more than about ten days of fasting during Ramadan." However, she notes that she finds the whole concept of calling someone a "good" or "bad" Muslim problematic. When asked about her mother's religious commitment, Amina notes "Oh she follows everything to a tee. She's a *good* Muslim!" She then discusses the role of religion in the lives of the rest of her immediate family.

My middle brother is married for the second time to another Somali woman and they are very devout. My sister also believes in Islam but I would not call her devout.<sup>373</sup> She's kind of wishy-washy about this. She lives with my mom, so she does enough to keep my mom happy, but it seems like a show. My older brother truly believes in Islam but does not follow it very well, so we are probably the most alike. Although he has a girlfriend but he is not supposed to! My mother knows about it but does not acknowledge it at all. His girlfriend is African-American and she is not Muslim and her lifestyle reflects this, particularly her revealing clothing, which my Mom hates. I like her. My older brother would never say he is not a Muslim even if his life doesn't really show it. I mean, I am coming to a place where I think I may be comfortable believing in God, but not needing to have that label. Islam will be a part of me no matter what choices I make. But I

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<sup>373</sup> Amina defined *devout* as, "not just doing all the things you are supposed to do as a Muslim, but believing in those things-needing those things as a part of feeling whole."

am no longer practicing Islam traditionally. So I guess I was raised Muslim but am no longer an active member of the religion.

Considering Amina's comment about not needing a label, a question is raised about Ayaan Hirsi Ali, whose book, *Infidel*, Amina mentioned she had read in college.<sup>374</sup> Ali, one of the most vocal critics of Islam both in the U.S and internationally, had recently been in the news when Brandeis University retracted an offer for Ali to receive an honorary degree from their institution.<sup>375</sup> Amina had commented about her frustration that the most recognized woman of Somali descent was such a polarizing figure, and Amina contends Ali has done more to hurt than help the plight of Islam.

Will I always defend Islam? Yes. Will I say that it's a beautiful religion? Yes. Will I say that religion is good for some people? Yes. And that's what bothers me about Ayaan Hirsi Ali. She thinks all religion is bad. But I am beginning to question if Islam is right for me. But I know that my Somali community will not accept this. No one will ever see my name, and accept the idea that I believe in God but that I am not Muslim. There is no leaving it. They will just categorize me as a 'bad' Muslim. I would never tell my Mom I am no longer Muslim. She would rather I say I am not Somali. I don't ever intend to have this conversation with her. But please get it. I am not saying this because I am afraid. Maybe it sounds hypocritical, but from an Islamic point of view, I think it would just be too disrespectful. It would hurt my Mom too much. She would feel I've lost everything.

It is for this reason that Amina keeps a headscarf in her car for the days when she goes to visit her mother, and only chooses to wear it when she is in her old neighborhood. She had worn the hijab from the time she was in fourth grade until her sophomore year of college. She and her college roommate, an African-American woman who was also

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<sup>374</sup> Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*. (New York: Free Press, 2008)

<sup>375</sup> The official statement from Brandeis can be found at:

<http://www.brandeis.edu/now/2014/april/commencementupdate.html>, accessed on January 1, 2016.

Muslim, both decided to cease wearing the hijab before they returned to school for their junior year. Amina regards this decision as leaving her with an instant feeling of being “free and unburdened.” She did not perceive this choice as an act of rejection or rebellion. “I wanted to be me and I never made the choice to cover myself. It was what I had been instructed to do and so I just always did it. How is that an act of religious conviction?” Amina argues that there was more religious conviction in her choice not to wear the scarf any longer but that the transition was far from easy. Many friends and teachers at her college asked her why she was no longer covering. “I had a hard time explaining it. I had never really *felt* Muslim and I also had never really *felt* American. I was always confused. And wearing the scarf made me feel more confused.”

### **5.7 Amina, Gender and the Hijabi Cult**

Amina thinks there is considerable discrimination against Muslim women who choose not to wear hijab. She has noted that within not only her immediate Somali community but also in the greater Twin Cities (Minneapolis-St. Paul) Muslim community there is “definitely a street cred (credibility) that comes with wearing hijab. It’s like there is this hijabi cult. You could be totally ignorant of what Islam is really about, or you could equally be doing a lot of non-Islamic stuff in your life, but if you are a hijabi, you totally get the benefit of the doubt. You are a ‘good’ Muslim girl.”<sup>376</sup> Amina affirms it would not matter how much she can recite the Qur’an or how much she knows about the religion – if she doesn’t wear the scarf her community will not take her seriously as a Muslim. “The way women are defined or identify you as Muslim is through dress. My hair? What is seeing my hair going to make someone do? Yes, people covered in the Prophet’s time. But they lived in a desert. I think it was as much about fighting off the dust as it was about fighting off men’s attention.”

Amina has experienced gender inequity within her community, though it was not something she could articulate until she started studying inequity in college and began to see where it was at work in her own cultural and religious environment. She became

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<sup>376</sup> Hasan, *American Muslims*, 137. Hassan observes, “I have a few problems with seeing hijab as a requirement, the main one being that, if the above interpretations are true, men are severely, disproportionately, excluded from the hijab requirement, particularly in the United States. The modesty passage is directed to both men and women as is the prayer passage.”



increasingly passionate about a variety of issues and was seeking out more classes to pursue her interests in social justice theory. She contends her study of social justice in college is what she can attribute to “sprouting the seeds of doubt my religious ideology and yet at the same time, I feel is something that God is speaking in to me. Weird.”

Amina appears uncomfortable as she discusses this topic. She has come to the conclusion that, indeed, college has changed how she regards not just Islam but religion in general. She relayed that she was “worried that someone may read this and prevent their daughter from going to college for fear that college causes Muslim women to walk away from Islam.”<sup>377</sup> When asked why this is such a concern she states that she knows that her own mother now regrets allowing Amina to go away for school. “My mom says that she feels a bit betrayed.” Amina’s mother had regarded post-secondary education as the right and only next step for Amina’s success. However, when Amina changed her major from nursing to Sociology, her mother may have accepted her choice but remained deeply disappointed. Amina recalls feeling like she “had crossed a line away from my mother,” creating a division that she feels cannot be removed.

For me, college was doing *exactly* what it is designed to do. I was becoming more educated. My world was opening up. I was having doubts but that’s because I was asking good questions. At the same time, I was sort of leaving my mom behind. I started to see that she viewed college more like a trade school. I was supposed to be training to be a nurse. I was not supposed to be turning into a feminist and questioning my religion. I remember my mom’s closest friend was highly opposed to me going to college. She told my mom, ‘Amina will be exposed to things you don’t want her to know! Amina will change her beliefs!’ And worst of all, she told my mom, “Amina will meet men!”

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<sup>377</sup> This concern needed to be treated delicately. This was a genuine fear for Amina and we again, covered the anonymity procedures as well as where and how the research in this thesis would be shared.

Amina laughs and says wryly, “And I guess that is exactly what happened. My mom wanted me to go to college and *not* be changed by it. She wanted me to come home just as I was when I left...but as a nurse.”

### **5.8 Amina Becomes a Girlfriend**

Harkening back to the concerns expressed by Amina’s mother’s best friend regarding what Amina would encounter in college, Amina concedes that meeting men was not a problem, but navigating how to interact with them presented significant challenges. She considers this to be one of the main reasons that she did not develop a “community of friends,” but instead summarizes her college experience according to individual relationships, the vast majority of which were with other females. Most of the groups, in Amina’s estimation, were mixed gender, and while she was not opposed to this it made her feel awkward and out of place. She had no experience with this type of social organization, so she avoided it as best she could. Despite her gregarious personality and her natural warmth, Amina says she did not really have “good friends” until her senior year. One of the friends she made in her senior year was a male student with whom she is now in a committed relationship.

My boyfriend is totally American and we have now been together for over two years. His dad is a Lutheran pastor, but I would say he is not religious. I’m probably more religious than he is. We met at the front information desk at my college where I worked. He came up and talked to me. I was trapped! He asked me where I was from? And then he did not say, ‘but where are you REALLY from?’ I hate that question. And then he asked me out for coffee. I said it couldn’t be a date and he said it didn’t have to be. He was a math major and we ended up having a lot of classes together. We started going on more outings (you know, basically dates) and now it has been nearly three years.

Amina describes her relationship as “very happy” and remarks that while she is attracted to him and they have romantic feelings towards one another, she finds the most value in the fact that she “considers him to be one of my best friends. He knows

me better than anyone.” She initially describes their differing religious traditions as “not being an issue,” but later will determine that it actually presents significant concerns. Amina finds that her boyfriend’s parents are very accepting of her and treat her with kindness. This is in contrast to her own mother, whom Amina says does not know about her relationship at all. She says that she is more fearful of her mother’s rejection of her boyfriend because he is neither Somali nor Muslim, though she notes his not being Muslim is the greater concern.

I think she could eventually get past that he is not Somali, but the Muslim part is the hardest. Although...’ (she pauses for a few seconds) ‘just to clarify this for you. Remember, Somali culture and Islam are totally enmeshed. I can tell when something is an Arab thing. But in Somali culture, I can think of so few things that would be regarded as ‘Somali,’ as separate and unique distinct category from Islam. Everything in Somali life is governed by Islam. I was always taught that there’s like nothing that can’t be tied to your religion.

Amina once asked her boyfriend if he would consider accepting aspects of Islam in order to smooth the road with her mother. She says he gently responded by hypothetically asking if she would make the same accommodations from a Christian perspective to make things easier with his parents. Instantly she recognized the insensitivity of her request and how it would be in her words “not only a break with my integrity but I realized how disrespectful that would be of people who truly believe. I determined it’s just easier if my mom doesn’t know.”

While this may have been easier during her last year of college, Amina admits this is becoming more burdensome. She finds living in two worlds disquieting. “One world where my boyfriend is integrated into every aspect of my life, and then another one where not only is he not involved but basically I pretend he doesn’t exist.” It places stress on all of her primary relationships and this is only growing more acute as the couple has begun to talk about a future, which involves getting married.

## **5.9 Amina’s Thoughts on Marriage**

Amina finds it ironic that she cannot tell her mother that she is in a relationship headed towards marriage when her perception is that her getting married is her mother's greatest desire for her life. "I am twenty-five and my mom is putting huge pressure on me to get married. I want to wait a few more years but I do want to get married to my boyfriend. I have determined I am pretty sure about that. I wish my mother would understand that taking your time before marriage makes for a better relationship." Amina states that in her Somali culture there is not only no dating, there is really not even 'courtship'. Amina does not think her mother would understand the concept of compatibility.

You meet for a week, you possibly go out on one kind of outing. Here is what my mom would say about how she met my dad: 'Your dad and I met. We had a six-hour conversation and I learned everything I needed to know. We knew he was established. My family was in agreement. He was a good husband, a good provider, and he wanted to marry me. That is enough.' I mean, what do you do with that? How do I meet my mom halfway when that is her frame of reference? To her, anything beyond those basics is being picky.

When asked what she is most looking for in a marriage partner, Amina rolls her eyes and gestures vigorously with her hands as she says slowly and deliberately, "COMPATIBILITY!" She puts her hands on the table. "So you can see my problem, right?" When asked to elaborate, she rapidly relays multiple characteristics.

Compatibility means we both see the world the same way. We have the same life goals. We don't want to be bored. I want to have the same level of education and ambition. My boyfriend is ambitious and I am not embarrassed to say that I like that. I DON'T WANT TO BE POOR. I went through that and it sucks.

Comments about economic status surface in nearly every conversation with Amina. She is sensitive to the instability that came along with growing up without financial security. She ties this to not having a father growing up. She recalls that not

having a father was difficult in many ways, but the reality that there was no main income provider put pressure on her family that she feels has never been alleviated.

We lived on assistance. We were never going to have *more*, you know what I mean? There were no signs it was going to get better and I figured that out pretty quickly. I remember this really bothered me in high school. I'd noticed and say to friends, 'Wow, you got another new jacket.' Or new shoes. 'Who got you that?' They would always respond that their mom and dad had bought it. So, like, it was hard to see that, and also even more painful because beyond the jacket, that type of relationship with parents just wasn't something I had. I knew my mom couldn't do it. I had to figure it out on my own. I tried to be very careful never to ask my mentor (Molly) for things. I was really protective of that relationship. I saw her every week and it meant everything to me. (PAUSE) I won't do 'that' – meaning, be poor.

Consequentially, this has altered the way Amina conceives of her future. She and her boyfriend often talk about marriage, but she finds those conversations almost always extend beyond relationship expectations to Amina's vision of what type of life she wants to provide for her children. Amina has spent considerable time determining whether or not she would like children and she says she had to come to terms with the reality that many of her concerns are based on fear of repeating the past. She has since decided, and she gives credit to her boyfriend for helping her, that she very much wants to be a mother and that she will be a good one, which when asked, she decides means "healthy."

She insists that her own children will be raised in a diverse neighborhood, and says this is "non-negotiable." She knows that if she marries her current boyfriend, which is her desire, it means her children will be bi-racial. She sees living in a community that is accepting of her bi-racial, bi-cultural, and possibly co-religious family as essential. She states that her boyfriend is accepting of her religious beliefs and in no way has tried to influence her or pressure her with his own Christian commitment. This is the model she would like to set for her own children. Amina values education for her children but

this is the least worrisome to her, noting that there are “so many solid schools in Minnesota. That just won’t be an issue.” Most important to Amina is that her children are able to “grow up in a home that is stable and that their parents own that home free and clear.” She does not want her kids to be worrying “about money and things like electricity.” She warns that she doesn’t think parents realize how much those things impact a child’s sense of security.

I want my children to have a sense of innocence for as long as possible. I want the things that I can make easy to be easy. I’m not saying you do everything for them but what is wrong with removing some of the struggle? I am not sure what I will say to my kids about God. I think I will teach them that God is real, but I want them to find their own way to him. In the same regard, I am open to who my kids may want to bring home. I don’t care as long as it is a good person who makes my kid feel loved and accepted.

Amina sees the secret to achieving these things as solid communication between parties long before marriage occurs. She states that she regularly discusses relationship expectations with her boyfriend, and that they are in tune with each other’s needs and styles of communication. Ultimately, Amina concludes that her own commitment to compatibility and suitability should please her mother because it would result in a marriage less inclined to end in divorce.<sup>378</sup> “I think my partner and I are together for a reason. We are very supportive. I feel a connection with him and what I most value is that he fully supports who I am.” Amina wishes that her mother could see the value in this attribute. “If I were to marry a man from within the community, I guarantee you it would not work out.” According to Amina, divorce within the Somali community is, “a reputation killer.” Amina brings up her sister to illustrate her view.

My sister got pregnant when she was sixteen. She was married to a guy who was about ten years older. My mom was not happy about the situation. They

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<sup>378</sup> This is Amina’s opinion, not one based on research.

eloped. Nobody was happy. But what choice did we have but to embrace it? Getting married gave the pregnancy legitimacy. I have an eight-year old niece whom I adore but my sister barely got her high school diploma because her life just kind of ended. She got divorced a few years later. That was a big deal. Divorce carries a big stigma in our culture, especially because she had a child. It's hard enough in our culture to get remarried, but since she is a mom it will now be more difficult.

When asked to elaborate, Amina goes on to explain that "She is damaged goods. Most likely she, my sister, will need to remarry a guy who also has kids or has been married before." In her second interview, Amina mentions that her mother was married for a short period of time when the family lived in Kenya. She asked if she had mentioned this during her first meeting and when told she had not, offers, "I probably wasn't comfortable with that yet." She does not have much to say about the marriage, only that it did not last long and that it was over and finalized once the family moved to the United States. Amina has wondered why her mother has never remarried in all of the years since they have lived in Minnesota. She has never directly asked her mother, but she assumes that it is either because her mother feels the stigma of mysterious divorce or because her mother has expressed many times that she would ultimately like to reunite with her family in Germany and move there permanently. Amina's grandmother is still alive and her mother feels it is part of her religious and familial obligation to assist with her care. Amina has never met her grandmother but states "My mom's family has been everything to us." Amina has aunts and uncles who she feels care about her success. She now has another uncle in Minnesota and an uncle and cousins in San Diego, California. Unusually, her mother's side of the family does not have many children and the majority of her mother's family now resides in Germany. Despite the fact that she rarely, if ever, sees them, she grew up with frequent phone calls. Her mother talks to her family in Germany every day, and Amina stays in touch with cousins via Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other forms of social media.

Amina speculates that remarriage would alter her mother's plans to reunite with her own family. When asked if she thinks a move to Germany is impending, Amina

shakes her head. Amina's sister and niece live in the same apartment as Amina's mother, and from time to time her older brothers live with them as well. They all pool their financial resources and, in Amina's estimation, "all kind of depend on one another."

Amina views herself as the black sheep in the family and she vacillates between feeling "left out" and being "grateful I have space to breathe." She is the only sibling to have attended college and she feels that while her family is proud of her, her education continues to create divisions. She recalls a recent conversation regarding women's rights with her immediate family, and she found that by the end of the conversation she was alone in her defense, with the rest of her siblings all supporting the opposing position. She was hurt by the conversation, and concludes that her siblings are often quick to dismiss her opinions because they have determined she has become too arrogant and self-important - out of touch with their reality.

### **5.10 Amina the Self-Proclaimed Feminist**

Amina remains committed to her feminist ideals, but she knows this is always going to create tension in her relationship with her family. Amina surmises that "her mother in-particular" rejects Amina's claim that she can be a Muslim and be a feminist.

I identify myself as a feminist. I remember someone in college asking me in a sociology class if I was a western feminist or a Muslim feminist. What a dumb question. I threw our academic definition of feminism right back at them. There is no differentiation. A feminist is a feminist. Women's rights are women's rights no matter what point of view you are working from.

Ironically, while Amina faces opposition from her Muslim family, recall that Nadia faces opposition primarily from her non-Muslim friends and co-workers. Amina's family rejects all definitions of the term 'feminist'. Nadia expressed that it is far more common for her to encounter non-Muslims who refuse to entertain the idea that one can be Muslim and feminist, concluding Islam and women's equality to be resolutely incompatible.<sup>379</sup> While

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<sup>379</sup> This is not unique to Islam. Scholars such as Leila Ahmed, Julianne Hammer, Ingrid Mattson, Jane Smith, and others argues that discrimination against *any* religion is all too common in feminist discourse.



Amina does not blame the religion of Islam for the issues she believes plague gender dynamics within her Somali community, she observes that it is hard to have hope for change when those she sees most actively defending traditional roles for women appear to rely on the Qur'an and the Islamic Tradition as their primary means of justification and support.

Islam is going to have to grow with the times. I mean, this is what Catholicism has done. I don't see Islam doing this same work. And I believe one of the main reasons for that is that it is males doing the interpreting. It works for them! There are no female religious leaders that the world will actually listen to. Ayaan Hirsi Ali doesn't count.

While not directly intending to, Amina's comments touch on one of the most controversial debates in both the North American, as well as the global Muslim *ummah*; the question of not only who has the authority to interpret but also if interpretation remains an open process.

It kind of bothers me when I hear both Muslim men and women say, 'We've given women power for thousands of years. Women have always had more rights according to Shar'iah than Christian women.' I think that's bogus. I feel like that is the only argument Islam has over Christianity. Sorry. You have to do more than that to convince me. I feel like Islam says a lot of things about women's rights, but do people practice it? Thinking globally, do males acknowledge those rights? Nooooo. And it's hard to challenge people's core beliefs. When I ask my Muslim friends why they believe in Islam, they just don't have good answers. When I was asked those questions, I gave the same generic answers. I said that Allah was real and that I wanted to be closer to God. And recently I have just started to be

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In both my research as well as in my experience as a scholar committed to my own religious tradition, I have benefitted from the writing of Serene Jones, current President of Union Theological Seminary in New York. See Jones' serviceable text, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

honest with myself and am thinking, ‘this is just not true. Those are not the right answers for those questions. I just do these things out of habit.’

Again, Amina points to her experience with hijab. “My mom insists that when I come to the apartment building I wear a scarf. I do this totally out of respect for her but it’s ridiculous. I have tried to point out to her that my wearing of the scarf directly contradicts what she argues wearing hijab represents. I say it undermines the value.” Amina laughs. “But she doesn’t want to see it that way so that’s the end of the discussion.”

### **5.11 Conclusion/Findings**

Amina continues to be challenged by her dual identity as both American and Somali. Her identity as a Muslim is embedded within both. All three contribute to who she is, and she does not want to have to abandon her Somali heritage in order to thrive as an American, or to reject Islam. However, she would like to reframe what her responsibility to her Somali community looks like. Amina has determined that to, “seriously...like keep my sanity intact,” she has had to build a wall of privacy around herself. This is, quite genuinely, how Amina practices self-preservation. Amina remains conflicted that many of the key influences in what she has determined as having helped her to survive and be successful are people and experiences that she has never really felt free to share with her immediate family. When she was in college and she had questions about the financial aid process, or her angst over changing her major from Chemistry to Math, the first phone call she made was never to her family. Her level of education has created another layer of separation between her and her siblings. She has the highest level of education in her family and the highest income. Amina is the only sibling to have completed not only college, but also high school. “It’s complicated. I know they are proud of me, but I also think they resent me. In my culture, you defer to anyone who is older than you. How does that work when you are the youngest but the most educated?” This is in contrast to what Amina encounters in other contexts, where she has determined her voice and experiences are valued and seen as worthy contributions. Amina says the rejection she feels from her family has resulted in strained relationships with her siblings. She reluctantly observes that they are “Sort of jealous of my life and

what I have. My sister will say, 'how come you have all these nice things?' and that makes me feel bad." When I respond, 'Well, I work really hard' they take offense at that. I am not saying they are lazy or that they don't understand hard work, but it is different."

