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2010 Association for the Sociology of Religion Presidential Address

Creating an American Islam: Thoughts on Religion, Identity, and Place

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I begin with the premise that there is an American Islam being created—a version of the faith that aligns with the contemporary United States both organizationally and culturally. This faith formation is connected to the immigration of Muslims to the United States since the 1965 changes in immigration laws, even though Muslims have been in the United States, especially among African Americans, much longer than that. Two sets of social forces are creating this American Islam: the lived religious practices of the second and third generations of these post-1965 families; and the imposed images of Islam and institutional constraints of civil society coming from major social institutions and native-born Americans. The interaction of these “bottom up” and “top down” dynamics can be illuminated by an understanding of “place” in both social and geographical terms.

Key words: Islam; American religion; immigration; place; sacred space; religious identity.

Just as, at one time, there was a debate about “Americanism” within Roman Catholicism, there are now people who would argue against the very idea of an “American Islam.” Some are North American non-Muslims enamored of some version of the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington 1996) argument, or those who are committed to a normative ideal of a “Christian America” (Wuthnow 2006). In ironic agreement, some in radical Islamic circles either deny that the development of an American Islam is

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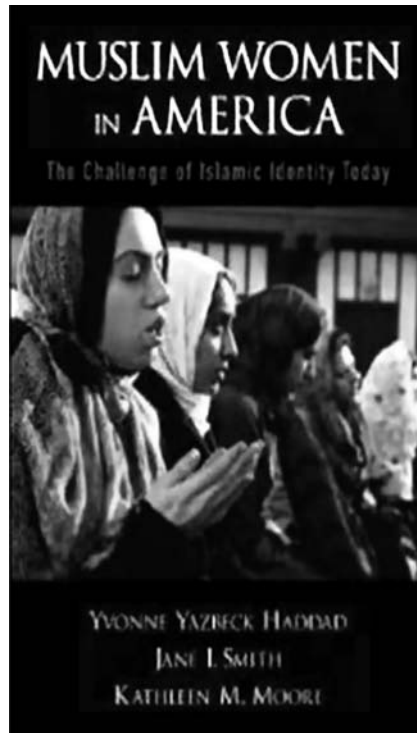
happening, arguing that all Islam is one and there are no cultural variations, or they believe that it is happening and find it a regrettable degeneration of the true faith. Another response is to claim that an “American Islam” is not a recent development, as there have been Muslims in this country for generations. In particular, there has been a significant African American Muslim population in the United States, both in the distinctly U.S. form of the Nation of Islam and in more orthodox manifestations, for decades (Smith 2010). This has led to an ideal typical distinction in the scholarly world that studies Muslims in the United States that differentiates between “indigenous” and “immigrant” Islam, largely along racial lines (Khabeer 2007; Leonard 2007).

But the mere existence of Muslims in the United States is not the conceptual equivalent of an “American Islam.” The latter evokes a religiously authentic and culturally legitimate faith that exists relatively unproblematically within its societal context, in the United States as part of the established religious mosaic. Thus, despite the existence of Muslims in America for some time, I argue that a truly American Islam is a product of the second and third generations of post-1965 “new” immigrants and is currently in formation. This development is due in part to the rapidly increasing numbers of these post-1965 families, and in part because many of the second and third generations now have the education and middle-class status to begin to make claims on, and demand respect from, the American public sphere. American Muslim communities increasingly have the resources to found and develop religious and social service institutions (Haddad 2009) that help, in turn, to organize these resources. Further, the United States has both a history of priding itself on religious diversity and a significant cultural strain that now celebrates “multiculturalism” (Kurien 2007; Wuthnow 2006). And, not insignificantly, American Islam has now captured significant scholarly, literary, cultural, and political attention. In sum, American Islam is getting harder for all Americans to avoid, as opposed to when its existence was an isolated family or locked within racially segregated African American communities.¹

A look at several recent book covers from scholarly volumes on Islam in the United States shows the extent to which this topic is engaged, especially in scholarly writings, based on recent immigrants from Arab and South Asian countries (figures 1–3). Note that the photographs focus on people who

¹There is active engagement between some in African-American Muslim communities and some in post-1965 immigrant Muslim communities as to what are appropriate practices, legal traditions, and cultural habits for Muslims in the United States. This engagement has been both cooperative and marked by tension, often along race and class lines. Khabeer (2007), Leonard (2003, 2007), and Smith (2010) all address this. My concern here is centered more on how Islam is coming to visibility, consciousness, and legitimacy within the general American public sphere and its religious pluralism—a dynamic that is the result of the numbers and resources of the post-1965 immigrants and their children.

FIGURE 1. *Muslim Women in America*, by Haddad et al., Oxford University Press, 2006. © Oxford University Press, New York, NY. Used by permission of the Press.



appear to be of either Arab or South Asian origin, signaled either by skin color or clothing, and the dearth of African Americans. I do note that the cover of Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad's seminal 1993 book *The Muslims of America* (figure 3) does work to show the variety among Muslims. But even in this photograph, Africans or African Americans are a distinct minority. And, as is common, the *hijab* headscarf for women functions as perhaps the dominant physical symbol of Islamic identity and a visible reminder of the potential disruption between Islam and the American "main street" (for other evidence of the ubiquity of the *hijab* in representations of Muslims, see [Williams and Vashi 2007](#)). Each of these book covers emphasizes, perhaps unintentionally, the distance between Muslims in the United States and Anglo-Saxon middle America (often through juxtaposition, as in figure 2).

Many other examples could be provided, such as the booklet "Being Muslim in America" (2009), published by the Bureau of International Information Programs in the U.S. State Department. The cover photo shows two young women playing basketball, one in a standard basketball uniform while the other is dressed in hijab with long sleeves and long pants under her uniform (interestingly, both young women are Muslim—

FIGURE 2. *Mecca and Main Street*, by Abdo, Oxford University Press, 2006. © Oxford University Press, New York, NY. Used by permission of the Press.

