

Article

## Learning to Be Muslim—Transnationally

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**Abstract:** This essay discusses the religious upbringing experiences and reflections upon them articulated by 53 Muslim American youth who were interviewed as part of a larger sociological study of Arab American teenagers living transnationally. On extended sojourns in their parents' homelands, these youth—most were born in the US although some migrated to the US at a young age—were taken “back home” to Palestine and Jordan by their parents so they could learn “their language, culture, and religion”. They were asked about learning to be Muslim in the US and overseas in the context of a much larger set of questions about their transnational life experiences. The data provide insights into the various types of early religious learning experiences Muslims have access to in a US Christian-majority context. The essay then examines how these youth later experienced and interpreted being Muslim in a place where Muslims are a majority. The study found that while a majority of youth said they learned more about their faith, almost half (42%) said that it was the same as in the US, that they did not learn more, or that the experience contributed both positively and negatively to their religious understanding. Key to these differences was the character of their experiences with being Muslim in the US. A majority of girls and of youth who attended full-time Islamic schools and/or were part of a vibrant Muslim community in the US gave one of the latter responses. On the other hand, most of the boys who grew up isolated from other Muslims in the US reported learning more about Islam. They were especially pleased with the convenience of praying in mosques and with being able to pray in public without stares. The data show that living where one is part of the dominant religious culture does not necessarily make for a deeper experience of religion. What seems to matter more is the type of experience with being Muslim each youth brings into the situation, as it was these that informed their subjective interpretations of what it means to be Muslim.

**Keywords:** Islam; Muslim; American Muslim; youth; religious transmission; transnationalism; gender

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## 1. Overview of Findings

This study's data on religious upbringing in the US show that family, especially mothers, are the most important transmitters of Islamic religious beliefs and practices to young children, a finding consistent with studies of the transmission patterns within other religious groups in the United States. Parents often tapped the resources of Saturday or Sunday schools to reinforce family teachings, but these were not always available nearby. Youth who attended these schools (38% of sample) largely described them as not particularly helpful, mainly because of their reliance on memorization, focus on historical figures rather than contemporary matters, and because they felt that classes were taught by untrained teachers. The data also suggest that the intermittent nature of these programs in combination with their significant distance from students' homes failed to create community among young Muslims, where friendship and solidarity could be experienced and teachings could be reinforced. On the other hand, some 20% of the youth interviewed in this study attended full-time Islamic schools for at least some part of their childhood in the US and were overwhelmingly positive about such experiences, in significant measure precisely because they created such community. Eleven percent of the interviewees said they had had no Islamic religious education in the US.

This particular analysis of study data also sought to understand whether, and in what ways, youth who spent their early years in the US found living in a Muslim majority context helpful to their religious growth and understanding, and if there was any relationship between the types of religious education they had in the US and their interpretations of these experiences. For example, were youth who had only family-based religious education more likely to view living in a Muslim majority country as helpful to their religious understanding than youth who had multiple sources of education, or did these resources not matter? Findings show that a majority of youth (58%) said that living in a Muslim majority place improved their religious growth and understanding. However, a substantial minority (42%) said that it did not help, that it was the same, or that it both helped and hindered. Youth who said they learned about Islam and being Muslim from their family alone in the US were the most likely to say that the experience of living "back home" was beneficial to their religious learning, while those who had attended full-time Islamic schools in the US were more likely than other youth to say that they did not learn more about their religion in a Muslim majority context, that it was the same, or that it was unhelpful. Youth who attended weekend Islamic classes answered in both ways, suggesting that something other than a linear process of religious learning is at work, that other variables come into play to influence their experiences and interpretations. Religious learning outcomes were clearly gendered, as girls were much more likely than boys (71% versus 44%), independent of religious education in the US, to say that the experience was not helpful, the same, or that it had elements that helped and elements that did not. Indeed, girls and boys spoke about and experienced religion in very different ways "back home". When girls spoke about expressions of their

religious faith, they referred mainly to ways of dressing and behaving around others, but when boys spoke about the same subject they talked mainly about praying.

This essay lays out in an organized and descriptive fashion the youth's recollections of their early religious learning experiences in the US as well as their commentary on their overseas experiences of religion, especially whether and how such experiences contributed to their religious understanding and growth. The data clearly show that youth interpret "indigenous expressions" of religion [1] in multiple ways and that these interpretations are informed by their previous US experiences. Their observations and experiences of presumed "religious authenticity" do not necessarily produce the outcomes expected by their parents, nor those of religious leaders and scholars who believe that immersion in a Muslim majority climate is beneficial to the religious formation of young Muslims growing up in places where they are a minority. What seems to matter more is the quality of that experience, and that is a subjective interpretation informed by the prior experiences each youth brought into the situation.

## 2. The Importance of Family, Congregation, and Society in Religious Upbringing

Sociological studies of religious upbringing<sup>1</sup> in the United States have tended to focus their analyses on two levels: the family and religious congregations. Although most U.S. studies have been of Christians and secondarily of Jews, the recent upsurge in immigration to the U.S. has provoked research on a range of other religious groups. Studies of the roles of family and community institutions in religious upbringing consistently find that the most significant actors in the religious education of children are the family, especially the mother, followed by religious institutions and their attendant congregations. Parents transmit religious beliefs and values and model religious practices within the home [1–3]. When parents are members of religious congregations, they convey their congregations' perspectives and beliefs on matters such as piety, faithful practice, authenticity, and religious authority. It is the parents who funnel their children into religious schools and institutions, their worship services, religious education classes, and affiliated social groups—the places where children learn "what it is that my religious tradition teaches" [4]. Speaking to the importance of religious congregations for conveying beliefs, Edgell (speaking mainly about Christians) notes:

People get religious ideas through a variety of sources, and people pursue a variety of paths to express their religion. But when it comes to asking questions about what it is that I believe or we believe as a religious community, congregations are probably the place for many, many people [4].

The growing body of sociological research on religion among immigrants and their children in the US tends to be focused on religious congregations (institutions and their communities). This literature finds that religious congregations play additional formative roles to those mentioned above: they aid in immigrant adjustment to the new place of residence and in the formation of second-generation identity and a sense of belonging [5–7]. The few studies that have addressed religious practices in the home confirmed that these are important to the religious upbringing of the children of immigrants [1,6,8].

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<sup>1</sup> Religious upbringing is a more broadly encompassing term than "the religious education of children"; it draws directly from the Arabic word *tarbiyya*, which connotes both formal education and ways of being and acting. Amer, one of the youth interviewed, described *tarbiyya* as "learning how to be a good human being".

Park and Ecklund, who studied second-generation Asian Americans of five different religious faiths, found a significant role for a more broadly defined extended family, in which mothers had the central influence, across all of the groups studied. The family's influence overlapped with the congregation as "parents provided the means by which children receive religious training in the congregation and provide models of participation and leadership for children" ([1], p. 98). They also found that "home-based religious practices" (reading the Qur'an or the Bible to children, reciting family prayers, receiving moral instruction) were equally important for all of these groups, even though they had assumed they would be more important for religious groups with fewer institutional and organizational resources. Additionally, they found that "international family visits" were especially important to the religious socialization and understanding of Hindu youth: "visits to relatives in distant countries linked children and young adults to indigenous expressions of religion" ([1], p. 107). Recent studies [9,10] have examined the impacts of transnational journeys embarked upon by American Muslim adults in order to develop deeper religious understanding. More than seeking to experience "indigenous expressions" of religion, these adults intentionally sought out specific religious teachers, who were often critical of local practices and indigenous expressions. In contrast to these adult seekers, the youth discussed here mainly interacted with Islam as locally practiced, taught in schools, and understood within the family, but across two very different places. In the US, these sources not only taught them what it means to be Muslim, they informed their expectations of what being Muslim would be like in a Muslim majority society, a perspective they carried with them overseas that imposed upon their interpretations of local religious teachings and behavior. In this way they were different from their parents and from local youth, often questioning matters that others may have taken for granted. Their transnational lens (see, e.g., [11]), informed by but not bound to Islam as practiced in the US or in their parents' homelands, was a resource they consulted when considering what they were being taught about Islam and how they would practice their religion, or if they would practice it at all. This unique transnational positionality adds a layer of complexity to what might actually be occurring during international family visits, such as those cited by Park and Ecklund. Finally, most studies of religious groups in the US, whether of new groups or of Christians and Jews, treat the Christian-majority social context of the United States as normative. Few have examined the specific ways that dominant social structures and cultures infused by a religious normativity, where certain religious beliefs, values, and calendars are taken for granted, affect the daily lives and sense of belonging of members of minority religious traditions (see, e.g., [5,12,13]). The data from this study speak to these impacts as described by youth, whose insights on how these matter are keener once observed through a comparative lens.

