

Youth and Religion Project

Module 6

The Second Generation: Americans Who Happen to be Muslims

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It is hard to think clearly about Islam right now. Since September 11th, many things that may have just seemed "exotic" or perhaps even strange, now seem potentially threatening. And the people of Islamic faith - Muslims - seem at time almost incomprehensible to many Americans.

And yet, we daresay that in time this period will seem more aberration than turning point. The last thirty years has witnessed an explosion in the numbers of Muslims in the United States, and that number continues to grow. While the actual number is disputed (the best estimates from social scientists is 2.5 to 3 million Muslims in the U.S., not the 6 million often reported), what is unarguable is the rapid growth in both number and visibility of Muslims in this country. The important point is that there is now a "second generation" of American Muslims - children of immigrants, but born here (for our purposes here we are not focusing on African-American Muslims, although our project does consider them). Whereas their parents are "Muslims who happen to be in the U.S." this generation are "Americans who happen to be Muslim." How these youth negotiate this generational shift, and the accompanying cultural change, may have lessons for those of us who take our "American-ness" for granted.

As part of Youth and Religion Project research, we did interviews with individual and focus group interviews with Muslim young people (college students), attended worship services, classes, and youth activities at several different mosques, visited several Islamic schools, and followed closely one particular organization of college-age Muslims who work in inner-city neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side. I left these experiences struck by how much in common these youth had with youth of other religions, and how much they work at figuring out how best to be both a good Muslim and an American.

Two images stand out to me. First is talking at one meeting with a young Muslim woman who is in both hijab (the head-covering scarf) and jilbab (the long, flowing, shapeless robe). Her cell phone rings, she answers, chats excitedly in English mixed with Arabic, and pulls out her "palm pilot" to arrange a study meeting for one of her pre-med classes. Here, in the Islamic garb that is often a public symbol of female modesty and submissiveness - is an educated young woman with professional ambitions and the latest in technology. What is more, she is talking with me - an unrelated male - openly and directly, and with her cousins has driven her own car to this meeting on the Southwest side in a "transition neighborhood."

Second, while participating in a neighborhood clean up day in a South Side neighborhood, we work - in gender segregated teams - while a stereo and huge speakers blare music pulsating with urban hip-hop beats. At the end of the CD a recorded message indicates the music is part of the "Islamic Rap" series put out by the Muslim Youth of America - a national organization that sponsors youth activities and offers youth resources to Islamic groups.

In each case - what could more Muslim? What could be more American?

I could offer many other examples - such as the time I went to a 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 wearing a Chicago Bulls t-shirt, another a high school football jersey, a third in a New York Yankees baseball cap. This culture blending could be the source of great confusion for young people trying to find themselves and the source of great conflict with their parents. Undoubtedly, that happens. But we also have mountains of evidence of kids growing in their faith, of becoming more sure of themselves, and of finding a secure "American Muslim" identity.

We think two factors are important in this process. First is the emphasis put on religious education at every gathering of Muslim youth. Second is the extent to which being openly Muslim offers youth a counter-cultural identity that lets them know where they stand and who they are. These two factors are intertwined and complement each other. Let me illustrate from some of our interviews.

Much religious education, of course, happens in the home among religiously observant families. Parents take their children to prayer services, and make sure they get religious instruction in "Sunday schools." This from an interview:

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.

I(nterviewer): [Y]ou graduated from it. You were going to it over time. A number of years—

R: Yeah, from the age of 3 to 13.

I: OK. I don't want to say your parents made you go, but was it something that you felt like, Yeah, I want to go do this! ?

R: [Y]eah, that was something my parents would have to drag me to. Of course, it's Sunday morning and I'd rather stay home and watch a football game than go to Sunday school. But I mean, now, nowadays I just go. I literally spend half my day there. Either teaching people or learning myself.

Or from another respondent:

I: [Y]ou had mentioned you go to camps?

R: [L]ike from 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. And then I'd go, hang out with the other guys and stuff. I used to get homesick, my parents would come after the third day and pick me up. . that would happen for a few years. And I think the first camp I attended full-time, essentially just me and my brother I guess, I 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 of 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. Yeah, so I've been attending camps for a long time. And it was almost sort of a—if your faith got low, you'd always go to a camp and it reenergized you.

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.

