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SACRED SOCIAL SPACES: FINDING COMMUNITY AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITY FOR AMERICAN-BORN CONVERTS TO ISLAM

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SACRED SOCIAL SPACES: FINDING COMMUNITY AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITY
FOR AMERICAN-BORN CONVERTS TO ISLAM

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THESIS

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By
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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

SACRED SOCIAL SPACES: FINDING COMMUNITY AND NEGOTIATING IDENTITY
FOR AMERICAN-BORN CONVERTS TO ISLAM

This thesis examines the religious experiences of American-born converts to Islam. The social nature of religion has been long ignored in research on the lives of religious people. A review of research on Muslim identities reveals an emphasis on immigrants, women, and youth in the British context. However, there is little to no research on the unique constituency of converts to Islam and the importance of social aspects of faith for establishing a sustainable and transformative practice of Islam. This research closes this gap through a case study of the religious experiences of American-born converts to Islam.

Through in-depth interviews with converts and community leaders, and sustained engagement with the Cincinnati Muslim community, I examine the extent to which social interaction (understood as both site and process) shapes convert identities and their understanding of religious belief and practice. My research suggests that religion not only occupies a variety of everyday lived spaces for converts, but that Islam can be understood as a way of being in the world. Since understanding of religious belief and practice is multifaceted and diverse, I explore the influence of social interaction and community on converts' spiritual modalities. I argue that spaces not deemed officially sacred (e.g. places of worship or pilgrimage sites) are just as influential in shaping the religious identities of converts, and help converts develop a religious way of being that is self-transformative and sustainable in the American context.

KEYWORDS: Converts, Islam, Community, Identity, Sacred Space, Lived religion

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to Project and Research Questions

My project stems from my interest in a recently emerging movement in the American

Muslim community to develop organizations and programs that focus primarily on helping

converts to Islam transition to their new faith, integrate into the broader Muslim community, and

find resources for maintaining their faith and seeking Islamic education after conversion. This

has resulted in efforts to create alternative spaces for segments of the Muslim community who

may feel alienated and unwelcome in traditional worship spaces like mosques. The effort to

create these spaces is mainly coming from independent, non-profit organizations that are

sometimes affiliated with a local mosque(s), and also from self-organizing individuals and

groups that decide to take this task on. One of the main pioneers of this movement is Usama

Cannon, who started Ta'leef Collective (TC) as an outreach program in 2002, which grew into a

501c3 non-profit organization in 2009. Based in San Francisco, TC's goal is to provide an

alternate space to the mosque that is sacred enough to be meaningful, but welcoming enough to

be comfortable for converts and marginalized Muslim young adults seeking to recommit to

Islam. For converts specifically, this space is meant to be a place where they can find

companionship and culturally-relevant programming to facilitate reconciling their former lives

with their new faith and making their conversion holistic and sustainable. TC hopes to provide a

space where this reconciliation and negotiation of a new religious identity happens in a way that

is particular to the American social and cultural context—TC calls this an indigenous expression

of Islam. TC offers a variety of programming for Bay-Area converts and young adults, and has

also opened a chapter in Chicago, Illinois. They offer a training program open to anyone wanting

to be trained in TC's model and approach to convert care in hope that individuals will take back these teachings to their own communities and replicate their efforts across the nation.

My project focuses on a sister organization to TC located in Cincinnati, Ohio and founded by an individual who was trained by the TC training program mentioned above called the Mu'allif Mentorship Program. The Cincinnati sister organization is called Salaam Community (SC or Salaam for short) and their expressed mission is to "engage seekers in a safe space for spiritual and social enrichment, striving towards a sound practice of Islam." SC serves people who are embracing Islam or have already converted to Islam, and also people who are reaffirming their faith. SC emphasizes that sound religious practice must address a believer's social and cultural context in order to be transformative and provide relevant principles for how to live their life and conduct their daily affairs.

Based on the stories of my research participants, I argue that SC operates through the creation of "sacred social spaces" (Lindenbaum 2012) which give converts the space to form friendships and a support network to help facilitate their transition. This companionship shapes their understanding of Islam, which in part influences how they carry religious practice to the other parts of their life where Islam would normally be excluded for socio-cultural or political reasons. I argue that these sacred social spaces are produced during official SC activities and programs as well as at informal gatherings that stem from bonds built or strengthened through SC. In this way, social interaction is not only a process, but becomes a site for converts' negotiation of religious identity. Past research has indicated the importance of the mosque space in shaping religious identities of various groups of Muslims (Dunn, 2001; Gale and Naylor, 2002; Naylor and Ryan, 2002, 2003; Sunier, 2005; Hopkins, 2007b; Kong, 1992; Prorok and Hemmasi, 1993), but the data from my research suggests that spaces that are not deemed

officially sacred, like the social spaces created by SC, may be even more influential in shaping the religious identities of American-born converts to Islam.

Through examining the social aspects of converts'[1] personal and community spaces, I will demonstrate how religion and spirituality persist in places that are not officially sacred. Furthermore, through an understanding of how religion occupies a variety of everyday, lived spaces, we can begin to see that converts' understanding of religious belief and practice is multifaceted and diverse, and takes the form of social and familial relationships, comportment, life outlook, and ultimately manifests itself as a way of life and a way of being for my research participants.

There is a strong spatial element to SC's programming; from the aesthetic they strive for at the venues at which they hold their events to the way in which they help converts feel comfortable and authentic (to themselves and the American culture they identify with) being Muslim in the different places of their everyday lives (home, work, school, the mosque, dotor's office, etc.). Scholars have examined how religious practices shape everyday lives (Hopkins, 2007a; Lindenbaum, 2012; Williams, 2010; Andersson et al., 2011; Jeldtoft, 2011; Mohammad, 2013; Silvestri, 2001; Gökarıksel and Secor, 2012) but the majority of this attention within geography has been directed to young people, women, or second-generation Muslims living in Europe. Lived religion and everyday religion practices have been more extensively explored within anthropology, sociology and sociology of religion. However, within the broader social science literature there remains a gap in the literature about the experience of Muslim converts in the American context and within geography there is no direct or explicit treatment of this topic. I believe Muslim convert experiences are particularly edifying of questions about sacred and

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[1] From this point forward I will use "converts" interchangeably with "informants" or "research participants" to indicate the individuals I interviewed for this research project.

secular space, religious practice, and the processes that inscribe various spaces with religious meaning because of their unique socio-cultural position as American-Muslims. Muslim converts simultaneously take part in a belief system that has potentially very different understandings of religious practice, sacred space, and the secular. They are raised in America and encounter American-specific norms and understandings of religion and its place in the public sphere at school and later in higher education, work, and so on. By examining convert experiences we can look at the same questions of the religious and secular that have already been investigated by scholars, but with a different lens—a lens that is offered to us by converts' unique position in American society.

This research project explores and extends some of the more recent approaches to the study of religion that have proliferated roughly in the past two decades in geography (Holloway, 2003; Falah and Nagel, 2005; Knott, 2005; Aitchison et al., 2007; Gökarıksel, 2009; Howe, 2009; Kong, 2001 and 2010; Guest et al., 2012; Hopkins et al., 2013) and elsewhere (Berger, 1999; Asad, 2003; Mahmood, 2005; McCutcheon, 2007; Woodhead, 2008; Vincett and Woodhead, 2009). One of these approaches is postsecular theory, which aims to critique what it asserts to be an artificial boundary between the 'religious' and 'secular,' which are analytical categories that are advanced by secularization theory. In a recent article Elizabeth Olson, Peter Hopkins, Rachel Pain and Giselle Vincett (2013) identified four broad categories under which recent postsecular scholarship falls into. I see my research project as contributing to the third and fourth categories identified by Olson et al., which are, respectively: 1) the deconstruction of the category of religion proper and 2) the exploration of the ways religion and spirituality persists in places previously assumed to be secular, or put in another way, examining the sacred in everyday spaces and places for various individuals and groups. Additionally, as suggested by Ethan

Yorgason and Veronica della Dora (2009), this project is also an attempt to "rethink the relationship between geography and religion as a two-way dialogue rather than a one-way 'colonizing process.'"