### 3. Methods

This analysis is based on interviews conducted by the author in 2011 with 53 Arab American Muslim youth whose parents had taken them "back home" to Palestine or Jordan to learn their language, religion, and culture (the reason stated by nearly every youth interviewed), including twenty five females and twenty eight males. While they had moved from the US at various ages, depending on their placement among siblings and other family-related variables, and some had been born overseas, all were juniors or seniors in high school in Palestine or Jordan when interviewed for this study. The youth saw these overseas experiences as temporary sojourns; the overwhelming majority said they

intended to return to the US as adults. Most of the interviews were conducted at high schools in the Jerusalem-Ramallah area (Palestine) and in greater Amman (Jordan), mainly because high schools are the best places to find such youth and these geographic locations are where schools catering to English language speakers have been established. School principals assisted me in locating students eligible for the study [raised in the US, high school junior or senior], sent study information and consent forms home to parents, and then excused participating students from classes so I could interview them. The interviews selected for this analysis were part of a larger study of transnational Arab American teenagers that also includes youth from Yemen as well as Christians. The findings reported here are thus not from an in depth study focused on religion, but one that examined transnational experiences in which religious learning is one aspect.

Youth in the study grew up in a wide range of places in the US; many were not raised in large cities or in places where other Muslims lived nearby. Youth living in Palestine and Jordan reported growing up in thirty-four different US cities and towns; less than half said there was an Arab or Muslim community in the place that they lived. The strength of this sampling method is that it does not have the congregational bias so often found in studies of members of religious groups, nor the focus on a concentrated ethnic community. We are able to learn about the experiences of Muslims living on the edge, whose daily lives are performed in a context where they are often swimming alone. One of its drawbacks is that it underplays what it's like to be Muslim in the US when surrounded by a Muslim community with robust Muslim institutions. Through examining these youths' recollections of learning to be Muslim and their narratives of current experiences we gain insights into what they consider to be the key agents and methods of their early religious socialization in the US as well as into how they interpret the "indigenous expressions of religion" they are engaged with "back home". As with all data that taps into memories, their recollections of earlier experiences should be understood as such. That is, when youth describe how and what they learned about Islam as children in the United States, they are recounting what they remember as meaningful, rather than expressing verifiable factual details.

#### **4. Learning to be Muslim in the US**

Interviewees described five main patterns of religious learning during their childhoods in the United States, including one described by 11% as none at all (see Table 1). The most common method cited (32%) was through their parents and extended family (sometimes including non-related adults), followed by 19% each citing Saturday or Sunday school, full-time Islamic school, or Saturday or Sunday school and family. The meaningful difference between the number of males and females offering the latter response suggests that something is going on: perhaps multiple-methods (weekend school and family) were utilized more frequently with females than males, or perhaps males were more likely to forefront formal instruction and de-emphasize (and thus render invisible) instruction that occurred in the informal sphere of the home. Youth who attended full-time Islamic schools in the U.S., who were more likely to be male than female, considered these schools as their primary source of religious education and usually did not mention family. That is, while half of the youth specifically identified family as a source of religious education, we should not conclude that family was uninvolved in the religious education of other half but rather that they imputed greater importance to formal, institutional educational venues, even if they did not find them useful.

Place matters with regard to the resources parents have access to for their children’s religious education. Despite significant growth in number and size of Muslim institutions in the US [13], not every U.S. city has a full-time Islamic school, and many Muslim families live at significant distances from mosques where they can worship or institutions offering weekend classes<sup>2</sup>. Many youth interviewed in this study attended a mosque service only on religious holidays, citing distance as the main barrier to more frequent attendance. The locations of youth who attended full-time Islamic schools attest to these limitations as they grew up in the large cities of Chicago, Milwaukee, Detroit, Atlanta, Boston, Brooklyn, and Miami. At the same time, there were plenty of youth from these same cities who did not attend full-time Islamic schools, highlighting matters of proximity, cost, and parental preference.

**Table 1.** Cited Responses to: “How did you know you were a Muslim? How did you learn about your faith when you were younger?”

#/%	Parents/Family	Weekend Classes	Parents/Family & Weekend Classes	Full-Time Islamic School	No Religious Education
Total = 53	17	10	10	10	6
%	32%	19%	19%	19%	11%
Females = 25	8	5	7	3	2
%	29%	21%	29%	<b>12.5%</b>	8%
Males = 28	9	5	3	7	4
%	34%	17%	<b>10%</b>	24%	14%

#### 4.1. Learning from Family

Youth who said they learned how to practice their Islamic faith from family members spoke of their parents’, especially their mothers’, endeavors to read Qur’an to them, teach them how to speak Arabic, pray, and fast during Ramadan. Families were most effective, however, according to the interview accounts, at transmitting moral lessons on how to distinguish between good and bad as a Muslim and in conveying their interpretations of the behavioral boundaries of the religion. These elements of the faith, which we might call a Muslim ethos and its daily life application, were repeatedly referred to by youth as either the “rules” or the “basics,” and were often framed in comparison to what “Americans” do. Indeed, learning “the rules” and how to fast were mentioned more often than any other aspect of religious education within the family and for many youth the “rules” were their main take-away and had the most memorable impact. Listening to these teens describe the pedagogical process, one can sense the challenge parents faced raising their children as Muslims in the US and appreciate why they thought taking them “back home” would be beneficial to their Muslim upbringing.

<sup>2</sup> Not sure why this is here. Appears again on page 6. According to Bagby’s ([14], p. 4) study of mosques in the US, about 80% of mosques are in large cities and their suburbs. “The number of mosques and mosque participants continue to show significant growth. The vast majority of mosques are located in metropolitan areas but the percentage of mosques in urban areas is decreasing and the percentage of mosques in suburban areas is increasing.”

When asked how she learned about her religion, Sawsan replied: “Our parents, my mom mostly. She was always like ‘You are living in America, but you are a Muslim. You’re living in America, but you have to follow my rules. And Islamic *rules*.’ And she always kept the Islamic boundary around us.” The notion of boundaries carried the message that good and bad for Muslims were different from good and bad for “Americans.” Indeed, Mohammed said it was better for a Muslim to be raised in Palestine than in the US because if a Muslim stays in the US “maybe he’s going to do things wrong, not listen to his parents.” When asked what kind of wrong things, he replied, “Like drink beer. Go out with girls. Like other things, you know what I mean...” And then he clarified, “I’m not talking about the Americans. I’m just saying for like us.” Mohammed felt that his experience in Palestine would help him teach his own kids “what’s right from wrong for a Muslim”.

Ziad, who learned about religion from his parents and also attended weekend school, described the boundary as a “red line” for Muslims:

Um my parents weren’t so strict as uh being, in a religious way, but they also kept like a red line. You know like don’t cross this line because that’s against our, against Islam. So I would stay behind that line. [Give me some examples of the lines.] Red lines? Like um like we would watch TV, regular, but we shouldn’t like you know watch things that has a lot of nudity. Also no kissing, no touching, you know, those kind of stuff. [Anything else?] No, not really. [Did they have books for you to learn from?] Well yeah they had the Qur’an for us in the house, but I didn’t know how to read Arabic, so that wasn’t a lot of help.

Diala, who spoke of receiving religious guidance from her mother, grandmother, and Muslim family friends, felt that she did not learn as much as she would have liked, but she knew the “basics”:

I mean my mom was mainly the person to teach us about religion... So yeah, I mean, although we didn’t get exposed to as much Arabic and religion as I would have liked at home, you know, we still knew *the basics*. You know, we don’t have boyfriends and, but they made me understand why, and although they were never really um strict about what I wore, I don’t know, naturally I just, I didn’t feel comfortable wearing shorts anymore.

Still, Diala distinguishes between knowing religious practices and understanding why Muslims engage in these practices. She did not learn the “why” until she moved to Palestine.

But to be honest with you, when coming here, to Palestine, I-we did-technically we did not know that much about religion. You know? I mean, yeah, we knew Muslims prayed and fast, and we did fast, and, you know, you’re supposed to wear the hijab. I never understood why though until I came here, until I got older. So, I mean, I wish my mom had—

Miriam’s account describes her parent’s efforts to convey the “traits” of a Muslim, which required developing an understanding of good and bad from a Muslim perspective. She considered these efforts more successful than their attempts to teach Qur’an, which were no doubt difficult because the Qur’an is written and taught in the Arabic language.

We would, say it was night, we have nothing to do, so my dad would just gather us all, and he’d just like read a hadith [sayings of the Prophet] out of the hadith book, and explain it, like, the traits of a Muslim where you can’t lie, basically, you have to help each other...the

whole idea of like you're either a good person or you're a bad person... My mom would try and get us to write the Qur'an, and try to translate it in our own way and what it means and stuff like that, on like it was Friday mornings. No sorry, it was Saturday mornings where we used to do that. But that also didn't last.