Amina says that life is harder, yet more peaceful, since she began to enforce some boundaries between herself and her family. She has asked them not to call her after midnight, and asks that they respect her schedule. She currently lives in her own apartment and she has not shared the location with her family. She also has not informed them that her boyfriend plans to move in within the year. She says this is difficult because Somali culture does not have boundaries. "You are supposed to work as a unit. You do everything together." Amina admits that the more her family sees what she has achieved and acquired, the greater the expectation that she will take financial responsibility for the family. She recalls that recently her mother wanted to be present when Amina went to buy a car. A gentleness comes into Amina's voice when she tells this story.

I mean, I adore my mom but why on earth would I need my mother to come with me? She-does-not-drive...She-does-not-understand either the American credit or banking system. Obviously, it was sweet that she wanted to come but it was also kind of sad. I realized that I have kind of, outpaced my mother in certain things. I know this would break her heart if I were to say it because that is exactly what she has worried about. That I would sort of leave her behind.

Amina says there is no notion of privacy within her Somali community. "To ask for privacy is to invite suspicion. You must be hiding something." Ironically, Amina's privacy is hiding something. Namely, her desire to make her own decisions without her family's direct input and to have these decisions be respected. Particularly, her decision to not just have a boyfriend, but to consider marriage with him. Amina says that she has always been very strong and being okay with being on her own has always been an important mechanism for her survival. She believes in destiny and fate, and contends that God has made her resilient for her own good. She is aware her mother has both raised her to be independent, but also wants her to be dependent.

My mom is a very helpful person. She has always taught us “do good for others.” She is like the amateur marriage counselor for many in our community. She is big into charity and raising money. I think this is a fusion of her religion and culture. The culture of Somalia was born after religion was there. Somali culture has not been around that long. So there’s no thinking about Somalia outside of Islam. Somalis are a blend of ethnicities. It’s why we look different from the rest of Africans. People will often say to me, “Oh! Were your ancestors slaves? And I’m like, “No. That was West Africa.” I mean, we look totally different from African Americans who are mainly of West African descent. If you know what you are looking for, you can see the Arab in us.

It would be inaccurate to describe Amina as a pessimistic person, yet she has determined that there is no middle ground, no happy medium where she can be free to engage her own pursuits and yet still maintain a positive, healthy relationship with her family. She describes this relationship as one where she feels not only accepted but that her family can also feel a sense of pride over her achievements. It bothers Amina that her boyfriend would be considered a great catch by nearly anyone outside of her Somali community. For these reasons, some of Amina’s experiences stand in contrast when studied alongside the experiences of Kasim, Nadia, and Mohammed. They all have the *shared experience* of carving out their identity as Muslim Americans, but Amina does not share the greater overlaps and commonalities that the others do. She does not feel free to embrace her American side fully when with her family. Nevertheless, Amina’s situation should not be viewed as abnormal. Khalida Saed, an Iranian-American Muslim who is an activist for LGBTQ Muslims notes, “I knew that when I grew up, I would have to choose between my family and my own life. In my culture, choosing anything other than family is considered to be the epitome of selfishness.”<sup>380</sup> Amina resonates with the estimation that to choose a life that separates one from family is regarded as selfish.

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<sup>380</sup> Khalida Saed, “On the Edge of Belonging,” in *Living Islam Outloud: American Muslim Women Speak*, eds. Saleema Abdul-Ghafur (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 86-94. Saed, who identifies as a homosexual (and does not go by her real name in writing)

When I was young, my mother talked about “opportunity-opportunity-opportunity.’ But now that I am a woman, it is as if none of those ‘opportunities’ matter when it comes to what actually makes me a successful member of my immediate community.” I took advantage of these ‘opportunities’ and now they have come back to bite me. I mean, not exactly. I wouldn’t change the choices I have made. My education has made my life better. It’s saved me! But it has come at the cost of isolating me from my family.

Amina also has begun to question if native-born Somalis can be truly happy and fulfilled in the United States. This is generalizations but she offers two examples that she sees as distinct according to generation. She thinks far too much pressure is put on young Somalis, “to think it is their responsibility to fix the ills of the homeland.” Amina does not think most Somalis really want to go back to Somali.

At least, young Somalis I know do not feel this way. We all want Somalia to be better, but I think a lot of us just don’t feel like it’s our fight. I feel like the only images of Somalia I see are negative. It’s hard to feel proud. Because your pride is based on a Somalia you never knew. It’s this manufactured pride in what my mom and others like her, or older than her, remember.

The Somali community in Minneapolis where Amina grew up was multi-generational and Amina says she was always aware of the “going back” mentality. She notes that her mother and others rely on what she calls “recreated memories.”

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goes on to conclude that she felt she had to reject Islam in all of its forms because she could not find a place for herself within it. Amina has expressed this same sentiment to me in our conversations. She struggles to determine what an Islamic identity would look like apart from her Somali community. Saed went on to find a new form of Islamic community in the Al-Fatiha Foundation, a national group that advocated for LGBTQ Muslims in the United States. Here she was exposed to the “Progressive Islam” movement popularized by Omid Safi and others. These encounters led Saed to her conclusion that, “Patriarchy and sexism are not necessarily Islamic traits but are actually cultural traits. Realizing this has allowed me to give religion another chance. I have also been empowered to begin reinterpreting the text outside the confines of sexism and homophobia.” Though Al-Fatiha dissolved in 2011, many former members reorganized into the Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity. See <http://www.muslimalliance.org>. Last accessed on June 25, 2018.

My Mom always talks about how much she misses Somalia. She recalls when they had land, would go to the beach all the time, had lots of friends and family around, when they had plenty of food. It's sort of idealized and romanticized. The life she remembers none of us ever experienced. I remember life as a refugee in Kenya much more clearly than life in Somalia. And those were not my happiest times.

Amina considers herself a "Minnesotan with Somalia in her heart." Minnesota is home to her. Amina occasionally considers whether or not she should try and plan a trip to Somalia in the coming years but says real life and the immediacy of student loans, rent, and day-to-day commitments take precedence. She is more concerned with saving money to purchase a home once she is married, a mutual goal set between her and her boyfriend.

Second, Amina points to the mental health issues that are prevalent in the older generation of the Minnesota Somali community and she believes this has a significant impact on overall health and well-being. She points to her mother's experience. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Amina's mother was diagnosed as having PTSD, a mental health condition that Amina's mother has never fully come to understand as a condition, though her mother accepts the idea that "things are not right in her world." Indisputably, this has had a significant impact on Amina's sense of security and stability as evidenced again and again in her personal comments, particularly related to those regarding her hopes for her future family.

Amina is far from alone in her speculations. Academic studies related to the mental health of Somali-Americans have grown significantly in the past decade. While the most prominent work is related to health-care fields, and is being produced by psychologists, nursing professionals, and social work, much of the research mined to better understand Amina's experience demonstrated an increasing interest in and awareness of the role of religious commitment and culture when investigating Somali attitudes towards not only mental health but health in general.<sup>381</sup> While it is not the intent

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<sup>381</sup> Carol L. Pavlish, Sarah Noor and Joan Brandt. "Somali Immigrant Women and the American Health Care System: Discordant Beliefs, Divergent Expectations, and Silent Worries." *Social Science & Medicine*

of this thesis to dig deeply into this area, it must be acknowledged that any further research related to the historical or religious experience of Somali-Americans must be inter-disciplinary, so that it takes the previously mentioned research into account. Amina's story caused me to consider the ways in which religious communities in general, but specifically mosques and Islamic community centers, reach out to and support single parents. In a context where gender dynamics, and debates over gender roles and responsibilities, are at work in every aspect of community life, one must consider the ways Amina's life and experiences with her religious community were impacted by not having a father present. In the cases of all the other narrative participants, while the influence of the mother is noted, it was the father who set the course for how the family initially navigated both American culture/society and the family's interaction with American Muslim communities.

While the offer to discuss attitudes and perceptions of marriage opened the door to talking with Amina, her story, more so than the others, led me to probe further into the underlying issues and challenges facing Muslim Americans that impact those very perceptions. Despite the inability to prove it, the reader must consider how Amina's lack of exposure to Islam outside of a Somali context, and lack of interaction with a diverse Muslim community, has shaped her experience and current engagement with her religion, as well as her attitudes and opinions regarding marriage. From a demographic perspective, Somalis are often isolated from other Muslim communities and do not have the same rates of education and affluence as other Muslim Americans.<sup>382</sup> The American classroom, be it public or in a private Islamic school, has provided the first encounters

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(1982), 71(2), 353–361. Pavlish, Noor and Brandt describe these difference as “discordant health beliefs.” They go on to conclude that the Somali viewpoint on mental health is that these are primarily, “spiritual issues that require spiritual explanations.” Discordant health beliefs more often than not, result in misunderstandings that leave both patients and physicians frustrated. This is far from an area the researcher would ever profess to have expertise in discussing. However, it is fascinating, and I look forward to continuing to investigate the way in which religiosity impacts views on health and state of well being. The article referenced here can be accessed online at:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2893335/>, Last accessed on November 21, 2015.

<sup>382</sup> Dunbar, Elizabeth. “Comparing the Somali Experience in Minnesota to other immigrant groups.” National Public Radio (2012). Available online at: <http://www.mprnews.org/story/2010/01/25/comparing-the-somali-experience-in-minnesota-to-other-immigrant-groups-of-immigrants->. Last accessed on March 24, 2015.

that many young Somali students and their families have ever had with “other” Muslims. It has provided exposure to differences between cultural interpretations of Islam.<sup>383</sup>

As opposed to the other narrative participants, the diversity within Amina’s friend group has mostly been non-Muslims, and Amina has relegated her religious identity to the private sphere when she is outside her native community. This is in contrast to Nadia, Kasim, and Mohammed, who have all broadened their friend groups as they have reached adulthood, but this broadening has mostly meant a diversity of Muslims from ethnic and cultural backgrounds other than their own.<sup>384</sup> In Amina’s life, her friend group has broadened, but her sense of Muslim community has not. She has determined that marrying a Muslim is “highly unlikely.” While Nadia, Kasim, and Mohammed all agreed, as did the vast majority of survey respondents, that marrying someone with a compatible level of commitment to Islam is essential, Amina does not agree. She is not sure she would want to marry another Muslim even if there were encouraging prospects. A few months after Amina’s interview, she and her boyfriend proceeded with moving in together, a decision she identified as providing her with “security and comfort,” but one she will definitely not be sharing with her family.

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<sup>383</sup> While tensions exist, there have been concerted efforts by local mosques and other Islamic advocacy groups to focus their efforts on breaking down barriers between Muslim youth. The hope is that if young Muslims can create friendships with Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds than their own at school, this will result in thoughtful conversations at home. Edward Curtis argues that the experience of Muslim refugees in the United States raise important questions about what it means to be American for Muslims and non-Muslims alike. When young Muslims increasingly interact with, befriend, and eventually marry Muslims from ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds different than their own, what unites them is their shared religion, which does not diminish other aspects of identity, but does seem to super-cede them. It is for these reasons that I intentionally present the narratives of Muslims in Minnesota from a variety of ethnic traditions. Though Somali Muslims are quickly becoming a majority, to elevate their experience would neglect the reality that their expression of Islam is being shaped, and at times, changed by their interactions with Muslims whose heritage is tied to the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and even Europe.

<sup>384</sup> For Mohammed, Nadia, and Kasim, their closest circle of friends is remarkably diverse. While Nadia and Kasim are Arab and Mohammed is Sudanese, they all see Islam as superseding their culture and ethnicity and were much more pointed about drawing distinctions between Islam and cultural/ethnic influences. Kasim told a story that helped illustrate his claim that he and his friends actively try to separate their religious practice from cultural influence. When he was president of the University of Minnesota’s Muslim Student Association chapter, he was gently confronted by another staff member who felt that their activities reflected too much of an Arab influence and that it was isolating some members of the campus Muslim community. Kasim agreed that this was probably true, and as a result, certain activities that had been planned by the MSA were instead taken over by the Al-Madinah Cultural Center, the student group referenced by Kasim that, while also popular with many Muslim students (such as Nadia and Mohammed), states as its goal to celebrate culture and ethnic heritage.



After interviews were concluded, Amina wanted to follow up and clarify some of her comments. It was not uncommon for all participants to, in hindsight, ask to elucidate certain experiences or perspectives they offered that might frame Islam or their particular ethnicity negatively. Amina shared some of these concerns but was more disquieted by the possibility that she may have misrepresented her community and her family.

I want to make clear that I think my culture is beautiful. But that doesn't mean I don't think it's flawed. I like the emphasis on unity and charity. Those are two main things. I fully believe in the concept of community. The ummah matters. That idea of community support. It matters. Just because I haven't found it, doesn't mean others can't. But I also want to clear up what I said about God. I want to say that I still believe in God. That may not always have come across when we were talking. And this is what I am trying to work out. I'm in a process. I feel like my religion is totally in flux right now. But I want to say that I am not giving up on God.

### **5.12 *Shared Experience Model: Approaching Amina Through an Interfaith Pedagogy***

In this final section, I will demonstrate how I would utilize Amina's story in one of my courses by using the *shared experience* model. As with the previous chapter, I will provide an overview of how this application is *relational* and what that requires of the reader. I will explain why I label this approach to the reading as a lens of *shared experience*, and how the Interfaith competencies of *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* can be developed in the reader when framed clearly. I will describe how I would apply my pedagogical approach to the reading with students by providing questions inspired by Interfaith theory and how I would process with students in the classroom. The difference here is that I have constructed the lesson as occurring after the reader has completed their *shared experience* exercise with the narratives of Nadia and Kasim. The questions asked and the written work required of the student demonstrate a necessary higher level of thinking and self-investigation. This lesson is

the second stride towards practicing skills that will help the student begin to consider their own narrative identity. What follows allows the reader to build on the foundation established in the previous lesson.

### **5.12.a Pedagogical Application (Guide for the Reader)**

The *shared experience* method is based on a *relational* approach to reading another's story.<sup>385</sup> While you are to take a posture of listening as you hear from Amina, a *relational* approach means you should intentionally try to consider what it might be like to be hearing her personally tell you her story. How would your attitude towards listening change if you were to imagine her seated across from you? Be reminded that listening to another's story is a necessary starting point to recognizing that they are human just like you. Listening requires intention on your part. As a part of this intention, please consider the golden rule of conversation - Listen to others as we would be listened to. Respectfully question and challenge others as you would be questioned and challenged.<sup>386</sup>

As you read (and listen) to Amina's story the first time, what *shared experiences* with Amina do you identify? While you may recognize certain factors like life stage, geographic location, and personal interests, recall that *shared experiences* are also things we all have in common as humans - emotions, economic status, attitudes and desires.

As you begin your second reading of Amina's narrative, you will be more intentionally seeking to engage by considering your responses to the questions provided. These questions are informed by two key interfaith capacities, *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* which I will define and explain here.

### **5.12.b Appreciative Knowledge**

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<sup>385</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 13-14.

<sup>386</sup> Robert J. Nash, DeMethra LaSha Bradley, and Arthur W. Chickering (eds.) *How to Talk About Hot Topics on Campus,: From Polarization to Moral Conversation*, 20.

*Appreciative knowledge* asks you to recognize the contributions of other traditions, have a sympathetic understanding of the distinctive history and commitments of other traditions, and develop ways of working with and serving other communities.<sup>387</sup>

As you re-read, I will ask you to consider how Amina’s story has helped you to build both a “general orientation and substantive knowledge base?” Are you willing to seek “the admirable, and the life giving rather than the deficits, the problems, and the ugliness?” How have these stories allowed you to “recognize the contributions of traditions and/or highlighting of exemplary figures” How have the stories helped you to develop a “sympathetic understanding of where a differing religious view is coming from?” Finally, how could appreciative knowledge help to you to build a base “that allows you to work effectively with a different community?”

### **5.12.c Narrative Imagination**

In order to practice a *narrative Imagination* you will need to cultivate an imagination which gives the “ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.” As you re-read Amina’s narrative, please start from considering what you can learn from Amina (*appreciative knowledge*), and then how you can develop a more thoughtful position of what life would be like if we were to imagine being in her position. This is practicing a *narrative imagination*. I ask that you be prepared to critically examine your own beliefs. This is not meant to be a hostile interrogation but rather a reminder to ask yourself the same questions you may have for Amina. Second, be reminded that individuals - Amina and you - tend to see themselves not just as individuals but as “human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern.” Treat Amina as you would your neighbor.

### **5.12.d Questions for Consideration: Identity**

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<sup>387</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 114.

1. Amina is candid about the trauma in her early life, and her struggles with feelings of loneliness and isolation. What was your reaction to this level of transparency?
2. How does her approach to her religious identity as a Muslim relate or differ to what has been expressed by Nadia and Kasim?
3. As Amina entered high school, she began to create two separate worlds for herself. How did this make life both easier and more difficult? Why did she find herself increasingly drawn to Somali friends?
4. College was major transition for Amina. She noted she “was anxious, yet I felt peace.” Did this make you reflect on your own transition to college? Can you relate?
5. Recall Amina’s comment that she maintains a dual identity and that this is a constant struggle. How has this caused Amina to consider her own means of interpreting and defining what Islam means in her life?
6. How do you think Amina’s socio-economic status growing up has shaped who she is and wants to be?
7. Amina chooses not to wear hijab while Nadia does. How was the decision an act of spiritual formation for both women?
8. What does Amina need for self-preservation?
9. What words would you use to describe Amina? Why?

#### **5.12.e Questions for Consideration: Family Life and Community Obligation**

1. Amina contends that most of her memories of her father are constructed, and that he has been memorialized with a ‘heroic legacy.’ How does her characterization relate to other impressions she has of life in Somalia as told to her by those in her family and community?
2. Contrast Amina’s initial move to Minnesota with her early years in Erie, PA.
3. What *shared experiences* can you identify between Amina and Nadia when it comes to their relationships with their mothers?
4. Are there *shared experiences* to be identified between their mothers?

5. Kasim, Nadia, and Amina all affirm the importance of community. How do they define community differently? What do they share in common with regards to their perceived obligations to their communities?
6. Amina struggles to balance self-preservation with the pressures of family and community.
7. For Amina, how does commitment to Islam function as a form of respect for her mother?

#### **5.12.f Questions for Consideration: Gender**

1. Amina self-describes as a feminist. What does this mean for her? How does she defend herself against those who argue she cannot be a feminist and a Muslim?
2. Amina describes both her mother and her mentor, Molly, as role models. What might these women have in common were they to meet and discuss their hopes for Amina's life?
3. What do you think of Amina's assessment of her mother's view of the purpose of college?
4. Do you think Amina would face the same challenges in her family and community environment if she were male?

#### **5.12.g Questions for Consideration: Marriage**

1. How does Amina describe compatibility? How do you think her life experiences have shaped her expectations of what she wants in a spouse?
2. Why does Amina place such high value on diversity? How might she respond to Nadia and Kasim's preference to marry someone who shares the same ethnic and cultural background?
3. How does diversity continue to be an influence in Amina's life throughout her story? How has this created both benefits and challenges for her regarding her relationship with her boyfriend whom she intends to marry?
4. What attitudes and expectations towards marriage does Amina share with Nadia and Kasim?

#### **5.12.h Broader Thematic Questions**

1. Much of Amina's Somali identity is rooted in memory - some hers, but mostly from family and community members. Do you perceive memories as being more helpful or harmful to Amina? How does her story make you consider the role of memories and their influence in your own story?
2. Amina comments that she never made the choice to "believe" in Islam. What does it mean to make your faith your own? What influence, if any, do you think American culture has on the way you view this?

3. Amina says that her study of Sociology “broke her world open” and that her worldview changed as she applied what she was learning. Has your education and course of study had a similar influence? Has it changed/challenged any of your relationships with family or friends?
4. Have you met others who adhere to the same religion as you but are from another ethnic or cultural tradition? How has this challenged your conception of what it means to be \_\_\_\_\_?
5. How are religious beliefs tied to family honor? Should they be?

### **5.12.i Pedagogical Application (Instruction)**

In contrast to the instruction for Nadia and Kasim, I would first assign students to do an initial reading with the instructions to consider what *shared experiences* they can identify with Amina. This would be in the form of a general list - informal notes that first come to mind as the student reads. Now that they are more familiar with the language and concepts I am seeking to teach, they are ready to have their first read be more structured. During the next class session, we would review *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*.

Students would then be given the set of questions for second reading of Amina’s narrative. These would differ from those for Nadia and Kasim in two ways. First, several of the questions for Nadia and Kasim include a clear self-reflection directive. After completing all components of the lesson on Nadia and Amina, students have now had significant practice with how to turn questions back to themselves and articulate answers. For this reason, Amina’s questions do not have the self-reflection questions included. This step of analysis should be implied, and I will remind students of this component. Second, Amina’s questions ask the reader to consider Amina’s story in light of Nadia and Kasim’s. As one of the questions suggests - they are to be in conversation with each other. The goal is not to draw black and white comparisons but rather to recognize the complexity of “living out” religion and belief in daily life as each draws

their own conclusions.<sup>388</sup> They begin to recognize religious commitment is in a constant negotiation, or “faith in flux,” which is a phrase I use with students to describe this state. This will allow for a richer reading of Amina’s story but also an opportunity to thoughtfully revisit Nadia and Kasim, possibly with new insights. Again, I would ask them to review their written response and rank the five questions they found to be the most compelling and would be willing to openly share.

Students would return to the next class session prepared to share their responses in pre-assigned small groups. Following the previous pattern, students would work together to categorize their questions and responses. However, I would give them the challenge of using the words they had used to describe Amina (question #8 under the Identity heading) as their guide for thematizing the questions. This nudges their thinking in a different direction and requires more in-depth analysis and conversation. When students have completed this thematizing, I would have each group write their list of themes on the front board so each group’s findings and emphases can be compared. We would gather altogether and a designated spokesperson from each group would briefly explain their theme choices.