My research investigates Muslim convert's understanding of religious space and practice, as well as the extent to which SC's sacred social spaces shape the religious identities of American born converts to Islam in Cincinnati. My research questions are:

RQ1: What are the organizational practices of SC in creating sacred social spaces for converts.

> What types of programs and events are offered by SC and how do converts experience these programs and spaces?

> What is SC's relationship with the local mosques and greater Cincinnati Muslim community?

> To what extent does SC create a sense of community and belonging for its constituents?

RQ2: Does SC shape converts' religious identity and practice?

> To what extent and in what ways does SC foster culturally relevant religious understanding, practice, and expression in converts? What are the limitations?

> How does the social aspect of SC bare on converts' spiritual modality, and to what extent do the spaces that SC creates blur the secular and sacred?

> Is SC able to cater to and support each individual's spiritual experience? Do converts feel part of the wider Muslim community?

RQ3: What do converts' understandings of religious practice and sacred space illustrate about belonging and cultural citizenship in a post-secular, American society?

> What is the social role of religion in the public sphere and in what ways is a culturally relevant expression of Islam being expressed and practiced?

> In what ways do the private/public and religious/secular binaries affect articulations of religion in American society?

Site Selection

In this section I will address the reasons for selecting Cincinnati as the site for investigating my research questions, and provide background information on the context of targeted convert support both nationally and in Cincinnati. I will also provide background information for the two major mosques in Cincinnati, including their location, composition and the type of programs and resources they each offer for converts in the greater Cincinnati area. Lastly, I will explain Salaam Community's organizational philosophy and approach to creating alternative community and social spaces for its constituents.

I chose to conduct my research in Cincinnati because of the fact that it has a very well established Muslim community and many mosques and Islamic centers scattered all over the greater Cincinnati area. As such, the two major mosques in Cincinnati also cater to community members living in northern Kentucky and in Dayton, Ohio, drawing in a more diverse membership. Cincinnati has a variety of 'officially sacred' Muslim spaces for which I could use as a starting point to engage with converts about their idea of sacred space and practice. In addition to the two major mosques, there are a handful of smaller mosques that serve segments of the Muslim community on a more daily basis or serve as prayer and worship spaces for working Muslims and students who are not always able to drive to either of the two major mosques for the five daily prayers. I recognize that claiming to examine the religious or sacred brings one dangerously close to assuming the rigid definitions that are often taken for granted in the type of scholarship of which I am critical. However, I only use the label 'officially sacred' to indicate the places that are communally agreed upon to be religious institutions/places for the majority of the Muslims in Cincinnati. Indeed there are many types of sacred spaces and these vary from individual to individual. In the context of this project however, I take my directive for

what is religious or sacred from the responses of my research participants and what they deem as such.

Immigrant Muslim communities in Europe are usually dominated by one ethnicity, making ethnic and religious identity more difficult to separate and leading to increased racialization of Muslim immigrants and subsequent generations. In the American context, mosque membership and Muslim communities are more ethnically diverse. The Muslim community in Cincinnati is ethnically, ideologically, and socio-economically diverse. As I will discuss in more detail later, the majority of community members are immigrants, which in a lot of ways influences their practice of Islam and the social environment created at the mosque. This in turn directly or indirectly affects converts own understandings of Islamic belief, religious practice and space. By selecting a community that is ethnically and ideologically diverse, I hoped to gain a more nuanced understanding of converts' different religious experiences.

Also contributing to immigrant Muslims increased racialization in Europe is the fact that "America tended to attract far greater proportions of wealthy, ambitious, educated immigrant Muslims" (Jackson, 2005: 17). So while there is a culture/religion dyad in American Muslims communities, relationships between ethnicity and religion are different than the ones found in Muslim communities in Europe. Having said this, it is important to be mindful of the temporality of the statement that American Muslims are not as racialized as their European counterparts. The 1960's in America saw a great influx of Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and Asia following the repeal of the National Origins Act and the Asiatic Barred Zone. In effect, this granted Muslim immigrants the status "legally white" (Jackson, 2005: 15) from a political and economic perspective, while Black Muslims who had been Muslim in America much longer were viewed as socially and economically inferior (Jackson, 2005: 16).

Another reason for selecting Cincinnati as my site of study is because it has seen an increased number of conversions to Islam in roughly the past five years. This is not officially documented in any records at any of the mosques or Islamic centers in Cincinnati. However, speaking to the administrators at the two major mosques, I have found that roughly 16-27 individuals embrace Islam annually in both mosques combined, which is more than a decade ago or at the time when either of the mosques were first established. Of course there are other individuals who convert at other smaller mosques and centers across the city, or outside the mosque, but these do not factor into the number of conversions above. I collected information from my research participants about when and where they converted to Islam (see Appendix A for this and other background information about my research participants), but the lack of demographic information about Muslim communities in general, and information about converts in particular, is consistent in Muslim communities across the nation. Furthermore, the very few demographic studies of Muslim communities only focus on mosques, which is problematic as many self-identifying Muslims are not necessarily members of a local mosque. If this logic is extended to converts, we can assume that there are some converts that are also not members of the mosque and/or did not convert through a mosque. My own research shows that many of my research participants converted with friends or family or at the home of a mentor.

My research focuses on the two major mosques in Cincinnati: the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati (ICGC) and the Islamic Association of Cincinnati (IAC). While there are many other mosques and Islamic centers in Cincinnati, most are small when compared to ICGC and IAC, and serve primarily as a prayer space as opposed to a community center that offers a prayer hall, a school, a multipurpose building/space and a variety of programming and services.

The major exception is an Islamic center called the Ihsan Center whose primary focus is educational programming for various age groups.

ICGC (commonly called the West Chester mosque or just "West Chester") has a reputation for being more socially liberal and having more members who are less aware of orthodox practices. Its members are generally of higher socio-economic status, as West Chester is a suburb of Cincinnati (about 25 miles North of downtown Cincinnati). ICGC is clearly visible from Interstate 75 and is architecturally prominent, emulating the aesthetics of traditional, intention-built mosques and stands out from the surrounding residential landscape (see Figures 1, 2 and 3). Most of its members are families and from Indian-Pakistani origin; the rest are mostly Arab. There are a small percentage of individuals of other ethnicities (e.g. Turkish, Russian, American, African-American, African). The major resource for converts at West Chester is a weekly "New Muslims Class" held on Sunday afternoons for two hours, and if converts request, one-on-one assistance, counseling and Islamic instruction. The weekly class is led by an elderly, immigrant member of the community. The mosque administrator told me that she feels ICGC could provide more services and programs if they had the financial resources. She informed me that welcome packages and one-on-one mentorship are two of the main things she would like to see the mosque offer in the future. Currently, about 6-12 individuals convert annually at ICGC.