Youth who learned how to be a Muslim from their parents and extended family alone tended to be from places in which they had limited exposure to and interaction with other Muslims. Their neighbors were not Muslim, few if any other children at school were Muslim, and they reported visiting a mosque only occasionally, usually during Ramadan and the Eids [feasts], due to distances. I should note however, that none of the youth interviewed for the study cited attending services at a mosque as part of their religious learning experience. This is probably because learning is not catalyzed in situations where one feels somewhat out of place: their Arabic language skills were limited, they did not know the prayer ritual well, and many were not regular members of the congregation.

#### *4.2. Weekend Classes*

Youth who attended Saturday or Sunday school, including those who specifically also mentioned their parents as teachers and those who did not, had the benefit of growing up where this resource was available, although for many the schools were located at a significant distance from their homes. They described weekend schools as places where they were taught how to pray, memorize Qur'an, speak and read Arabic, and learn the rules. Some also spoke of learning about the prophets. The educational content of the weekend schools was thus similar to that of the home with the addition of language learning, memorizing Qur'an, and Islamic history. Adnan put it this way: "My parents they taught me most of the things like how to pray and things like that and Sunday school I learned more about prophets and stuff like that..."

Nearly unanimously, youth recounted the weekend school experience as not beneficial to learning to be Muslim, whether they had educational back up in the home or not. Hasheema said, "I went to a Saturday school, basically, growing up, until I got big and then I just stopped going because we didn't really learn much." Reflecting on what he had gained from attending weekend school during the summers, Samer reported, "When I got here I did not know that much." Similarly, Aisha, who attended Sunday school for Arabic language and religion, simply recounted, "it was difficult to learn about them, but I know there was more to see over here." Many complained about the memorization required, which they viewed as unhelpful to learning. Many also described their teachers as lacking qualifications to teach religion. As Yara put it, "teachers are just like volunteers." Similar to those who learned to be Muslims from family alone, learning the "rules" or "the basics" was what youth who attended weekend classes recalled most. These youth described going to a mosque very occasionally, more often during Ramadan and the Eids, and, as noted above, did not describe these visits as learning experiences. Students commonly lived at significant distances from each other and the weekend courses were episodic, so there was little opportunity for these young Muslims to develop community with each other. Consequently, with few Muslims in their neighborhood and social life mainly revolving around family, there was limited external reinforcement, support, or reward for being Muslim.



### 4.3. Full-Time Islamic Schools

Youth who attended full-time Islamic schools described learning how to pray, fast, speak Arabic, and memorize Qur'an. Notably, they did not refer to their religious education as learning the rules, the basics, or the boundaries, probably because it offered so much more. For example, Etedal said she "knew everything" before moving to Palestine because she went to an Islamic school, unlike her brother, who only knew the basics. She does note, however, that in Palestine she learned about the everyday practice of being Muslim, the repertoire of daily life values and behaviors that compliment worship and rituals.

Well because I went to a private school I already knew all this stuff, so I didn't really learn any—much here. No, I already knew everything before I came. And now I know how to act, I know like the right way to act, to behave, treat your family and friends and everything like that. I knew that but, like, my younger brothers didn't know that, they like, they knew the basics and everything, but they didn't know much.

It is likely that prior to living in Palestine Etedal knew this repertoire, yet in Palestine its performance is more spaciay comprehensive as the expectations of behaving with propriety exist everywhere and are reinforced through the observation of others, including strangers. Etedal says: "I became more mature, and I learned, you know, the way you're supposed to behave here, and act and everything. You know, that everything, like, everybody's watching you here basically. And that was basically it."

Most of the youth who attended full-time Islamic schools made a point about how great it was to be part of a community of young Muslims. Lina said fondly, "I felt like I was surrounded by religion everywhere" as prayer rituals were woven throughout the school day. Nasreen recalls:

I love how they would, uh, you know in Islam we have like our five prayers, five daily prayers. They would have like during the school time. Uh, we have the mid-day prayer. We have to pray it.

We can assume that these positive feelings about Islamic schools speak to their contribution to happy childhood experiences in the US but also to something that is missing overseas, something they would not miss were it not for their transnational lives. Some youth said they missed the sense of community that was created at the school and carried over to the nearby mosque. In the Muslim majority world, mosques are mainly places where men go to pray and listen to sermons, while in the US most mosques house congregations composed of families. For example, Saif said:

Here I don't have that great of a connection with the mosque. For example in America the mosque was for me was a community, people would be going, talking, here the mosque is just, it's a mosque, it's a place where you pray and then you leave.

Youth who attended full-time Islamic schools also talked about having classmates who were of different nationalities. Khalil had great memories of his Islamic school, where his classmates were from India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and other Arab countries. Although he did not see them much outside of school, he said they always looked forward to collective activities like fundraisers. The racially and ethnically diverse context of full-time Islamic schools in the US spawned their

awareness of a religious faith, an Islam, that was not tied to a single culture, as it was with their immigrant parents.

In Islam for example it's a religion that's based on unity of people no matter the race. Before anything, we're Muslims. So we used to interact a lot. We wouldn't feel that there was much of a difference.

Boys and girls who attended full-time Islamic schools (as well as girls more generally) were the ones most likely to say that they did not learn much more about their faith while living overseas, and many of them were disappointed with their experience of religion in a Muslim majority society. The benefits they were told of living in such a society for their religious growth eluded them, and this was not simply because they felt they had already learned enough about their religion. Having been educated in a multi-ethnic community of Muslims where presumably the Islamic pedagogy was cleansed of cultural variations, they found that Islam as practiced "back home" was too culturally bound.

### **5. Learning Religion "Back Home" in Palestine and Jordan**

During the course of interviews, youth were asked how living in Palestine or Jordan, both Muslim-majority contexts, affected their religious knowledge, growth, and personal experiences as Muslims. They were specifically asked: "Has being here helped you in your understanding of Islam?" and "How is it different being a Muslim here than being a Muslim in the US?" responses to which were probed for details. The following discussion is based on responses to the first question, with responses to the second question providing further insights. We expect that being Muslim in a Christian-majority context is quite different from being Muslim in a Muslim-majority context. In one case your religious rituals, calendars, diet, and modes of dress are at odds with the majority culture while in the other case they are normative. Theoretically at least, the same distinction should apply to dominant social values and norms of appropriate behavior, although being understood as humanly rather than divinely constructed these are more subject to variations associated with class and place and to change over time. Furthermore, technologies of globalization are making obvious inroads into local cultures, informing the musical and material tastes of youth. Nonetheless, the fact that these youth were taught while growing up that Muslims have different boundaries than "Americans" and that knowing how to conduct life within such boundaries turned out to prepare one well for social life in Palestine and Jordan indicates that these cultures are infused with a local variant of Islamic norms and values. However, as we will see below, the unique transnational lens of these youth produced varying interpretations of whether being Muslim in such a context was all together better. Some saw the dominant culture as productive of a mechanical conformity, different from the deeply considered actions driven by faith they were taught, and found that disconcerting. Thus, while one might assume that living in a Muslim majority context enhances religious learning in ways that cannot be achieved in a Muslim minority context, which is certainly something parents believed to be the case when they took their families overseas, the data show that these teenagers do not necessarily see it the same way. While some, especially boys, were thrilled by their freedom to be Muslim and especially their ability to pray wherever they wanted, others, especially girls but also many boys, were disappointed when the moral geography of Palestine and Jordan was not what they expected. They were surprised to discover

that many Muslims did not practice their faith dutifully by praying five times a day, or by praying at all. They were also disheartened by what they saw as a lack of behavioral and moral consistency when persons who publicly performed acts of faith [praying, wearing hijab] acted in other settings in ways they considered un-Islamic. These observations, because they defied their expectations, are products of their US-based experiences that taught them to see Muslims in very fixed and sometimes very ideal ways, whether from a mainstream American culture that represents Muslims in religiously essentialized, non-complex ways, or from their religion teachers at home and in school who often contrasted how others behave to how “we” Muslims behave. What they found instead were human beings, with all the variations and vulnerabilities that implies, a social fact that locally-raised youth likely took for granted.

When responses to these questions are examined by the type of religious education youth had received in the US before going to Jordan or Palestine, the data show that those who learned religion from their family members alone and those who reported no prior religious education gained the most from living “back home.” This outcome is not surprising given that their starting position was one of limited information. On the other hand, youth who attended full-time Islamic schools at some point during their childhood in the US were the least likely to say they experienced gains in knowledge and understanding. Youth who attended Islamic weekend schools were split: some said they learned more while others said that they did not, that there were positive and negatives, or that it was the same. Girls who attended weekend schools were more likely than boys who did so to offer a nuanced analysis (both positive and negative) or to say it was the same. The opinions and insights expressed below are based on the observations of youth informed by their unique position as transnational learners of Islam. Rather than treating their views as the perspectives of adolescents—persons at a developmental stage of growth—I see them as having a certain type of integrity that is less obfuscated by the demands of conformity imposed on geographically situated youth or adults. In my view, based on much research, their in-betweenness or liminality makes of them keen observers. The answers and explanations these youth gave in response to questions about learning religion and being Muslim provide key insights into the complex ways that religion, gender, and society intersect in two geographic locations. After a brief exploration of gendered differences, the data are organized according to the three levels of social organization they discussed when describing their religious learning experiences—schools, community, and society.