After this discussion, we would return to the definitions of *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*. Instead of the previous narrative’s exercise of labeling the questions according to *appreciative knowledge (AK)* or *narrative imagination (NI)*, the students are now prepared to be more autonomous in their responses. I would provide them with the instruction to spend ten minutes engaging in free-write (with access to their materials) responses to the following two question prompts:

***Appreciative Knowledge:*** *How does Amina’s story and experience expand your understanding or knowledge of Islam? Did it challenge or reinforce anything you feel*

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<sup>388</sup> Patel, *Interfaith Leadership*, 70.



*you already knew? What can you appreciate about how she discusses her relationship with Islam? What do you admire about Amina?*

***Narrative Imagination:*** *Does knowing a bit about Amina's life as a child and adolescent help you understand her better as an adult? Did you relate to Amina in any way? What questions did Amina ask herself that have also occurred to you?*

After completing this writing exercise, students would exchange their response with one other partner, read each other's responses, and then discuss. The objective is for the students to see that each individual is going to bring their own experiences and values to the reading of another's story. They are moving beyond identifying commonalities or differences to developing a more sympathetic understanding and appreciation for not only the subject of the narrative but also for their fellow classmates as they share their own experiences. In the words of Nussbaum, they are becoming a more 'intelligent reader' of the narrative.<sup>389</sup> They are also beginning to understand that they too, have a story. This becomes a first attempt at constructing their own narrative identity. This recognition of personal story will become the starting point for engagement with the final narrative of Mohammed.

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<sup>389</sup> Nussbaum *Cultivating Humanity*, 11.

## CHAPTER 6

### MOHAMMED'S DESTINY

#### 6.1 Introduction

In this final narrative, the reader will meet Mohammed, a single young Muslim man who is trying to determine if the time has come to settle down and start to think about getting married. Raised on three continents, Mohammed has lived a very full life for only being in his late twenties. Islam has always been Mohammed's source of strength and security, and he believes that all of his experiences and opportunities are part of Allah's plan for working out his destiny. He sees marriage as a non-negotiable part of his future, but he is cautious and wants to have his life in order before he finds a spouse. He has determined that he is taking the necessary steps to "prepare for marriage." Mohammed argues that the better he knows himself, the better spouse he will be when the time comes and he feels ready. Mohammed wants to please his Sudanese family but believes he has found his home in the United States, and he is well aware that this has shaped his views on marriage. However, he is not sure if the right girl will be someone from the U.S. or from "back home."

Mohammed's narrative continues the investigation of how factors such as gender, religious commitment, culture, family, and community all influence a young Muslim's daily life. However, Mohammed's thoughtful and methodical approach to how he conducts his life provides insight into the very personal and reverent commitment to Islam, family, and community some Muslims undergo as a part of their adult formation. For Mohammed, marriage preparation is a part of religious piety. He also views it as a part of spiritual formation. While all of the narratives in this paper demonstrate that there are multiple means of embracing and expressing Islam, Mohammed engages his religious commitment with such sincerity that it must be noted there is something distinct about his experience. Like Amina, Mohammed often feels caught between two cultures. Yet, while Amina attributes this struggle mainly to her family and ethnic community, Mohammed is quick to articulate that the pressure he feels to appease multiple parties is self-inflicted. Is it the case that Mohammed has set too a high bar for

himself regarding how to balance the influences of both his American and Sudanese backgrounds? Mohammed argues that Islam is the scale that can balance these two, and that the more he leans into his Islamic practice, the more he feels secure that he is on, as he says, “the right path.” However, his parents, brothers, and many of his friends feel that the seriousness with which he takes life is resulting in a holding pattern from which Mohammed cannot seem to extricate himself. He agrees that he could be described as a “man with a plan,” but he wants it to be clear that he does not see himself, but rather Allah, as the architect.

Mohammed is a deep thinker. His characterization of his religious beliefs and how they influence his decisions are often complex and descriptive. While never using this label himself, his story presents as an illustration for how to articulate one’s narrative identity. Prior practice with applying the *shared experience* model to previous narratives will make engagement with Mohammed’s story more accessible. As Interfaith Studies competencies, *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* are now familiar to the reader, Mohammed’s narrative provides a final opportunity to advance these skills, further equipping the reader to consider how to frame their own narrative identity.

## **6.2 Chapter Structure**

This chapter is structured by telling Mohammed’s story through the research collected through face-to-face interviews, email exchanges, text exchanges, and other forms of expression. Mohammed is contemplative, and very articulate. He prefers to have ample time to gather his thoughts and respond. Semi-structured interviews with Mohammed often lasted up to twice the amount of time as other interviews, despite the fact that the same set of questions was used as the structure of the interview. Mohammed was also the most likely to send along articles, follow-up comments, links to Muslim authors and speakers he enjoys, and other materials via email in between face-to-face interactions. However, Mohammed prefers to discuss things in person, and when contacted for a follow-up call once research was mostly gathered and written, Mohammed wanted to meet again as opposed to emailing.

Mohammed's story will be told through his own words as much as possible. In addition, because Mohammed would so frequently quote hadith during interviews, or would reference the podcasts he was listening to, or the books/articles/websites/blogs he was reading, inclusion of these materials as a part of telling his story is more prevalent than with the previous narratives of Nadia, Kasim, or Amina. Following up on Mohammed's "sources" by reading, listening, or sometimes even visiting became an integral part of writing this narrative. My intention is to also expose the reader to the world of Mohammed by using these materials throughout the content of the narrative. Crafting Mohammed's story has been at times the most straightforward, and at other moments the most complex of all of the interview participants. In terms of access, Mohammed wanted to be an "open book," and there was no question he was unwilling or uncomfortable to answer. It was relatively easy to investigate his world because he has so carefully constructed it. He does associate with a specific mosque, and even serves in a recurring volunteer role there. He leads a markedly disciplined life for a single man his age, and it was not difficult to imagine a week in the life of Mohammed because there is a repetition to it that is discernible and accessible.

While accessibility to Mohammed made things easier, his earnestness and intentionality created an increased sense of pressure to make certain to get the story "right;" to do his personality justice. To understand Mohammed, one has to pay careful attention to his early years and his family's efforts to transition successfully to life in the United States. The chapter will begin with his early life in Saudi Arabia and Sudan, before transitioning to his life in the United States. Mohammed is able to pinpoint what he considers to be his most formative experiences and life stages to this point, and because of this, his chapter is more easily organized into specific subject matter, such as religious commitment, and peer-pressure towards marriage. The chapter will conclude with a brief summary and then analysis of the themes and new questions that emerged from Mohammed's story.

At the conclusion of the chapter I will provide the reader with the final administration of the *shared experience* model for use with a narrative. The reader is now not only familiar with the core competencies of *shared experience*, *appreciative knowledge*, and *narrative imagination*, but now has substantial practice with application.

As a part of the previous lesson the reader was asked to contemplate and present in writing how they developed a sympathetic understanding and appreciation for Amina by including their own *shared experiences* in their response. In this third implementation of the *shared experience* model, the reader will begin from a more advanced position, and the questions and sequencing of assessment are designed to establish a bridge to the final objective of developing one's own narrative identity.

### 6.3 Mohammed: *Sacrificial One*<sup>390</sup>

Mohammed left early on the day he was to be interviewed. He does not like to be late. He chose a coffee shop right on the edge of downtown St. Paul. A local chain, the coffee shop is always busy, and finding a seat can be difficult, let alone a spot for two where you can actually hear one another. Mohammed is wearing dark jeans, a fleece pullover, snow boots and a knit cap. It is February in Minnesota, and it is very cold. Mohammed is quick to get out of his seat and offer a smile and friendly greeting of “*Assalam Alaikum!*”<sup>391</sup> He does not extend his hand, preferring to wave as a means of expressing warmth in order to maintain the physical boundaries he sets between himself and members of the opposite gender. Mohammed declines the offer for coffee or tea and it is not discernible if this is because he does not care for anything or because he is being gracious, which is a characteristic that exudes from Mohammed. He reluctantly accepts a bottle of water with a laugh and a “if you insist” but notes this was not needed.

In 2007, Mohammed was the president of the Muslim Student Association at the University of Minnesota. After being sent an email inquiry inviting any willing Muslim students to come to Bethel University and speak about their lives and experiences as religious individuals on a large, secular campus, Mohammed replied within an hour that not only would he come, he would bring three other students with him. The Bethel

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<sup>390</sup> While the name Mohammed is an alias, the interview subject's real name means, “to sacrifice.” Mohammed is the second of three sons. As sons are highly valued in Sudanese culture, his mother and father gave him this name because they considered a second son to be such a blessing from Allah, that they dedicated Mohammed back to Allah for his service.

<sup>391</sup> This Islamic greeting of peace never fails to make me feel accepted and I awkwardly stumble through the customary return of Mohammed's extension of peace by stating, “Alaikum Wassalam!”

students were captivated by Mohammed’s story of his early life in the Sudan and then arrival in the United States. Later, one of those students would observe that while Mohammed was a really nice guy, “it was the way he articulated his belief in God, and how that belief motivates his daily decisions that I think will have a lasting impact on me.”<sup>392</sup>

### **6.3.a Mohammed (Background)**

Mohammed was born in Saudi Arabia in 1986. He has strong memories of “what Americans refer to as the First Gulf War.” He remembers playing in his family’s small yard, surrounded by high concrete walls that were good for kicking a football against, while the sound of missiles could be heard overhead. His father, born and raised in Sudan, had been living in Saudi Arabia, working for the telephone company, even before meeting and marrying his mother, a second cousin who is also from Sudan. His father studied French and Arabic in college and wanted to find a better opportunity upon graduation than returning to his hometown of Khartoum.

Mohammed is the second of three brothers, all born in Saudi Arabia. It was a normal part of his early years to spend months at a time with his extended family in Sudan, accompanied by his mother and brothers, while his father remained working in Saudi Arabia. He remarks that though Saudi Arabia felt “normal,” Sudan was always referred to as “back home.” His mother decided to move the kids back to Sudan permanently when Mohammed started school.

We made it three years in Sudan before Mom decided she wanted to move us back to be with Dad in Saudi Arabia. We didn’t have any extended family in Saudi Arabia and I think most of our Sudanese family did not approve of our leaving Sudan. I had one uncle who had left Sudan to attend medical school in Russia but that was more forgivable because it was believed he would come back.

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<sup>392</sup> Anonymous comment on student response survey at semester’s end.

### 6.3.b Coming to America

In 1995, Mohammed's father told his mother that he was taking the necessary steps to move the family to the United States and that, *inshallah*, they would be there by 1996.<sup>393</sup> Mohammed recalls that he and his elder brother were flexible kids and that they had learned to "just roll with the punches." He considers that the move was much more difficult for his mother.

She's always been really supportive of Dad, and to be fair, Dad can be pretty restless. But I know this one was tough. Saudi Arabia didn't feel that far away from Sudan. She could go back to Sudan whenever she wanted. I think she knew it wasn't going to be quite so easy with a move to the U.S. While we didn't have any family in Saudi Arabia, we had connected with a fairly large community of Sudanese families and we had become close friends with our immediate neighbors, an Egyptian family with kids our age.

Mohammed's father had settled on Minnesota because, like Nadia, Kasim, and Amina, he had an uncle who had recently moved there and had found work and a stable living situation. Mohammed's family had to go through the lottery system as they were not considered refugees, "like my Kenyan and Somali friends." Mohammed recalls that when he and his brothers would gripe about the move, before-during-and after, his father had a particularly effective tactic.

He told us that in 1996, two million immigrants had applied to come the United States. Only fifty-thousand of these immigrants were chosen. Then he would point at each of us individually, pausing for effect. We were often reminded of these statistics by both Mom and Dad, when we needed, as my Dad would put it, 'a little motivation.'

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<sup>393</sup> *Inshallah*-“If Allah wills it.”

Mohammed recalls that the plan had been to stay in Minnesota for around two weeks, and then the family was going to move on to California where Mohammed's uncle had two brothers who had agreed to help the family out. However, two weeks turned into two months and the family decided to try and make a home in St. Paul. Mohammed notes that his father is "very adept" and he remembers that his father moved quickly to action when they decided to stay. He treated the transition to America no differently than his previous moves; getting a job within days, a reliable car, and a home for his family to rent near what he had learned was a "good school" for immigrant kids. Mohammed and his older brother started school in January and he remembers that the climate was a "huge transition."

My brother and I had to wait outside for the bus and I remember thinking that it just wasn't possible that a human could be so cold. When we started school, we lived at my uncle's house and when we moved into our new house we had to switch buses. Well, the first day my brother forgot and got on the wrong bus. I was scared when I did not see him on the bus with me but I didn't have any way to try and tell the driver he was missing. My brother was totally distressed when he figured it out. He didn't speak English so he couldn't tell the bus driver. He decided to just get off at the first stop that he could. Well, he actually wandered into a small grocery store that just happened to be owned by a Sudanese man! What are the chances of that? The owner was able to comfort my brother, call the school and speak to the principal, and then arrange for my brother to be picked up. My parents were so relieved. I remember my Dad saying that clearly Allah was watching over us. They were shocked at how kind the school was in working the issue out and making sure my brother got home safely.<sup>394</sup>

Despite the positive ending of the previous story, the language barrier would prove to be the most daunting challenge for Mohammed's family. He observed that in

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<sup>394</sup> In each of the narratives in this thesis there seems to be one story shared by each of the interview participants that center around a small, yet significant random act of kindness from a stranger that offered a spiritual sense of reassurance to the families of these young Muslims. Some literally called them "lifelines."



Saudi Arabia, the only issue had been that his Sudanese Arabic had a distinctly different accent. He was placed, by the school, into the ESL (English as a Second Language) program track for part of each day. Mohammed recalls that he was immediately exposed to what he calls “extreme diversity.”

My ESL class had kids from India, two girls who had just moved from Cambodia, and several Hmong students. I had never heard of Cambodia and definitely didn't know what it meant to be Hmong. I was most intrigued by one of the kids from India because I found out, and I don't remember how I found this out, but that he was Muslim. This was fascinating to me. At that time, I didn't know anybody who wasn't Arab or African who was Muslim. Most of the kids in my class were at about the same level as me and I remember I felt pretty comfortable right from the start.

### **6.3.c Settling In**

Mohammed thrived in the structure of an American elementary school.<sup>395</sup> He had never had a female teacher, nor had he ever been in a mixed gender classroom. His teacher was “extremely nice,” and a “fantastic teacher when it came to the way she engaged us.” He could not believe how kind she was to the students. His previous experience in school was characterized by an atmosphere of rigidity. He recalls, “In Saudi Arabia and Sudan, you were there to learn. You weren't supposed to speak. If you step out of line, you had better believe you are going to get punished.” Mohammed shook his head as he considered this memory. He remarked that it strikes him as both funny and sad now to consider that some cultures think the only way for kids to learn is through harsh instruction. He says that, “elementary was good, but it was a very focused, and exhausting time.”

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<sup>395</sup> Mohammed attended Battle Creek Elementary and Middle School. This school has a solid reputation for helping students from immigrant backgrounds to acclimate and thrive. In 2015, 40% of the student population was multi-lingual, one of the highest rates in the state of Minnesota. See, <http://battlecreekel.spps.org/about>. accessed January 13, 2015.

Mohammed's parents were also learning English and they followed the instructions of Mohammed's teacher to "push reading at home, for all of us, as much as possible!" Mohammed's father had learned a fair amount of English growing up, as had his mother. He admits that certain adjustments were easiest for his younger brother who was only five.

He was successful in school right away because he was just a kindergartner. He absorbed everything. I would go to school, come home, we would eat, and then it was homework or reading, or *reviewing* homework with my parents until bedtime. I mean every night. It was as much for my parents as it was for us. Dad worked with me on reading and mom worked with me on math and science.

Mohammed's mother had a degree in Chemistry from a school in Sudan and she enrolled in some science courses once Mohammed and his brothers were settled in school. After a year she found a job at a children's hospital. This clearly makes Mohammed proud. "It was her first and last job here in Minnesota. She loved it there."

When asked to consider further how the initial move presented challenges for maintaining a sense of culture, Mohammed asks to be able to think for a minute before responding. He recalls that when the whole family started to become more proficient in English, his father started to grow concerned the boys would lose their Arabic. The family decided they would continue to use English at home, but all of their religious practice would be conducted in Arabic.

I would say that more important than maintaining Sudanese culture was my parent's commitment to maintaining our Islamic values. Back home, you kind of take religion for granted. There are fifteen mosques within walking distance of your house. Everyone around you is Muslim. But here, when you're a religious minority, your eyes are wide open and there is a need for your religion to become even more a part of you.<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>396</sup> When asked if "back home" means Sudan or Saudi Arabia, Mohammed laughed and said, "Sudan. But it's the same deal in Saudi Arabia."

Mohammed does not think that he and his older brother ever had issues with retaining their culture. As he was ten, and his older brother twelve when they moved, he notes they had “strong memories.”

I don't feel like Islam came up too much. For the first two years, nobody really raised any questions. I mean, when you are ten, you are not thinking about how the move you have just made is going to affect your religion. You are more worried about what type of food you have to eat, and as I said, getting on the right bus. We still tease my brother about that. It's only recently I've started to kind of think back and evaluate my experience. I certainly wasn't analyzing it then. It was just...my life.

When his family first arrived, there were only four mosques in Minneapolis/St. Paul but the number has tripled over the past decade.

The largest mosque was in Columbia Heights. They had the most programming, and kind of the loudest 'voice' in the Minnesota ummah, I would say. There was one by the Holy Land Deli in Minneapolis that we would attend sometimes, especially for Friday prayers. But my family has mainly attended a very small, diverse mosque in North Minneapolis. There are Egyptians, Palestinians, Iraqis, some Somalis, and Syrians.<sup>397</sup>

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<sup>397</sup> The Holy Land Deli, referenced by Mohammed, is an icon for both Muslim and Arab communities in Minneapolis. Started in the 1980's by a Palestinian immigrant (via Kuwait), who came to Minnesota for college, the deli has morphed into a large restaurant and production operation that sells Middle Eastern food products all over the state. The owner, Wajdi Wadi, is something of a local celebrity, known throughout the business community and the recipient of several awards for leadership, entrepreneurship, and community service. See, <http://holylandbrand.com/history/> . Last accessed on August 10, 2015. While the Holy Land does not just cater to Muslims, it is a popular gathering spot, as well as caterer for events and weddings. Most recently I was eating at the Holy Land early in the evening. The restaurant was mostly empty but the second the sun went down, it was as if a full bus of customers descended on the deli. I had neglected to remember it was Ramadan. The store was overrun within minutes

Mohammed recalls that there was one Egyptian family that his whole family became particularly close to during their first years in Minnesota that they met through the mosque.

The father in this family had been involved in the mosque for a long time, and all of the kids in the family were born and raised here. We basically latched onto them and became very good friends. Our moms were close; our dads were close. We kids were all close! It was so comforting.

Mohammed explains that this friendship was very healthy for his family, because while they felt a connection to other Sudanese immigrants, they were at a different life stage.

Through my uncle we had become connected to the broader Sudanese community in Minnesota. For some reason, and I don't know why, we were all in St. Paul while it seems like the majority of Muslims from other backgrounds were in Minneapolis. Most of these Sudanese families had younger kids. We seemed to be an "old" family, and people would even refer to us this way! Which was kind of weird. I mean my oldest brother was only twelve.

Mohammed concludes that, over time, as Sudanese families became more affluent, many, especially those with younger children, began to migrate further away from the cities into the suburbs. Mohammed shrugs his shoulders. "I guess they wanted the things everybody seems to want. More room, yards for their kids to play in, smaller schools."<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> Years ago, when I interviewed families for my MA thesis, which related to education choices for Muslim families, several expressed a specific reason for moving with their young children to suburbs. For families with children born in the US, the belief was that they would be treated better in suburban school environments. One woman I interviewed recalled that on her son's first day of school in St. Paul, he was sent home with a packet of information for ESL (English as a Second Language) programming. She said she and her husband laugh about this now but were deeply upset by it at the time. Their son was born in Minnesota, and only spoke English. However, she acknowledged that their district had many immigrant families and because they had, in her words, "foreign sounding names" her son was lumped into this category. By moving to the suburbs, she believed they were recognized and categorized based on their

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class status. When her younger children started school in their new suburban district the family had a different experience. “No ESL packet,” she concluded.

#### 6.4 Mohammed's Understanding of Islam is Expanded

In his elementary years, Islam was taught to Mohammed in what he describes as the “typical way, I think.” He describes this as mostly being taught a series of “dos” and “don’ts” and that this was also the way his parents would draw distinctions between American society and Islamic practice. “They would point to examples, say dating, and say, ‘Okay they do that here, and we don’t.’ Or things like, ‘here’s what they eat, here’s what we eat. Be careful in the lunchroom.’ My uncle was a big help because he gave us a lot of good advice.” Mohammed stops and laughs. “Okay, I *think* it was ‘good’ advice.”

By the time he reached high school, Mohammed had been in the U.S. for nearly five years and he felt like he was coming into his own. He attended a racially, ethnically, and socio-economically diverse high school in St. Paul. At Harding High, he had many friends, including his older brother, and two cousins. He describes his high school experience as “fantastic.” He did well academically, and began to get involved in extracurricular activities. He was in band for his first two years, playing trombone. He also played American soccer and ran track. When Mohammed considers his friend group, he identifies that the majority were Hmong.

From start to finish, from elementary through high school, the majority of my friends were Hmong, no question. It’s really interesting for me to sit back and think about that now. I mean, culturally there were very few similarities. But for sure the one thing that I relate to is that they were real good about family values. Family was super important to them. And they are amazing badminton players. Nobody ever goes to the basketball games at Harding; it is all about the badminton. The gym is full of badminton award banners! If that doesn’t tell you a school is mostly immigrant kids, I don’t know what does.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>399</sup> One in three students in the St. Paul Public Schools are of Hmong background. Women’s badminton is now a recognized high school sport in Minnesota, and all but 2 of the schools that offer women’s badminton are in the metropolitan communities of Minneapolis and St. Paul. While there is no identifiable cultural connection between badminton and Hmong heritage, it has become what one local Hmong leader calls a, “racial comfort zone.” He also suggested that badminton is popular because it is relatively cheap sport to take up, and many schools in St. Paul now offer badminton in middle school. Retrieved at: <http://minnesota.cbslocal.com/2014/05/09/a-cultural-connection-with-badminton/>. Last accessed on January 14, 2015.