Figure 1: West Chester mosque (photo taken by Sarah Soliman)

Figure 2: I-75 visible to the very right behind white separating wall (photo taken by Sarah Soliman)

Figure 3: Interior of West Chester Mosque (photo taken by Sarah Soliman)

IAC or "Clifton" is located in the city, very close to the University of Cincinnati. Although Clifton mosque has a dome and minaret, its exterior is more subtle than the West Chester mosque, and blends into the surrounding landscape (See Figure 2). The Clifton mosque is located on a main road in the neighborhood, but because there are many other houses of worship located along the same road, the mosque does not seem out of place amongst the houses and schools of Clifton Avenue. Because the Clifton mosque is located near a University, members are generally students and/or younger singles or couples. The ethnic make-up of Clifton is more diverse than West Chester, with higher percentages of the Arab, African and African-American members than at the West Chester mosque. Clifton is an old and gentrified neighborhood, and people are generally of a lower socioeconomic status. There is good public transportation within the city that makes it easy for Muslims living in or around Clifton to attend the Clifton mosque, but more difficult to attend the West Chester mosque if one does not have a car. Clifton Mosque does not currently offer programs or services to converts, instead choosing to refer new converts to Salaam Community. This mosque recently created a welcoming/outreach committee and one of their objectives is to create programs for converts at the mosque. The administrator at Clifton feels that the mosque is open and welcoming to converts but does not have the adequate tools and training to deal with converts on their journey and follow up with them. New converts receive pamphlets and books on Islam when they convert, but like the West Chester mosque, Clifton would like to establish specific classes for converts and a big brother/big sister type program to help mentor converts until they feel stable in their faith and in the community.

Figure 4: Clifton Mosque (photo taken by Adam Soliman)

As previously mentioned, there has been a recent effort in the American Muslim community to create alternative spaces to the traditional worship space of the mosque for segments of the Muslim community who may feel alienated and unwelcome at the mosque. Cincinnati is home to a recently established organization called Salaam Community that is dedicated to creating alternative sacred social spaces for converts and seekers[2]. It was founded in 2011 by Maryam,[3] who went through TC's training and decided to start a similar organization in the Greater Cincinnati area. Although there are other convert care organizations across the US and Canada, I chose to look at SC because it is not an official chapter of TC like the convert care organization in Chicago, and for this reason it theoretically has flexibility to cater to the specific needs of converts in Cincinnati as opposed to being limited by following a specific model. Also, as I mentioned previously, SC is based in Cincinnati, which has an ethnically diverse Muslim

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[2] Individuals exploring Islam, usually (but not necessarily) with the intention to later convert.
[3] All names of research participants have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

community and mosque membership, as opposed to Chicago where mosque membership is more segregated (for example, there is an 'Arab mosque' or a 'Somali mosque'). Additionally, some individuals who have gone through TC's training go on to create convert care programs that are more like a branch of an already-existing mosque as opposed to a separate organization. Salaam Community is affiliated with the Clifton mosque, but is a separate entity with it's own expenses, staff, and budget.

SC's mission is to provide community and a support network for converts and those recommitting to Islam in the greater Cincinnati area. Unlike TC, SC does not yet have a physical space of their own but is working to acquire one in order to provide a consistent environment where people can feel comfortable, welcome, and know what to expect at events and programs. In the meantime, SC holds its events and programming at the mosque or public spaces such as schools and office complexes. As Maryam (SC founder and president) told me, the advantage of this is that converts are getting to visit a variety of spaces and locations, the mosque being one of them. Maryam said that if they had a permanent location, some converts may not have stepped into the mosque yet, or felt comfortable to do so on their own.

Maryam identified three types of programs that SC offers, some of which are still under development: 1) educational, 2) social and 3) convert care and mentorship. Their educational programming includes a monthly prayer workshop that teaches the basics of prayer (an obligation for Muslims) so that converts can learn and start practicing immediately, one-off workshops on various topics, and annual workshops on preparing for Ramadan (the holy month of fasting for Muslims). SC is also working on developing a "Being Muslim" class which would address all the basic beliefs as well as many of the daily habits and issues around community life. SC's social programming aims to promote connections and friendships between constituents in

order to gain entryway into the community and foster social cohesion. This includes dinners for breaking the fast during Ramadan which are held in community member's homes (which SC intends to continue throughout the year). Convert care and mentorship services include following up with people, outreach, care packages that include some literature and other print materials on Islam, and eventually a system of pairing people up with mentors. SC also hosts a quarterly event open to the entire community called Community Conversations. These events are educational but also focus on social cohesion through what Maryam calls "thought leadership". SC invites scholars and speakers to talk about issues of concern that address both their target population and the wider community. Speakers talk about issues that are specific to the Muslim-American experience; previous topics have included "Navigating our Identity as Muslim-Americans," "Navigating Culture vs. Religious Tradition," and "Practical Spirituality in Our Everyday Lives."

SC is a new organization that is still growing and developing, and as such its role in the wider Muslim community as well as the relationship it has with the converts it serves is changing. In the time since I officially stopped conducting fieldwork, SC has established a monthly class that they've been working to develop called Soul Café, which "is an intimate class and discussion on developing good character and implementing practical tools for living a life of purpose drawn from traditional Islamic texts" (see figure 3). Currently, SC mostly serves new converts, but it hopes to develop a larger constituency that includes converts at all stages as well as born Muslims who are recommitting to Islam. In the future, this diverse constituency may change the way that SC operates and shapes converts religious understandings, practice, and identities. It was difficult researching an organization in its formative years, as well as one that champions an idea that is novel and still settling in the wider Muslim community. I have tried my

best to present as faithful an analysis of SC's organizational practices and the processes by which it shapes and influences the religious identities of converts.

Figure 5: Soul Café flyer

Many of the converts I spoke to were also at a moment of change or transition. For some, the change they were experiencing at the time I interviewed them was due to their recent conversion. For others—especially women—they were leaving one stage of life behind and entering another (e.g. they had their first child or their children are now older and they have more time). I mention this because as converts circumstances changed, their relationship with the Muslim community and SC changed as well. These changes affected how they viewed themselves as Muslims, as well as their beliefs and religious practice, and how they fit into the Muslim community. In fact, during the course of my fieldwork I learned that one of my research participants decided to change her birth name to a 'Muslim' name. When she explained her decision to me weeks after her interview, she expressed that her new name represented the new person that she had become when she embraced Islam.

Methods and Methodology

From the perspective offered by feminist geography, I've come to know that any type of knowledge production is political (see Rose 1993). As a scholar, it is important to be conscious of the ethical considerations of representing the lived experiences of one's research participants. For this reason I chose to formulate a project about something that was close to me, and something that I had a prolonged engagement with beyond the few months of fieldwork I conducted in the summer of 2013. Since 2004 I have had a long personal engagement with, and involvement in, the Muslim community of the greater Cincinnati area, with specific experiences working with Muslim youth and converts to Islam. In addition to the ten years of organizing, teaching, and outreach work I have done, I've also served as the administrative assistant at the Islamic Association of Cincinnati (May 2010 - June 2011) and volunteered in the administrative office of the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati (September 2004 - June 2006). I mention this

for two reasons. First, while the bulk of the data utilized in my thesis is from the in-depth interviews I conducted with converts and community leaders, I also pull secondarily from my experiential knowledge working and volunteering in the community to triangulate themes identified in my interview data. Having been a long-time member of the community I was aware of the subtly alienating atmosphere of the mosque, which was something my research participants took for granted I knew and thus did not talk much about in their interviews. Second, my time in the offices of the two main mosques in Cincinnati gave me intimate knowledge of the extent of resources (material, financial, and human) that these two mosques are equipped with to provide sufficient convert care as well as the interface between the community and the converts that happens at the office or over the phone with mosque secretaries or administrators. Furthermore, having worked in two different positions that were separated by 4 years, I have been able to observe the changes, or lack thereof, in how the mosque space and the mosque community culture influences and shapes converts' religious identities and experiences of Islam.