In these comments we see both a report of religious education and the early stages of the development of a distinctly "Muslim" social identity. However, in keeping with observations we make about Hindu and East Asian youth, many young American Muslims have wide differences in experience and knowledge with their parents. Many of their parents' social and cultural lessons are not very relevant to them. Many young people report that their parents - while culturally traditionalist - are lax

or secularized in their religious practice. Consider this excerpt from a young woman:

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. Every organized gathering of Muslim youth I have witnessed has at least one period devoted to specific instruction in the faith - whether it be explanation of passages from the Qur'an, or lessons from the Hadith (the stories of the Prophet's life and actions). There is widespread ability to quote Scripture, or to provide theological explanations for Islamic practices and holidays. Even "social" gatherings have some religious instruction (often from people who are considered religious "elders" but who are basically age-peers) in the same way that evangelical Protestant youth gatherings almost always have some witnessing.

One reason this religious education is so valuable to these young people is that it helps them distinguish between what is their religion (and thus necessary to observe) and what is cultural (and thus may range from optional to detrimental). So, for example, when I attended a lecture/discussion on dating and marriage at a mosque, the speaker went to great lengths to separate the Islamic rules for dating from traditional cultural practices such as arranged marriages. An excerpt from another interview:

I: [H]ow do you distinguish between something that's religious and something that's cultural?

R: [W]hat I try to do is look for very sound evidence when it comes to anything that anybody says to me that doesn't make too much sense. Or a lot of times we go back to the life of the Prophet—peace be upon Him—and all the companions of the Prophet and the women at that time and how they lived their lives. [If] something is explicitly stated through the Hadith or see in the Qur'an that it's wrong, then we leave it. And if it's not explicitly said, then you consider it a grey area of where it's controversial or you need to do further research. But I would

never say, **Yes, this is a sin** if I've never found any sound evidence. [I]t may be something that people are ashamed because of their own cultural background, which is natural.

I: So grey areas might be considered cultural?

R: I guess the more you understand your religion—when you're younger, you really don't understand . . . I was just taking whatever I heard from people and relied on that. And so once you get older, you begin to do research yourself. . . . There's so many things that can fall into that category when you begin to question where this is coming from. Some things are for example the way you get married, like arranged marriages compared to non-arranged marriages . . . [or] the way that the women dress. If you go to Africa, women don't wear what I'm wearing. No, they wear African clothing. And if they go to Turkey, they wear Turkish clothing. In the West, they go to some Limited Express at the mall and they get a skirt and a shirt. But the whole point is that everything is covered but the face and the hands. And everything is loose and covering all shape and form. So, in a case like this, you can see how there are so many different cultural influences in the way that people apply Islam. But again, it still complies with Islamic teaching and there still is that one common ground that's flexible enough to sheath all different people. . . . Another ridiculous sort of example is girls from the Middle East are told to preserve their virginity by not riding on bikes and on horses and things like this. Where here, we're raised in America and always went horseback riding. Every time I got to a camp, one of the main activities was that we all go horseback riding. And so a lot of times, you come back to these real cultural Arabs who still haven't really began practicing Islam in their lives. And the only thing they know about is, **OH! You rode on a horse? But that's Haram! That's a sin!** And you know right away that this is ridiculous. It's not Islam.

Many of our female respondents report that they did not wear hijab regularly growing up, especially if their high schools or neighborhoods had few Muslims. But going to college, meeting more Muslims, and continuing to learn more about their religion, persuaded many to begin to cover:

R: **It wasn't really taught to me. My Mom doesn't wear it, my grandma doesn't wear it. No one wears it. But I found out - I researched, I talked to people - just one day it hit me and I decided to wear it.**

While the women invariably explain their decision as based on religious obligation, we note that it also emphasizes their differences from non-Muslim students. They instantly signal who they are and what group they identify with. And there are practical benefits - women who cover are unlikely to be hit on by non-Muslim men. Such overt signs of piety help remove ambiguity

from new social settings. Others react to you differently, and co-religionists are visibly present to help divert one from temptation. We often heard women say they monitored their behavior when covered because **"you represent Islam"** to others.

Late adolescence is a time when young people define themselves in distinction to others. Often these "others" are parents. We see this among our second generation Muslims, as they try to build an American Islam distinct from their parents' commitments. But we also see them define themselves against what they see as a dominant American culture of moral laxity. We have seen this among evangelical Protestant youth, where "moral" issues are seen primarily as matters of personal vice. We have seen Hindu youth present themselves as counter-cultural by emphasizes spiritual values and deriding materialist concerns. 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.

We'll give the last word to one of our college-age young women: **"My mother says to me, your outside may be American, but at heart you are Egyptian. But I say, no, my icing may be Egyptian, but the cake is American ."**

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