Mohammed's high school became even more diverse when a significant number of refugees from Somali arrived in the summer of 2003 between his sophomore and junior year.

The Somali population seemed to me to be pretty small in St. Paul but much larger in Minneapolis. But this changed in my junior year. The first thing they did was establish a *jumaa* (Friday prayer) in the school. It was amazing. I had never really had that. They were so organized. They got themselves a room and had things approved by the principal. Muslim kids were given special passes to be excused from class and go pray. I give them a lot of credit. And that has kind of been their story. They get things set up really quickly and then other Muslims get to benefit from the changes.

Mohammed contends it would not have occurred to his family, despite the fact that they were actively practicing Muslims, to ask for an accommodation of the school. He is clear that this is not because he thinks the answer would have been "no" or that they were fearful in any way. Rather, he suggests that, as the minority, it was not comprehensible to him that exceptions would be made for someone like him.

Mohammed affirms that the increased presence of Somali Muslims in his school, which he claims was overall a positive change, did challenge his own concept of Muslim identity. He began to wonder if he had been too complacent, if he had too easily started to just relegate his religious self to his home or his weekend activities.

Towards the end of high school, because of those changes that came with the Somali community, there was a greater awareness of Muslims. Prior to that, there were only a few Muslims in my high school. And it is not like we were a group, you know. So for the first few years, I never thought much about Islam as a part of who I was at school. I remember there being some confusion for one of my teachers because I was Muslim but not Somali. And then there were

questions about if I had just recently become Muslim. It opened my eyes that maybe the non-Somali Muslims who were already well-established in Minnesota had not been as upfront about our Islam as we maybe could have been.

Mohammed's comments reveal a larger tension that can be observed in Muslim communities throughout Minnesota. As was discussed in Amina's narrative, the large influx of Somali immigrants coming to Minnesota in a relatively short period of time has created some unique challenges for Muslims of varying ethnic and cultural backgrounds who have expressed concern that Somali Muslims are not always careful to distinguish the differences between religious practice and culture.<sup>400</sup>

When Mohammed is asked if he perceived that there was increased scrutiny on Muslims in his school after 9/11, he starts by remembering exactly where he was on that day. He was in trigonometry class and his teacher stopped teaching when an announcement came over the speaker system to turn on the classroom television. He recalls that 9/11 pushed people to learn more about Islam, but he does not recall any distinguishable difference that it made in his own experience.<sup>401</sup> When asked if he recalls how it impacted his broader Muslim community, he does remember that the daughters of their closest Egyptian American friends had a more difficult time in school after 9/11.

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<sup>400</sup> Nadia told me that she is often mistaken for Somali because she wears a hijab. She concluded that she thinks many Minnesotans see Islam and Somali as synonymous and do not seem concerned with making a distinction. She told me a story of a time when her younger sister was working at a local bank as a teller. A customer in the drive-thru refused to be serviced by a "Somali." While this discriminatory comment was distressing in nature, regardless of the inaccuracy of the label, when her sister expressed that she was not Somali, the customer gestured to her hijab, then said with disinterested confusion, "Whatever!"

<sup>401</sup> It is worth considering if this seemingly insignificant impact 9/11 had on Mohammed's experience is related to the diversity at his school. Only 9% of Harding's student population is Caucasian, the majority is Asian-American and the rest are either African-American or of varying ethnic backgrounds. Mohammed is technically counted as African-American, though he finds this frustrating, as it is not a category that he feels reflects his experience. However, for those young Muslims I interviewed who attended suburban high schools, where the majority of students were of Caucasian backgrounds, their post 9/11 school experiences were more challenging. This was more acute for the females who chose to wear hijab in high school.



Now that you mention it, what I do remember was thinking that it was odd. I didn't get why it was harder for them because that wasn't my experience at all. Geez. Looking back now, I feel bad about that because I don't think I was sensitive to it. I guess I will attribute this to being a 'typical' high school guy. Or maybe even just a 'typical high schooler.' I certainly wasn't thinking about the fact it might be harder to be a girl for any reason, let alone a Muslim girl.

Mohammed puts his fists to his temples, and gently taps them simultaneously against his head, as if scolding himself. When asked if he perceives that aspects of life are harder for female Muslims in his friend group now, He nods vigorously. Though he will discuss this in more detail later, he points out that most of his female friends choose to wear *hijab*, and are much easier to identify. He suggests this alone creates more difficulty for them.

## **6.5 College Years and Beyond**

Mohammed was accepted to attend college at the University of Minnesota in 2004. His older brother had spent a few years in community college and would join Mohammed at the University. Mohammed was grateful to be starting together and mentions that having his brother aid him in the transition through this step into adulthood was helpful.

I wasn't sure what my major should be. I was leaning towards Architecture but it wasn't a sure thing. Starting in middle school and then carrying on into high school, I really loved drawing. Actually, this was something that connected me to Hmong friends. They were so talented at drawing. We were all into Japanese Anime. I would draw at school, and then I would come back home and draw some more. I never played video games. I would draw instead. I have always, even when I was young, had a love for constructing and putting things together. And I guess that kind of led me towards architecture.

Ultimately, Mohammed determined that architecture would involve several more years of school, and he was aware the job market for architects was saturated. "I want

to like my job, but I also want to be able to support a family and afford to give them a stable life. I will admit that I really like having a sense of security, and I didn't like the idea of struggling to find a job." Instead, he chose to study Math, which he states has more in common with his passion for drawing than may be evident at first glance. He laughs, though it is not initially clear, until asked to explain, why that is funny.

I was the worst Math student for most of my younger years. I mean, I did not get it at all. Then in my last year of high school, I took calculus. I don't know what happened but that class completely changed my perspective on Math and I fell in love with it. I think it had a lot to do with my teacher. I still remember her name. She just made the class what it was. I did really *really* well. And it almost seemed effortless. I felt really good about switching to Math. It was definitely the right fit.

### **6.5.a A More Personal Faith: The MSA and the AMCC**

In the last few years of high school, Mohammed's family lost touch with the Egyptian family with whom they been so close in their first few years in the United States. However, during the first week of university, Mohammed ran into his friend, who was one of the sons in the Egyptian family. They had not seen each other in years, but it was a very warm reunion. Mohammed asked his friend where he could pray the jumaa prayers on Fridays? His friend then told him about the Muslim Student Association on campus, as well as about the Al-Madinah Cultural Center, and how both had designated prayer spaces. Mohammed was not previously familiar with either of these organizations, but he decided to check them both out within his first month of attending the University. "From that moment, I had exposure to these support networks. From the first time I visited each, it was like...boom! Instant community."

Mohammed marks this as a significant period of growth in his life, one of both coming into adulthood, but also as being a new way of engaging his religious identity.<sup>402</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> For more information on the Muslim Student Association see, Yuskaev, Timur. "Muslim Public Intellectuals and Global Muslim Thought" in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam* eds. J Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge University Press, 2013) 266-277. In the early stages the MSA was a broad effort by Muslims of all possible orientations. According to Yuskaev, in addition to Pan-Islamic values, what united early members of the MSA was, "a rhetorical opposition to western secularism." He goes on to observe, "this was a marker of distinction from the larger society, which inspired religiously

While he had always valued Islam, and saw it as central to his life, the practice of his religion was not something he considered to be fulfilling, or even enjoyable. He credits his friends and his experiences with both of these Muslim campus groups to be what opened him up to a new way of thinking about and expressing his Islamic beliefs.

I felt like now I was a little bit more complete. I became treasurer during sophomore year and then was president of the MSA during my fourth *and* fifth year. When I ask myself, ‘when have I been the best Muslim?’ I always think about my years in college and the MSA and AMCC. The MSA would hold study circles and a monthly program where we would go to a local *masjid* and stay overnight. We did not really need to have a scholar in our group. We would just designate someone to prepare to give a short talk and then we would all discuss it after. These things all drew me closer to the religion.

Mohammed expresses deep fondness for this time of communal connection and learning. It was his first exposure to the process of taking charge of his religious learning. He states, “to me, that is exactly how Islam is supposed to be practiced. In a group. It breeds accountability. It makes you feel like you belong, like you matter. Like you’ll be missed if you are not there!” Yet, Mohammed was clear that what he thinks made this work so well was that there was a level playing field amongst his peers. They were all “in it together,” and no one presented themselves as a religious authority over the others. Mohammed’s affection for this time in his life illuminates the difficulty for many young Muslims who feel a sense of being set adrift after college, no longer connected to a strong community of like-minded religious young people. Mohammed’s recollection and sentiments are consistent with those of Nadia, and it should be recognized that this sense of displacement is experienced by males and females

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motivated activism and responded to the fear of assimilation.” It can be cautiously argued that this has changed significantly over time. While the MSA chapter at the University of Minnesota does still serve as a point of contact for immigrants or international students, the vast majority of members were born in the United States as is the case nationally.

equally, though the impact manifests differently.<sup>403</sup> This is especially true for those that are single after graduation. When asked to consider this further, Mohammed observes that one thing that made the transition from college to career life easier for him was his solid base of friends.

With my increased involvement in MSA and AMCC, the diversification of my friend group did change. It totally narrowed down. Just because I found Muslim community, and I was really involved. It just kind of happened. Pretty soon, my affiliation outside of that group was only limited to classmates I would study with or whatever. But, some of the folks from MSA and AMCC had non-Muslim friends who were always welcome, and so I did meet some people that way. But my scale had definitely tipped towards a majority-Muslim group. I feel like the MSA and AMCC attract the best of Muslims. But that means Muslims from all different backgrounds. I hope that doesn't sound awful but I can't think of a better way to say it. And it is hard to be away from that core group once you graduate.<sup>404</sup>

Mohammed observes that the vast majority of his friends were always commuter students, meaning most lived at home with their families during college. He thinks this also made the post-college transition easier because his friend group was already accustomed to needing to communicate frequently about where and when to meet up.

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<sup>403</sup> For example, some of the female survey respondents indicated that, while they felt empowered by the leadership positions they were able to hold in the MSA, outside of the college context, the broader Islamic *ummah* in the United States does not embrace female leadership with the same confidence.

<sup>404</sup> While there are few, formal studies on the history or impact of the Muslim Student Association on American Muslim life, encounters with the MSA show up frequently in the literature that includes narratives. Occasionally, I would come across a critique of the MSA as being an organization that is male dominated at leadership levels, but there is no conclusive evidence that this is the norm. In contrast, I found far more research regarding women's positive experiences with the MSA. A good suggestion for further reading on specifically Muslim women's experiences is the volume, *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim*, edited by Maria Ebrahimji and Zahra Suratwala (White Cloud Press, 2011). One of the most striking descriptions of the MSA in this collection comes from a woman named Ayah Ibrahim who was active in her MSA chapter at the College of William and Mary in Virginia. She recalls, "I still reminisce about the sense of ummah we created in the greater community at William and Mary. Even when others didn't partake in our traditions or beliefs, there was an honest effort to support these activities. The generosity of the people I befriended and their openness inspires me to be optimistic and to have faith in others...it wasn't until I experienced a William and Mary Ramadan that I came to appreciate what this holy month truly means; self-denial, community charity towards all."

I still get together with friends from MSA/AMCC frequently. And I have met up with friends who now live all over the world. And we understand each other. There are no barriers. It feels like true community. There is accountability, without actually talking about accountability.

He also notes that his friends became close to his family, and, in turn, he feels close to his friends' extended family networks. "Again, I think that's a Muslim thing. I really value my friend's commitment to their families. I know many of my friends who ask my Dad for advice or want to get his opinion on things. I love that." This value of family is something Mohammed says is equally attributable to his Sudanese background and his Islamic identity.

Part of the reason my friend group changed is that I just lost touch with a lot of high school friends, the way I think anyone does. But a lot of my friends from high school were trying to do anything they could to get away from home. Well, I was different. I wanted to stay close to home. What I noticed from friends in high school as they were applying for college was that the trend was to get as far away from home as possible. That's just not how it worked with the Muslim families I knew and the Muslim friends I made in college seemed to think more similarly to me.<sup>405</sup>

He highlights this point by relaying events from the most recent gathering he attended with friends, a party to watch the Superbowl, the culminating game at the end of the American National Football League season. Mohammed states that while they were watching the game, he and his friends somehow got into a discussion about the political turmoil in the Middle East. "It was such a good conversation. For some reason, it just hit me in that moment how much I value these brothers of mine. Islam tells us, stay with the umma. It means, stay with your people; your group. That's everything." Mohammed shares a hadith that illustrates this piece of wisdom. "The wolf never

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<sup>405</sup> This is consistent with what I have found. In twelve years of inviting Muslim students from the University of Minnesota to come and speak in my classes, only one, who was an international student from India, lived on campus. The rest lived with their families.

attacks the flock of sheep, he attacks the lone sheep. If you don't stick with the community, you are going to have a really tough time."<sup>406</sup> Mohammed notes that this is a particular struggle for Muslims in his life stage. They are busy with new jobs or graduate school. Many are getting married and buying homes. Other things have become priorities and compete for the time it takes to stay invested in the *ummah*.

### **6.5.b Mohammed and the “Sisters”**

For Mohammed, college would bring his first real interactions on a regular basis with females. Mohammed recalls that it occurred to him he was going to have to create boundaries that had not existed previously, mainly because he says he just really never had to think about it before. He remarks that things were always easier when it came to his interactions with Muslim women. He says this was because women in the MSA “knew the parameters. They knew the limits.” Mohammed notes that his Muslim friends understand and abide by the same boundaries that relate to gender interactions that Mohammed feels are appropriate for single people his age. One of the things he likes about spending time with others' families is that it allows males and females to gather together in a way that is, according to Mohammed, “in keeping with how we should relate to one another as Muslims.” When asked to further consider the relationships he has with females, Mohammed takes a deep breath and lets it out very slowly before speaking.

Relationships with the opposite gender have always been tricky to me. In Saudi Arabia, it was an all-guys school and there was a fence that set us apart from an all-girls school. Other than my mother, I really don't even remember speaking to a girl. It was different in Sudan, but even there, I was really in a man's world. I do think this is why this has been an awkward thing for me even here.

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<sup>406</sup> The hadith Mohammed is referencing comes from Abu Dawud, stating, “The wolf never attacks the lone sheep.” This hadith is often used in the context of determining right relationships between men and women. Several scholars, such as Dr. Musharraf Hussain (Britain) and Dr. Hamza Yusuf (USA) have used this hadith in their arguments in support of women attending prayer in mosques as a contrast to Muslim communities that restrict women from attending community prayer and urge women to pray at home.

He says that in all honesty, he never really thought about girls in high school.

Mohammed recalls that during his freshman year, he was in the cafeteria and a girl “came out of nowhere” and introduced herself to him. She then asked if she could get his number. Mohammed’s eyes become saucers as he relays this story. He points to his face and says,

I was like ‘this,’ you know? I was stunned. This had never happened to me before and it was so incredibly awkward. I just shook my head, turned around and walked away. I feel so bad now. I wish I had just thanked her for her interest and explained that my religion doesn’t allow me to do things that way. I mean, she was with a group of friends and I am sure it was embarrassing. And then when I would run into her that year in the hallway she would just kind of give me this look. ‘Arghh.’ It was awful.

Mohammed covers his face with his hand and smiles. He mentions that it was not uncommon in college for study groups that were mixed gender to form before exams. He notes that while he never verbally addressed the issue, he would always make sure another male was going to attend before he would commit. “Party of three!” was kind of my internal, unspoken tag line,” he recalls. “If we were forced into groups, I always managed to be in a group where it was not just me and other females.” This attentiveness to gender interactions is something Mohammed still considers as he starts his career. He observes that his own standards are really best practices for the workplace, and so “it has never been a problem.”

Mohammed is quick to acknowledge that part of his staunch commitment to his boundaries around gender dynamics is the result of his own shy nature. By avoiding females, he observed, “you avoid a lot of the drama and scrutiny that I think you find in any young Muslim community.” However, he wants to be clear that his self-imposed boundaries are ultimately about protection.

That goes for me, but mostly I think that protection is for the sisters. I would never want to think that my actions towards a sister sent the wrong message, or that my interactions with a sister would harm her reputation in any way. In college I began to think about being married and what that would look like. But, I decided to just focus on school. I was too busy, and I think I was not ready to even be thinking about these things. I never sensed that my lack of interest in pursuing a relationship that would lead to marriage was going to be disappointing anyone!

Mohammed is very firm, though, in his view that marriage is essential.

Islam is a way of life. Everything and anything we do needs to come back to Islam. We are called to be married. I think the Tradition makes that pretty clear. Marriage is one of those big commitments and you know it is important because the Qur'an talks about it in detail.

## **6.6 Family Transitions: Mohammed's Parents Return 'Home'**

When Mohammed's older brother was nearing college graduation, and his mother was clearly happy in her stable job situation at the hospital, his father began to discuss his desire to return to Sudan. He was restless. He had never been able to use his degree in French, and he felt like he was "spinning his wheels," according to Mohammed. His father explained that he had spent most of his life away from home and felt that it was time to go back. He wanted to establish a life there, start a new business, and reconnect with family. Mohammed's parents determined that his father would go back alone, get things settled and his mother could come later. This was in 2007. However, Mohammed's mother would delay her return. Mohammed's younger brother was only fifteen when his father left for Sudan and his mother did not want her youngest son to have to leave his school. She also worried if he left, he would not return to the United States for college, and she believed this was an opportunity of which he must take advantage for his future. She moved in 2011, when Mohammed was in his last year of college at the University of Minnesota and his younger brother was in his second year



there. Mohammed says with sadness that it was very difficult for his mother to leave her job. She was very happy in Minnesota. While she felt obligated to return to Sudan with Mohammed's father, and she was looking forward to being around family again, one of the things she would most miss was having a "real career."<sup>407</sup>

In 2012, when Mohammed was first interviewed, he expressed that life in Sudan was going very well for his father. He owned and managed a bustling cafeteria in a business district in Khartoum, had purchased a small farm where he employed migrant laborers, and was considering starting an import/export business.

I think my Dad is happier in Sudan because he feels a sense of autonomy that he did not here. While my dad always worked in Minnesota, it was a series of odd jobs. At first he worked for a rental car company at the airport. Then he spent several years working on the production line for several small electronics companies. He eventually worked for a semi-conductor company where my older brother would eventually become an engineer. He was always 'hustling.' Always taking care of us. I also know he just really missed family. That's such an important part of our culture. When I first came here and I was starting to get to know people and they would say, 'My uncle lives in this state, and then my grandparents live in this other state.' I didn't understand that at first. Especially

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<sup>407</sup> When I first interviewed Mohammed in 2012, his mother was still living in Sudan. According to Mohammed at that time, while she was enjoying her proximity to family, overall she was not happy. She had remarked to Mohammed that she does not feel, "busy enough here." Mohammed noted that his father had tried to encourage her to apply for work at one of the hospitals or clinics in Khartoum but that his mother had been hesitant to do so. When asked why he thinks this is the case, he is thoughtful before responding. "I think my mom's perception is that things in Sudan are getting worse. She sees it differently than my dad. I think she may be reluctant to get too settled for fear it may prevent them from living quickly if they need to." Indeed, the situation in the Sudan did deteriorate. Only it would be Mohammed's father who would leave and return to Minnesota in 2015 while his mother would remain in Sudan with his older brother's wife and child. Mohammed's father was involved in Sudanese politics and became disenfranchised with corruption that is rampant there. Inflation was making it increasingly difficult for business. After traveling to Saudi Arabia to celebrate Eid with friends, Mohammed's parents had a layover in Qatar. His father made a split second decision to stay in Qatar and try and find work and apply for a 30 day visa. This would not work out and his father would return to live with his sons in Minnesota. In the meantime, his mother Mom had gone back to Sudan to care for Mohammed's older brother's wife who was pregnant and living in Khartoum. In May of 2015, Mohammed's mother was still waiting for her daughter in law's visa paperwork to be approved so that she could return to the U.S. with her son's wife and her first grandchild, both of whom were born in Sudan. Mohammed would comment that his mother was, "desperate to get back to the U.S. and had grown weary from the stress of life in Sudan."

when I figured out it was not because they had moved away to find work to, like, escape some kind of hardship. In my culture, you do everything you can to stay together. I really loved that about our years in Sudan. Even when we moved out of my uncle's house, when we all decided to stay in Minnesota it never would have occurred to us to move more than a few blocks away.

Mohammed missed his father but was supportive of his decision to return to Sudan. He expressed that his father had always supported him, and now it was time for him to reciprocate. "A lot of friends ask me, 'Hey! When is your Dad coming back?' and I am like, 'I don't know. He may not be'."

### **6.7 Mohammed Makes Islam His Own**

Looking back, Mohammed notes that his father's departure marked a period of increased involvement and investment on his part and the rest of his remaining family, in the broader Muslim community. It was during this time that Mohammed came to the conclusion that his religious commitment was truly his own responsibility.

I realized how much I had taken religion for granted, especially in the early years in Saudi Arabia, a predominantly Muslim culture. You overlook things. Had I grown up there, I think I would have been completely different. Religiously, I think I am much better when I am here in Minnesota. This became clearer to me when my father left and I felt like I had to step it up. Here, Islam has to be in you. It can't just be around you. You have to grasp it as a part of you, instead of relying on what is all around you.

In Mohammed's summation, his years in the MSA and AMCC have been his most formative.

I feel like it was my first exposure to seeing the power of the Muslim community in action. It seriously helped me grow from being, like...a boy, into a man. I think I even recognized that I was becoming a stronger individual, but within a

community. When I look back now I can see that something was missing for me before college. Islam had always been important to me, but now it was real. My time in the MSA and AMCC breathed life into me.