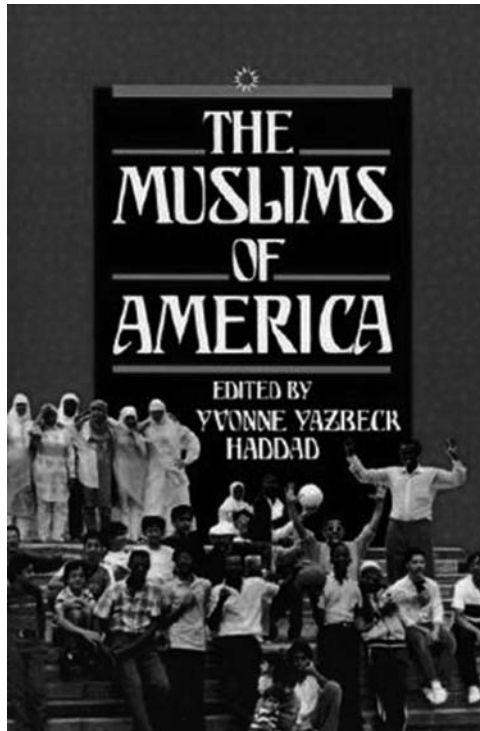


Arab Americans from the Detroit area).² In all, however, African American Muslims remain underrepresented in our dominant public images of Islam in the United States, as African Americans remain underrepresented in our politics, culture, and media generally. However, this focus on recent immigrants as the most visible representation of Islam in the United States is sometimes uncomfortable for Muslims themselves. For example, a post-9/11 public-service ad campaign sponsored by Council on American–Islamic Relations (CAIR) titled “I am an American Muslim” featured several people who emphasized that their families had been in this country for generations—deliberately unhooking American Islam from recent immigration (Alsultany 2007).

But if we are to think about an American Islam as a religious form that has a significant place in the *public sphere*, that becomes a player in community and

²It is significant to note that all of the books pictured here are fundamentally sympathetic to religious pluralism and encourage the idea of Islam as a culturally legitimate religion in the U.S. Books hostile to Islam, of course, almost invariably use cover art that dramatizes the differences between Muslims and “America.”

FIGURE 3. *The Muslims of America*, by Haddad, Oxford University Press, 1993. © Oxford University Press, New York, NY. Used by permission of the Press.



perhaps national politics, and that becomes a significant and widely perceived presence in the American religious mosaic, we must focus our attention on the religion being crafted—on the ground and in community-based organizations—by second and third generations of post-1965 immigrants, and how that interacts with the imposed images, stereotypes, and understandings of the larger non-Muslim American population. This essay explores what this empirical story tells us about religion, its interactions with “identity” as a social and public phenomenon, and “place,” conceptualized both socially and geographically.

THE “AMERICANIZATION” OF ISLAM

One can discuss the “Americanization” of Islam in both organizational and cultural terms. There are several organizational features that are widely regarded as being distinctive about American religion. Many consider a congregational structure and a “community center” model of social service delivery to members as distinctly “American” (e.g., [Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000](#); [Warner](#)

1994) religious forms, particularly when this emerges among communities of immigrants. The crux of this organizational form is the basic reality of American religious institutions as locally organized and ultimately responsive to local members. These members finance, build, incorporate, administer, and populate religious institutions. In doing so, they are in control of their own religious lives (one area of life where recent immigrants actually may be in control) and can revel in home cultures and familiar ways. This is a dominant finding coming from most of the scholarship on recent immigrant religion in the United States (e.g., Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Kurien 2007; Min 2010; Warner and Wittner 1998; Yang 1999).

Importantly, the extent to which these immigrant associations are formally organized they are also necessarily brought as much into contact with—perhaps brought *more* into contact with—American political and civil authorities, and with non-Muslim neighbors and civic and business organizations, as they are with other Muslim organizations and translocal Islamic religious authorities. Organizing a local Islamic center does not require the imprimatur of the world-wide Islamic community, or a national Muslim ecclesial authority—but it does require negotiating with the zoning board, local contractors, health and safety inspectors, those who control local traffic ordinances and parking restrictions. Because of this, it is not surprising that immigrant religious institutions are often the gateways to wider civic engagement (Foley and Hoge 2007; Kniss and Numrich 2007). It may well be that in many parts of the world, the mosque is a fundamentally locally organized and administered institution,³ but it certainly helps facilitate the adaptation of Islam to American religious dynamics.

In this way, Islam is well suited to take advantage of American civil society's Tocquevillian dimensions (particularly compared with Hinduism or Buddhism, see Williams 2007), precisely because it has an organizational form that can be adapted to the "congregation" as a unit, and is less reliant on translocal or transnational ecclesiastical religious authority. Certainly many mosques hire imams from Pakistan or the Middle East to serve here—but these imams are usually most adept at religious instruction, and are often not the administrative leaders of mosques, Islamic schools, etc. I have met imams who were barely able to handle English—which may not be an issue for Qur'anic education, but makes dealing with civic authorities much more difficult. The form of the imam-led *masjid* is less common in my experience (and in the literature that considers the issue; e.g., Bagby 2004; Unus 2004) than a President-led or board-led mosque. While the *ulama* are revered in Islam, the faith is also in many ways a lay-driven religion and thus lends itself to self-organizing in the United States.

³A point made to me by Fred Kniss about Muslim populations in East Africa and India.

When established in this country, the Islamic Center is as much a cultural and educational center as place of worship, as the institutions usually include a large community hall and have room for things such as cultural programs, religious education (often literally a Sunday school), wedding parties, and the like. There are spaces for Muslims to congregate socially as well as pray, in ways that are not often typical of mosques in traditionally Islamic countries. It is important to note that it is an organizational adaptation when *masjids* become “congregations” in the United States (Abusharaf 1998). This process includes the formalization of governance structures, developing a concept of “membership” in a particular local congregation, and the professionalization of organizational leadership (clergy as well as boards of directors).

Islam’s organizational structure is thus resonant with the “de facto congregationalism” (Warner 1994) that marks much of American religion, and those institutional pressures push Islam further in that adaptive direction. There are translocal Islamic organizations, such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), as well as attendant off-shoots such as the Muslim Youth of North America—the youth programming branch of ISNA. These organizations function much the way that denominations do for congregationally organized Christian groups in the United States (such as the UCC or Baptists), that is, they act as a resource for programming and a sponsor of regular conventions—not as a structure of ecclesiastical religious authority with the capacity to discipline local organizations (see Chaves 1998). Moreover, they are not sources of financial support or sponsorship for local organizations—local *masjids* or Islamic centers must be self-sufficient, supported by local populations.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that ISNA itself developed out of the Muslim Student Association (MSA). The MSA was first founded in 1963—before the 1965 changes in immigration law. It was founded by and for young Muslims who were in the United States as students, and who could not find any real fellowship either among existing communities of African American Muslims, or among the relatively small numbers of Arab and Pakistani Muslim communities scattered around the country. As the MSA on the East Coast got larger, and as many students graduated and stayed on in the United States, an MSA morphed into ISNA. In that organizational sense, one can truly say that “American Islam was born in the MSA.” This is both a comment about social space, but also a significant point about geographic space and settlement patterns to which I will return.