### *5.1. Gendered Differences*

A majority (31, or 58%) of the 53 youth interviewed said that their knowledge and understanding of Islam increased while living in Palestine or Jordan. On the other hand, 42% (22) said either that it did not contribute positively to their religious understanding, that it contributed in both positive and negative ways, or that it made no difference. Boys were far more likely than girls to say that their knowledge and understanding of Islam increased (71% *versus* 44%). Reasons for this distinctly gendered difference would benefit from ethnographic study, but study data and prior research by the author suggest three explanatory variables: gendered patterns of upbringing, role of mosques, and cultural perspectives on Muslim men. With regard to upbringing, Muslim parents in the US place more emphasis on teaching girls the “rules” than boys and expect more conformity to them from girls than

from boys. Girls are therefore better prepared for the Islamic flavor of daily life in the social environment “back home”, while boys have a sharper learning curve.

Mohammed’s rendering of how he learned Islam in the US highlights this focus on girls:

I remember how my mom was in America and we were in America, my mom sat with my sisters and she was telling them, she was teaching them what a Muslim can do and what a Muslim can’t do and they listened. They know that when they go to school, they can’t do nothing wrong. They know that they can’t eat beer—or drink beer or eat pork or anything cause in our *din*—in our religion—they can’t do that.

While a gendered difference in expectations also exists in Palestine and Jordan, boys there are generally held to a higher standard of behavior than in the US, by extended family, community, and the society at large. The boundaries or red lines that were mainly enforced on females in the US also encompass males in Palestine and Jordan, although breaches by males are tolerated to a much higher degree than those by females. Thus, Mohammed said, “Maybe I would not have listened to my mom in the States cause I would have looked at others doing everything wrong and copied them.” In Palestine he developed a stronger personal sense of right and wrong and he appeared to appreciate it. He concluded that Palestine is “the right place to live...a good society.” In Palestine “there are people to tell me what—like my relatives and cousins they tell me what’s right from wrong. In America, maybe there’s nobody except my mom and dad. Maybe I would have not listened to them”.

A second reason that might explain why boys overwhelmingly said they learned more about their religion in Palestine and Jordan than girls is related to mosques, which are much more conveniently located than in the US and are generally male-only places. Boys are not only welcomed in the many neighborhood mosques in Palestine and Jordan, they are by their own accounts highly encouraged to pray in them. This interaction of proximity and gendered space means that boys are far more likely than girls to be placed in situations where knowing how to perform prayer rituals and recite Qur’an matter, circumstances where they would need to learn more than they knew coming in. Largely excluded from mosques, girls do not face this type of religious ritual performance challenge. Their challenges are much more likely to come with regard to matters of public behavior, dress, and manners, which, as noted above, are behaviors for which they tended to have received training in the US. Finally, one cannot help but think that freedom to be a Muslim male, without the associated negative stereotypes found in the US, and freedom to pray publicly without invoking stares or slander, contribute to a subjectivity that boys would feel good about. In multiple gendered ways, being Muslim in Palestine and Jordan is very different from being Muslim in the US.

### 5.2. Learning Islam in High School: Palestine and Jordan

Youth interviewed for this study were juniors and seniors attending high schools in Palestine and Jordan where the Islamic religion is taught as a class [*din*]. Religion courses were usually mandatory, except that some private schools exempt English language dominant speakers from religion courses if they are taught only in Arabic. The majority of youth attended private schools that teach in the English language (even if they were raised in Brazil or Puerto Rico), although some offered both an English and Arabic track of instruction, because their Arabic was not proficient enough for public schools or

private Arabic language schools. Some, however, attended local public schools or private schools with Arabic language instruction because either schools with English language instruction were far away from their homes or because their parents choose to enroll them in Arabic speaking schools, despite the fact that their Arabic was not at the high school level [most youth said they were at the 6th grade level]. Christians were also interviewed in this study, although they were a proportionately smaller group. The schools they attended offered *din* courses in both Christianity and Islam.

Only a handful of youth said that religion courses at school played a significant role in furthering their knowledge about Islam and those who did so tended to have had little formal religious instruction at any prior time in their lives. For example, high school religion classes in Jordan were Samira's first formal religious learning opportunity. She grew up in Texas and learned how to pray and fast from her parents. The closest mosque was in Fort Worth, an hour and a half drive away, so they went there only on Muslim holidays.

It was my first time actually learning about my religion because they gave religion classes. It was part of the curriculum; it wasn't anything extra. So I learned a lot from that, I learned how to read and write Arabic, so I was actually able to read the Qur'an in Arabic. Um the hijab, I just recently started wearing it. I've only been wearing it for two years now. I don't know as much as I should know, but you know, I'm still learning. But here it helped a lot. I wouldn't have learned that much over there as I have here. [So, you learned it mostly in school?] Yes.

A few others mentioned religion classes at school as a source of learning Islam, but they coupled it with a string of influences, such as extended family, community, and mosques (boys only), suggesting that it was not a strong contributor to religious learning on its own.

Nayef from Amman grew up in New Jersey and said he did not know much about Islam before moving to Jordan. While he spoke about his religion class (in a relatively liberal school) in positive ways, it was only after he mentioned his parents and mosques, and then being prompted:

I didn't know anything before, like, about Islam, what's haram and what's halal. But now I do. [Where are you learning?] My parents, and two mosques, like... I'm more familiar with Islam, and I can read Qur'an really good now so, it's better. [And you study it in school too, right?] Yeah, only in religion class. They give us the sura, like, and they translate it to English so you can understand it, but you have to memorize the Arabic too. [Do you talk about it?] Yeah we do talk about, like class discussions a lot.... here we're free, like we— 'cause we have some, we have two atheists in the school. Yeah, so like, we're free to talk about it, like, 'cause we had a debate, Darwin theory against creationists, and, so she discussed with us evolutionists and how it's wrong and stuff. Yeah.

Similarly, Mohammed, who was quoted earlier as feeling vulnerable to social risks in the US, credited his family, the mosque, and religion classes. In Palestine he is "Memorizing the Qur'an more. Learning about *din*. Going to the mosque a lot, almost like every day. And learning *din* in our school".

Muna grew up in Chicago, where she said she learned the "basics": how to pray, fast, and wear hijab. She was now living in Turmos Ayya (Palestine), attending a local, Arabic language public school. She credits school and her family with helping her understand the reasons she should pray, fast,

and dress in certain ways. Indeed, understanding *why* Muslims practice their faith as they do was important to many youth, mostly girls, who wanted to know the meaning behind what appeared to be routinized behavior.

[So has being here helped you understand religion better?] Yes, it did. Over there they told me the basics, the simple basics. I learned at home how to pray, how to fast in Ramadan, how to wear the scarf. But I don't know why, why to wear jelbab, mandeel, I mean hijab, when the right time comes; I never knew why. Why I should pray, how I should fast, *etc.* Here they told me why, and how a girl should behave in Islam. [So, you learned that in school?] Yes, here and at home.

Dalal from Ramallah grew up in New Jersey and was one of the very few who said they enjoyed religion classes. She said she always thought of herself as a “Muslim first”, yet she credits moving to Palestine with dramatically changing her experience of religion.

I moved here in 2006, by 2007—I moved here Fall of 2006, by Ramadan of 2007 I had started praying, cause and you know when I was in America I thought ‘Oh, praying is just, you know you don't have to do it’ but I didn't realize it was, I mean, it is, you know it's a must. You know? And I want to pray. I wanted to always pray. So I finally learned that and I finally understood what religion is, you know. It's so beyond praying and fasting and this and that—you know? And uh I became very proud. I started enjoying religion classes a lot. So now I feel like um I understand the religion much more—

The above quotes express the points of view of the small number of youth who had positive things to say about religion classes at school. Far more common were criticisms of these courses. Indeed, many students elected to be interviewed during *din* class because they said they found it boring or could not understand the Arabic. Study data point fairly solidly to the conclusion that religion classes at school did not enhance religious knowledge or understanding for the overwhelming majority of these youth. For some they were a turn off because they stressed memorization, rules, and history, while allowing for little questioning and discussion. These critiques are similar to the ways in which they described weekend religion classes in the US. Hasheema grew up in Michigan and attended weekend religion classes, but said she did not really learn much from them. Although there were two mosques near their home, she only went to a mosque on the *Eid*. Now living outside of Ramallah, she said, “I'm a better Muslim here for sure.” Yet when asked about her current religion classes at school, she said they teach “stuff that doesn't even matter anymore”.

Yeah, we take...yeah, but we learn things that aren't really like, like we'll learn about stuff that doesn't even matter anymore. Like history more so than religion. And we'll learn about, like, like now we're taking something called *zaqat*, like giving money to the poor. And it's really, it's like ‘If you have thirty cows you have to give a sheep’ or something...it's like, what does that have to do with...I'm never gonna need that, so, yeah.