I hope what follows is a critical study of community that can provide geographers with insight into how particular spaces can shape the religious identity of a group of people who are both viewed and view themselves as somewhat culturally liminal. I also hope to demonstrate how the production of alternative spaces for converts can be effective ways to counter feelings of alienation and marginalization at the mosque, and also alienation from American culture. Community and belonging is present at the mosque, but can most definitely also be found, and created, outside the mosque. Thus, a focus on the social aspects of religion allows us to account for an important element of religiosity and spirituality.

As a child of Muslim immigrant parents, I spent many years feeling culturally liminal myself. As a youth I was extensively involved in Muslim youth organizations and organized

countless youth camps and weekend programs for Muslim youth across the nation. As I became older I served as a counselor at the same camps and programs that I used to organize. As a result I have heard the stories of dozens of youth and their own struggles finding their place and purpose growing up first generation. I started working with converts in my own community and felt that their experience often very closely paralleled those of the youth I counseled. I began this project with the intention to focus on the issue of cultural liminality and religious identity of converts as played out in American mosques. Soon after I started interviewing my research participants I realized that what I was expecting to uncover was more complicated than I anticipated. Research participants expressed an overwhelming concern with "keeping the faith" rather than feeling culturally lost or confused. In addition, converts both sought out and *created* alternate sacred spaces to the mosque where they could feel comfortable with their cultural and religious identity. However, converts still felt a need to remain active and involved at the mosque—although sometimes alienating—because something about it's architecture, aesthetic, and symbolic nature helped them feel part of the ummah (global Muslim community), and in some instances, connect more directly with the divine.

I began my project being very conscious about the class and racial dimensions of the experiences of American-born converts at American mosques, but my research design was not equipped to capture these experiences. Finding the necessary participants to conduct such a study was outside the scope of my Master's thesis project and the amount of time I had in the field. Previous research has shown that interaction between the African American Muslim community and immigrant Muslim community is sometimes tenuous. In Cincinnati there is a small community of African-American converts in downtown Cincinnati who attend a small mosque in the inner city called Masjid al-Ashab. Some of the individuals from this mosque also attend the

Clifton mosque. I received no respondents from this community when recruiting converts to interview for this project. I'm inclined to think that this is for two reasons: first, members of the inner-city mosque do not regularly attend SC programming or the two major mosques in Cincinnati, and thus did not hear about my study, and; second, if any of these individuals did hear about my study they may not identify with the mainstream definition of a convert that was evoked in my recruitment material. African Americans that attend Masjid al-Ashab are more established Muslims (i.e. have been Muslim longer, may have aunts, uncles or siblings that have also converted, and have married other converts or Muslims and had children of their own who are now Muslim). From what I have observed, Black Muslims' family networks more closely resemble immigrant family networks and therefore there may not be as much a need to seek out additional community or social groups like the ones provided by SC. Nevertheless, some aspects of race—and in a more limited way, class—do surface in my interviews, but I hope that future inquiry and investigation will further develop this area.

In addition to incorporating techniques to recruit more African-American converts, my research design could have been improved if I included additional questions in my online questionnaire about my research participants' education level, profession, and where they live in order to better understand how class effects their religious experiences. I could have also accompanied my participants for a few hours while they do ordinary things like shop, run errands, pick up their kids from school, etc. This is an intrusive method of data collection, and I would have only felt comfortable accompanying a few of my research participants with whom I had developed a closer relationship to or had already known prior to interviewing them. Additionally, joining converts on their informal social excursions that happened before or after SC or mosque events would have been useful in comparing how they conducted themselves

outside the mosque and SC event spaces with how they behaved within these spaces. I did attempt to record how often they went to a mosque and SC activities, and which mosque they choose as well as other not officially religious activities to get a full picture of how prominently these spaces and times factored into their lives. However, physically accompanying converts at these different times and places would have added an additional layer of insight into their lived experiences that may have otherwise be overlooked or taken for granted.

My approach to this project was a case study method in which I utilized: 1) semi-structured interviews with converts to Islam and community leaders, 2) online questionnaires for converts, 3) participant observation of SC and mosque events, and 4) analysis of mosque and SC websites and organizational literature. I chose to use qualitative methods to help me generate data to answer my research questions because I was interested to better understand converts' lived experiences with religion in the American context. Convert experiences in Cincinnati are not representative of all convert experiences, but it is my intention with this project to contribute to broader theoretical conversations about religion in American society through critical analysis of a section of the American population—converts—that is uniquely positioned to inform such conversations.

Over the course of two and a half months I conducted ten in-depth interviews with mostly American-born converts to Islam (one of the converts was born, raised, and converted in a Western European country but has lived and worked for a long time in the US as a convert). All but one of those interviews was audio recorded and ranged from 30 minutes to 1 hour 40 minutes, and one interview was conducted through email correspondence. Before each interview I asked research participants to fill out an online questionnaire that collected mostly demographic information as well as some specific information about their conversion (when they converted,

how long they have been Muslim, where they converted and with whom). This information along with other pertinent background information about each of my research participants is presented in a table in Appendix A. Overall my research population was not very racially diverse. Three of my participants were of a different ethnicity (African American, Latino, and French), but the majority of the converts I spoke to were white. I had almost equal participation from each gender; I spoke to six female converts and four males. Participants were of a diverse range of ages and life stages, from their middle twenties to late fifties. I also interviewed six community leaders—some of which were converts themselves—whose positions ranged from mosque administrator, mosque board member, a teacher of an Islam 101 class at the West Chester mosque, and the founder of SC. Lastly, I interviewed a TC teacher and content developer over the phone to get a better understanding of the specific approach to convert care that both TC and SC employ. Lastly, I attended eight different events, and several informal gatherings that usually took place after a formal event and involved eating out with a small group from the attendees or socializing on the mosque grounds or at another location.

Fieldwork and Data Collection

I conducted a total of two and a half months of fieldwork between May and September 2013. As mentioned in the previous section, my approach to this project was a case study method in which I utilized: 1) semi-structured interviews with converts to Islam and community leaders 2) online questionnaires for converts 3) participant observation of SC and mosque events and 4) analysis of mosque and SC websites and organizational literature.

I used four sets of semi-structured interview questions. One set was for the community leaders of IAC and ICGC to establish a detailed picture of the resources and programs available that cater specifically to converts. I conducted three of these interviews. Another set was

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specifically for an instructor and content developer at TC, a non-for-profit organization based in the San Francisco bay area that spearheaded the convert care movement. A third set of questions was for the founder and president of SC who is largely modeling their organization after TC's work. I conducted interviews with mosque and organizational leaders to understand how these institutions perceive converts' experiences and needs. My last set of questions was for converts—my main body of research participants—of which I interviewed ten. I conducted detailed, semi-structured interviews with converts to understand who Cincinnati converts were and their religious experiences and understandings, and to gain insight into how these understandings and experiences manifest in their everyday lives.

The interview questions for community leaders and TC and SC staff were used to obtain organizational knowledge about convert care, and as such the responses I received were straightforward and I followed my interview guides very closely. When interviewing converts however, I did not follow my interview guide as closely. I had constructed my questions in a way that compartmentalized the data I anticipated on receiving in a way that did not match how my participants viewed their experiences and religious practice in their everyday lives. I realized that this could potentially steer their thoughts in a direction that did not accurately reflect their feelings and experiences, and as a result I tweaked some of my questions to better fit the patterns I noticed in my first two interviews. After my first few interviews I also realized that converts did not talk as much about cultural liminality as I expected, and so I chose to leave out some of the questions that focused on this. In my initial interview guide I included two questions that I later realized were two vague and did not seem to provide fruitful information, or solicited puzzled faces and in general seemed to unnecessarily prolong the interviews. The two questions

were: 1) How has Islam shaped your private practice, if at all? 2) How has Islam shaped your public life or persona, if at all?