Bakalian and Bozorgmehr (2009) argue that Islam is coming of age in the United States and credit, with appreciation for the irony of unintended consequences, the events of 9/11 for the emergence of an American Islam. Their claim is that the backlash against Muslim Americans (and others of Middle Eastern origin) was serious enough in both civil society (such as hate crimes) and in governmental “war-on-terror” policies that it sparked a mobilization of activity, energy, and claims-making by a significant number

of civil society non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) organized around Muslim and Middle Eastern concerns. Thus, groups such as the CAIR and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC) stepped up to take more public and visible roles as defenders and interpreters of Muslims in America, and they have become more effective and professionalized in the process. Indeed, Bakalian and Borzorgmehr's tale of 9/11 backlash and a similar one from [Cainkar \(2009\)](#) actually have a hopeful thread running through them to a surprisingly upbeat conclusion—that both despite and because of the backlash and difficulties of recent events, Islam is becoming more civically engaged and more “American” as a result (a point also made by [Bilici 2011](#)). This is not to dispute the seriousness of the backlash (see also [Peek 2011](#)). Participants in the anti-Islamic backlash certainly dispute that Islam can be truly American; but the argument of this essay is that such resistance is in the long run a losing effort (see also [Williams 2010](#)).

Bakalian and Borzorgmehr's analysis of the organizational response to 9/11 and its aftermath is convincing. In the long run of the history of American society and the incorporation of Islam, 9/11 will be a chapter, and not “the day that changed everything forever.” Without in the least minimizing the fear and discrimination that many American Muslims continue to experience since 9/11—and without minimizing the extent to which some elements in American political culture work hard at the “othering” of Islam and question whether Muslims can be good Americans—American consumer culture has historically been a solvent on traditional identities, American religious culture has historically fostered and facilitated hybrid practices and identities, and historically new immigrant populations have had remarkable creative capacities in their efforts to find a workable accommodation within this expansive society. Many groups before immigrant Muslims have ended up having to work very hard at resisting too much assimilation into Anglo-conformity—it is not clear why it should be that much different for the educated, middle-class second, third, and fourth generations of Muslims.

Along with the organizational story of institutional adaptation, there are cultural dimensions of the development of American Islam that I have seen repeatedly during recent research; these cultural practices represent a lived, on-the-ground construction of a genuinely American religious option. Fostered within self-organized, voluntary associations that provide social support, religious education, and invariably, connections to American civil society, is a set of meaning-creating practices by second- and third-generation Muslims that will be the heart of an American Islam. As *masjids* become cultural centers, the culture being incubated is often a matter of “living on the hyphen.”

This is particularly true for second-generation non-Christians—who are negotiating the divide between their parents' culture and the dominant culture that is represented by their non-co-religionist college peers, or by mass media, the culture of higher education, political institutions, and the like. One of my

students at Loyola University refers to himself and his peers as “T-C-Ks”—“third culture kids.” Many of these young people have found a quintessential American form—the religious voluntary association—where they can express their fidelity to their religious tradition as well as work out the interpretations of that faith that allow them to live smoothly among age peers. The intersection of organization and public identity is a particular social space, and usually accompanied by a physical space as well.

THE SECOND GENERATION

My evidence for the grassroots creation of American Islam comes from data gathered on second-generation Muslims and Islamic religious organizations through the Youth and Religion Project (YRP), a collaborative project between myself and R. Stephen Warner of the University of Illinois, Chicago. We have gathered data on a number of different populations of youth and young adults: white, black, and Latino Christians—both Protestant and Catholic—and Hindus and Muslims. We did interviews with individuals (mostly college students) and with focus groups (divided by gender and faith tradition, and sometimes ethnicity/race). Further, we attended worship services, classes, and youth activities at religious organizations that cater to, or were run by, or seemed to attract, youth. For the research on Muslims, we spent time at several different *masjids* and Islamic Centers (two in particular), and visited several Islamic schools. In particular, I followed one organization of college-age Muslims who do community organizing work in inner-city neighborhoods, and one MSA at a metropolitan university. We were in the field both before and after 9/11. One of the orienting concerns of the research was how young people use religious organizations—many of them organizations they themselves start or run—to help organize a public identity—presumably one that is coherent with their personal and spiritual identities.

Some images from my fieldwork continue to stand out to me. First, I remember talking at one MSA meeting with a young Muslim woman who is dressed in both *hijab* (the head-covering scarf) and *jilbab* (the long, flowing, shapeless robe). Her cell phone rang, she answered, chatted excitedly in English mixed with Arabic, and pulled out another electronic device that contained her calendar to arrange a study meeting for one of her pre-med classes. Here, in the Islamic garb that is often a public symbol, to many Americans at least, of female modesty and submissiveness—was an educated young woman with professional ambitions and the latest in technology. What is more, she was talking with me—an unrelated male—openly and directly, and had, with her cousins, driven her own car to this meeting.

A second salient memory came from participating in a neighborhood clean-up day in an inner-city neighborhood, sponsored by a young adult run group called Southside Islamic Neighborhood Organization (SINO). We

worked—in gender-segregated teams that included young women in *hijab* wielding shovels, rakes, and paint brushes—while a stereo and huge speakers blared music pulsating with hip-hop beats. The music and rhythms were pure urban America, while the lyrics told stories from the *hadith*, the Hebrew Scriptures, and Islamic history. At the end of the CD, a recorded message indicated the music is part of the “Islamic Rap” series put out by the Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA)—a national division of ISNA that sponsors youth activities and offers youth resources to Islamic groups (see also [Khabeer 2007](#)). In each of these examples, it was a thoroughly Muslim setting, but in so many ways it could not have been more “American.” And my field notes abound with similar stories—such as the time I went to a suburban mosque to observe their Qur’an classes. One teacher, an elderly Pakistani man who spoke virtually no English, brought forward his star pupils to do recitations for me—one young man who was about a junior or senior in high school wearing a Chicago Bulls t-shirt, another about the same age in a high school football jersey, a third boy of about 10 or 11 in a New York Yankees baseball cap.

There is more evidence of the ways that the second generation is forging an American Islamic identity through an examination of books about young

FIGURE 4. *The American Muslim Teenager's Handbook* (second edition), by Hafiz et al., Antheneum, 2009. © Mark Peterman; used by permission of Mark Peterman Photography; www.markpeterman.com.