Fadwa from Amman said simply “it's just those details, like, you have to memorize”.

Miriam, who was born and raised in Atlanta and now lives in Ramallah, said religion classes are not “enhancing critical abilities”:

We're studying religion in school, yeah, but I don't feel like...it, all they do is just give you rules, this is what you can't do, this is what you can do. Abide by them. I don't feel that they're enhancing our critical abilities of dealing with situations, or, it's just more like of giving you just this guidebook with strict rules, and just following them. That, I don't think that's what—[So you're not studying the Qur'an?] We—we memorize the Quran, but we're not studying the Quran.

Appeals to a type of piety based in mechanical conformity did not resonate for many of these young Muslims, especially girls, who wanted a deeper sense of meaning, an understanding of why Muslims believe and act as they do. Boys, on the other hand, rarely spoke of a quest for deeper meaning. Instead, they tended to discuss the joys of praying and going to the mosque or to be broadly critical of the Muslim society they found.

A few youth said that religious instruction was biased by cultural interpretations. Abla, who grew up in New Jersey and now lives in Amman, said her religious education began in Jordan. She described her father as a borderline atheist and her mother as non-practicing. She said that religion classes “don't really go into the spiritual like side” and “they don't really care about like having you like really understand or enjoy your learning, they just want you to learn the material and that's it”. She described her male religion teachers as biased.

Yeah like sometimes you can just like see a bit of like bias like from teachers, because sometimes Islam is kind of like more, like leans more toward the guys, and like more privileges for them, and like once you have a male religion teacher, like it's supposed to be between, equality between the sexes, but the males over here in the society, like, they take their own liberties in like interpreting it as how they want it to be, where they have like more dominance, so once, so there are some things that when you take it, and then they're talking about the role of the woman, how she has to stay at home, she can't leave without asking her husband. [They say that in religion class?] Yeah it's not in the Qur'an but it's like, there were some questions, and then we take a lesson about the roles of each individual, and so like when it came to the woman, the teacher he like asked a question, he's like so what do you think about like the woman leaving the house without calling her husband? And then for me, it's, I'm ok with that, like you don't have to call him for everything, like I'm leaving the house, I'm getting in the car, but he said, no you have to call because like you have to know, so it depends on like who's teaching you it.

### 5.3. Religious Growth

Despite the nearly unanimous criticism of high school religion classes in Palestine and Jordan, 58% of the youth interviewed said that living in Palestine or Jordan did increase their religious knowledge and understanding. This group included those who said they learned nothing about Islam in the US, all but one of those who learned to be Muslim mainly from family members, about half of those who attended weekend religion classes at some point in their childhood, and one boy who attended a full-time Islamic school. For these youth, being surrounded by Muslims was key to their religious growth. They came to better understand Islam as a way of life and as a way of acting around others;

they enjoyed sharing Muslim feasts and fasting communally. Boys especially appreciated the ease with which they could pray and attend mosque services, felt more commitment to a Muslim ethos [as moral and behavioral code], and generally more free to simply be Muslim. These youth derived a sense of completeness, freedom, and comfort from the ubiquity (Islam and Muslims are everywhere) and totality (the full Muslim experience) that contextualized social life as a Muslim in Palestine and Jordan, one that moves in concord with Muslim rituals, calendars, and sensibilities. It allowed for a social and psychological ease that accompanies feeling that one is a constituent part of the society instead of an outsider who must deal with the assumptions, expectations, and discrimination of others. The presence of large extended family, which was true for most but not all of these youth, added key reinforcement to being Muslim in multiple ways, as teachers, observers, reinforcers, disciplinarians, and communities with whom to share being Muslim. These communities of support and face-to-face relationships with other Muslims were sorely lacking for many of these youth in the US, an outcome of migration and settlement patterns.

### 5.3.1. Feeling Ease, Free, and Complete

Fadwa from Amman, who grew up in Houston, described the experience of being Muslim as one that feels “complete”. Although she notes that it is the same Islam with the same rituals and feasts [*eids*], being surrounded by other Muslims and hearing the call to prayer [*adhan*] creates “a whole different feeling”. That feeling propelled her to pray and read Qur’an.

Actually, being here, by itself, gave me a new, a new... I don’t know, what would you call it. It’s the same religion, same, same thing, same fasting in Ramadan, same *eids* and everything, but over here it’s just, when you have all those people around you, most of them are Muslims...it’s just, it’s a whole different feeling. Like I hear the *adhan* over there, you know how the *adhan*... Yea, I started praying, and I’m reading Qur’an more. It’s just, it’s, it’s a nice feeling– I don’t know it’s like, I felt, like, complete...

Husni from Ramallah, who grew up in Alabama learning about religion from his parents, also appreciated being surrounded by a community of Muslims who lived according to the same lunar-based schedule and celebrated feasts together. When speaking about fasting, Ramadan and the *eids*, he compares Palestine, where “everyone” is “used to what’s going on” to the US, where fasting was perceived by those around him as abnormal, the rotations of the lunar calendar were confusing, and feasts were not really celebrations.

Here it’s easier to be a Muslim. Cause like there’s not really much trouble like you can, people are like are used to what you’re doing. Like in Ramadan if you don’t fast, everyone’s not fasting, I mean everyone’s fasting. But over there, if you fast everyone’s like “what’s going on, is he normal?” Like everything’s changing. Cause Ramadan changes from time to time so they get confused. But here everyone is used to what’s going on, and like on the Eid, everyone goes out and celebrates. Over there it’s like a small Muslim community that goes out and celebrates and it’s not as much as like really celebration, it’s just being with each other at that time.



Ala' grew up in Virginia learning about Islam from his parents, a full time Islamic school until third grade, and then Sunday school. He now lives in Amman and acknowledges that "there were a lot of things I thought I knew, but I didn't know actually", signifying that his experience in Jordan has taught him substantially more about his religion. He described fasting during Ramadan while in the US as an outsider experience, sitting "in the library if I wanted, instead of sitting in the cafeteria, or if I wanted to hang out with my friends, I would still sit in the cafeteria with my friends and fast". In Jordan he said he actually *feels* Muslim, it's "regular" and he doesn't "stand out".

Here you actually feel being a Muslim—I mean it's like a common, common thing here. It's like regular that I'm Muslim. Over there it's like something that stands out.

Alia, who said she is more religious in Jordan and understands Islam better, spoke about a greater sense of freedom that comes from not having to deal with the expectations of non-Muslims. Growing up in Minneapolis learning religion from her parents and at weekend classes she felt external pressures to act in certain ways because she was Muslim.

When you're in America, cause they expect you to be Muslim they have this mind in their head they expect you to be like wearing a scarf, and all like, like praying every five minutes and stuff, and they expect you to do this, and like that, but here it's like you're a Muslim, but it's a normal thing cause you're in a Muslim country, you're in a Arab country. Like it's more free to be a Muslim and people don't expect more out of you because you are Muslim.

Alia's perceptions of American expectations of Muslims mirror expectations held by quite a few Muslim American youth. Many had imagined that Muslims "back home" were unambiguously religiously observant, living their daily lives true to the rituals, values, and ethos of Islam. They assumed that a social environment compatible to Islam produced better Muslims. As we will see below, many of the youth who had this expectation became disappointed by the Muslim realities they found, circumstances that did not inspire their religious development.

### 5.3.2. Islam is a Way of Life

Practicing Islam according to the Qur'an and Sunna [sayings of the Prophet] is intended to be a fully encompassing way of life that includes not only religious rituals but also ways of speaking, dressing, showing gratitude and humility, disciplining, and engaging in all sorts of social relationships. Jumana, who grew up in Florida, said she learned about these aspects of Islam living in Ramallah. In her view, Islam as practiced in the US follows a Christian model of attending services and praying, but that is only part of what Islam is.

Like it makes me more aware of what Islam is. It's not just a religion, it's a way of life and I never really understood that before. Like it has to do with the way you dress, the way you talk to your parents, the way you act. It's more than what I thought. It's not just like you go to church on Sunday like I was used to over there in America. It's like you go to a mosque every Friday and you pray every day and that's Islam. So here I'm like no, they taught me more.

### 5.3.3. Praying and Fasting around like Others

Boys who said they learned more about their religion in Palestine and Jordan were especially keen on mentioning the presence of mosques, fasting in the company of others doing the same, being able to pray during prayer times, and to pray anywhere. As noted earlier, mosques are places where men pray and listen to sermons; there are few mosques in Palestine and Jordan that accommodate women, who are expected to pray at home. Ala' described the Muslim American experience as one of concealment, as living in a place where a Muslim cannot pray openly, especially as compared to being able to pray "in the middle of the street".