I noticed that when I asked participants questions related to their religious practice or knowledge, some of them became a little embarrassed by what they perceived to be too little involvement in the Muslim community or not going to the mosque as often as they would have liked. Some participants became apologetic and felt the need to justify the level of their involvement or practice although I did not ask them to do so. When I asked these types of questions I suddenly became aware of my relation to my research participants as a veiled, Muslim researcher asking them about their religious belief, practice, and everyday lives. I anticipated that some of my research participants might feel that their level of practice or participation was inadequate to what they perceived my personal expectations were, and tried to equalize this power dynamic in both verbal and non-verbal ways during the process of scheduling an interview and during the actual interview itself. After receiving responses to my call for participation for my study (mostly via email), I would introduce myself to participants and thank them for their willingness to participate. I then asked them where they lived in order to suggest a suitable meeting location for the interview. As much as possible I asked my research participants to suggest a meeting time that fit their schedules. Because of the proximity of most of my research participants to where I was residing during my fieldwork, most of my interviews were conducted at a public library's meeting room. During the interviews, I shared stories of my own experiences to show converts that I too had religious struggles and spiritual downs.

My first practical encounter with my own positionality as a veiled researcher who self-identifies as a practicing Muslim happened when I was preparing for my first interview and trying to decide what to wear. My first instinct was to dress business casual, which seemed

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appropriate for my part as researcher during the interview. I quickly changed my mind, thinking that I wanted to deemphasize myself as the researcher to get less scripted responses from participants. I then thought to dress how I normally dress, in a long skirt and long-sleeved shirt, but considered what message I might be sending to participants who do not know me. After much deliberation I opted to wear slacks and a long dress shirt with the participants that did not know me, but with the ones that did, I dressed in the way that I normally do. I also struggled during my first interview with the type of persona I should try to maintain; I anticipated that my participants would be telling me intimate stories about their conversion as well as sharing other emotional parts of their spiritual journeys and religious experiences. I resolved to remain neutral in my verbal and non-verbal responses to participants' stories and not express my opinions about what they said, whether it was agreement or disagreement. I also decided not to express my empathy for their experiences in the same way that I usually did when mentoring converts who visited the mosque during my time as assistant administrator at Clifton. During my first interview I very quickly realized that these rules that I constructed for myself created obstacles in communication, comfort, and trust between the research participant and myself. Once I gave up being an 'objective' and 'neutral' researcher, conversations became less stiff and my research participants more freely volunteered information and opinions on community life and their experiences, especially critiques of the mosque and SC. My personal experiences inevitably influence my perspective and approach to my research topic and project, shaping the knowledge that was produced through my fieldwork and subsequent analysis. I have come to understand that my role as a researcher is not to try to minimize these influences, but to be aware of how they shape my opinions and arguments in my thesis.

I audio recorded interviews and transcribed them during the Fall of 2013. To transcribe my interviews I used the software InqScribe to slow down interview audio files and facilitate transcription. I listened to each recording at least twice to transcribe and then check for mistakes. Listening to each interview multiple times helped me note inconsistencies in participants' responses, which would help in my future analysis. At this stage I was also able to note follow-up questions I had for participants as well as relationships between different sections of an interview and between different interviews. All these notes were made using the comment function in word.

After transcribing my interviews I sent a copy (without my comments) to research participants, along with any follow-up or clarification questions, and gave them the opportunity to review their interview material and ask me to take out anything they did not feel comfortable with me using in my thesis. I felt this was an appropriate allowance to make since I asked participants questions that solicited intimate information about their religious choices and lives in general, and I anticipated they would feel some level of anxiety about sharing their conversion story and experiences in the Muslim community, some of which they had never told anyone before. Indeed, during the interviews some participants, after recounting a particularly intimate or what they viewed as a shameful or embarrassing detail about their conversion or post-conversion experiences, they asked for reassurance that I would not be identifying them. Despite this, all participants allowed me to use all of the original interview data, for which I was grateful and appreciative.

I then proceeded to print the completed interview transcripts, online questionnaires, and interview material from community leaders and notes from my phone interviews. I decided to use a color-coding system to code my data. After conducting each interview and during the

transcription process I had noted topics as they emerged and started to jot down themes and patterns I identified in order to facilitate data synthesis when the time came to actually sit down with my interview material and start to analyze and bring things together. I took only the topics, which were more like descriptive categories, and assigned each one a different color. I closely re-read each interview, and with the appropriate color highlighted the topics that I had already identified. As I read more interviews new topics emerged and old ones were sometimes merged or reworked. This was a very organic process, and as I read more of the literature in my research area I made more connections that resulted in further tweaking my descriptive categories. Some of these topics were "religious belief and practice," "community and sociality," "gender," and "authenticity." By the time I finished coding my interview notes and transcripts and my field notes, I realized that the focus of my research had slightly changed from my initial focus on cultural liminality. Instead, converts spoke most about religious beliefs and practice, their daily routines, and feelings of authenticity and belonging. Underlying all of these topics was an emphasis on the importance of friends and community for my research participants. Coding my data confirmed what I had noticed early on in the interview process: that converts are much more concerned with staying on the 'path of Islam' than they are about cultural liminality. Of course social-cultural issues factored into this concern, but it was not the overarching theme as I had originally anticipated. Sections of text that were coded for "religious belief and practice" were often simultaneously coded for "community and sociality." I think this speaks to the central role that community plays in the worship practices and religious understandings of converts, which will be my main topic of engagement in chapter three.

I also generated field notes from my participant-observation of mosque and SC events, as well as an analysis of their organization's literature. To avoid taking long notes that would

distract me from actual participation and observation, I carried a medium-sized notebook on which I would jot down reminders throughout an event. After arriving home I would transfer my reminders to my word processor and write out longer notes—each event got a new dated entry on the same file. I wrote descriptive notes about what the event was, where and when it happened, and what went on at the event. I would then insert personal reflections and reactions in italics. These reflections and reactions included general questions that would be raised and specific questions for particular converts that I knew I would be interviewing in the future, interpretations of what transpired at the event, interactions with event participants, and how I perceived myself being perceived or accepted at the events. At the end of each entry, I would note in red text any emerging themes or major developments in my research. I coded my field notes in the same way that I coded my interviews.

Because of the length of my interviews, I generated more data than I was able to incorporate into a Master's thesis. The excess data mostly details the role of religion in participants' lives before conversion to Islam, and how that changed or stayed the same during and after the conversion process. The role of religion through transition points to other themes like healing and spiritual bypassing (Masters, 2010). Although this information greatly helped me in understanding where converts were coming from and how they reached their current understanding of religion and piety, I found that trying to incorporate this information directly into my thesis seemed forced and at times superfluous.

Reflections

Overall I feel this study accomplished what it set out to do: explore the experiences of American-born converts to Islam and their understanding of religious practice and sacred space, and to critically study community. However, in many ways this study was incredibly

preliminary. There is almost no statistical information about the demographics of American Muslims, and no official information specifically about the Cincinnati Muslim community. The exceptions are two reports from the US Mosque Study Project (Bagby et al. 2001; Bagby 2011). When I interviewed mosque administrators in Cincinnati they were not able to provide me with specific numbers of how many individuals convert at their institutions annually. Without this information, it was difficult to establish a baseline understanding of community dynamics with regards to ethnicity and socio-economic status.