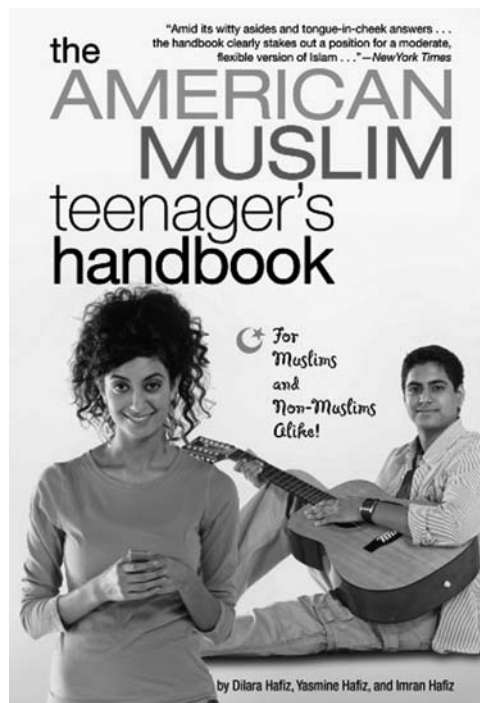
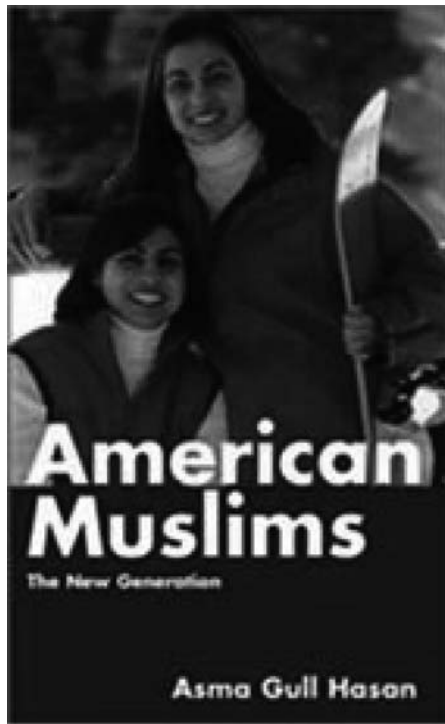


FIGURE 5. *Americans Muslims*, by Hasan, Continuum Books, 2000. © Continuum Press, New York, NY. Used by permission of the Press.



American Muslims written by these young people themselves. The books' cover photographs often show mixtures of classically American cultural images (such as the Statue of Liberty, or the national flag) with some symbols of the faith or as background to the book title. Other book covers work assiduously to present thoroughly “mainstream” images of the authors, and of American Muslim young people (figures 4–6).

For example, in figure 4, there is a young man, relaxed and with a guitar, behind an uncovered young woman. This cover is on the successful second edition of the book, published by a subsidiary of Simon & Schuster. The first edition, published by Acacia Press in Gilbert, Arizona, had a different cover design featuring four “head shots” of teenagers, two female, one with hijab the other without, and two of males, one of which shows relatively fair-skinned boys in what look like athletic uniforms. If anything, the imagery of the second edition shows even fewer of the juxtapositions common among the academic book covers. In figure 6, Sumbul Ali-Karamali presents herself as “the Muslim next door”—integrating herself into the imagery of the archetypical American neighborhood, and paraphrasing the colloquial expression for someone who is thoroughly “normal” and “All-American.” Asma Gull Hasan, the author of *American Muslims: The Next Generation* (2000) and other books, grew up in

FIGURE 6. *The Muslim Next Door*, by Ali-Karamali, White Cloud Press, 2008. © White Cloud Press, Ashland, Oregon. Used by permission of the Press.



Pueblo, Colorado, is pictured with her skis (figure 5), and describes herself as a “Muslim Feminist cowgirl” (3)—a label she proudly says she invented.

Images on a selection of book covers can be over-interpreted, as much more goes into them than just an author’s intention. But book covers are meant both to communicate a book’s message and catch potential customers’ eyes by using familiar symbols and occasional juxtapositions. They do contain a message, at the very least about the publishers’ perceptions of the target market. In any case, the relative differences between the academic books on Islam, that seem to thrive on the juxtaposition of Muslim identity and non-Muslim contexts, and these books coming from non-academic American Muslim authors, and which seem to emphasize a nonproblematic integration, is striking. It illustrates again that the creation of an American Islam is happening at the intersection of on-the-ground practices of people who are negotiating a public identity with the symbolic boundaries of a larger cultural imaginary.

Clearly the social and cultural situation of “living on the hyphen” requires a significant amount of “identity work” for those involved, and it can be very stressful (Sirin and Fine 2008). Nonetheless this cultural work is creating the practical, lived expressions of American Islam; it is happening largely in organizational settings that young Muslims find comfortable. Two factors are important in facilitating this process of negotiating American society while remaining authentically Muslim—things that appeared repeatedly and consistently in the settings I observed. First is the emphasis put on *religious education* at every formal gathering of Muslim youth. Second is the extent to which being publicly Muslim offers youth a *counter-cultural identity* that let them

know where they stand and who they are through the process of identity through distinction. The latter seems particularly true post-9/11, even as that context presents challenges to young American Muslims.

These two factors are intertwined and complement each other. Of course, much religious education happens because of the work of religiously observant parents who take their children to prayer services, make sure they get religious instruction in “Sunday schools,” or send them to summer camps. An example comes from one of our interviews:

R(espondent): [At] Sunday school . . . they teach 4 classes. One is about the history of the Prophet, one is about the Qur’an where you memorize and you learn about the meaning of it and how to interpret it and stuff like that. One is actually a class on how to actually read the Qur’an properly and one is a class on theology. Basic concepts and rules and how to pray. Stuff like that.

Or from another respondent:

I(nterviewer): [Y]ou had mentioned you go to [summer] camps?

R: [F]rom when I was young, I’d go to camps. Actually, I think my brother started going at 5 [years old]. I started going at 7. . . . [B]ack then, it was just the parents would get together and they’d organize a camp and they’d . . . run the camp. . . . I think the first camp I attended full-time . . . was at 13. . . . [T]here were 200 people there and it was actually a really intense camp.

I: How was it intense?

R: Like there’s just a lot knowledge that was thrown out and there’s a lot—you build a brotherhood, you build a sisterhood. You learn a whole lot about things.

I: You see others like you—

R: Yeah. And these are like nationwide and continental camps. So you’d make friends with people all over the United States and Canada. So literally, right now I can pretty much go to any city in the U.S. and find a place to stay without a problem.