There is no question that Mohammed is earnest about Islam. When this observation is made, he is good-natured about it, but does not deny its accuracy. He notes that many of his friends give him a hard time for being “so serious.” However, he makes no apologies for this, and explains that Islam calls for adherents to acknowledge Allah’s authority in every area of life, so wouldn’t it make sense that Islam is a frequent topic of conversation?

My deen is everything. It’s not just something I feel. It’s something I know. If I don’t live according to this, there is no sense in living. It’s big for me. Without it, I’m just a walking corpse. It’s my way of life. I don’t know how to think about myself without Islam. Whatever is good in me is because of Islam. It shapes all the good qualities in me. The really nice thing is that no one can take it away from me. If I was to lose it, it would be because of me. It would be on me.

This leads to a conversation about how Mohammed feels coming of age as a Muslim in the United States has influenced not only his religious practice but the way he experiences Islam. When asked to consider if he can articulate specific ways he thinks living in America has shaped his religious commitment, he cannot seem to do so without contrasting life in America with his experience of life in Sudan. Along with Kasim and Nadia, Mohammed “struggles” more with his commitment when it is a normative part of the society he is living in. At the time of his second interview, Mohammed had spent the previous winter in Sudan and concluded that his Islam did not feel as ‘alive’ while he was there.

While I was surrounded by Islam, it was different. It seemed like it was limited to taking care of the rituals. There wasn’t a deep understanding or desire to know more. It was just kind of ‘go with the flow.’ You do your prayers, you do your

fasting and that is kind of it. Not really much reflection goes on. I want to be clear that's just kind of how I felt personally. I'm not judging anybody. That's just what it was like for me.

Mohammed expresses that, initially, he felt a certain amount of guilt upon returning to Minnesota. He wasn't supposed to feel like coming back to Minnesota was "coming home." However, Mohammed notes that he has since come to accept that he can feel equally at home in both places, but for different reasons. He observes that while he loves the food, the proximity to extended family, and the warmth of Sudan, he knows many of his Sudanese family would be distressed at his conclusion that he feels "more like myself" in terms of his religious identity when he is in the United States. "So I remember just feeling really good about coming back to Minnesota. Here, I don't take it for granted. You want to hang on to it. It just becomes so dear to you." Mohammed's experience is consistent with that of many young Muslim Americans who find that they want to embrace two worlds. When asked if Mohammed thinks this is the same experience for his parents, he quickly responds, "not as much," but then he thinks about it for a few seconds.

You know, actually my Dad has always kind of been this way. He started memorizing the Qur'an in 1991. He finished right before we moved to the USA in 1996. I used to see him...I mean if my Dad was not working, or sleeping, he was reading. This is still the way it is today. He always has a book in his hand about Islam. It is a big part of his life. And I guess now I wonder if that would have been the same if we had always lived in Sudan or Saudi Arabia.

Mohammed has a deep affection for both of his parents and he credits them equally with having instilled a love for Islam in his brothers and himself. While his mother worked odd hours at the hospital, Mohammed remembers that she, too, always seemed to be reading, and that often he would find his mother up in the middle of the night, praying. "Maybe it was the same for them," he observes. "This need to keep your deen activated. Maybe I just did not see it because I was not old enough to think about

it that way.” In Saudi Arabia, Mohammed’s parents sent him and his older brother to memorization circles. He explains this was something not only for children. He remembers looking up during class and seeing his father in his own circle with a group of men across the mosque in a different corner.

I think it’s cool now when I look back on that because it was not just the dad dropping off the kids, you know. He was there to learn, too. He was a model for us. Seeing something like that. I think it was a first glimpse that made me realize, ‘Hey! This thing is for *everybody*.

Mohammed does not see this pattern of family-oriented religious education at work in Minnesota. “It seems that parents want to get kids to get into Islamic school so badly, but you don’t really see them there. It’s like study is for the young...and then the very old.” Mohammed thinks this ends up deterring kids once they reach late adolescence. He explains that instead of Islam being a family pursuit, it becomes another thing kids have to do on top of all their other extracurricular activities that fill their time. He knows it is surely a priority for parents to instill Islam in their children but do they really make it a part of their lives? Mohammed thinks it is imperative that parents model the importance of Islam to their children through their own behavior.

We are all in this together. That was how I was brought up to understand the ummah. I was never forced to do things. I slowly started to do things as I saw my parents do things. They were patient with us. They were always involved. I knew it was real to them.

### **6.7.a Mohammed and the Mosque**

Mohammed observed that practicing Islam gives him a feeling of satisfaction as it relates to his parents. One of his favorite hadith states “For everything there is a polish to clear away rust and the polish of the heart is remembrance of God.”<sup>408</sup> When asked

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<sup>408</sup> Reported by al-Bukhari.

to explain further, he spoke of obedience and the notion that being a good Muslim honors Allah, but that it also honors his parents, which, in turn, is another means to honoring Allah. “Part of the motivation to be obedient and to be committed to my deen is that I know it’s a way to honor my community.” For Mohammed, “obedience and time are as much of an offering as monetary charity.” Mohammed mentions that he is currently volunteering as the treasurer at a majority Somali, Islamic youth and family center on the southside of St. Paul. He believes that being involved in a responsibility that requires accountability is one of the ways he exercises love for his community. “I am contributing by using the skills I have, and because I have made this commitment, well...I need to honor it. I need to show up. Maybe if I did not have something like this it would be all too easy for me, too, to sort of fall away.”

When Mohammed surveys his mosque he sees the very young (early elementary until early teens). Then, he says, there are those who are in their late twenties or early thirties that are newly married and upwardly mobile. But the group in the middle, “is nowhere to be found.” Mohammed cannot put his finger on why this is. “But I recognize that once you are on your own, you aren’t a part of the household anymore. And what I see at the mosque is the whole family household. And the mosques offer programming accordingly. “Kids and parents. Kids and parents.” Mohammed volunteers at his local mosque but he notes that there is a sense that they are not doing a good job at bringing people in at all, regardless of their age or life status.

He thinks there are two reasons for this reality. First, at the current moment, so many of the Muslims in Minnesota are in this sort of gap age where they find no association in the mosque because they feel that the content that is delivered is not particularly relevant to them and their context. Second, increasingly, there are many other resources available. Most of Mohammed’s single male friends rely on technology for their own personal study and enrichment. They find scholars online that they think are better educated and more relatable. While Mohammed is committed to serving in the mosque, he admits that the mosque is not his first source for religious education. Like many of his friends, he relies on weekly podcasts from popular American Muslim thinkers like Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, or on content from websites like Virtual Mosque and

AltMuslim. Online media offer a wealth of religious instruction for large segments of the Muslim American population, and recorded Islamic teachings are freely distributed or marketed throughout Muslim American communities.<sup>409</sup> This disappoints Mohammed but he “gets it.” He wishes that today’s American Muslims would understand that Islam is not supposed to be done individually. “I love communal prayer. It’s key to our practice.” Yet, he empathizes with those who rely on speakers and resources outside of the mosque. He admits that he resonates with western-raised scholars who speak to his own life experience and reality.

When asked if he is aware if this pattern of looking outside of the mosque for teaching spans gender, Mohammed nods vigorously. Mohammed agrees that many of the Muslim females he knows from college seem to have drifted from communal life in the mosque. “It may be that Muslim females find a place they ‘fit’ online that they do not in the mosque.” He notes that he struggles with the typical structure of the mosque, where tradition calls for men and women to be relegated to separate spheres.

Increasingly, I just really struggle with that organization. If you look at teaching and practice, the role of the woman is so important. It’s the “sisters” who are at the center of teaching. Family life is dependent upon the mom. I think that’s regardless of whether she is a working mom or not. But we don’t really acknowledge this, as we should in Muslim culture, in my opinion. I think more integration goes a long way to learning respect for women. How can we teach our sons and practice respect when we try and restrict interaction. It’s not what life looks like outside of the mosque.

Mohammed does not think separation is always negative, but that too much emphasis on separation is misguided. He comments that separation leads to ignorance,

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<sup>409</sup> Zareena Grewal and David Coolidge, “Islamic Education in the United States,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam* eds. J. Hammer and O. Safi (Cambridge:Cambridge University Press, 2013), pg. 247.

particularly of women's experiences. "Those who are living it are the best resources. It's one of the things that most drive me crazy."

### **6.8 The Clock is Ticking: Parental and Peer Pressure towards Marriage**

Mohammed has recently attended a friend's wedding and he remarks that never before has he received so many questions about his own marital status. He believes this is because he is finally finished with his graduate degree, and his standard defense against this type of inquiry has historically been to chant the refrain, "When I am done with school." He laughs and remarks that this defense no longer satisfies his friends, or his parents. When asked if he feels strong pressure from his parents, he laughs loudly and grins.

Oh, yeah! Especially now that my older brother is married. For a long time, all of the pressure was on him. Now that he is married, it's like, 'Next?' My parents have officially turned their sights towards me! But honestly, I do not get as much pressure as other friends I know. Some of them? They get "mad" pressure. I mean, I even have friends whose parents are going behind their backs to try and get the ball rolling.

Mohammed's eyes are huge as he says this, rubbing his thin goatee. He then relays a story about a Muslim male friend who is Pakistani-American. Apparently, the friend told everyone he was leaving for a vacation in Pakistan and, "out of nowhere," posted a new profile picture of himself and his new Pakistani wife on Facebook. Mohammed was shocked because he had no idea this friend was even pursuing marriage. He remarks that everyone in his friend group was surprised. Many began commenting on the picture on Facebook and asking questions.

Well, I guess his mom took matters into her own hands. She contacted her family in Pakistan and bought my friend a plane ticket. She basically just said, "You are taking this ticket and going to meet this girl. He sent the girl an email, which was the first time he had contacted her and told her that he was going to honor his



mother by coming to Pakistan but that this was not his idea and he was not planning on anything coming from it. I guess she emailed back with basically the same response that she was not interested but was willing to follow through to please her parents. But! Get this...they met. They liked each other. They spent a week getting to know each other. And they decided to get married. So I guess it can work!”<sup>410</sup>

Mohammed contends that parental involvement and interest in marriage seems to span all cultures, but he does have many friends whom, he says, “have parents that would never approve” of their children choosing to marry someone who does not belong to their own ethnic and cultural group.<sup>411</sup> According to Hena Zuberi, tribalism, even more than racism, is prevalent in all circles of Muslim American society.<sup>412</sup> Mohammed thinks this is particularly acute in Southeast Asian Muslim circles. When he surveys his friend group, many of whom are from India and Pakistan, he notes that almost all are married to women who share the same cultural and ethnic heritage. When asked if Mohammed perceives that his parents would like him to marry a Sudanese girl, he says they are “about fifty-fifty” as he uses his hands to mimic a scale attempting to balance. “I know one guy who is struggling with this. He is having a really tough time. I think my parents are more realistic about this because there just aren’t that many Sudanese families here.”

The Sudanese do tend to marry within their own ethnic group, in Mohammed’s view. But he contends that sharing an ethnic background does not personally matter to

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<sup>410</sup> Mohammed expressed disbelief but it should be noted there was no hint of judgment or disdain in his retelling of this story. This will prove ironic. While this interview took place in 2013, many of Mohammed’s friends would learn of his own engagement in 2014 via Facebook when Mohammed’s fiancée, whom none of his friends had met, would update her relationship status to “engaged” and link her name to Mohammed’s. He was not aware of this at time and would later relay that he experienced the same interrogation from his friends that he has inflicted on others.

<sup>411</sup> See, Ayesha Mattu and Nura Maznavi, eds. *Salaam, Love: American Muslim Men on Love, Sex, and Intimacy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014. While not an academic work, this collection of true stories related to relationships from American Muslim men of varying backgrounds is stunningly honest. The stories are not exclusive to any one topic, but several offer insight into the challenge of family involvement in the pursuit of a marriage partner.

<sup>412</sup> Zuberi, Hena. “The Muslim Marriage Crisis.” *MuslimMatters.org*. <http://muslimmatters.org/2013/09/27/muslim-marriage-crisis/> Last accessed on January 8, 2015. Zuberi interviewed employees at several matchmaking organizations on the east coast. One interviewee, Muhammad Jameel, has been a matchmaker in the Baltimore area for over 25 years. He told Zuberi, “We get requests that the candidate must be Indian and not Pakistani, Durrani not Mazari, must be African-American, not African, so we counsel them so they can enlarge their vision.”

him as long as he and his future wife are in “religious harmony.” While Mohammed states that he is fairly confident his parents fully support his view, he does note that if it were to be a point of challenge, he would do his best to use his knowledge of Islam to defend his position. “My parents just advocate for marriage...and they leave it at that. The rest is up to me. I’m in charge of what I want in a wife. But, my thinking is obviously influenced by my parents because we have the same values.” “You’re lucky” is what Mohammed often hears from his friends when it comes to his parent’s philosophy. However, he notes the irony in his friend’s situations. “My friends who are the most freaked out about marriage are the ones with the pushiest parents, with the most ridiculous restrictions. They don’t see their own part in this dilemma.”

Mohammed argues that there is nothing in Islam that suggests he needs to marry within his own ethnic group. On the contrary, he offers support for his position by mentioning a hadith which encourages marrying from distant groups and tribes in order to strengthen the community and to promote physical health.

The *hadith* says that we are to marry from distant groups and tribes to strengthen and teach each other. You know? Because this diversity makes you stronger especially when it comes to genetics. There’s so much wisdom and science at work there, even if people would not have understood that at the time.

Here, Mohammed affirms the concerns first raised by Nadia and Kasim that there is a distinguishable and problematic hypocrisy at work in many American Muslim communities regarding acceptance of inter-cultural, inter-ethnic, or inter-racial marriage. He states that it frustrates him, but that he is also sympathetic to the reasons shared culture or ethnicity remains valuable to so many families. Yet, he argues, the community has to be flexible according to its time and context.<sup>413</sup> He observes that Muslims in America “simply must” be more open to greater diversity in the backgrounds of their

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<sup>413</sup> Mohammed would later point me to *Qur’anic* support for the importance of diversity. He sent me Surah 30:21-22 which states, “Among His signs is that He created you from dust; then, suddenly you were human beings dispersing [throughout the earth]. 21. And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought. 22. And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your languages and your colors. Indeed in that are signs for those of knowledge.”

children's marriage partners. He states, "there's another hadith which says 'to support the community when it is in the wrong is like falling into a well while catching the tail of your camel which was about to fall into it.' You have to be willing to, from a place of love, press your community for change sometimes."<sup>414</sup> Mohammed goes on to express that he wishes Muslims could focus on the larger goal, which he considers to be the encouragement to marry in the first place.

Look, a 'good' Muslim marriage produces stronger and healthier kids. I need to make the best marriage possible because that makes for the best family possible, you know? It's in my community's best interest that I build a strong marriage, and to me that means the community needs to be more open to marrying outside of your same group. We know we are called to be married. How can you, as a parent, justify standing in the way of a good marriage because of something like culture?

Mohammed recalls a recent Skype conversation he had with his parents about marriage. His mother kept asking if there was anyone (anyone!) that he found even slightly interesting through his MSA friendships? He laughed and said "Mom, I just haven't met anyone. I don't function that way." Mohammed admits that this may unfairly portray the females he has encountered. He notes that there are many wonderful, smart Muslim women. So what is the problem? "I'm not sure why. If I am being honest, I think I am just being picky." He knows that he wants to be married, "for sure," before he turns thirty. At the very least, he wants to be engaged by age thirty. Though he admits that, because he is a man, this deadline is really more self-imposed than something he feels is real.

What I hear, and I think this goes beyond Muslims, but is true even of the larger culture, is that for guys, the older they get it does not necessarily make getting married harder. If females are willing to be married to someone much older, but

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<sup>414</sup> The hadith quoted by Mohammed here was relayed by Abu Da'ud

guys are not accepting of that, it creates a problem. But I admit that as a guy, I do not have to be as worried about it. I feel like I can be on a success track and I don't have to sacrifice anything. I don't think it is the same for Muslim women.

Mohammed agrees that as females get older, especially once they hit the age of thirty, people begin to wonder if there is something wrong with them and question their single status.

I definitely want to get married, but I am not worried about it right now. At the same time, I would like to have kids early. I think it works better when there is not a significant age gap between you and your kids. One of my friends got married at twenty-three and he already has a one and half year old. He will ask me about marriage and say, 'Hey! You gotta move on this. You need to have kids early when you have plenty of energy.'

Mohammed agrees that is a good point, but it has not motivated him into action. He thinks there are eligible women out there, but marriage "seems like a distraction that pulls me away from my career and education goals right this time. If I keep up the pace that I am going, I will be able to finish these things soon, and then I can start to think about the more personal aspects of my life."

Mohammed lives with both of his brothers and while he expresses enthusiasm about his older brother getting married soon, he knows things will be very different once his sister-in-law moves to Minnesota from Sudan. "It will be the end of something but that is okay. We have told him he needs to be the one to move out, though!" Mohammed notes that he also has no desire to get married soon because he does feel a sense of obligation to his younger brother who still has two years left of college. His brother is currently the president of the MSA and Mohammed says he would not be surprised if his brother actually finds someone to marry before he does.<sup>415</sup> He notes that

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<sup>415</sup> He did not know it, but Mohammed's prediction about his younger brother will prove correct. He will, indeed, become engaged and get married before Mohammed. He will marry into a well-known Muslim family in Minneapolis that has the admirable reputation of reflecting the diversity of the *ummah*.

“the three of us are all shy and awkward when it comes to gender dynamics, especially for me and my older brother as we spent that time in Saudi Arabia.” Mohammed comments that he thinks that having sisters would have been helpful. It would have normalized gender interactions for him, both having a sister and having her friends around. He explains that because he does not have sisters, his relationships from the AMCC and MSA have been key to his own development and for building empathy for females and how their perspectives are different. He comments that one of the changes that he sees in his life after college is the limited interaction he now has with females.

It’s not that I want to delay marriage, but I feel there are certain things that I want to get out of the way first. I think this will make for a healthier start. I won’t have as many things competing for my attention. I have an Egyptian friend who says, ‘Listen. You have two choices. You can pursue your career or get married. So you should focus on one and then the other.’

However, Mohammed notes, “he will go on to say, ‘but you know my wife was such a support to me when I was getting my Masters degree, I cannot imagine how I would have finished without her help.’ So I guess there are always two sides!”

## **6.9 What is Mohammed looking for in a Spouse?**

When asked if he has considered what traits he is looking for in a future spouse, Mohammed raises a finger to indicate that he is thinking about his answer. After a painfully long silence he states “First for me is the religious aspect. I am looking for someone who has good faith, who comes from a good family, has good morals. These are the most important. I think the fourth one is beauty. There are other things that are important but they are below these four.”<sup>416</sup> He goes on to explain what he means by this “religious aspect:”

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Mohammed’s brother’s in-laws are from Turkey and Germany, and their five children have all married Muslim spouses from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds.

<sup>416</sup> Mohammed is referring to a hadith related by Abu Huraira and Bukhari which reads, “A woman is married for four things: her wealth, her family status, her beauty and her religion. So you should marry the

For me, I want things to be as Islamic as possible. I would not want it to become what has become the norm in some places, like my parents bring someone out of nowhere and just try to ‘make something happen.’ I would prefer it be someone I know from the community. Someone I can ask around about and find out where they are in their own life and intentions. Whether it is a mutual friend or family members, I want it to be something that is initiated by me. For me, more than anything, I would not want to create an awkward moment or to burn bridges. I mean, if I have no interest in someone that you have brought to me, it is just so painful. I feel like that person would hate me. We are human beings. We all want to feel wanted and I would never want someone to feel rejected by me. If there is no reason for it, why go about it this way? I don’t want to fall into the trap of being in relationship with the opposite gender in the wrong way. Whether that’s colleagues at work that are not Muslim or other Muslim women. Boundaries should always be there, no matter what. But marriage helps you. It helps eliminate the questions. It’s me taking a stand and declaring what my intentions are to my spouse, and what they are not to others.

Author Asma Gull-Hasan notes that in many communities, while meeting someone of the opposite sex within Islamic guidelines can be done, there is an overwhelming amount of pressure on the interactions. “You must only be sincere in your interest in marrying this person. You can’t just shoot the breeze and hang out with them for the hell of it. As a result, first meetings are loaded with expectations.”<sup>417</sup> Mohammed agrees that American culture has affected his views on marriage, both in terms of what qualities he wants in a marriage partner, and his expectations for what makes for a healthy marriage. He is clear that this is more difficult later in his twenties because his interactions with Muslim women are limited now that he is no longer in college.

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religious woman (otherwise) you will be unsuccessful.” (Book #62, Hadith #27) Wealth has been interpreted beyond socio-economic status by some scholars to include things like level of education or intelligence.

<sup>417</sup> Hasan, *American Muslims*, 133-137

According to scholar Debra Majeed, “Ultimately, the majority of Muslims get to know members of the opposite sex for the purpose of marriage. Many also limit mate selection to their own ethnic, cultural, or language group.” Mohammed agrees and confesses, “The main thing that comes to mind is that I would find it very tough, and actually I wouldn’t even consider trying to marry someone who lives in Sudan or mainly grew up in the Sudan. I have spent the majority of my life here and I feel like there would be major barriers, even if ethnicity wise we are the same.” When asked to consider why he feels this way, he replies that “the path to marriage should be easy, and I just think that would be huge gap that would be too difficult to overcome.” It’s pointed out to Mohammed that while he argues religious commitment is the first priority, he too seems to think sharing cultural characteristics makes life easier. He nods his agreement.