Second, I began this project from a very practical perspective, as opposed to a theoretical one. However, through the course of refining my research questions and methods I realized that as a child of Muslim immigrant parents my previous impressions of convert experiences was influenced by national discourses (particularly in the media) about Muslims and Islam in America and the supposed clash of civilizations between the Muslim East and Christian West. These discourses are things that I have personally had to negotiate growing up, and which converts have had to negotiate as well (particularly if they've converted post-9/11); however, the supposed incompatibility of being both Muslim and American did not surface as a primary concern for converts in interviews. One reason for this is that converts expressed continuity in their belief through pre- and post-conversion, while changing their practice and conduct. My interview data also suggests that participants had their own encounters with discourses about national belonging during the 'finding out more about Islam' phase before conversion. Whether these discourses about national belonging play a crucial role in the negotiation of religious identity for converts remains unclear. There has been considerable research on how discourses of national belonging affect the social identities of minorities in the West (Mahtani 2001, cited in McAuliffe 2007; McAuliffe 2007). Cameron McAuliffe (2007) has argued that in contemporary

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research on Islam, Islam is given "the authority of a Nation" (Said 1978: 307), meaning when

religious identities are spoken about it is in a way that essentializes national religious

stereotypes. In his work on the Muslim Iranian Diaspora (2007), he tries to "draw important

distinctions between the nation and religion in the construction of, and subsequent investigation

of, religious minorities." This research project does not endeavor to analyze the current national

discourse on Islam and Muslims in America, but it is a necessary undertaking if we are to

understand the context in which converts negotiate their religious and social identities. As

McAuliffe notes:

> The choice of what identity an individual takes is not made in a value-free social environment. Decisions over self-identity are contingent upon the available social space for their expression. That is, decisions over the negotiation of identity are made by *and* for the individual, as agency over self-representation is set within wider networks of understanding the Other (2007: 32-33).

American-born converts to Islam negotiate their identities not only in the available social

spaces for their expression, but also in the available sacred spaces. Converts make decisions

about what mosque to attend and when, which SC events and programs they will participate in,

and with which community members they befriend and spend time. Converts express agency in

the social circles and events that they choose to attend, and in the ones that they create for

themselves, but these various sacred spaces are situated in broader social and cultural

environments which also shape converts' identities.

Thesis Overview

In this research project, I investigate converts' understanding of sacred space and

religious practice in Cincinnati, Ohio. Guided by my three research questions, my investigation

is based on an analysis of interviews with converts and community leaders as well as participant

observation of community events.

In the next chapter I establish the conceptual framework for my research by detailing the theoretical approach I take in my analysis as well as the geographic concepts I will be using. I bring together literatures of postsecular theory, new geographies of religion, lived religion and embodiment. I will illustrate why we need to examine more than just officially sacred spaces and religious practices to understand converts understanding of religious belief, practice and space. In Chapter three, I discuss converts' different community imaginings and argue for conceptualizing social interaction not only as process but as a site in order to understand the extent to which companionship and community shape converts religious identities and understandings. I will discuss SC's organizational practices in creating sacred social spaces for converts and the extent to which these spaces factor in their daily lives. In Chapter four I will discuss the notion of the body as sacred space and explore embodied religious practices in my research participants' accounts of their everyday lives. I suggest that rather than understanding religious practice as a system of symbols (Geertz, 1973) that signifies meaning and can be read like a text, religious practice is embodied and can be understood as socio-spatial practice (Secor 2002). In Chapter five I summarize my research findings and gesture to some persisting questions, suggesting future directions for research.

CHAPTER 2: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Before turning to the experiences and stories of the converts I spoke with, I will provide a theoretical context for my analysis of American convert identities and notions of the religious and the secular. In what follows, I will briefly review traditional approaches to geographies of religion, which have roughly paralleled trends in cultural geography (Kong 1990; Park 1994). Second, I will discuss the epistemic and ontological shift that happened in research on religion roughly in the 2000s due to emerging debates on secularization and postsecular theory. In the third and final section I will review existing literature on "new geographies of religion" (Kong, 2001) by outlining the theoretical approaches and conceptual contributions of more recent approaches to geographies of religion, with a special focus on sacred space, lived religion, identity and community—key concepts I will employ in my analysis of convert experiences of sacred space and religious practice in the following two chapters.

Traditional Geographies of Religion

As Lily Kong (1990) states in her early review of research on religion in geography, the phrase "geographies of religion" was itself a debated term describing research at the intersection of religion and geography. Erich Isaac (1965, cited in Kong, 1990) was one of the first to differentiate between a "geography of religion" and "religious geography." For Isaac, ancient Greek world maps, diagrams, and cosmological models that reflected a religious worldview should be classified as religious geography. Religious geography was more concerned with investigating the divine spatial order of the earth and thus was more of a "'religious' pursuit than a 'scientific' one" (Kong, 1990: 356). Up until the twentieth century, various approaches to linking the study of religion and geography emerged: ecclesiastical geography, which was concerned with mapping the spatial advance of Christianity and aimed to understand the spatial

extent and influence of non-Christian religions; biblical geography, which tried to identify the location of places and names mentioned in the bible; physicotheology, which concerned itself with showing how the wisdom of God manifested in nature; and, an environmentally deterministic approach to studying religion that explored the influence of the environment on religion (Kong, 1990: 356-57). A detailed survey of this literature is not relevant for my purposes here; however, what is important to note is that the work on religion in geography before the twentieth century was overwhelmingly concerned with how various aspects of the environment and geographical location influence and shape religious belief, religious imaginary and religious symbolism.

Though the above trends continued into the twentieth century geographic study of religion, in the early twentieth century Max Weber influenced a shift to investigating the influence of religion on social and economic structures (Kong, 1990: 358). Geographers thus took up research that examined how religion influences changes in the environment and landscape. In order to research such relationships, geographers had to define and delimit what constituted 'religion' in order to study how it shaped the environment. According to Isaac (1961-62: 12), the role of geography of religion was to "…separate the specifically religious from the social, economic and ethnic matrix in which it is embedded, and to determine its relative weight in relation to other forces in transforming the landscape" (Isaac cited in Kong, 1990: 358). Examples of this literature include James R. Curtis' (1980) investigation of religion's effect on the landscape in the form of yard shrines in Miami's little Havana; William K. Crowley's (1978) mostly historical study of the settlement, diffusion, and growth of Amish communities; and Sara Hershkowitz's (1987) framework for thinking about residential segregation specifically based on religion. Other scholars have looked at the politics of location in establishing places of worship

or other religious places like cemeteries, shrines, etc. Joe Turner Darden (1972) studied the factors that shape decisions about where cemeteries are located in Pittsburg; Yosseph Shilhav (1983) explores symbolic and functional approaches to choosing the location of synagogues.

Generally then, the historical development of geography in twentieth century focused on a one-sided relationships; whether it studied the influence of environment on religion, or the influence of religion on the environment. These trends in geographies of religion have largely paralleled trends in cultural geography (Kong, 1990; Park, 1994). In the environmentally deterministic phase of our disciplinary contributions, landscape and environment were studied to understand their influence on human society and culture. This type of approach is most prominent in Ellen Semple's work (1911), Ellsworth Huntington's (1945) work, and Ake Hultkrantz's (1966) work. The Berkley school of cultural geography approached the study of lands and people in a different way; the landscape was the object of study and researchers examined and investigated the various man-made forces that shaped and molded the landscape. This type of work was mostly descriptive, as was work on religion in geography (which was again, mostly descriptive and historical).