Alongside these reports of formal religious education sponsored by families, set in mosques or at a summer camp, I repeatedly saw examples of religious education even when attending regular meetings of youth-run groups. SINO held monthly members’ meetings to plan both service and social activities; these *always* included a *Dars*, a half-hour talk on a religious or ethical theme, often from an age-peer who was treated like a respected “elder” due to his (in my experience, always “his”) knowledge about Islam. In an almost 1970s-style consciousness raising, young adults educate themselves in the faith, and work out how to be Muslims in a non-Muslim society. For example, from my fieldnotes taken at one of SINO’s monthly membership meetings:

At one point in the discussion of the . . . site [where the group was doing service work], the [Euro-American] woman convert asked if she could get an “Islamic opinion” as to whether “women can do this work.” She had worked at that location in the past and wanted to do so again, but wanted to know if it was acceptable Islamically. The question produced some confusion among the men (the meeting moderator and the current group President). They asked her to elaborate on why this might be problematic, she continued to ask the question in the

same words. The men turned to the man who later delivered the Dars, who thought briefly, then said to follow the “conventional wisdom.” No one seemed to know what the conventional wisdom was, so they tossed the ball back to him. He considered the Prophet’s concern with the safety and protection of women, versus the benefits of the work being done. At this point, one of the late arriving men sort of burst in and said, “so it’s cost–benefit analysis.” [I did not think that was quite what was being said—I thought the tenor was that any cost at all might make the situation unacceptable.] Others sort of disagreed that it was quite so simple [not so much, I thought, because they understood what the “conventional wisdom” was, but because the outburst seemed rude]. This exchange went on for a while, not really being resolved, until the moderator wanted to move on.

Obviously, this is not always a smooth process. But this example shows both on-going religious education and the development and expression of a distinctly “Muslim” social identity among youth. These efforts at education and clarification continue through the crucial “identity moment” of young adulthood. The Euro-convert is a particularly clear example of self-conscious identity work, but I witnessed many debates and discussions among people trying to tease out Islamic legal principles and apply them to their particular life practices. It seemed particularly vibrant when young people were immersed in groups of age peers (for some young Muslims, college is their first time they have a significant peer circle of nonfamily Muslims).

The life practices they are trying to negotiate, of course, are in the United States, a societal and cultural context that is not always welcoming and for which their parents, and many formal religious authorities, cannot provide much guidance. Many young American Muslims have wide differences in experience and knowledge with their parents, and as a result, many of their parents’ social and cultural lessons are not very relevant to them (this is not uncommon for the second generation; see [Min 2010](#)). Many young people report that their parents—while culturally traditionalist—are lax or secularized in their religious practice:

R: My parents, my family has always been Muslim by culture which I mean . . . is not always very valid because I don’t believe that . . . that God considers you a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew based on your blood or . . . something that you inherit. I believe . . . you have to make a conscious decision. And so, at first, I think my parents were Muslim by culture. . . . [I]t wasn’t until much later in life—my mother didn’t begin covering until probably in her early 30s. . . . I started [at] 16, 17 years old. And this is something—this is a general thing in any Muslim family. So I think there’s been like a, you know, a rise in awareness. Islamic awareness, in my own generation compared to my parents’ generation.

Part of this “rise in awareness” comes from the continuing emphasis on religious education. There is widespread ability to quote *Suras* from the Qur’an, or to provide theological explanations for Islamic practices and holidays. Even in those cases where young people do not have the necessary knowledge, those are still the terms within which things are discussed. This rise in awareness is within an American culture where religion is an achieved status—attained after a conscious, deliberate decision, not a birthright or ethnic identity. As in

the quote above, “choice” is a valued criterion for religious authenticity (Williams and Vashi 2007:283–84).

Thus, at the same time that second- and third-generation young people are defining themselves in distinction to their parents, they also define themselves against a dominant American culture that is seen as either or both decidedly Christian or secular. Often being counter-cultural involves distinguishing oneself from a context of “moral laxity.” This resonates with what our research found among evangelical Protestant youth and also among Hindu young people. On several occasions I saw them present themselves as counter-cultural by emphasizing spiritual values and deriding materialist concerns.

Indeed, one could argue that one characteristic of American religious communities right now is that almost everyone thinks of themselves as part of a minority. High-status Episcopalians define themselves by their minority ethical–political positions, or reference the fact that Evangelicals seem to run the country. Evangelicals counter that they are under siege from cultural and media elites espousing relativism and secularism. There are many ways to be counter-cultural, and bolstered by a continuing exposure to religious education, many second-generation American Muslims are finding a way to do so effectively—by which I mean in ways that give them a sense of social and religious “place.”

For example, I was visiting an Islamic school that had both day-students and boarders, and was talking informally with several young men—ages about 16–19. I asked them specifically about the challenges of trying to be Muslim in America. Again from my fieldnotes:

One of the students . . . at first denied that it was any problem at all, that the US has a great tradition of diversity and tolerance, and that one is free to follow any religion here. I reframed a bit to indicate I meant that American culture had many dimensions that are not compatible with Islam, and that as a country founded by Protestant Christians the US remains most “comfortable” (my term) for them.

With this all the students agreed heartily. They reported various degrees of knowing they were different, of learning to negotiate that (one example—worrying about missing the bus for the high school soccer team’s trip to a game because he had to go pray). Having to be clear that Muslims don’t drink or date, and how that can produce a great deal of tension. Several noted that the challenge was in fact too much for many Muslim youth, and many were indeed dating, using drugs, not dressing modestly, etc.

In addition, all the students noted that they had some tension with their 1st generation parents (all four students were born here; all had parents born on the subcontinent). This, in their view, had both a positive and negative aspect. The negative was that they were often in tension with their parents over what they should be doing with their lives. They noted that many in the immigrant generation were so concerned with making it in America that they were less concerned with religion and the like. At my distinction of “your parents are Indian Muslims living in America, you all are American Muslims” they gave vigorous assent.

The positive they saw [about being Muslim in the US] is that they are following a “purer” or “truer” Islam, unburdened with much of the cultural baggage that their parents and families

have. Indeed, several seemed to indicate that their intense interest in religion and religious education put them at some odds with their more secular and assimilating parents.

About this time one of the teachers strolled up (a fairly young man). He reiterated that Islam in America was “liberated” (his word) from Arab and Indian culture. Thus the move to the US was producing a purified form of the religion. When I commented that English North America was founded by people coming here to establish a purer form of their religion, unpolluted by their home culture, several students and the teacher voiced assent and one mentioned that Muslims were in that American tradition.

Thus, being Muslim in America is a challenge (at one point the student who first denied it was a problem said “I should recant what I said earlier, it is a challenge we face every day.”) but it is a challenge they should welcome religiously. The surrounding society gives them more challenges to overcome to keep their religious selves pure, and they have the opportunity to produce a truer Islam unbound by other traditional cultures.