Okay, that’s true. But please note the distinction. There would be a big-time disconnect culture wise. I have adapted to the culture here. And I am going to argue that the good outweighs what many think are the bad. We are way more aware of diversity here. I think there is far less prejudice, less ignorance. I don’t find that to be the case in Sudan. I mean, say you marry someone from back home, and bring them here. Well, they are coming here at such a different stage of life. I have seen this not go well. I have seen some friends marry from back home and it is very hard for their spouses to adapt once they come to America. They feel like they will never catch up. One spouse is going about their life the way they have always known it and the other spouse is having an immigrant experience. How can either one, no matter how intentional, really understand the struggles of the other? Everyone I know in this situation, the spouse from ‘home’ wants to go back. And it creates tension. I don’t have any numbers or anything, but I feel like I hear more cases of it *not* working out than working out.

However, Mohammed will follow up on this assessment by relaying the marriage story of his older brother, which follows almost identically the path to marriage that Mohammed just indicated is not his preference.

We were in Sudan for a few months and my parents said to him, ‘Listen. Now that you are here, you are going to need to make something happen.’ Well, we were there for three weeks and nothing happened. My parents were, I think this is funny now, like, really frustrated. My mom even said, ‘Oh no, this trip was for nothing.’ However, we went back home and my brother started chatting with his now-wife on Facebook. They had met during the last week of our trip. And then he came back and told my parents that he was ready to get married. We were all shocked. My older brother is very shy. The fact that he would sort of take the initiative to get this all going himself was pretty impressive. I thought they were going to have to drag my brother with chains to make that happen.

Mohammed seems uncomfortable, or possibly even disappointed with his last few comments when they are repeated back to him. He asks to amend his statement. “At the same time, I think if two people are coming from the same place in regards to their religious commitment, then you could come from two separate planets and it would work out.” However, he notes that he sees how this works better in theory than in practice.

When asked who he thinks has the most difficult time finding a marriage partner, he quickly remarks that it is, “hands down, female converts to Islam, or I guess divorced women.” He sees how his own optimism regarding the idea that religious commitment can trump all other obstacles is a particular challenge with these two demographics.<sup>418</sup> He states that he has a hard time thinking of families that would be enthusiastic about their sons marrying a woman who has no “family history” or has already been married.<sup>419</sup> Mohammed says that,

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<sup>418</sup> Zuberi, “The Muslim Marriage Crisis.” Zuberi explains some mosques have started matchmaking services such as Salaam Nikah, a local service offered for divorced and widowed Muslims by the Islamic Center of Northern Virginia.

<sup>419</sup> Mohammed’s comments about the difficulty of finding a new partner when one has been divorced highlight a need that has been identified in the broader Muslim American *ummah*. While there is room for further academic study of this subject, I did find several articles from mainstream Muslim publications, as well as blogs and websites that are confronting the dilemma of the lingering stigma of divorce. I even found specific dating sites that are designed for previously married Muslims. One of these websites, Eternal Garment, was started by Reza ul-Hasan, a male divorcee who experienced significant challenges



We all want to please our parents. I think we all have that in our mind. However, it has become too extreme. It's almost like three people are trying to marry one person. Where are you going to find this perfect person? It's not ideal anymore. You are making marriage harder, not easier. It shouldn't be that way.

Mohammed shakes his head and states that while he does not believe that there should be any kind of hierarchy regarding one's value as it relates to marriage, he admits it exists.

While he is very happy living in Minnesota he notes that he does feel drawn to the Middle East. He is clear this does not mean Sudan. He feels its future is too unpredictable. He would very much like to be closer to family and also to important sites in Islam. Mohammed pauses and then expresses a laid-back frustration as he says,

But then at the same time, as I said, I think I do better with my religion here.

There is so much benefit to my faith here. See that's another thing that I think is why my parents hint at me meeting someone from Sudan. I know they would like to be closer to me and think the chances of me moving back would be greater if I married a Sudanese girl. I understand that but there is a need to be realistic.

Sudan is a third world country; there is a lot of instability. They are so far behind in terms of infrastructure and other advancements. But, I know there is a need for people with skills to be willing to give up earthly comforts to come and work towards making things better. I know some people...actually, I would put my parents in this category, who have committed to doing this and I commend them.

Over the next two years of interviews, Mohammed will become increasingly animated when articulating what he wants in a future spouse. He admits this is because he has recently turned twenty-nine and his self-imposed deadline is looming. He reports

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in his own pursuit of a new relationship and saw a need in his community. See, [www.eternalgarment.com](http://www.eternalgarment.com), Last accessed on October 17, 2015.

that he is now an uncle and that his parents are bursting with pride at having become grandparents. “To see their joy, it has kind of made me realize how much I love my family and want to honor my parents the way my brother has with the family he is now creating.” Mohammed is still not ready to seek out measures such as online matrimonial sites or even to inform his parents that he is now interested in considering if he is ready for a relationship. “I don’t see those as necessary right now. The first thing, I think, is to have an open heart and mind. To trust that if this is what Allah has for me, then Allah will make that clear and bring it along. As long as I am open. That’s the key. That’s the first step.”

## **6.10 Conclusion**

Mohammed mentioned early on that he initially wanted to major in Architecture because ever since he was young he “had a love for constructing and putting things together.” In this chapter, the reader has seen how Mohammed’s approach to his own daily life reinforces this “love” for making things fit together. His story inspires greater appreciation for the seriousness with which many young Muslims take not only their religion, but also their responsibility to their religious community. For Mohammed, it is clear that marriage is a part of this communal responsibility. He admits that the pressure to get married is very real, and that the older he gets, he receives not only parental pressure, but pressure from his peers as well. Mohammed’s early years in America serve as evidence of the hard work and determination that go into an immigrant family’s efforts to adjust to life in American society. At the same time, Mohammed’s parents were intentional in their desire to have their sons maintain a sense of Sudanese heritage and to, above all, find one’s security in Islam, which Mohammed seems to adeptly use as like a passport to help him bridge cultures and countries.

It must be observed that Mohammed thinks his own interactions with the opposite gender have been limited in certain respects because he did not have sisters, yet it is clear from his relationship with his mother – from his obvious respect and admiration for her – that this limited interaction has not resulted in an ignorance of the significant challenges facing young Muslim women. This is consistent with the survey findings, which indicated that if there is one thing young Muslim men are in agreement

on, it is the notion that Muslim women face greater challenges and pressure when it comes to marriage, relationships, and community expectations.

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri asserts “the structure of Islamic practices that allow for varying understandings of God and community to come into relation through individual acts of worship has pluralistically shaped Islamic normativity and conceptions of community among American Muslims.”<sup>420</sup> This certainly can be seen in this chapter where the reader has encountered yet another young, devout Muslim who is finding alternatives for religious teaching and community outside of his mosque. Mohammed seeks religious enrichment through his weekly reading of online blogs, articles, and he sets aside time for the podcasts he and his friends recommend to one another. Here is more evidence that the traditional “brick and mortar institutions of Islamic higher learning now compete with emerging and relatively more successful virtual institutes.”<sup>421</sup> While Mohammed is committed to supporting his local mosque, he was clear that it was his involvement in the Muslim Student Association and the Al-Madinah Cultural Center that have most strengthened his religious development. These were places where he was amongst peers who were having the shared experience of negotiating dual identities, seeking to balance their cultural heritage with their newer, albeit comfortable, American self. Many young Muslims with dual identities feel the most at home within diverse communities. They are most comfortable not with those of the same ethnic background but rather with those that share the same life struggles.

While Mohammed defends the centrality of the community in Islamic practice, it is also evident that he is on an individual journey - one that has been designed just for him. “My destiny and the path that has been laid out for me is uniquely my own,” he argues. As he weighs the advice he has received regarding relationships, along with his observations of his friends, he has come to the conclusion that it is best for him to delay marriage. He determines this will be beneficial not only for himself, but also for his future wife, and, in turn, his family and community.

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<sup>420</sup> GhaneaBassiri, “Religious Normativity and Praxis Among American Muslims,” 226.

<sup>421</sup> Grewal and Coolidge, “Islamic Education in the United States,” 263.

I know that I am not very good at juggling a lot of things. There are many duties the *Tradition* lays out that you need to do for your spouse. I take that seriously. You know what, let me take care of some of my things now, so that I can give my attention to my spouse as I am called to do. For me, I want to wait until I am ready to give marriage the energy that it needs. Marriage brings double responsibility. I do not want to do injustice to anyway. You have to take care of this person! Islam tells me that his person is my responsibility. You need to provide for them and take care of them. As a married person, my spouse should not be in need from anyone other than me. This certainly is beyond the financial. Am I giving them the emotional and religious support they need? It is my obligation to make sure that I am in the best position possible to do this.

Mohammed speaks of his decision to delay marriage as a form of thoughtful restraint on his part. He contends his conclusion that he is not ready to consider marriage is attributable to his efforts to “truly listen to Allah” and to be willing to understand that you often have to delay things you desire until you are in the best position to receive them. One of Mohammed’s favorite scholars, Imam Zaid Shakir, explains this concept of delayed gratification as enslavement. He observes, “Our fulfillment does not lie in our liberation, rather it lies in the conquest of our soul and its base desires. That conquest only occurs through our enslavement to God. Our enslavement to God in turn means that we have to suppress many of our soul’s desires and inclinations.” Mohammed wants to make clear it is not that he finds marriage undesirable. Instead, it is quite the opposite. “It is very much my desire to be married. And, indeed, sooner rather than later.” Mohammed defines “sooner” as in the next three years.

I am a guy. I want that relationship. But I do not feel that I am who I need to be as a husband yet. I want to be stable, yes financially, but also I want an internal stability. I want to be less about ‘me’ and more about others...more about God. I need to be ready to be a part of my partnership. To mold myself into someone else...to sort of die to self, a bit. I am not there yet. I think it’s good that I know that.

Mohammed laughs. “Okay. I was able to explain that to you. I just need my family and friends to see it that way.”

### **6.11 Shared Experience Model: Approaching Mohammed through an Interfaith Pedagogy**

In this final section, I will demonstrate how applying the *shared experience* model to Mohammed’s narrative will continue to emphasize the Interfaith capacities of *appreciative knowledge and narrative imagination* that have been introduced and practiced in the previous narratives of Nadia, Kasim, and Amina. Ultimately, the reader will be prepared to form their own narrative identity. While some of the steps of instruction will be the same, this last lesson will include the most rigorous engagement with the material, as the building blocks for how to approach a narrative through the Interfaith theory based lens of *shared experience* should now be familiar to the reader. It is by design that Mohammed’s narrative is the last to be read and it has been constructed to inform and connect to the material in the preceding narratives of Nadia, Kasim, and Amina. What follows allows the reader to build on the foundation established in the previous lesson.

#### **6.11.a Pedagogical Application (Guide for the Reader)**

The *shared experience* method is based on a *relational* approach to reading Mohammed’s narrative that requires you to listen and engage with intention. While you are to take a posture of listening as you hear from Mohammed, a *relational* approach means you should imagine you are sitting together with him as he personally tells you his story.

As you read (and listen) to Mohammed’s story the first time, what *shared experiences* with Mohammed do you identify? While you may recognize certain factors like life stage, geographic location, and personal interests, recall that *shared experiences* are also things we all have in common as humans - emotions, economic status, attitudes and desires.

As you begin your second reading of Mohammed's narrative, you will be more intentionally seeking to engage by considering your responses to the questions provided. These questions continue to be informed by two key interfaith capacities, *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* which should be familiar to you.

#### **6.11.b Questions for Consideration: Identity**

1. Mohamed and Amina were both drawn to Math in college. From what you have learned of them through their stories, why do both like it so much?
2. Mohammed believes his religious belief and commitment are strengthened by living in the United States. What factors can you identify that contribute to this?
3. As best you can, try and place yourself in Mohammed's shoes. Describe the type of environment that allows his commitment to Islam to thrive.
4. How does Mohammed 'make sense' of his world?
5. Is Mohammed's "faith in flux?"

#### **6.11.c Questions for Consideration: Family Life and Community Obligation**

1. How was Islam taught to Mohammed by his parent's? How was it modeled for him?
2. Mohammed describes being taught Islam by his parents in the 'typical way.' What did he mean by this? What do you think Nadia, Kasim, and Amina would think of his description of 'typical?'
3. How does Mohammed's interaction with Somali friends classmates add to your understanding and assumptions about the Somali community as described in Amina's story?
4. How does Mohammed embrace two definitions of 'home?'
5. Mohammed commented on the absence at the mosque of those who are "the group in the middle." Mohammed offers his own analysis for why he thinks this is the case. What do you think of his reasoning?
6. What does community look like for Mohammed?
7. What do these narratives teach about obligations between Muslim children and their families? Respect? Authority? Honor? Responsibility for care of elders?

#### **6.11.d Questions for Consideration: Gender**

1. Do you recall what Mohammed's name means? How could 'sacrifice' be interpreted in his story?
2. How does Mohammed describe his self-imposed boundaries? Whom are they meant, in his words, to protect?
3. In what ways do you think Mohammed's mother has influenced his views of women?

#### **6.11.e Questions for Consideration: Marriage**

1. For Mohammed, how is marriage preparation a part of piety?
2. Why does Mohammed think he would prefer to marry a woman who was raised in the United States?
3. Mohammed argues marriage strengthens the community. How so?
4. In what ways have Islamic sources informed what Mohammed wants in a spouse?

#### **6.11.f Broader Thematic Questions**

1. How have these narratives challenged your conception of "home" vs. "back home?"
2. How have these narratives challenged your conception of "diversity?"
3. How have these narratives challenged your conception of what it means to be "American"?
4. Who were the secondary characters in these narratives? What can they teach about what it means to be a good neighbor?
5. What does your religious environment look like? Consider both the observable and non-observable. What things can be 'felt' even if they cannot be seen?
6. What religious spaces and influences do you think are most important to you at this life stage? How has that changed? What sources do you rely upon?
7. How would you describe an environment that allows your personal faith to thrive?

### 6.11.g Pedagogical Application (Instruction)

In keeping with the instruction for Amina's narrative, I would first assign students to do an initial reading by again considering what *shared experiences* they can identify with Mohammed. This would again take the form of a general list - informal notes that first come to mind as the student reads. During the next class session, I would begin a review *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* by having the students write definitions for each in their own words.

Students would then be given the set of questions for the second reading of Mohammed's narrative. There are fewer questions in this set but the questions promote a deeper level of thinking and analysis. Again, the objective is that students now direct the questions to themselves for self-investigation without being prompted to do so. While few of Mohammed's questions explicitly ask the reader to consider the perspectives of Nadia, Kasim, and Amina, this too, should be implied.

Students would return to the next class session prepared to share their responses in pre-assigned small groups. Following the previous pattern, students would work together in groups though this time, I would not ask them to perform the same categorization exercise. Instead, I would ask them to discuss the following questions related to *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* which had been assigned as a writing exercise for Amina's narrative.

***Appreciative Knowledge:*** *How does Mohammed's story and experience expand your understanding or knowledge of Islam? Did it challenge or reinforce anything you feel you already knew? What can you appreciate about how he discusses her relationship with Islam? What do you admire about Mohammed?*

***Narrative Imagination:*** *Mohammed told many stories about himself as a youth? Did you relate to Mohammed in any way? What questions did Amina ask herself that have also occurred to you?*

After the discussion, I would ask students to perform an individual free writing exercise for 10 minutes in response to this question prompt:

- *What does it mean to you to now be a caretaker of these stories? What, if any, responsibility do you have towards them? What would it look like to be a loving neighbor to Nadia, Kasim, Amina or Mohammed? (You may interpret neighbor*



*any way you wish. It could be literal, or for example, it could be they are a work colleague or attend the same book club)*

After the writing exercise, students would exchange their response with one other partner, read each other's responses, and then discuss. I would then direct students to join with another group (four total) to spend 20 minutes in discussion over their responses to the specific questions identified above as "Broader Thematic Questions." I would ask them what a reader of their responses to these questions could learn about each of them as an individual. When we commence together, each group would share one or two insights from their discussion. I would then inform students that their personal responses to these questions will serve as the basis for their own attempt to construct a written narrative identity, which will be the culmination of the *shared experience* model to be discussed in the final chapter.

## CHAPTER 7

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

“The most that we can ever do in a classroom is to seek a ‘mutual reciprocal understanding’ about our different religious stories and let it go at that”

– *Robert Nash*

In this final chapter I will provide a summary of the thesis and present key findings and observations from the research conducted related to the enduring value of narratives and their use in the field of Interfaith Studies. I will propose the implications for future research, specifically how my work relates to narratives used in American History. Limitations to the research will be presented and following the conclusion, I will describe the culminating exercise in the pedagogical model have developed for use with the narratives of Nadia, Kasim, Amina, and Mohammed.

#### **7.1 Summary**

The ways individuals and communities ‘orient’ around religion and spirituality continues to change according to time and context. While Theology and Religious Studies endure as active academic disciplines, there has been a call for new approaches that emphasize the transformational aspects of religious experience and the change that occurs through the development of relationship between groups and individuals from differing religious or spiritual traditions. Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook defines Interfaith Studies as “an emerging discipline with the aim to help all participants to acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to interact, understand, and communicate with persons from diverse religious traditions; to function effectively in the midst of religious pluralism; and to create pluralistic democratic communities that work

for the common good.”<sup>422</sup> Interfaith Studies provides useful language, concepts, and methods that can be applied to research and sources within seasoned academic disciplines to create new pedagogical models to better equip students to live well in a religiously diverse America.

Religious literacy and relationship building between religious groups and individuals remain a crucial need in the United States. This need is particularly acute in ‘diversity deserts,’ such as religiously exclusive college campuses when I teach. Colleges must respond to this need and course curriculum can provide an advantageous and effective starting point. The purpose of this thesis has not been to provide an overview of the current state of interfaith engagement in the United States, or of what interfaith dialogue in the US looks like. Rather, the intent has been to not just propose a model for Interfaith based pedagogy, but to demonstrate a pedagogical application by utilizing existing narratives.

Relying primarily on the work of Oddbjørn Leirvik and Eboo Patel, I have designed and demonstrated in this thesis what I am calling the *shared experience* model. Rooted in Interfaith theory and inspired by years of teaching and research in an exclusively Christian environment that lacks religious diversity, the *shared experience model* emerged from an observable need to provide my students with opportunities to hear from and engage with religious others not present in our academic community. One such underrepresented group is Muslim Americans. The innovative application of Interfaith pedagogy presented in this thesis allows four ethnographic narratives of young Muslim Americans to come to the forefront and demonstrates how they can be used to help a reader cultivate the skill sets necessary for interfaith competency by first identifying around what Zareena Grewal calls *shared experiences*.

The work and writing of Eboo Patel and Oddbjørn Leirvik have been essential to my writing. Their complementary visions of the field of Interfaith Studies builds on historical paths of approaching religious experience and dialogue between religious

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<sup>422</sup> Sheryl, Kujawa-Holbrook, *God Beyond Borders: Interreligious Learning Among Faith Communities*. (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2014). Published as a part of the Horizons in Religious Education, series 3.

individuals proposed by such influential figures as Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas, Hans Georg-Gadamer, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. As a result, woven throughout the *shared experience* model I propose for use with narratives are questions and exercises that have been influenced by the philosophy, ethics, and dialectical models proposed by these foundational thinkers. Leirvik has defined the necessary elements to promote the transformational ‘change,’ that results in the ‘action’ Patel articulates as the end goal of interfaith engagement.

The intention of this thesis is to produce a work that represents the valuable learning that can occur at the intersection between the academic and the relational. Primarily, I chose to focus on Patel and Leirvik as in addition to the aforementioned scholars, both rely on contemporary scholarship from contemporary scholars such as Catherine Cornille, Martha Nussbaum, Diana Eck, and David Cheetham. This thesis responds to the need proposed by both Patel and Leirvik that Interfaith theory needs to be translated into pedagogical practice. To do this, I integrated portions of Patel’s framing for how to develop a *narrative imagination* (Nussbaum) and *appreciative knowledge* (Patel) as means of approaching the ethnographic narratives that were presented in the preceding chapters. The result is a *relational* method for engaging stories by first identifying *shared experiences*.

## **7.2 Key Findings and Observations**

Interfaith Studies can respond to the imperative of Robert Nash to bring spirituality, faith, and religion to the forefront on college campuses in order to move towards a more pluralistic society. These attempts are happening in both informal (extra-curricular) and formal (academic) ways, and I contend my *shared experience* model provides an example of the latter. When combined with narratives, the *shared experience* model demonstrates that is possible to re-engage religion in academic curriculum by recognizing, investigating, and even celebrating religious identity as a part of the human experience. Individual expression and relational aspects of religious commitment matter and they can be formally studied and investigated in a way that does not present religions as universal or static.



### 7.2.a Enduring Value of Narrative

As stated in the Introduction, I believe there is a responsibility for Christian scholars who teach at institutions like mine to work against ignorance and misinformation regarding other religions, and the classroom is an effective location to increase the exposure of students to traditions other than their own. Narratives provide a starting point prior to face to interaction.

One of the most rewarding elements of teaching students through narratives occurs when we come together to discuss them after reading. Beyond making progress on our goals of developing a *narrative imagination* and *appreciative knowledge*, as students begin to comment and discuss they observe something profound. They start to realize that while they all may identify as Christian, they are responding to the stories of young Muslims from a diversity of Christian perspectives and viewpoints. The students are now reminded that not all Christians think alike or come to the same conclusions. Christianity is not monolithic either.

In my years as a high school American history teacher students would express incredulity when learning about certain topics such as Japan Internment during WWII or the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s. Students question how these things could have ever happened? They contend they 'don't seem real.' It is easy to collectively forget, especially moments that remind us of when our society did not live up to the values we eschew as foundational to our identity. I predict that there will come a day when a future generation will question how Islam and Muslims in the United States could have been treated with such vitriol, such ignorance? Narratives of Muslim Americans who lived through these times will serve as powerful reminders. As John Fea states, "We use narratives to make sense of our world. It is how we bring order to our own human experiences and the human experiences of others."