Over here there are like mosques here—everywhere you're surrounded by Muslims, like especially when it comes to praying and fasting. I could do it in the middle of the street here and no one would—it would be regular. In America, it would be, it really stands out. Like if I would go and ask 50 people around me what religion they were, maybe only one person—not even one would be Muslim, so over there it's a lot more—its not secretive, but its more concealed.

Adnan, who grew up in Alabama and learned about Islam mostly from his parents, also felt that being able to pray anywhere without attracting stares made being Muslim easier in Jordan.

Being a Muslim is easier in Jordan cuz like you can pray anywhere. I mean like nobody will look at you but like in the States if you're in the mall or somewhere and its time to pray you have to go somewhere, everybody starts looking at you. But here it's easier.

Not all of the youth living in Jordan or Palestine would agree with him, but Ala' said he really liked the social life in Amman, which includes family, neighbors, and the way that religious practice is seamlessly woven into life due to the close proximity of the mosque.

See in America, great school, but not so great social life. Here, poor school, but great social life. So basically if the school was here great and the social life was great, it would be the perfect lifestyle. [So what makes it great?] I mean cause the family. We have family right here and I have another aunt in Marj il Hamam and we always sit with them, hang out, dinners. Also the religion. I have a mosque two minutes away from the house. I go there, pray, come back. We're friends with our neighbors. The friends here I can easily go out and have fun and we all live next to each other and stuff.

Sameeh grew up in a Chicago suburb that had only two Arab families and now lives in a village outside of Ramallah. In the US he learned about Islam from his parents and went to a mosque "occasionally, maybe twice a year ... because there's not that many Fridays we get off." Even then, he said "we would just pray and then leave... I never really saw any Arabs or anything." Like Ala', he compares fasting in Palestine, where everyone is "doing it", to fasting in the US, where one must sit in the school lunchroom while everyone else is eating. Being in Palestine has helped him understand his religion more because practicing Muslims surround him. He highlights his ability to go to the mosque, listen to the sermons, and pray during class time, experiences he did not have in the United States.

Because 90% of the people here are Muslim compared to America, where I think it's like 1% are Muslim. I'm not sure. It's something like that. It's under 5% that's for sure. So going from where everyone around is Muslim and practicing the same thing. Ramadan and fasting month is easier cause everyone is doing it compared to when I used to sit at lunch and everyone is eating. So, and you learn more cause you go to the mosque more, you hear speeches, you learn a lot from the people around you because they're all religious and they hear things compared to just learning things from my parents and yeah. You learn a lot. Yeah I learned more, but I also practice my religion more here because in America I didn't really get up to go and pray in class, but over here it's *'adi*. It's normal.

Narratives about praying and going to mosques were largely male accounts. I cannot help but think that their importance to these young men is due not only to the social fact that worshipping in mosques and praying in public are male only activities. I also believe that simply being able to engage in these activities freely is a liberating experience because being male and Muslim in the US is a stigmatized identity and they know it. Although young, most of the teenagers I interviewed reported experiencing some type of hate speech, anti-Muslim joke, or discrimination while in the US. While these events did not dominate their memories of growing up in the US, they certainly informed their sense of being different and being part of a religious faith that is looked down upon. Growing up in American society, it is hard to imagine that these youth were not exposed to the images of Muslim men praying that were contextualized in a way that sparked fear in so many Americans. In combination with their significant isolation from many other Muslims, one can imagine their unease with being practicing Muslims.

Yara's story is unusual for a girl because she speaks of praying in a mosque. Yara was living in a village near Bir Zeit (Palestine) and was raised in Palestine, Cleveland, and Tallahassee. She went back and forth between Palestine and the United States throughout her childhood depending upon conditions in Palestine (Israeli military activity, schools closures) and the family's desire to stay together (her Palestinian father, born outside of Palestine, has been unable to acquire entry to or residency in Palestine from the Israeli authorities). Her school in Palestine does not require that she take religion class because it is an Arabic subject, so she learns at home from her mom, which reminds her of the memorization of Qur'an she did in Saturday school in Florida "cause they don't want us to like forget". She describes the mosque in Tallahassee as being a "run down" place that nobody cares about, especially in comparison to Christian churches. Palestine is a better experience for her as a Muslim because she fits in better in a society where there is "prayer everywhere".

I mean it's hard because ... it's so like uncared for. Like you just go and you see all these gorgeous churches, and all these like Sunday schools, and all these benefits... And then you come to this mosque and it's like this little run-down place, because like it feels like nobody cares. And like teachers are just like volunteers, and it's not like something that it should be. It should be a mosque, a beautiful place to pray and worship, like the churches that they have there, but we don't have that. [So you come here, and ...?] I mean, I love it. Because it's just like prayer everywhere. It's like I feel like I fit in more. [Do you ever go to the mosque here?] I have, there's one in Surda. For prayers, and I go.

While boys who found their religious learning experience positive commonly credited being able to go to a mosque regularly, not being able to go to the mosque, because it was an activity largely

restricted to males, was a source of discontent for many girls, and is one reason that overall, girls were less likely than boys to find their overseas experience helpful to their religious learning. For example, Fatma from Turmos Ayya, who grew up in Chicago, says she learned more about religion in Palestine from school, daily life, and her mother, but “here not a lot of girls go to the mosque, so my mother tells my brother to go to the mosque but not me”. Fatma says that in Palestine a mosque “is just a mosque” but in the US “it is not just a mosque it is a place for all Islam people to gather”, a point we will return to when we look at why some youth found their experience as Muslims better in the US.

#### 5.3.4. Being Responsible

Finally, another reason a number of youth gave for learning more and understanding their religion better in Palestine and Jordan had to do with becoming a responsible Muslim, learning how to behave in a Muslim appropriate way. As might be expected due to upbringing patterns in the US that are gendered, this development was something only young men reported. Ayman from Beit Hanina credits being in Palestine with helping him to “grasp” his religion and be “responsible”. The social environment encouraged him to start listening to his father. Growing up in Tampa, his father used to talk to him about religion, but he was never “into it”. He went to the mosque only for *eids* and never attended weekend school. Now he reads Qur’an, prays, goes to the mosque on his own, and listens to the sheikh’s qutba’s (sermons).

I really never, like my father used to tell us about it, like you should fast and stuff like that, but I really never, like, was into it until I came here. [When you came here how did that change?] I finally like grasped it, in, like I read the holy, I started readin’ the holy book the Qur’an, I’d pray, listen to the sheikh and stuff like that. [Did you do that on your own? In school?] No I did it by myself. My dad like told me about it and then like I started to learn from him how to pray and stuff, and then like I started going by myself. [To a mosque?] To the mosque.

... Like um before I was lazy, to tell you the truth. But then now like uh once I came here and stuff, I’m more responsible. [Why?] Because like when my father used to tell me about my religion and stuff, like the fasts, I never used to do it back in the States. And over here like I felt like, you know, stupid. I should listen to them and stuff like that. And now like Fridays I go to the mosque and pray, and then I pray by myself, I read the book and all that. [So being here helped you in your understanding of your religion.] It helped me a lot, yeah.

Ayman’s sentiments were echoed by a number of males, who said they did not fully listen to their parents or follow “the rules” for Muslims while living in the US. Recall Mohammed quoted above, who used to listen to his mother tell his sisters how to be good Muslims. He said it was better for a Muslim to be raised in Palestine than in the US because “here, maybe there are people to tell me what—like my relatives and cousins, they tell me what’s right from wrong”. The same was true for Iyad from Turmos Ayya, Palestine. Iyad grew up in California and said he knew nothing about his religion before coming to Palestine. In Palestine he learned the social and behavioral boundaries set by his religion.

Way better, like over there I know that I am Muslim, but I don't know the stuff we can do and we the stuff we can't do. Over here I know a lot of stuff.

Significant differences in behavioral expectations of Muslim boys and girls, such as existed in the US, were not done away with in Palestine and Jordan, but they were substantially lessened. Muslim girls were generally well prepared for the rules of comportment that governed the social environment they moved to while boys had much to learn. Corresponding to these heightened behavioral expectations on boys, as well as greater freedom to be Muslim in public space and a plentitude of mosques in which to pray, boys were far more likely than girls to say that their knowledge and understanding of Islam increased in Palestine and Jordan. Still, many girls derived pleasure from the Muslim infused social setting, describing a sense of ease and completeness about being Muslim that enhanced their religious growth. And while the mixing of politics and religion was discussed mainly by those for whom it discouraged religiosity, Hadeel, who was raised in Philadelphia and lived in a village outside of Ramallah, said she learned more about her religion in the context of observing and feeling daily life under Israeli occupation.

Actually being here made me learn more about like religion. I knew a lot about religion, but being here seeing with my own eyes and feeling like...what people go through, like just seeing it, then hearing it, it's different. It is totally two different things. And when you sit and see what's going on, you would just sit and cry. Like literally.