Traditionally geographies of religion have been classified as a subfield of cultural geography since scholars' understanding of religion was that it is a cultural system or constitutes part of one (Stump, 2008: 5). Roger W. Stump treats sacred space as a cultural construct, and asserts that "geographic perspectives, focusing on the concepts of place and space, are crucial in understanding essential aspects of religion as an expression of *human culture*" (2005: 6, emphasis added). Kong states that the study of religion in geography has been brought more into the fold of social geography with increased attention to "the religious group or community as the intermediary force between religion and the environment" (1990: 359). Stump's *The Geography*

of Religion is significant in that it has within it earlier trends of studying religion's impact on local and global landscapes, but it also hints at moving towards an approach that incorporates interpretations of religion with a social bent, concerning itself with everyday life spaces and practices. Stump says:

> Religions serve as primary repositories of meaning and identity, and are used by believers to address issues of ultimate significance in their lives. As a result, the study of religion provides crucial insights into the structures and substance of human cultures. From a geographical perspective, moreover, religious belief and practice provide essential insights into the inherent spatiality of culture and the complex interactions between culture and place (2008:6).

However, Stump's text does not demonstrate a consistent commitment to focusing on the non-cultural and everyday, lived aspects of religious belief and practice.

In roughly the last four decades, calls for research that examined the mutual relationship between religion and environment have increased (Park, 1994; Buttner, 1974; Kong, 1990; Cooper, 1990, 1992). This includes studies about the geographical contexts within which particular religious beliefs and traditions have developed. Also, following new approaches in cultural geography, work in geographies of religion started to "deal variously with notions of conflict and symbolism" and instead of trying to separate the religious from social, economic and ethnic factors, geographers are investigating the relationships between them (Kong, 1990: 362). Gregory J. Levine (1986: 437) asserts: "it is essential to go beyond this kind of narrow empiricism [referring to geographies of religion being "catalogues of artefacts and mentifacts"] and to try to appreciate religion as a profoundly social force. It is also necessary to go beyond an idealism which sees religious as a motivator in landscape change but fails to appreciate the social nature of religion." Instead of simply examining the *type* of landscape change that religion influenced, geographers investigated the *processes* through which the changes were made; instead of studying sacred places and structures, geographers started focusing more on their

meanings, how these meanings vary across space and time, and whether there are conflicting inscriptions of meaning taking place. In Chris C. Park's words, "Religion can both inform and be informed by society, and emphasizes the need for geographers to regard dimensions other than conventional religion as legitimate topics of study" (1994: 26).

The Shift from Secular to Postsecular Theory

In addition to a shift to looking at reciprocal relationships between religion and environment and valuing religious communities and individuals as a meritable scale of analysis, there has been another shift from secular to postsecular approaches to geographies of religion that mirror a larger move to postsecular thinking in the social sciences and humanities more generally. In this section I will briefly outline the tenants of secularization theory, the postsecular framework that some geographers have adopted, and critiques of the postsecular trend in geography. These are important to discuss, as secular and postsecular theories greatly shape how scholars approach the study of religion; each theory holds different assumptions which impact the formation of analytical categories, the delineation of which analytical categories are of importance, and shape the conception of socio-political norms within which particular cases of religion and spirituality become manifest.

In the twentieth century, the dominant paradigm for the study of religion in the social sciences was secularization theory (Gorski et al., 2012: 6). Secularism is most commonly understood to be a political doctrine that originated in Western Christian society in early modernity that entailed the separation of religion from secular governmental institutions (Asad, 2003: 1).[4] Later secularism was asserted to be applicable to societies everywhere that had

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[4] See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, for a more nuanced explanation of the diverse forms of "secularization" present in early Christendom and some Islamic empires.

experienced modernity, regardless of whether they were Western or Christian (Taylor 1998).

Jose Casanova (1994), among others, has identified three main components of secularization

theory: 1) the decline of individual religious belief and practice; 2) the separation of religious

and non-religious spheres; and 3) the privatization of religious belief and practice.

Various developments, both inside and outside the academy led to a questioning of the

secularization thesis. Global social and political events (e.g. the Iranian Revolution, 9/11,

increased involvement of religious groups in civil society, the post-socialist Buddhist revival,

faith-based organizations and initiatives; evangelical mega-churches; the American religious

right; global rise of different religious fundamentalisms); decreasing popularity of positive

realism and empirical reductionism (Park, 1994: 2); and a questioning of previous evidences

invoked in support of secularization all contributed to rising doubts in the theory. With these

developments a discourse of the postsecular gained popularity in academia, a theory that

critiqued some of the contested and take for granted assumptions of secularization theory.

Scholars started to assert that 'secular' and 'religious' are not distinct categories as

previously thought; instead they are historically specific and co-constituted. Talal Asad traces the

genealogy of religion as a category of analysis in anthropology and concludes that, "there cannot

be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships

are historically specific, but because the definition is itself the historical product of discursive

processes" (1993: 29). More specifically, geographers study the "intersection of sacred and

secular forces in the making of place" (Kong, 2001: 212) and identify cases where the

private/public spatial dichotomy does not easily map onto the sacred/secular dichotomy.

According to Banu Gökarıksel (2009), "Religion is an ensemble of utterances and practices

categorized as such in a particular historical and geographical context; this ensemble is labeled as

'religion' and separated from social and political life only through the active coding of its boundaries" (Secor 2007, cited in Gökarıksel, 2009: 658). This is in direct opposition to Isaac's (1961-62) understanding of the role of the geographer of religion, which is namely to separate religion from other axis of difference to determine its level of influence on transforming and shaping local landscapes.

Second, with regards to the extent of secularization, some have argued that the developments in Western Europe, and the historical origins of secularism in the Christian West, have been applied uncritically to other parts of the world that have experienced lesser or different forms of secularization, or even not at all. The United States is a good example. Philip Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (2012) argue that if we look at legal principles and institutional arrangements then the US closely follows the secularization thesis. "As regards individual beliefs and public engagement, however, the United States is perhaps the least secular country in the West" (Gorski et al., 2012: 7).[5] Also in discussing secularity in the United States, Saba Mahmood (2006: 326) posits, "secularism has sought not so much to banish religion from the public domain but to reshape the form it takes, the subjectivities it endorses, and the epistemological claims it can make." Asad (1993) explains how the idea of the separation of religion from other spheres such as politics and science was particular to Christian Europe and not necessarily reflective of other societies. Furthermore, even within the modern, secular West there are great differences:

> …in France both the highly centralized state and its citizens are secular, in Britain the state is linked to the Established Church and its inhabitants are largely nonreligious, and in America the population is largely religious but the federal state is secular. "Religion" has always been publicly present in both Britain and America. Consequently, although the secularism of these three countries have much in common, the mediating character of

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[5] See Nicolas Howe 2009 for more examples of how the United States complicates notions of "normative secularity."

the modern imaginary in each of them differs significantly. The notion of toleration between religiously defined groups is differently inflected in each. There is a different sense of participation in the nation and access to the state among religious minorities in the three countries (Asad, 2003: 5-6).

Further, "One of the conditions of modernity is multiple differentiations, not only between secular and sacred, but in multiplicities of religious inclinations" (Kong, 2001: 215). This has led geographers to understand that religion and religiosity is not monolithic. Therefore the places where we are to look for and examine religion cannot be singular, and consequentially our analytic methods and categories have to reflect the plurality and diversity of sacred space and religious belief and practice. We cannot only study religion in its instituted social forms—the only reason why we can say there is an instituted or general form of religion is because of the collective of a multiplicity of religious experiences and manifestations.