The goal of narratives is not to arrive at a clean conclusion. Nadia, Kasim, Amina, and Mohammed all vocalized struggles in their current life stages, but their stories do not end with tidy resolutions. Instead, the narratives meet them where they are/were at currently. The reader sits with them in their struggle and tries to see it from their vantage point, as opposed to watching for them from the finish line.

### **7.2.b Use of Interfaith Pedagogy with Existing Sources**

While I am trained to conduct research in oral history and ethnography, it is not imperative that an educator compile their own narratives to incorporate Interfaith theory. I have successfully applied portions of the *shared experience* model to texts I currently use such as Moustafa Bayoumi's *How Does It Feel to be a Problem: Being Young and Arab in America* (2008), Maria Ebrahimji & Zahra Suratwala's, *I Speak for Myself: American Women on Being Muslim* (2011), autobiographies *The Butterfly Mosque* (2011) by G. Willow Wilson and *Acts of Faith* () by Eboo Patel, and most recently, *Growing Up Muslim: Muslim College Students in America Tell Their Life Stories* (2014 ) by Andrew Garrod and Robert Kilkenny. In an upcoming course I will apply the *shared experience* model to Omar Saif Ghobash's new text, *Letters to a Young Muslim* (2017).

In addition, as Interfaith Studies prioritizes multi-disciplinarity as a defining feature, the *shared experience* model can be applied to individual stories in a multitude of contexts. Thus, as useful as narratives centered on religious identity, and despite the need for more to be produced, it is encouraging that the crucial competencies defined with Interfaith Studies do not have to be delayed. Instead, I see Interfaith-based pedagogical approaches as a tool to invigorate and reimagine stories that have long been curriculum standards in traditional disciplines. Beyond texts, elements of Interfaith theory, and the type of format proposed in the *shared experience* model can be used to approach any form of story-telling - film, documentary, poetry, live speakers.

### **7.2.c Shared Experiences amongst young Muslims and Christians**

This thesis was initially formulated as an investigation of how young single Muslim American's process of identity formation could be better understood by examining their attitudes and perceptions related to marriage. Though the priorities and thrust of the thesis changed over time, the desire to elevate Muslim voices has been achieved, not by classifying Muslims according to ethnicity or race, but rather by starting with the *shared experience* of being young, single Muslims who regard themselves as fully American, in addition to other identity considerations like race, gender, ethnicity or

heritage. As argued in the Introduction, this shifts the focus of the research towards religiosity and away from more common categorizations used historically in research related to religious communities, namely ethnicity. As evidenced throughout this thesis, the bond of religious affiliation often supersedes other markers of difference. However, those differences have still been identified and discussed, principally as they relate to the identity negotiation process of Amina, Kasim, Mohammed, and Nadia.

The opinions expressed in the narratives in this thesis, and the self-reflection conducted by the reader in both discussion and writing related to *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* should all be regarded as unique and valid. An opinion does not need to be shared by the majority to be a worthy contribution to research. However, I have identified three distinct *shared experiences* amongst the young Muslims I have interviewed and the Christian students who have read their narratives that I contend are valuable to present for further consideration.

***Shared attitudes towards marriage as a religious, family, and communal form of responsibility.***

The stories presented in this thesis, and resulting assessment through conversation and written reflection in my classroom reveal that for many Muslims and Christians there is a common belief that marriage remains essential, but marriage is also a difficult pursuit. The participants in this study, both in the quantitative and qualitative responses, *care* about what their families think. All of the interview participants in this thesis agreed that there is a disconnect between parental expectations and their own regarding what makes for an eligible spouse yet this has not resulted in a desire to please their parents. One can't discern how much of this is a religious response and what part is a typical human response. If one believes religion to be at the core of their being, then I argue it is both, and they cannot be separated. The young Muslim voices here all demonstrate how they are in the business of reinventing what they contend it means to honor their families through their religious "tradition" and this is something that deeply resonates with the Christian students I teach.



### ***Multiple expressions of identity***

Amina, Kasim, Mohammed, and Nadia were all adamant that their American values inform their Islamic values and vice versa. Nadia states that she is able to hold her Islam “up as a sort of magnifying glass” to examine American culture and make her own decisions about what she feels is acceptable. This ability to draw sharp distinctions between one’s religion and the broader culture puts religious minorities in the United States in a unique position. For Nadia, Islam is not intertwined in the dominant cultural narrative. As a result, she feels that she is in a better position to navigate between her religious and cultural influences, which combine to make her Muslim American self, her dual-identity.

Participants involved in this study embraced having multiple identities. Having “hyphenated” descriptors appeared to be a point of pride, especially as they aged, visited their family’s ancestral homelands, and became more educated about their religion. Being identified as “Muslim-American” or “Arab-American” was not viewed as being less-than, though many spoke of the issues having a hyphenated identity can present in daily life. Yet, part of being American is being allowed to individually define how you want to be identified, and this varies according to context. It is not the case that all Muslims feel marginalized for being Muslim, or for being Sudanese, or Palestinian. Maybe this is unique in Minnesota, a state which, perhaps due to its Scandinavian roots, has historically been respectful of religion, and is socially and politically more progressive than many other parts of the U.S. As Mohammed asserted “Being American allows me to be my best Muslim-self.”

The *shared experience* here for Muslims and Christians does not come in connection over embracing a hyphenated identity but rather the challenge it presents for Christians to consider what this would mean for them to describe themselves this way? Hearing the experiences of Nadia, Kasim, Amina and Mohammed had a significant impact on my students. As mentioned, they considered how they might describe themselves and wrestled openly with which descriptor should come first - religious commitment or nationality? Some expressed discomfort with the responsibility implied in being a representation of their community – fearing they were not a ‘good’ enough

Christian to be regarded as an example. I have witnessed healthy debates between students over the frustration of who gets to speak with authority on what Christian means and represents. Others expressed they have negative reactions to the term 'Christian' but still want to be regarded as followers of Jesus Christ. Finally, some felt conviction, and determined they need to do more towards strengthening their faith identity. The healthy conversations that took place around hyphenated identity was interfaith at its best. The students developed genuine empathy for the challenges of being defined by your religion and your nationality, they began to consider what this would look like in their own lives, and ultimately, they determined that self-description is an individual choice and that personal backgrounds and life experiences significantly impact the choice one wants to make.

### ***Making Faith your Own***

Instead of downplaying the role of religion in daily life, Nadia, Kasim and Mohammed have become more emboldened by their faith, embracing it as a central part of their identity and self-expression. They have chosen to educate friends, neighbors, co-workers and classmates not through exposure to religious texts or history, but rather through the sharing of their own stories and experiences. They do this not just for themselves, but for the sake of their *ummah*, and the love they have for that community. They are determining their own religious path and I contend this is part of being American. Both the young Muslims in this study and my students are embracing a "religious individualism."<sup>423</sup>

There is much to be learned from further investigation of the new forms of religious authority utilized by young adults in their religious expression and search for answers. All have access to religious texts and readings, that many of their family members have never had. Perhaps because of this access, or more broadly from living in a society that places high value on individualism, all of the interview participants, like so many of the Christian students I teach, see themselves as being in charge of their own religious exploration.

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<sup>423</sup> Robert Bellah, Richards Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven Tipton (eds.) *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996)

For some, this individualism does rely on the belief that religion provides a normative framework for daily life. While I certainly do not want to represent any one expression of Islam as monolithic, it is the case that for some Muslims (as in any religion) there are “right” and “wrong” ways to do things, and there were times when statements were made by Mohammed such as “Islam says this...” or “In Islam \_\_\_\_\_ is forbidden.” While some of the participants (Amina) would make broad or ambiguous references to “what Islam calls for,” others (Mohammed, Nadia) made consistent and overt references to religious texts, the Tradition, and other religious sources. This is why grouping narratives together and allowing them to speak to one another is so useful. I want to be clear there is a need to look past normative behaviors, and I contend ethnographic narratives help to do this work.

### **7.3 Implications for Future Research: American Religious History**

I contend the acquisitions of Interfaith competencies such as *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* can be enriched when the student has also been learning about the historical and social development of Islam and religious practice in different contexts over time. Beyond apparent fields like Anthropology and Sociology for example, narratives can serve a powerful purpose in pre-professional fields such as business, nursing, and education. These are all worthy of further exploration, but they did not serve as focus in this thesis. As a Christian scholar operating within a History department, as my work moves forward, I will focus specifically on scholarship that demonstrates that narratives play a crucial role in the teaching of history, and specifically religion as a part of American history.

Returning briefly to the first chapter, teaching of religion in the United States has experienced dramatic changes in the last sixty years. A number of Supreme Court cases and litigation related to religion in the schools prompted a response from academia and textbook companies to significantly downplay or even remove entirely references to religion in curriculum. Religion was relegated to the private sphere, and the result was religion and religious identity being ignored as factors that shape society or education. There has been movement to correct this oversight. I argue that this movement can primarily be attributed to the events of September 11, 2001. In the wake

of 9/11, and in the decade that has followed, there has been a collective recognition that the U.S. is a religiously diverse society and that religion is not something that can be ignored or undervalued if a population wants to live together peacefully and productively. As discussed, this is one of the driving factors Patel offers for why academia needs to move towards a field of Interfaith Studies

American Historian John Fea claims that this need for greater education around religious diversity in the U.S. is being recognized within the historical profession, commenting that a top priority for the field is “making religious belief and practice an important part of the stories historians are telling about the past. Historians are taking seriously the way religious faith shapes behavior.”<sup>424</sup> Fea goes on to observe that American religious history is one of the “hottest” sub-fields in American history.<sup>425</sup>

I argue that one cannot discern a more apparent “hole” in the religious knowledge of Americans than that which represents Islam. Courses on American history provide an innate location to bring in more Muslim American voices. Contemporary scholarship in the field of American Islam gives consideration to Muslim American experiences within the broader story of American history; it does not place them there. This project seeks to further the indisputable claim that American history includes Muslim history. The narratives in this thesis serve as examples of new research that solidify Muslim Americans as having an active and long-standing role in narrative of United States history. The preceding list is not exhaustive, but I contend my existing work has something to contribute to existing and future research that focuses more specifically on these issues.

In the introduction to this thesis, I offered a brief justification for why I chose to engage in ethnography as opposed to oral history. As I have begun to consider my work moving forward, I have come to the conclusion that there is fertile ground for the historian in me as I continue to work with the Muslim community in my midst. Collecting stories is, a powerful form of activism. It means “I am not going to let you or your story be forgotten. I know you matter.”

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<sup>424</sup> John Fea, *Why Study History: Reflecting on the Importance of the Past*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 19-20.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

## **7.4 Limitations to the Research**

### **7.4.a Balancing Personal Observations**

While all participants self-identified as being devout, I had to come to terms with my own biases and perceptions regarding what devout means, even if participants were permitted to freely determine their own definition. Who am I to suggest religion is not central to one participant's life because it is not congruent with the others? This is the very assumption/prejudice I strive to get my own students to recognize and resist. I had to consider if I was holding the participant to my own set of standards, which are certainly influenced by my own Christian faith and culture? If the interview participant is speaking in a way that suggests they are uncertain, I questioned how clearly that needed to come across? It was difficult to determine when to take the interview participants comments at face value, and when they needed to be measured against or nuanced with other forms of evidence? Ultimately, I determined the most pragmatic solution was to weigh comments only against solid evidence that cannot be disputed - former transcripts, places of residence, education, social media the research had access to, etc...I attempted to take the responsibility to not make judgments or assumptions with the utmost seriousness.

### **7.4.b Geographic Location**

Nadia, Kasim, Amina and Mohammed all attended schools in the city or first ring suburbs where there is greater economic, cultural, and ethnic diversity. Consequentially, schools in the first ring suburbs offer more extensive ESL programming and cultural sensitivity training for teachers. I am a former teacher in Minnesota. As someone who has taught in suburban schools in the Twin Cities, and has lived most of life in the suburban environment, I am aware the experience may have looked quite different if the interview participants had lived further away from the urban core of Minneapolis and St. Paul. While the school district I currently resides in (which is the same as Kasim and Nadia) has significantly increased in diversity over the last decade, and Muslim families are present in every school, it is not the case at all for the neighboring district. They are

also becoming more diverse, but it is mainly through an increase in the number of families relocating from South East Asia. A project centered on Muslim Americans who have been raised primarily in what is classified in the United States as second and third ring suburbs would undeniably yield another set of diverse narratives.

#### **7.4.c Excluded Voices**

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri warns researchers of American Islam that misguided understandings of Islam are based on “idealized conceptions of Islam and not in Islam as it is actually practiced.” Several of the authors whose work influences this thesis have begun to consider if we place too much emphasis on “ideal” voices? This is a concern I have regarding the central voices in this work. While Kasim, Nadia, and Mohammed all feel a sense of deep religious and social connection to broader Muslim networks (both in the United States and throughout the world), Amina describes herself as feeling lost. She identifies with other Muslims who find themselves on the margins, whether it is because of their race, their heritage, or their sexual identity.

While Kasim and Nadia both admitted to being “over-indexed” (See Chapter Four) in Arab friends, I became concerned about being “over-indexed” in Arab interview participants. When the results of the initial online survey concluded, the majority of participants who indicated they would be open to further interviews were from Arab backgrounds. It was much more complicated to find Somali voices, even though they make up the largest demographic of Muslims in the state. For these reasons, the inclusion of Amina’s narrative, despite the challenges it presented, was crucial to this work. It is less complicated to tell the stories of those who consider themselves “found,” than those who feel they are lost. Yet, there is a need for researchers to extend themselves beyond the box to find legitimate experiences that are just as crucial to creating a full picture of young Muslim American lives.

#### **7.5 Conclusion**

The objective has been to demonstrate that acquisition of appreciative knowledge and a narrative imagination can result in a move beyond mere tolerance of religious difference to a lived-out commitment to pluralism. I have made the argument that in coursework

that exposes students to the stories of ‘others’, particularly those that have been marginalized, the addition of interfaith capacities like *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* can lend a richer reading of a narrative or a ‘hearing’ of a story that makes room for students to develop greater empathy and hospitality towards religious others while also practicing critical self-reflection.

Through the *shared experience* model I have proposed, the reader establishes common ground with the narrative subject around common experiences or even crises that can further expand both the mind and heart of the reader.<sup>426</sup>

Utilizing narratives in academic coursework has allowed for the bringing in of Muslim American voices not present in diversity deserts like my exclusively Christian classroom. The narratives themselves become a contribution to the growing body of literature in Interfaith Studies that is centered on personal stories that illuminate religion, faith, and community as shaping forces of an individual’s identity.

Second, engaging these narratives through a well-constructed model based in Interfaith theory, results in the development of *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination*, two capacities that can contribute to a greater appreciation of pluralism.

When we establish trust, and engage with empathy, we don’t have to be afraid of discussing the difficult or even the ugly. We can, as Robert Nash suggests, find things to admire in both the “strengths and weaknesses.”<sup>427</sup> I have demonstrated that when applied to narratives, an interfaith based pedagogy can provide a comprehensive means to engage religious diversity. The narratives of Nadia, Kasim, Amina, and Mohammed have not only provided the the reader with greater intellectual understanding, but also created a space to get to know these individuals by relating to them on a personal level. This relational focus is what differentiates Interfaith Studies from other disciplines. The reader of these stories has been asked to move beyond understanding and knowing to the objective of *caring*.

It is my hope that my approach to teaching narratives will allow students to experience a Buberian transformation, a change in mindset that can ultimately result in

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<sup>426</sup> Catherine Cornille, *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2008), 96.

<sup>427</sup> Robert J. Nash, *Faith, Hype, and Clarity: Teaching about Religion in American Schools and Colleges* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999) 32-33.

relationship. We have engaged with Nadia, Kasim, Amina and Mohammed in order that we might “learn, change and grow, not so that we can force change on the *other*.”<sup>428</sup> We have worked together, strengthening each other’s arguments through our respectful commitment to communal understanding.<sup>429</sup> We have become neighbors, and are now more willing to not only exercise empathy, but consider and take action to make our neighbor’s lives better - healthier.

Recently, a student, Dominique, sent me an email and told me about an incident at family gathering.<sup>430</sup> When her uncle began to make stereotypical statements about Islam, her initial reaction was to remain silent. However, the face of one of the female speakers who spoke in the Muslim Women in History course Dominique had taken the previous January popped into her head. Dominique had felt an instant connection to this Muslim woman, and they continued to stay in touch after meeting. Dominique told me she gently asked her uncle, “Okay. So, do you actually know any Muslims? Because I do.” While Dominique informed me the conversation that followed did not change her uncle’s opinion, he did soften and even retracted some statements after admitting, no, he did not actually know any Muslims. Dominique had anticipated his response, and she mentioned to me that while her goal was not for her uncle to be embarrassed, she was pleased that his admission caused him to self-reflect and adjust his comments.

In Dominique’s experience, we see that her relationship with her new neighbor (our Muslim speaker) is what gave validity to her conversation with her uncle. She “knew” Islam in a way he did not. She also expressed she felt compelled to speak out when she imagined how our speaker might feel if she were to overhear Dominique’s uncle’s comments. Dominique had developed *appreciative knowledge* and a *narrative imagination*. She had moved her theoretical learning into practical application.

Much of what made the narratives rich and honest is attributed to the level of trust that was established between researcher and participant, particularly around the mutual respect for religious belief. Anthropologist Brian Hoey argues that there is no

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<sup>428</sup> Swidler, *After the Absolute*, 3.

<sup>429</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p., xxi.

<sup>430</sup> The student’s name has been changed to protect her privacy.



rule which restricts ethnographers from becoming advocates for those they study.<sup>431</sup> Ethnographic narratives have helped me to become more proficient in developing an ethic of interfaith inquiry and spiritual integrity.<sup>432</sup> These skills need not be separated from my scholarship or academic identity; they enhance them. My desire is that both this thesis and my future research demonstrate what it can mean for a scholar and teacher to be an “agent for change in the study of religion.”<sup>433</sup>

The ethnographic narratives and the examples from my own academic life presented in this thesis demonstrate that wisdom equips us to be able to overcome fear. As I have defined, I consider this both a literal fear of the “other,” and the fear of engaging or being in relationship with the “other.” When we grow in wisdom, and here I will contend that capacities like *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination help us with that growth*, we are living out the Christian commandment to be a good neighbor. When we choose to challenge our fear, we are more willing to question, more willing to self-reflect, and more willing to encounter truth. In closing, at the heart of my teaching and my personal life and faith commitment is the conclusion that we restrict the fullness of what God is trying to do in the world when we limit the identities of those God is using to speak into our lives.

## **7.6 Final Application of the *Shared Experience Model*: Constructing Your Own Narrative Identity**

The model I have created offers a new, valuable way to approach narratives. It gives the stories a greater meaning and demonstrates their effectiveness as a teaching tool. As a field, interfaith Studies’ emphasis on the pragmatic makes it more inclusive,

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<sup>431</sup> Brian A Hoey. "A Simple Introduction to the Practice of Ethnography and Guide to Ethnographic Fieldnotes" *Marshall University Digital Scholar* (2014)

<sup>432</sup> The Interfaith work I have participated in over the previous ten years has profoundly changed me. I see myself as developing into a scholar activist. I define my responsibility as using sound academic scholarship to engage a primarily evangelical Christian audience regarding Islam. Beyond education (knowledge acquisition), I am interested in dispelling prejudice, identifying points of commonality, and working towards reconciliation. While I contend this was happening in subtle and spontaneous ways over the past few years, it has been my increased exposure to, and involvement in interfaith circles that have motivated me to be more intentional in my instruction and scholarship. Interfaith Studies has given me tools and equipment to enhance and guide my research, and it has also given the work a sense of both place and purpose.

<sup>433</sup> Leirvik, *Interreligious Studies*, 1.

and reveals an awareness that times are changing. It is a 21<sup>st</sup> century approach in many ways- value of individual experience, interdisciplinary nature, willingness to evolve, clearly defined outcomes.

The reality is not all students will become high profile leaders. However, the *relational* interaction with narratives affects the non-traditional, or “quiet” leaders as well, equipping all to be good neighbors in whatever environment they reside. I contend both types of leadership are necessary for a healthier civic landscape that respects and values religious diversity. For the culminating exercise in the *shared experience* model, the student will be drafting their own narrative identity guided by the following instructions:

In the last narrative (Mohammed) your final assignment was to consider in writing what it means to be a caretaker for the stories we have read and studied. Then we discussed your responses to the following questions:

1. What does your religious environment look like? Consider both the observable and non-observable. What things can be ‘felt’ even if they cannot be seen?
2. What religious spaces and influences do you think are most important to you at this life stage? How has that changed? What sources do you rely upon?
3. How would you describe an environment that allows your personal faith to thrive?

For your final, cumulative assignment, you will be making a first attempt at drafting your own narrative identity. You will be doing this in the form of a letter, with the intended recipient being one of our narrative subjects (Nadia, Kasim, Amina, Mohammed) This means you should consider them your audience, and as you are now aware of their story, it is your opportunity to share yours.

As you compose your letter, rely on the materials you have produced from reading the narratives as well as the narratives themselves to address Eboo Patel’s five essential personal experiences:

- Moments of inspiration or enrichment from people or ideas of other traditions.
- Moments of connection or relationship with people or ideas of other traditions.
- Moments of prejudice or conflict with people or ideas of other traditions.

- Moments of action or appreciation with people or ideas of other traditions.
- Moments of recognizing difference with other religious people or ideas, yet feeling admiration.

Secondly, consider what you want the reader of your story to gain? What would you like them to consider as they approach your narrative? Once the narratives have been completed we will be sharing them with a trusted partner from class to read and contemplate, in order to foster our *appreciative knowledge* and *narrative imagination* as it relates to individuals in our own community.