#### *5.4. Ambivalent and Negative Experiences of Religious Growth*

Forty two percent of the youth interviewed, including 14 girls and 8 boys, said they did not learn more about their religion while living in Muslim majority Palestine or Jordan: that living there did not contribute positively to their religious growth, that it contributed in both positive and negative ways, or that it was the same as living in the US. Nearly all of the youth who had attended full-time Islamic schools and about half of those who attended weekend Islamic classes in the US fall into this group. We have already discussed the fact that high school religion classes had little positive impact on religious development, yet neither were they cited as specific sources of disaffection. Like those who said living in Palestine or Jordan had increased their religious knowledge and understanding, those who were less positive also referred to the people, the culture, and religious institutions. However, where the former saw ease of being, freedom to pray, a concordant rhythm of life, and Muslim completeness, they saw regimentation, insincerity, lack of commitment, and a perceived inappropriate mixing of culture, politics and religion. Moreover, for those who had experienced it in the US, they missed the sense of community they had at mosques and Islamic schools, which was not duplicated overseas. For this group, their discontents were heavily informed by their moral imaginaries of what a society would be like when organized by and with people living according to a Muslim ethos; it did not live up to their expectations.

##### *5.4.1. Assumed Moral Geography of Islam*

Youth naturally brought with them on their sojourns assumptions they had developed in the US about Muslims and Muslim majority societies, just as they had constructed imaginaries of what life

in an Arab country would be like [15]. One of these assumptions, held by many, was that all or most Muslims would practice Islam fully: pray five times per day, wear hijab, shun alcohol, pork, and dating—assumptions that mirror what a large number of non-Muslim Americans think. The continuums of practice they actually observed in Palestine and Jordan, from rigorous to imperfect to none, were dismaying. Kamilla, who grew up in Texas and California before living in Amman, describes her expectations and what she found:

And I remember coming here and I brought my prayer rug and my prayer clothes and I assumed every single person would be praying and nobody would drink. It was interesting because most people don't pray in our school here. Maybe its because were in high school, but not everyone prays. The majority—we only have three people who are covered.

She attended an elite private school in Jordan where being able to discuss such incongruities was helpful.

Most are not devout Muslims, but we could openly speak about it with no worry and I think that's a kind of comfort and that helped me build my self-esteem about being Arab—about being Muslim.

Sam, who attended a full-time Islamic school in Boston, said that “in America” people think that Muslims in Palestine are very religious [although it is not perfectly clear who he is referring to, he seems to mean US Palestinians], but when he got there he found that not to be the case. Instead, he believes that because of the pressures of the Israeli occupation many had “let go” of religion while others followed it to the exclusion of everything else. Neither of these extremes was satisfying to him.

The thing is in America they think that they're really religious here, everyone like takes a very important role in religion, we have Jerusalem, we go pray there all the time, blah blah blah, but that's not how it is here. People are really sick of like, sick of how things are here, and because of this they kind of, some of them let go of religion and fall apart. I feel like others, those who choose to follow religion, follow it so closely to the point where they forget everything else. They forget who they are, life, whatnot. And that kind of separates them from society.

#### 5.4.2. Lack of Sincerity

The most commonly articulated criticism of those who were ambivalent or negative when asked whether living in Palestine and Jordan increased their religious understanding revolved around observations of the perceived un-Islamic or insincere behaviors of persons whose outward appearance suggested that they were believers. In their view, Muslims who pray or wear hijab should do so out of deep faith and not behave in ways that contradict this faith. This view was often expressed in a comparison to their perceptions of Muslims in the US, who they saw as persons serious about their religious faith, who prayed and conducted their daily lives according to Muslim values and a Muslim ethos, or as non-practicing Muslims. While the latter were not faithful to their religion, they did not pretend to be. These youth were, in other words, disturbed by what they saw as the insincere performance of Islam for public consumption.

Luqman grew up in Los Angeles, went to the mosque every Friday and attended Saturday school. He felt his religious education was better in the US than in Jordan because “in the US people who go to mosque have pure intentions. Here they go cuz have to”. Lina, who attended a full-time Islamic school in the Detroit area before moving to Palestine, expressed dismay at girls wearing hijab and dating.

Even if it is an Islamic people over here, it is not Islamic. Muslim people over here are like two faces, you know. Anyone who wears the *mendeel* (hijab), I can guarantee, I can guarantee you, that more than 15% that they have boyfriends.

Mai, who lived in Los Angeles and Louisiana prior to Palestine, was bothered by the same phenomenon. She concluded that American Muslims were more religious than Palestinian Muslims.

I think people in America where I grew up, they were more religious. If they were religious they actually stuck to it, whereas here they are fake about it and they do it as for show for the *balad* [village], so they don't get a bad reputation. Cause I know girls that are hijabis and they're hooking up with guys in empty houses. That—stuff like that—you know and they're sitting here talking about religion and it's not. It's not like, in America when girls put it on, they leave it on. They don't go take it off when some dude walks by.

Sam, who grew up in Boston and attended a full-time Islamic school in his early years, came right out and said that he thinks men in his Palestinian village worship in mosques for show.

Over here, nobody cares about religion, in all honesty. Like for example in [my village] I feel like people go to the mosque on Fridays because they have to, or else their image will be bad in front of everyone else.

Sam said he was more religious in the US. He believes that Muslims are more religious in the US “because they're forced to be. Their community, um, if they're not religious then their community, they'll separate, they'll fall apart.”

#### 5.4.3. US Muslims Hold onto Religion More Tightly

Sam's thoughts were echoed by many others who found their overseas experience with religion unsatisfying. They felt that American Muslims cared more deeply about religion than Muslims in Palestine and Jordan; some saw them as conformists or performers lacking moral depth, while others saw them as persons who were less serious about faith. Using various ways to describe it, they attributed the American Muslim phenomenon to Muslim's social position as religious minorities. Khalil, who grew up in the Houston area before moving to Amman, tried to put it in context:

To tell you the truth, being a Muslim is always being a Muslim but basically of course this is what we try to understand... but sometimes there is bound to be a little bit of difference... sometimes. Not necessarily in the practicing or so... sometimes over there... lets say they're a bit more attached over there... I mean over here, we're attached as well but I mean a lot of times I find people...I don't know they really just don't care too much about it, but over there they really do and also at the same time when you're a Muslim you also get to blend a bit of your American culture into your Arabness and Muslim.

Diana, who grew up in Ohio, Georgia, and Florida before moving to the Jerusalem area, said being different is what encourages American Muslims to “hold on”.

Over there because you’re different you try to hold on to it and over here because *khalas* everybody is the same and in the United States you hold on to it tightly.

Aziza, who lived in Massachusetts before Amman and learned religion through family and 12 years of Sunday school, calls it “uniqueness” and recalls fondly the sense of community she had with Muslims in her area.

I was part of the youth group and stuff so we’d hold events and during the summer we’d have speakers come in and stuff, so I loved it. It was really good community. We don’t have that here in Jordan because it’s not like a unique thing to be a Muslim or anything, so there’s no like core community cause it’s everyone. So in the States like because we were a minority we formed like our own little community family. It was nice.

In her view, Muslims do not have community in Jordan because everyone is Muslim. Of course not everyone is in fact Muslim and Muslims in Jordan do have community, but it is generally not formed via religious institutions. However, for young Muslim boys and girls who grew up around other Muslims in the US, the mosque and the Islamic school, if one existed, were among their primary sources of community.

#### 5.4.4. The Mosque is not a Community

This disjuncture between the way the mosque functions in Palestine and Jordan and the way it functions in the US was disconcerting to many of the youth who said their experience in Palestine or Jordan did not enhance their religious understanding. Saif from Jerusalem, who grew up in New Mexico and went to a full time Islamic school for 8 years, said the mosque in Palestine is “just a mosque” a place to pray and then leave.

For example, the mosque, in America the mosque for me was a community, people would be going, talking. Here the mosque is just, it’s a mosque, it’s a place where you pray and then you leave. So I guess I really didn’t learn much more about my religion here. I learned that um a lotta people, cause again a lotta people misinterpret religion and I guess a lack of connection between the mosque and you know people.

When we consider that the majority of boys who reported learning more about their religion in Palestine and Jordan also spoke highly about praying in a mosque, and that these also tended to be boys who had less consistent exposure to Islamic institutions in the US, we can probably safely conclude that those young men had not experienced the American variant of mosque as community. They thus did not have the same comparative referent that Saif, Sam, and Luqman had, which produced a very different perspective on mosques. Where they found comfort praying in a mosque, the latter found a kind of emptiness. Saif also felt his Islamic education in the US was “more defined” than in Palestine. Here we see another impact on perspective that flows from living in a community that has invested in its Muslim institutions.



You'd have books and people who taught and people who actually went to college just to study Islam and to be a sheikh or an imam and they would be teaching. Here I don't have that great of a connection with the mosque.