In this excerpt are many of themes reported in this essay—the tension with parents, the development of counter-cultural identity even as they claim to be well within American traditions, and an active concern with negotiating any American-Islam distance. I will give a summative word to the apt self-description offered by one of our respondents:

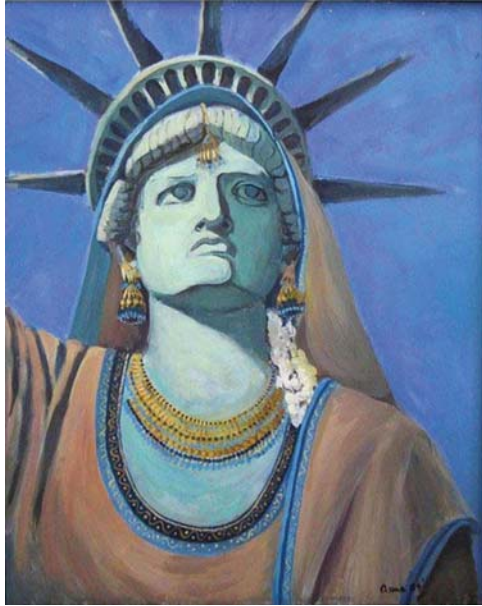
My mother says to me, “your outside may be American, but at heart you are Egyptian.” But I say, “no, Ma, my icing may be Egyptian, but the cake is American.”

As a final illustration of the creative identity work being done by young Muslim Americans, I reproduce below a painting by a Pakistani born artist Asma Ahmed Shikoh, titled “Self Portrait 1.” Ms. Shikoh moved from Karachi to New York and now lives in New Jersey. She used the Statue of Liberty because of its symbolic connections to immigration and new beginnings. The image is both iconically American and recognizably South Asian. The face appears proud, perhaps just a bit defiant, and the expression certainly determined. The features are bold and well defined, with eyes that are wide open, but also have a hint of vigilance as they look into the middle distance. For me, it is wonderfully evocative of the American Islam currently emerging (figure 7).

THOUGHTS ON RELIGION, IDENTITY, AND PLACE

The foregoing has considered the development of an “American Islam” as a product of both “top down” and “bottom up” social processes. As non-Christian and fairly recent immigrants, most Muslims do not share a religious identity, a racial identity, or a cultural history with the non-Muslim and Muslim Americans already here. They have encountered a society that officially separates religion from the state but venerates its place in civil society—a civil society organized more or less on a Protestant congregational model (Williams 2007). And both

FIGURE 7. “Self Portrait 1” by Asma Shikoh, appears as part of “Self Portraits 1, 2, and 3” in the series “Home” by Asma Ahmed Shikoh, 2004. Acrylic on Board, 24×30 inches. © Asma Ahmed Shikoh; reproduction used by permission of the artist; asmashikoh.com.



cultural imagery and recent events have made some native-born non-Muslim Americans wary of these very developments. But Muslims in the United States have adapted their religious organizations, and are doing significant cultural and identity work, so that the second and third generations are producing a culturally authentic lived religion distinct from Christian America but also from the home cultures of immigrant Muslims.

The theoretical question for this essay is how to think about all of this in terms of “place,” both as a geographic location and a social space. First, it is worth considering whether there is something particular about Islam and place. There are clear impulses within the faith toward “universalism,” and a type of “placelessness” is built deeply into the religious culture. The religious truth of Islam is potentially available to all people everywhere—part of the missionary and conversionist impulse that Islam has exhibited since its inception. The *ummah*, the Islamic community, is a universal concept that can be a religious space and sense of community as much as a geographic reality. Thus, “place” can be constructed as something of an abstraction, or as primarily a social relation.

On the other hand, there are some distinct ways in which Islam is emplaced geographically. The *hajj* to Mecca is one of the five pillars of faith, and Muslims travel from around the world to that particular spot. Mecca, the *Ka’bah*, the Dome of the Rock, and other sites considered holy are very particular geographical locations, anchored in the faith narrative and elevated above

their materiality—even as they inhabit it. As Tweed (1997) puts it, these sites are simultaneously “locative” and “trans-locative”—there is a distinct “there” there, and at the same time it takes the religious imagination and religious identity across times and places. This is particularly meaningful for a population that lives in diaspora.

Historically, these paired, if somewhat contradictory impulses—a universal religion that supersedes the claims of clan, blood, territory, or political loyalty, and an emplaced faith born in Arab culture in particular cities with a notion of the religious community as a geographically located place—have given Islam an uneven relationship to the modern nation-state and religious pluralism. The legal interpretations and conceptual discourses vary. For some juridical traditions, the *dar-al-Islam* (the “land of Islam”) is wherever Muslims are able to live their religion freely, whether that place is Muslim majority or not—the *dar-al-Islam* and the *ummah* have no necessary geographical locations. But other traditions have urged against Muslims living in non-Muslim lands, or among nonbelievers, as the lack of *Shar’iah* is taken to be coterminous with the lack of a true Muslim community (Al-Alwani 2004; Khalidi 2004; McCloud 2004). Not surprisingly, in contemporary writings on the issue, many of the theorists interpreting the *dar al-Islam* liberally and more abstractly are themselves residents in western diasporic lands, who live comfortably in pluralistic societies (Shepard 2009).

But if Islam has a particular set of responses to various issues of place, it is hardly the only religion for which place matters. After all, *that* place matters is a sociological cliché. But how does it matter, and how does that vary? Many postmodernists would tell us that we live in an endlessly plastic world now—reality is virtual, identities are pastiches of individual agency, and social life is a *bricolage* of particularized constructions (see Williams 2005). On the other hand, theorists of the “body” find all places to be resolutely local. Identity is embodied, intricately tied to the corporality of actual persons and their physical beings. The attentions to place and to the body are not paired just in their academic trendiness. Place is often deeply intertwined with the body—people resonate with sights, smells, sounds, and the materiality of an actual location. We know that such things trigger memories and emotions. These work deeply in making us who we are through the memories that form key elements of the narratives we tell about our lives.

Religion is deeply enmeshed in that nexus of body and place through the sounds of the music, the smells of incense, or the vibrations one feels during chants, harmonies, or from the rumble of the pipe organ.⁴ In my first experience with a Sufi Muslim group, I sat in the circle and listened to approximately 20

⁴Knott (2005) analyzes the relations between religion, location, and space through an examination of the left hand in religion. Left hands are literal, emplaced parts of the body, but also occupy social spaces with religious meaning. Her spatial analysis is thus simultaneously intertwining the physical and mental.

people engage in a long chanting prayer. I watched for a while, trying to commit to memory various ethnographic details. Eventually, I quit trying to think and observe and just relaxed into the rhythms of the chanting, closing my eyes like the participants. The effects were hypnotic. I could feel the vibrations of the male voices chanting, the rising and falling of the pitch, the interplay of the hard consonant sounds and smooth vowels. I had no ability to understand the content—but I distinctly felt the physicality of the spiritual experience.