## APPENDIX A

### Teaching Islam: A four-part framework

*As this thesis is constructed around ethnographic narratives, it is necessary to explain where and how I use them in my classroom. Here, I will briefly describe my approach for teaching Islam to majority Christian students, and ground my narratives in a pedagogical overlapping that I have found effective.*

On the first day of class, I describe to students how I am approaching Islam as a historian who is also utilizing methods from Interfaith Studies. I explain that I implement a four-part framework to my teaching that represents the intersections between a traditional discipline (History) and a relatively new field (Interfaith Studies) that offers me rich resources as an educator expected to “demonstrate the integration of faith and learning.” My initial primary role is to “educate” them through the use of reputable academic sources, and to train them to distinguish between different types of sources.

Second, we allow ourselves to be “illuminated” by considering perspectives and opinions we may not have considered before. “Education” has provided a firm foundation, and now we can allow ourselves to be “illuminated” by considering perspectives and opinions we have not before. This is mainly done through primary sources that bring in human voices, as well as hearing from Muslims in our community. I classify the use of narratives, both those in this thesis and others I include, as primary sources that are a part of this illumination process. We are studying real people and real events. This is an essential when studying religious history. In the coming pages, I will clarify the connection between narratives and “illumination” by proposing my own structure for approaching narratives, influenced by the research of Eboo Patel, Oddbjorn Leirvik, Diana Eck, and Martha Nussbaum.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, we find opportunities to “celebrate” those we are studying. What I mean is that we look for the beauty in others made in the image of God by examining art, music, food, and other forms of achievement. This can also occur when reading and discussing narratives. I contend that when we not only study, but choose to celebrate the lives and history of those we consider the “other,” we are doing redemptive work.

Finally, as a Christian scholar, I argue that our sacred Christian texts teach us that nothing falls outside of God's purview, and I ask students to intentionally "contemplate" how our coursework may be speaking to or shaping spiritual identity. Borrowing from John Fea, I also argue that, "all human beings have inherent dignity and worth independent of their actions or behaviors." I take this a step further and argue 'independent of their beliefs' as well. Recognizing these...developing interfaith capacities such as *appreciative knowledge* and narrative imagination becomes an expression of love for neighbor. In the spirit of Emmanuel Levinas, this obligation towards our neighbor becomes our primary responsibility. We should, quite genuinely, seek to find a trace of the Divine in the face of our neighbor.

### **Sample Course Objectives for my classes with an Interfaith Studies component**

1. We will use course content and community educational opportunities to develop an *appreciative knowledge* toward the experiences and humanity of those we are studying.
2. We will work to cultivate a *narrative imagination* as we encounter the stories of others different from ourselves.
3. We will seek to approach coursework and events with both a *critical eye* and *hopeful heart*.
4. We will articulate and describe a *responsibility for living well* as a person of faith in a diverse community

## APPENDIX B

### How to read *Growing Up Muslim*

Over the course of the next few weeks you will be reading *Growing up Muslim*, (Garrod and Kilkenny) a text that is a compilation of narratives by American Muslim college students. I will not be supplying you with GRQ's for this text as I do not think they are the most conducive way to approach reading narratives. Instead, we will be relying on two "lenses" borrowed from the academic field of Interfaith Studies.<sup>434</sup> Interfaith Studies offer the reader a lens or framework through which to approach a narrative. Though face-to-face interaction is essential, the reading of a narratives can provide a productive starting place for increased interaction with religious diversity.

As you read *Growing up Muslim*, you should take notes/jot down thoughts for each chapter based on consideration of the following two lenses. You will be provided with question prompts for the first four chapters. You may want to turn the 'components' into questions, if that helps you have a better understanding. Be sure and be specific. What details, brief stories, or quotes can you identify in support? These notes are something you should bring to class on designated days. When we have finished the class, the notes will inform your final written response.

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#### **LENS 1: Appreciative Knowledge**

*Appreciative Knowledge* seeks to recognize the contributions of other traditions, have sympathetic understanding of the distinctive history and commitments of other traditions, and develop ways of working with and serving other communities.

**Goal:** The objective of *appreciative knowledge* is to move beyond mere tolerance to a place of appreciation for faith difference.

This knowledge is comprised of the following five components, as attributed to Eboo Patel:

1. Developing both a "general orientation and substantive knowledge base."
2. Being willing to seek "the admirable, and the life giving rather than the deficits, the problems, and the ugliness.

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<sup>434</sup> Though conceived within Religious Studies and Theology circles, Interfaith Studies offers signatory approaches, asks different questions of religion and religious experiences, and defines the role of the researcher in ways that are distinct from both Theology and Religious Studies. It is not an exclusively American conception, but has been shaped by influential voices from Europe (Oddbjørn Leirvik) and the United Kingdom (David Cheetham) in addition to America (Diana Eck, Martha Nussbaum, Eboo Patel, Leonard Swidler, Paul Tillich). Interfaith Studies relates to the praxis field of interfaith (or interreligious) dialogue by examining the experiences of individuals as they encounter interfaith engagement. It recognizes the "living" aspect of religious identity. As articulated by Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "yes, religion is about systems, but our primary concern should be with religious persons." Interfaith Studies does not treat religions as fixed entities or as monolithic.

3. Recognizing the contributions of traditions; highlight exemplary figures.
4. Develop a “sympathetic understanding of where a differing religious view is coming from.”
5. Build a knowledge base that allows you to work effectively with a different community.

### **LENS 2: Narrative Imagination**

Ethicist Martha Nussbaum argues individuals must develop a “*narrative imagination*,” which requires one to cultivate an imagination which gives the “ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.”

**GOAL:** In essence, while we should start from considering what we can learn from you (appreciative knowledge) we can develop a more nuanced position of being ready to, in my words, “imagine what life is like for you.”

Nussbaum offers three interrelated capacities:

1. One must be prepared to critically examine their own beliefs.
2. One must see themselves not just as individual but as “human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of recognition and concern.”
3. Cultivate an imagination which gives the “ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of that person’s story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have.”

## APPENDIX C

### Sample Syllabus for a Course on Islam with an Interfaith Component

#### HIS212U HISTORY OF ISLAM SP2018

##### **Course Description:**

This history survey course is designed to introduce students to the religion of Islam from inception and development in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, to Islam as it is practiced worldwide today. Specific emphasis will also be placed on the history and development of Islam in the United States. The goal of this course is to increase understanding of Islam and facilitate improved communication between the Christian and Muslim communities. Contemporary issues and controversies will be examined through the historical lens of the Muslim experience throughout history.

##### **Course Goals:**

1. Examine the roots of Islam from a historical perspective.
2. Provide understanding of basic tenets of Muslim faith and differences between religious sects.
3. Exploration of Muslim contributions to world progress.
4. Exposure to Muslim culture through examination of art, lifestyle, religious practice and architecture as it varies throughout the world.
5. Understanding of Islam in today's society, America and around the globe/

##### **Course Themes:**

1. Developing *Appreciative Knowledge* and considering the impact of the study of another religion on one's primary religion
2. Cultivating a *Narrative Imagination* and exploring the impact of personal interaction on one's opinions and perspectives
3. The responsibility of Christians regarding others of different faith systems

##### **What is a "U" course?**

1. Knowledge: Identify the interconnectedness of the culture being studied with other world cultures.
2. Knowledge: Understand worldviews and ways of life from a variety of perspectives, including Christian perspectives.
3. Knowledge: Analyze how the culture has been transmitted and changed due to the influence of time, environment, and other cultures.
4. Skills: Develop a vocabulary that allows discourse between the culture being studied and one's own culture.
5. Skills: Show empathy to and engagement with the ideas, points of view, and feelings of others when these differ from one's own.

##### **Required Texts:**

Brown, Daniel. *A New Introduction to Islam*

Curtis, Edward *Muslims in America: A Short History*



Garrod, Andrew and Robert Kilkenny, eds. *Growing Up Muslim*  
Wilson, G. Willow. *The Butterfly Mosque*

## APPENDIX D

### List of In-depth Interview participants

Amina

Female

Birth Year: 1989

Place of Birth: Mogadishu, Somalia

Ethnic/Cultural heritage: Somali

Languages spoken: English, Oromo, Arabic

Year of relocation to the USA: 1996

Residence: St. Paul, MN

Education: B.A., Sociology/Anthropology & American Racial and Multicultural Studies

Marital Status: Single as of 2016

Kasim

Male

Birth Year: 1989

Place of Birth: Jenin, Palestine

Ethnic/Cultural heritage: Palestinian/Arab

Languages spoken: English, Arabic

Year of relocation to the USA: 1991

Residence: Maplewood, MN

Education: B.S., Business Finance, Accounting, Marketing

Marital Status: Married in 2014

Mohammed

Male

Birth Year: 1989

Place of Birth: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Ethnic/Cultural heritage: Palestinian/Arab

Languages spoken: English, Arabic

Year of relocation to the USA: 1996

Residence: Minneapolis, MN

Education: B.S. Mathematics, M.S., Actuarial Studies

Marital Status: Married in January 2016

Nadia

Female

Birth Year: 1986

Place of Birth: Jenin, Palestine

Ethnic/Cultural heritage: Palestinian/Arab

Languages spoken: English, Arabic

Year of relocation to the USA: 1991

Residence: Maplewood, MN

Education: B.A., Sociology, Social Justice

Marital Status: Single as of 2016

## Appendix E

### Initial Research Questions

The initial research questions that guided this study included the following:

1. How do you self-identify? (Describe yourself) What factors shape this decision?
2. How do you define community? What informs this definition?
3. What role does the religious community (*ummah*) have in how you live your life and in how you make decisions?
4. What does it mean to you to be devout?
5. What role does your family play in your life and how you make decisions?
6. How do you perceive marriage? Do you want to get married? Why?
7. Do you consider marriage to be a requirement for Muslims? Why?
8. What are you looking for in a suitable marriage partner?
9. How did you arrive at this set of criteria?
10. Are your parents/family and religious community supportive of your criteria?
11. Do you think American culture and being American influences your religious commitment?
12. Do you think American culture and being American influences what you are looking for in a future marriage partner?
13. What sources do you seek as you answer the previous questions?

## Appendix F:

### Data Corpus

The data corpus refers to all data obtained for analysis. This included initial traditional research and reading, informal conversations and observations, surveys, in-depth interviews and field work.<sup>435</sup> Qualitative methods such as interviewing allow for the capturing of key aspects of the lives of young adults that don't emerge in surveys. Simultaneously, a quantitative survey allows for themes and commonalities to be identified, and serves as a baseline to return to throughout the research process. This combines the use of surveys, interviews, and observations, all of which were filtered through thematic analysis, which will be explained in coming pages. This thesis recognizes the usefulness of a combined methodological approach, known as methodological triangulation.<sup>436</sup> Methodological triangulation allows qualitative and quantitative data to inform one another in the same study. Each data set speaks to the other. Methodological triangulation was chosen for two reasons. First, it serves to "round out the picture of what amounts to a composite set of information."<sup>437</sup> Second, it restrains the researcher's own subjectivity as more dominant data sets, like the in-depth interviews, were always weighed and checked against other data sets like the survey results and field work observations. Each data set will now be introduced and described, beginning with the initial survey and research questions, followed by the in-depth interviews, and then concluding with fieldwork and observations.

### Research Questions: Structure and Administration<sup>438</sup>

The initial research questions that guided this study included the following:

1. How do you self-identify? (Describe yourself) What factors shape this decision?
2. How do you define community? What informs this definition?
3. What role does the religious community (*ummah*) have in how you live your life and in how you make decisions?

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<sup>435</sup> Braun, Virginia and Clarke, Victoria. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. (2006) Vol 3, No. 2, 77-101.

<sup>436</sup> Roof, Wade Clark. "Research Design", in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2014) pp. 74-75.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 75.

<sup>438</sup> Question number 9 and number 13 were initially included as a part of questions 8 and 12. They were extracted and reworded to be separate questions after the initial online survey.

4. What does it mean to you to be devout?
5. What role does your family play in your life and how you make decisions?
6. How do you perceive marriage? Do you want to get married? Why?
7. Do you consider marriage to be a requirement for Muslims? Why?
8. What are you looking for in a suitable marriage partner?
9. How did you arrive at this set of criteria?
10. Are your parents/family and religious community supportive of your criteria?
11. Do you think American culture and being American influences your religious commitment?
12. Do you think American culture and being American influences what you are looking for in a future marriage partner?
13. What sources do you seek as you answer the previous questions?

An initial online survey was created in order to find willing interview participants. It was comprised of 45 structured questions that related to the thirteen central questions listed above. The survey required the participant to respond in one of three ways, depending upon the question being asked. Though many of the questions asked participants to respond according to a Likert scale, or a ranking system, each question was followed with an optional opportunity to respond in writing to any of the questions previously asked. Though not many did, this afforded the participants the opportunity to discuss the topics presented in their own words, free of the constraints enforced by fixed-response questions.

The intention of the survey was to generate a list of themes and definitive questions to serve as a frame for the semi-structured interviews. While the survey was anonymous, participants could choose to provide their contact information if they were open to being interviewed in person. It was anticipated that the survey would generate a willing number of participants who would consider committing to further in-depth interviews.<sup>439</sup> After creating a set of research questions based on the findings from the survey, a series of semi-formal, conversational interviews were designed to be conducted with six undergraduate Muslim men and women who were either known by the researcher or volunteered after participating in the online survey.

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<sup>439</sup> The number of respondents who volunteered was encouraging and not all could be interviewed for lack of time and resources. Out of the thirty that were eligible based on their answers, ten agreed to be interviewed.

## Field Work

Two of the participants live within a few miles of me and chose locations that I already frequents. Each participant was provided with the following documents: an overview of the thesis proposal, a release form allowing their story to be used in the thesis, and a copy of the University of Exeter's statement verifying that approval had been received to conduct interviews. All research participants were given an alias to protect their confidentiality. During the interviews, conversations were recorded using the voice memo application of an Apple iPhone 5s. After the interviews were complete, the phone data would be backed up to a computer hard drive as well as to a USB storage device. Legal pads were used for each interview for additional notes and recorded details such as facial expressions, perceived mood, tone of voice and other observations. Though the research in this thesis is not grounded in phenomenology, observation was necessary.<sup>440</sup> The participant's perceptions and feelings were not disregarded and, where appropriate, are utilized to more thoroughly represent the participant's experience and personality. Adding in appropriate details regarding their demeanor or mannerisms gives insight into their personalities, and allows the readers to have a richer experience as they read the narrative chapters.

The interviews were semi-structured, with pre-determined questions based on specific themes and issues but participants were encouraged to respond in their own words, allowing them to stay on a particular question or topic for as long as they preferred. They are frequently quoted directly.<sup>441</sup> To do otherwise would risk their voices being lost. It was expected that there may be questions an interviewee might refuse to answer and participants had been made aware of their right of refusal. Remarkably, this never occurred in any of the conversations. All of the recorded interviews were later transcribed and

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<sup>440</sup> The type of analysis I am conducting is also related to phenomenology in that it focuses on the human experience subjectively. This approach emphasizes the participants' perceptions, feelings and experiences as the paramount object of study. Rooted in humanistic psychology, phenomenology allows me to give a voice to the "other" as a key component in my qualitative research. This allows my respondents to discuss the topic in their own words, free of constraints from fixed-response questions found in quantitative studies, and in the initial data gathered from the online surveys.

<sup>441</sup> This can get lengthy at times but at every opportunity, the aim is to let the participants use their own words.

matched with the notes on phenomenological details and observations.<sup>442</sup> The conversations were timed and the notes reflect that timing so the researcher could later assess how fatigue might play into a participant's mood and response. Several subsequent emails were exchanged to ask interview participants to either expand or clarify statements, as well as to check for accuracy.

Following the transcription of face-to-face interviews, the transcription and the hand-written notes would be corroborated. They would then be sifted through to identify any blatant patterns or details that tied clearly or directly to the themes and findings from the online survey. The interviews were then categorized by the determined themes, more nuanced than those revealed in the surveys.<sup>443</sup> The four most prominent themes were then identified and remaining themes were sub-categorized within each. Each narrative chapter would eventually be organized around the most consequential theme that I determined was blatant in the individual's story, and would help create a cohesive narrative.

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<sup>442</sup> I transcribed all interviews personally utilizing procedures outlined by Anna Davidson Bremborg. See, Davidson Bremborg, Anna. "Interviewing" in *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion* eds. Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (New York: Routledge, 2014) pp. 310-322.

<sup>443</sup> Though daunting, this was one of the most rewarding parts of the research process. I'll admit that in each case, I had pre-interview predictions about what theme was going to emerge in each individual's interview. Upon revisiting the collected data a second and even third time for some, I discovered stronger, more intriguing themes struggling to be heard. For example, I had not anticipated that Nadia's challenges in finding a spouse would reveal her greater struggle to find acceptance within her own extended family and culture. Though I knew Amina had difficulties with her family and often clashed over cultural differences, I had not predicted that she would conclude that letting her family go would mean that she would conclude she needed to let her religion go as well. It is not easy to present a neutral face, jotting in your notebook, as your interviewee confesses that though they love Islam, they question how they can have a healthy future with it as central part of their life.

## APPENDIX F

### Certificate of Ethical Approval



#### COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

College of Humanities  
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### CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL APPROVAL

Academic Discipline: Theology

Title of Project: The Search for *Sakinah*: An Exploration of the Evolving Marital Expectations of Young, Muslim Americans\*\*

Name(s)/Title(s) of Project Research Team Member(s): Amy Leigh Poppinga, PhD student

Project Researcher's Contact Details (email and telephone no.):

Email: [ap402@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:ap402@exeter.ac.uk) Telephone: 001-612-207-8950

Brief Description of Project:

In the United States, young Muslims spend a great deal of time formulating their hopes and dreams in regards to marriage. They develop these dreams in the midst of a culture that often presents images of marriage and relationships that are contradictory to their Islamic principles. ***How do the cultural realities of growing up in a western, non-Islamic society impact the young Muslim American's perception of the marriage process and marital expectations?*** It is hoped the research will shed light on the issues and concerns of the dynamic, diverse, younger population of Muslim Americans. Also, the research seeks to allow Muslims a voice through documenting their own stories and experiences.

This project has been approved for the period

from: March 2012

to: June 2014

Signature

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Z. Boughton'.

Date: 13 March 2012

(College Ethics Officer)

Name/Title of Officer (BLOCK CAPITALS): DR ZOE C. BOUGHTON

\*\*The title of the thesis was changed and approved in 2014 to better reflect the direction the research was taking as the project evolved.

**Appendix F: Proposal and Consent Form for Research Projects**



## APPENDIX G



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### Proposal and Consent Form for Research Projects

**Title of Research Project:** The Search for *Sakinah*: An Exploration of the Evolving Marital Expectations of Young, Muslim Americans.\*\*

**Name and title of Researcher, and Details of Project:**

Amy Leigh Poppinga, International PhD student, Department of Theology and Religion

**Start & end date permission requested for:** Start February 2012 End June 2014

#### SYNOPSIS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In the United States, young Muslims spend a great deal of time formulating their hopes and dreams in regards to marriage. They develop these dreams in the midst of a culture that often presents images of marriage and relationships that are contradictory to their Islamic principles.

***How do the cultural realities of growing up in a western, non-Islamic society impact the young Muslim American's perception of the marriage process and marital expectations?***

There are no commercial interests regarding this research. It will be published in the form of an academic dissertation. However, it is hoped the research will shed light on the issues and concerns of the dynamic, diverse, younger population of Muslim Americans. Also, the research seeks to allow Muslims a voice through documenting their own stories and experiences.

#### RESEARCH METHODS

The Muslim American community has been subject to intense scrutiny and criticism since the events of September 11, 2001. They are also suffering from research fatigue. It is imperative when working with the Muslim community to clearly communicate research intentions and perceived goals. Participating in this research poses minimal risk beyond potential emotional discomfort when asked questions of a personal nature.

This dissertation will involve a blend of both quantitative and qualitative research. It will include: *recorded intensive interviews, survey distribution, participant observation, and archival research*. An online survey will be distributed with questions that are designed to determine the role of religiosity, cultural influence, and personal preference in the participant's development of marital expectations. There will also be the opportunity to provide general feedback and comments at the end of the questionnaire.

Biographies of select individuals will be gathered by conducting semi-structured interviews which will take place both in person, via the phone and email, over the period of one year. Subsequent interviews may be scheduled as needed.

**Definition of invited participants:**

Participants must be: between 18 and 30 years of age, self-identify as Muslim, and have lived in the U.S. for at least 8 years. Participants will mainly be contacted through local mosques, community organizations, and listservs. Anyone who receives the survey also has the capability to share the link (snowball) with their own contacts, which may result in a higher number of participants.

Select interviews will meet the same criteria listed above but will not be anonymous. They will be given the option of requesting the use of an alias in the completed dissertation.

**Data or information to be collected, and the use that will be made of it:**

The surveys will be anonymous but will ask participants to provide basic demographic information. Qualtrics allows for the survey creator to send the survey to known participants, though their responses would not be traceable unless they consented to give their contact information. Anyone who receives the survey also has the capability to share the link with their own contacts, which may result in a higher number of participants.

Interviews and research completed at organizations will be conducted in the same manner as the select interviews mentioned above. Members or participants at any organization will be made aware of my presence and research goals in advance of attendance.

**How will the information supplied by participants be stored?**

During and at the end of the project all interview materials will be securely stored on portable hard drive with password protection for the relevant files. The signed documents will be kept as hardcopies and securely stored in a personal safe. The data will be kept for the foreseeable future as it pertains to future research projects. The computer files can be deleted and any hardcopies shredded at any time.

**Contact for further questions:**

**Amy Poppinga (student researcher)**

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**Consent:**

I voluntarily agree to participate, and agree to the use of my data for the purposes specified above. I can withdraw consent at any time by contacting the interviewer.

*Note:* Your contact details are kept separately from your interview data.

Printed name of participant: .....

Signature of participant: .....

Preferred contact - email or telephone: .....

Signature of researcher: .....

***One signed copy to be retained by the researcher, and one by the participant.***

\*\* The title of the thesis was changed and approved in 2014 to better reflect the direction the research was taking as the project evolved. Interview participants were made aware of these changes.

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