Muslim youth who said they were part of a Muslim community in the US, because they attended full-time Islamic schools, were regular members of a mosque congregation, and/or because they had many relatives living nearby, were more likely express this kind of dissatisfaction with what they saw as a lack of community among Muslims in Palestine and Jordan. Ali, who attended a full-time Islamic school in the Chicago area and lived near a mosque, said Ramadan and the Eid were better in the US, and this was mainly because religious events shared with lots of family.

Like in America, Eid was fun, we had all cousins and all my aunts, but over here we have only one uncle and one aunt we go see. Yeh, my family is there, I liked there, and Ramadan there. Say like the month of Ramadan, it felt more Islamic there like in Ramadan. Over here no one fasts in school, like no one knows anything, except some of them, but a high number don't fast.

Ali said he did not learn more about his religion in Palestine, but he did learn about his culture:

No I can't say that, but it helped me understand my culture, because I learned how to do things over there, how to do the prayer and fast. I still do them over here.

#### 5.4.5. Islam and Culture are Mixed Together

A number of youth spoke disapprovingly of the mixing of culture and religion. For example, when asked if being in Palestine helped her understand her religion better, Mai said:

No. I've always understood Islam. I know right from wrong. When I came here I hear people saying, "this is haram." This is haram and it's not, it's just 'ayb (culturally wrong). It's just what they look down on in the *balad* (village). So they're mixing culture and religion, which isn't—it doesn't make sense.

Sam said:

For example, when you don't talk to girls and what not, that has nothing to do with Islam here. It's more about culture and honor and what not than it is about Islam and religion.

Awareness of the mixing of culture and religion is common to adult second generation Muslims who were raised in the US within a community of Muslims [16]. As they search for commonality with Muslims in their schools and mosques whose parents have different national origins than theirs, they look to shed the cultural practices that separate them from each other and find the authentic Islam that binds them. Yang and Ebaugh ([6], p. 280) found this pattern more generally among second-generation Americans from many religious traditions, who "return to theological foundations ... because they must bridge differences of culture and ethnic origin (internal pluralism) among co-religionists and because the authority of a religion that is based simply on tradition loses its power." It is too simple to say that this type of observation emerges only from a transnational perspective, because there are Muslim movements within the Muslim-majority world also fostering such a return. However in the

case of these youth, because they said they did not learn more about Islam in Palestine and Jordan, this perspective is likely to be an outcome of earlier experiences with in the US.

#### 5.4.6. It's Political

A few of the youth in Palestine, all males, were critical of the political meaning embedded in practicing Islam. Sam said his classmates discouraged him from practicing his religion, ridiculing him by saying “you’re not Hamas.” He became less religious in Palestine due to such peer pressure.

I feel like over here I’ve kind of become less religious, in a sense, than I was in America. Cause in America you have your friends who are very religious, they influence you, over here I feel like people are like “what are you doing? Don’t do that. You’re not like Hamas. You don’t need to do that.” [Like do what?] Pray, go to memorize Qur’an, whatnot. And like I’m free to do what I want, you know what I mean? So I guess I’ve become less religious when I moved here. And that’s because of the people around me.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

These data show that learning to be Muslim transnationally is not the simple linear process that many, including parents and youth, had expected it to be. Rather than learning more deeply about Islam upon moving from a Muslim minority social context to a Muslim majority one, adolescent Muslims learned about Islam differently. By this I mean that they experienced rhythms of life, ways of practice, religious institutions, forms of community, and gendered expectations rooted in Islam that were different from those they knew in the US. Some found that these social features enhanced their understanding of Islam while others did not. Youth brought to their experiences in Palestine and Jordan an interpretive frame informed by their experiences of being Muslim within the United States, and these varied widely. Some were part of vibrant communities hosting mosques, youth groups, well-developed weekend classes, and full-time Islamic schools. Others intersected with fellow Muslims outside of the family only sporadically, because other Muslim families, mosques, and weekend religion classes were located some distance away. In between points on a continuum of Muslim American experiences include places where mosques and weekend classes were nearby but lacked the quality of investment, development, and staffing found in vibrant Muslim American communities. What they knew about Islam and how they felt being Muslim in the United States informed their receptivity to a different way of being Muslim, in a place where being Muslim is normative but also imperfect.

Muslim youth growing up in Muslim minority contexts develop moral imaginings of what Islam looks like in its geographic home [9]. Parents, relatives, religion teachers, friends, and a range of media sources inform these constructions of what “we” do and how “we” live. Their interpretations of later engagements with “authentic Islam” are shaped by these expectations. Youth who expected and perhaps desired a geography of full observance and free-willed sincerity were often disappointed by the more complex and flawed realities they found on the ground. Observations of non-practicing Muslims, perceptions of men attending mosques for social approval and hijab-wearing women acting improperly, and a conduct of social relations not always infused with charity and humility, bothered them deeply. Youth perplexed by what they saw as regimented conformity lacking spiritual depth

thought American Muslims were more sincere, practicing out of choice and a deep commitment to their faith. They inferred that piety should be a conscious decision and not have the appearance of a mechanical act (cf. [17]). Many, however, found joy and comfort in the freedom to be Muslim, anywhere, anytime, in the syncopation of religion and daily life, in learning Islam as a way of life more deeply, and in sharing expressions of faith and religious holidays with so many others. Youth who felt this way said they understood Islam better because of these experiences. These realities co-exist in Palestine and Jordan, subject only to the different interpretations and emphases given to them by young Muslims.

Girls had different experiences of being Muslim than boys, both in the US and in Palestine and Jordan. In the US, parents placed more effort on raising their daughters to know Muslim values and “the rules” of proper Muslim decorum, including modesty, ways of carrying oneself, how to relate to male and female strangers, and showing respect for others. They buttressed these teachings with notions of difference from other Americans and by setting behavioral boundaries. While parents tried to inculcate these ideas into their sons, monitoring and enforcement was often weak. Girls were far more likely than boys to say that they did not learn more about Islam in Palestine or Jordan, that it was the same, or that it was both positive and negative. One main reason for this gendered difference is because they were already well prepared for living in a Muslim majority society, in matters of dress, behavior, values, and public decorum. Boys, however, found that in Jordan and Palestine people had higher expectations of them with regard to following the rules. While boys still had wider latitudes in behavior than girls, the differences were less extreme and they found that they had to change. In addition, because girls were largely excluded from religious institutions in Palestine and Jordan, their abilities to properly engage in ritualized actions such as praying, reciting Qur’an, and comprehending religious sermons were put to the test publicly less often than boys. Boys had to perform ablutions and prayers in front of those for whom these were almost natural activities and recite Qur’an and listen to sermons among others whose command of Arabic was far superior. In lieu of engaging in communal or public prayer, the public performance of an appropriate Muslim repertoire of behavior had enhanced religious significance for girls. It is no surprise then that girls who said their understanding of religion grew spoke about cognitive matters such as grasping the meaning behind why Muslims value and do what they do, while boys spoke mainly about ritual matters, such as going to mosques and praying in public, practices out of reach and even stigmatized for many boys in the US and out of reach for girls in Palestine and Jordan.

This study shows that for youth the transnational experience of being Muslim plays out in complex ways, very much dependent on how they experienced being Muslim while growing up in the US. The more satisfying the US experience, especially for boys, the more disappointing the one in Palestine and Jordan, not because it was inherently flawed, although they may have interpreted it in this way, but largely because it was different. Youth who grew up among a vibrant community of Muslims in the US, in which they were regular members of a mosque congregation, where they may have also attended a full time Islamic school and had extended family was close by, tended to describe their American experience positively. While in Palestine or Jordan, they interpreted their experiences with religion from this perspective and found them lacking, especially because mosques did not play the community role that they were used to. Boys for whom being Muslim in the US was a largely isolating experience, who spoke of fasting alone in the lunch room and having only sporadic contact with other

Muslims, found community in Palestine and Jordan through family and mosques, and comfort in being Muslim, signified by the freedom to pray anywhere without stares. Both outcomes highlight the importance of community and solidarity to producing a positive and meaningful religious experience, which I think has heightened importance for Muslim men who have lived in places where their identities are stigmatized.

This article examined the processes of learning religion as described by Muslim American youth who lived in two countries before they reached the age of 18, one in which they were a religious minority and another in which they were part of the majority group. They were brought to the latter by their parents, who wanted them to understand their culture, language, and religion better. The data show that although the different contexts matter for some aspects of being Muslim, living in a place where one is part of the dominant religious culture does not necessarily make for a deeper experience of religion. Living in a society where daily life is scheduled around your religious calendar, celebrations, and rituals and where you can practice your faith freely without stares, assumptions, or discrimination provides a personal sense of comfort and ease. Yet these factors alone are not sufficient to import a better understanding of religious faith. For some, they are counter-balanced by a seeming mechanical conformity and ritualism, sometimes perceived as disingenuous. What seemed to matter more than objective features of the macro social context was the type of experience with being Muslim each youth brought into the situation, because it was these experiences that informed their subjective interpretations of what it means to be Muslim.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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