Moreover, bodily experience plays a central role in memory, and in the absolutely critical importance of memory to shaping both personal and collective identity. Given the centrality of memory to religion (Stier and Landres 2006), it follows that religious identity and religious experience themselves are deeply enmeshed in bodily experiences, and deeply placed by the location of those bodies and the attendant smells, sounds, sights, tastes, and touch.

Social geographers have taken another analytic step up in scale and have been writing recently on the geographical dimensions of religion; several, such as Stump (2000), have engaged directly fundamentalist religion. They examine the critical importance of sacred space as physical places, and the religious and often political work that goes into protecting those places from defacement. They examine the attempt to control public space, particularly in contests with secular institutions and institutional logics—contests fought in sites such as schools, town squares, and public media. Third, they have examined the spatial dimensions of the religious moral community and how often that is focused on physical space, whether shutting the community off from polluting influences or segregating genders in all religious activities.

A CURRENT CONTROVERSY

The very dynamics of geography, collective identity, and bodily and spatial proximity were on display in the summer and early fall of 2010 in the controversy regarding the so-called Ground Zero Mosque. A group of Muslims, who have been having worship services in Lower Manhattan for years, have outgrown their current space and have proposed building an interfaith community center that will include an Islamic prayer space on a site two blocks north of where the World Trade Center (WTC) twin towers once stood. In effect, they want to build the type of fully rounded community center that I referenced above, but one augmented by specific programs designed to foster interfaith understanding. The center was to be called the Cordoba House (the group raising the money and making the proposal called themselves the Cordoba Initiative). The planned site has a standing structure, a former Burlington Coat Factory retail building. The existing building is not particularly significant architecturally or historically (the Landmarks Commission refused to protect it from destruction), except for the fact that the building was hit by airplane debris on September 11, 2001—a part of a landing gear put a hole in the roof.

The proposed new building would have none of the architectural features that are commonly associated with Middle Eastern or South Asian mosques.

The plans were proceeding without too much difficulty, making it through several of New York City's various governing and regulations board easily—the local community board's approval vote was 29–1. But some conservative politicians and activist community groups began to call the project a “mosque” (which then morphed into “mega-mosque”—presumably referencing its 13-story blueprint) and claimed it is being built on or next to “Ground Zero” (meaning the former site of the WTC towers). They began to organize rallies protesting the plan. By August 2010, the protests and accompanying talk-show agitation dominated public stories. Some high-profile conservative politicians—most prominently former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and former Alaska governor Sarah Palin—kept the media attention on the issue. Given that August is a slow period for national news media as Congress is out of session, and it was the beginning of the 2010 mid-term Congressional election season, the media attention was considerable.

This was a dramatic example of how a place becomes infused with meaning and that in turn shapes social action. All of the reactions to the 9/11 attacks—the fear, the horror, then the veneration of the fallen, the rage and desire for revenge—bubbled up to the surface again, and the protests against the project resonated with significant numbers of Americans. In densely packed Lower Manhattan, one cannot see the WTC site from the proposed site or vice versa; it is certainly not “on” Ground Zero, nor will the new building be able to cast a physical “shadow” on that site. But the WTC space now has the aura and language of the sacred for many Americans. Some opponents of the project call the Islamic Center plan a “desecration.” Even many who do not oppose the project often refer to the WTC as “hallowed” or “Holy Ground.”⁵ A specific geographic place merged with a social space of religious identification (both the religious identity of the attack's perpetrators and the civil religious identity of the American nation) to produce for many people a deep emotional reaction to the proposal.

Other arguments made either for or against the project are also interesting for a more self-conscious sociology of place. One claim is that there is tremendous importance in the initial designation of the project as “Cordoba House.” Cordoba, Spain, was the seat of the Caliphate during al-Andalus, the period of Islamic Spain. Critics see the name as a symbol of a land being conquered, and recall that the Moors turned the Cathedral in Cordoba into a mosque. Indeed, many claim that it is a distinctive and particularly Islamic practice to build a

⁵One interesting aspect of the controversy has been the veneration of New York City, as a place, by people who before 9/11 and often afterward have had little positive to say about it. Conservatives often treat New York City as the apotheosis of “the other” and all that is non-American—an international city with liberal attitudes, the home to media elites, and full of immigrants from around the world. And yet the WTC is sacred ground.

mosque on a holy site of a conquered territory, literally “emplacing” the victorious religion in a territory. In contrast, others noted that Moorish Cordoba was a seat of learning and great literary and artistic achievement—and that it was by medieval European standards a citadel of religious tolerance for Christians and Jews as well as Muslims (ignored in all of this was that after Fernando and Isabella’s *reconquista* of Spain the mosque was re-configured into a Catholic cathedral—and all of this was on a site that had Roman and Visigoth religious ruins as well).

Another claim—first made very public by Newt Gingrich—is that a mosque would be acceptable in Lower Manhattan when they allow the building of churches in Saudi Arabia. A Gingrich fund-raising letter decries this as a “double standard” that should be opposed and the idea made it into street protest signs. This claim posits American identity as a place, or the territory of a tribe (see [Jacobson 2002](#)), not as a set of principles or shared value that distinguishes the nation from the rest of the world. The claim directly emplaces religion, identity, and nation, and uses that locative nexus as the basis for social exclusion. Other opponents conceded that Muslims have the right to build a mosque and that Americans should tolerate such diversity, but felt that the Park Avenue building was too close to the WTC site. Many of those offering such a response had difficulty defining how much distance would in fact be appropriate. Implied in this reaction is that the geographic place of the WTC needs a bubble of sacred space, again finding a deeply emotional connection between the sacred and a specific location.⁶

Clearly this physical location, and the city in which it exists, has been invested with new meaning, based on a violent, collective event. Anti-mosque sentiment and protests have since appeared in other parts of the country—including in Brooklyn, in Tennessee, and in Southern California. In each case, it is the publicness and the materiality of the construction of a new building that seems to ignite the protest. Muslims have been in these places without incident for years. The new mosques are symbols, but they are real physical entities as well—bringing issues of cultural change, religious diversity, and religious conflict, into such a sharp relief that they cannot be ignored.

PLACE IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

In sociological terms, any given location only becomes a “place” when it becomes invested with meaning and value. In [Gieryn’s \(2000\)](#) influential article “A Space for Place in Sociology,” he argues that for something to be a

⁶I thank Frank Lechner for observing to me the depth of the emotional connections apparent in these reactions, and the importance of understanding that depth to my theoretical claims, whatever my own political commitments.

place sociologically it must have three constituent features: (1) a geographic location—meaning a finitude and boundaries that locate something somewhere; (2) material form or physicality; and (3) investment with meaning and value.

Religion often and clearly plays a key role in the investment of meaning and value, and we can learn a great deal about “emplacing” through studying religious places—how ritual produces sacred physical as well as sacred cosmic space, how narratives may give a place an important role in the work of the Divine (see [Neitz 2005](#)), or how memory connects identity as God’s people with locations in this world (see [Lane 2001](#)). Physical place is often infused with meanings that relate to the Divine, and powerfully motivate social action. Place is prominent in the literature on collective memory, whether those places be territories, monuments to events, features of the natural world, or aspects of the built environment that were constructed for one task but that become meaningfully reappropriated. This can also be true of elements of the natural world, as they emplace us in the cosmos in a way that seems natural, appropriate, and timeless ([Schama 1995](#)). But as the site of the former Twin Towers shows us, it is not limited to the natural.

The extent to which collective memory is critical to collective identity is also well considered by social scientists (e.g., [Stier and Landres 2006](#)). Stories that are told, remembered, re-created, shared, and incorporated into a collective narrative, are deeply part of who we are, as well as who we are not. They connect us in space and in time, to the past and the future; we are connected to a place—a homeland as territory—or to a “home” that may not be a literal physical place but can only be expressed by metaphors that treat it as if it is.

That logical syllogism, from place to collective memory to collective identity, makes clear sense and our theoretical tools can engage it. In sociological short-hand, we might think of religion being an exogenous “independent” variable actively shaping the meaning and the actions that people take toward places in the world. But we should also try to understand the extent that place itself has what could be called its own “direct effects” on identity and religion. These are situations in which place may be the “independent variable,” shaping religious thought and action. Some of these effects may be things that actors themselves do not fully realize, in the same way that gender can shape social action without actors always being aware of it in any self-conscious or critical matter. This would include asking how religious identities—both individual and collective—become what they are in part because of the social and physical places in which people enact their lives. How is it that place could matter, and how should we go about investigating that?

While this is a general question, it is distinctly apropos for my concern with Muslims in the United States and the creation of an American Islam. The extent to which social space and physical environment are intertwined is perhaps most observable in immigrant populations, especially immigrant

communities in urban settings. If anyone knows that “place matters” it is immigrants, who are faced with both preserving and creating religion and practical lives in a new cultural and physical context.

Significantly, I believe, this religious and cultural work is happening most notably in cities. Urban spaces are both geographical and social, and both dimensions shape the religious expressions of the people who live within them (Williams 2002, 2006). Cities are what they are by nature of the density of the populations who live in them. People are geographically constrained and in physical proximity to each other, they interact with other people and other “types” of people many times every day. Many cities have areas that are more or less villages; they are residentially dominated by one group—the food available, the music coming out of windows, the language one hears on the street, in the churches, and inside the homes is relatively homogenous. But one cannot venture far without encountering others, whether at work or on the street, in public transportation, or in the public schools. The inevitability of encounter is one of the reasons that fundamentalism was spawned by the modern city, but has often had trouble flourishing there (Williams 2011). And deeply traditionalist faiths, those that hope to freeze a moment in time such as the Old Order Amish (or the Mormons in the nineteenth century) must try to do so in more rural areas.

Geographic envelopment creates a particular type of social space, while encounters with others create another kind. Physical boundaries are often symbolic, but it is at just such points where the geographic and the social dimensions of place intersect (Williams 2004). Negotiation, understanding, prejudice, and cultural sharing all occur. Gieryn (2000) notes that proximity, in the form of face-to-face contact, can produce either engagement or estrangement. We see both responses in the religions that emerge in multireligious cities. Cities are sites of tremendous religious syncretism and tolerance, but simultaneously can produce intense desires for religious purity and cultural withdrawal. Proximity to others produces a reaction that creates the “other” as a social distinction. Often this is a matter of theology, or of the details of ritual practice, or race or class differences. But the visual matters as well. One cannot avoid everyday encounters that require a response. This increases the importance of symbolic boundaries and the denial of polluting influences. But the denial itself is a powerful shaping mechanism—avoidance takes work.

Part of what makes cities distinct is the sheer number of people who can be gathered together—it matters when there are enough people that ever-finer gradations of identity can form a group. So in cities such as St. Louis, there is only one Hindu temple, with altars in it for a number of different deities. But in Jackson Heights in Queens, it isn’t necessary for different devotional groups to mix; the large Indian community can internally differentiate. Chicago has an Ismaili Center for that small sectarian group of Shi’ite Muslims—while in Cincinnati there are three Islamic Centers serving the entire new immigrant community, but they by necessity all take a ‘big tent’ approach. In this regard,

college campuses have some physical similarities to cities. There is density, there is diversity, and there is a set of cultural pragmatics that requires between-group contact, even as it may foster within-group solidarity. To say that American Islam began on college campuses is partly a statement about generation, but I think it is also a statement about the geographic reality of universities. Again, place matters.

Both the syncretism and the impulse toward purity in cities are partly a function of population, density, and encounter. Cities draw people, people find each other, and in the process borrow, adapt, and react to the many others who are there. Given the range of what we call “cities” or “urban spaces,” we need to investigate how that variation works. How is the American Islam that is being created in New York, or Chicago, distinct from that happening in “donut cities” such as Detroit, or Cleveland? How does the urban sprawl of Los Angeles or Houston—where one can often drive over neighborhoods without direct contact—affect the dynamics of cultural sharing or shunning?

There is a deeply entwined relationship between meaning and materiality. For the physicality of place to be sociologically interesting, it must be invested with meaning. But meaning must have a site about which identity, emotion, ritual, and memory can be “located”—the materiality matters. The transformation of huge buildings into a huge crater in Manhattan was powerful, irrespective of the tragic loss of life. The appearance on the street of people publicly displaying their religious identity must be noticed, and can only be overlooked by incorporating it into the routine and normal. Our religious identities come with places just as they come with bodies—even when we culturally create them or re-create them primarily through metaphor. Place is a dimension of the contexts in which religion is enacted and experienced. Investigating it systematically can only enrich our understanding of the dynamics of religion in the contemporary world.

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