Despite the growing popularity of post-secular discourse in geography, some have advised caution in fully embracing post-secular theory (Kong, 2010; Wilford, 2010). Justin Wilford (2010: 328) claims, "The burgeoning subfield of the geography of religion has largely advanced under the assumption that secularization is marginal to understanding contemporary religion." For Wilford, the idea that secularization is marginal is central to approaches that invoke postsecular discourse. He sees secularization as a useful and still-relevant framework for geographers to study modern religion, and warns against conflating secular theory with "a modern, neoliberal, imperialist ethic of domination" void of political resistance (Wilford, 2010: 328).

Overall, the main question at the center of the secular/post-secular debate is whether there has been a resurgence of religion in the past few decades.[6] This question alerts us to a few

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[6] However, for some like Wilford, this question is irrelevant. He argues: "The charge that the world is as full of religion as it ever was is beside the point of the secularization paradigm because the latter

considerations, however. First, how do we define "resurgence" and "religion"? As previously stated, the boundaries between secular and sacred are blurred and fluid. For example, the Basilica of Sacre-Coeur in Paris has historically been a political symbol and has become for many leftist Parisians symbolic of social struggle (Harvey, 1979); Kim Knott (2010) has explored the many uses of churches in England, including multicultural celebrations sanctioned by the local government; and Murat Es (2013) has shown that Turkish-run mosques in the Netherlands are used not just as places of worship but also as community centers and multi-purpose spaces. In the United States, a large forger Catholic Church in San Francisco Is not being turned into an art academy, and in many cities such as Seattle, religious structures are being regularly transformed into condos and loft spaces. Kong (2001: 226) warns geographers that, "analytic categories must not be treated as substantive categories. Religion, like class and race, must be subject to historical and place-specific analysis rather than taken as a priori theory." Before we sanction claims that assert religion has experienced a resurgence, we must analyze what activities, events, commitments, and feelings constitute this category 'religion', and whether this category has been understood differently at different times. If scholars have looked only at certain manifestations of religion and the sacred, and then start to include other manifestations that were once deemed secular or non-religious and argue that this is evidence for an increase in religion, then these claims are not reliable.

Second, stating that there has been a resurgence of religion assumes that there was a previous period where religion was supposedly dead or dying, both in the real world and in the amount of attention given to the study of religion in the academy. With regard to the latter, Kong (2010) states: "While much of the earlier geographic research on religion…did not use the

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postulates a particular social environment for religion, not necessarily the responses to it" (Wilford, 2010: 229).

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language of postsecularism, it was clear that in numerous contexts the engagement of the sacred and secular was not 're-emerging' but rather continuing. Thus some caution may be needed in implying the arrival of the postsecular" (Kong, 2010: 764).

Third, some of the evidence that has been used to support the thesis that religion has been experiencing decreasing importance in society and personal lives is suspect. Kong (2010) gives the example of an opinion poll conducted by the Hungarian state the indicated an increase in the non-religious population from 46.6% in 1972 to 60.7% in 1980 (Tomka 1991, cited in Kong, 2010: 764). This poll was taken during an imposed atheist, anti-clerical policy between 1949 and 1989, therefore rendering the results of the poll unreliable.

Fourth—and closely related—while it may be true that religion is experiencing resurgence, surely there have been places in the world where religion was and always has played a central role in society, thus pointing to continuity in religion's prominence. Again, looking at Eastern Europe, churches played a significant role in maintaining civil society and national identity even during the totalitarian communist regimes (Kocsis, 2006) and in humanitarian aid (Havlicek, 2006). As Kong points out, "The dangers of applying the discourse of postsecularization in a globalizing and totalizing way are that significant continuities are neglected and interpretations of present-day phenomena potentially flawed" (2010: 765). Lastly, do hypotheses about the rising and falling role of religion explain actual occurrences in the real world or simply shifts in academia?

It is worth noting that not all scholars who have adopted postsecular discourse assert that it is a major shift (either theoretically or actually) from secularization theory. For example, Justin Beaumont (2008) argues that, "postsecular refers to the limits of the secularization thesis" (Beaumont 2008, cited in Kong, 2010: 763). For Beaumont, postsecular refers to a religiously

plural society, which includes not only diverse religious beliefs but humanist and secularist posititionalities as well (Beaumont 2008). As such, "it is precisely the interrelations between these dimensions and *not just the religious* that are taken into account and the focus of attention [in postsecular approaches]" (emphasis added, Beaumont, 2008). Regardless of the definition of the postsecular and whether it is invoked in analysis of the religious, there has been much innovative and insightful research coming out of geography on individual religious experiences, embodied and every day religion, belonging, and religious identities and communities. In a recent article, Olson et al. (2013) identified four broad categories under which recent postsecular scholarship falls: 1) efforts to go beyond materialism and structuralism as the only explanations for how the world works, "effectively creating space for religious, spiritual, or other-worldly experience to be recognized as a legitimate form of knowledge of the world"; 2) establishment of normative alternatives to secularization theory that do not necessarily endorse religious normativity; 3) the deconstruction of the category of religion proper and 4) the exploration of the ways religion and spirituality persists in places previously assumed to be secular (Olson et al., 2013: 1424).

I am careful about how I use postsecularism, as the term has been appropriated in many contexts in recent years; I do not wish to posit that secularism is being replaced by religion; rather I intend for my project to contribute to the accumulating literature that attempts to demonstrate that there are relationships between the secular and religious that we must considered seriously. My project specifically broadens the category 'religion,' which even in postsecular literatures is still rigidly defined (e.g. many scholars have taken to identifying the many instances where religion clearly imposes on secular time and space without actually thinking about the categories *themselves* differently). Further, one of the main postsecular

critiques is that secularism takes the European experience as representative for the trajectory of religion in modernity (Berger et al., 1999; Kong, 2010); my research project aims to tell a distinctly American story of the convert experience outside any predetermined script of the role of religion in modern, Western society.

New Geographies of Religion

Whereas earlier geographical study of religion has primarily paralleled the Berkley school of cultural geography, new geographies of religion[7] have taken cues from sister disciplines, namely sociology and anthropology. New approaches incorporate cultural politics, politics of community, and the relationships between religious communities and place (Kong, 2001: 224). There has also been a considerable amount of work that focuses on the making of meaning in sacred spaces, and the processes by which this meaning is invested in different spaces. Research in this area has examined the intrareligious and interreligious conflict and convergences over meanings and uses of sacred space, as well as the beliefs, practices, and processes through which meaning is made and assigned. Geographers have made their own contributions to understanding competing religious and secular discourses in the making and maintaining of sacred space. Furthermore, whereas earlier contributions attempted to separate religious motivations from social, economic and racial matrices (recall Isaac, 1965), new geographies of religion emphasize the links and relationships between these axes of difference.

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[7] Kong (2001) has defined new geographies of religion as entailing an emphasis on "different sites of religious practice beyond the 'officially sacred'; different sensuous sacred geographies; different religions in different historical and place-specific contexts; different geographical scales of analysis; different constitutions of population and their experience of and effect on religious place, identity and community; different dialectics (sociospatial, public-private, politics-poetics); and different moralities" (Kong, 2001: 211).

In what follows I will review existing literature on new geographies of religion by outlining the theoretical approaches and conceptual contributions of more recent approaches, with a special focus on sacred space, community and belonging, identity, and lived religion and embodiment. This review is not intended to be exhaustive nor comprehensive. I will mostly focus on the literature that is directly relevant for the analysis of my research data, and many of the themes that I group prior research under will be explored in further depth in subsequent chapters. Moreover, just as the identified themes are semi-artificial distinctions that are deeply intertwined, so too are the divisions of the literature from which I pull. I present the bodies of literature as separate here for ease of description, though it should be noted that there is much overlap.

Sacred Space

Kong (2001: 213) writes that sacredness is not an essential, static, and stable characteristic of a place; rather, sacredness is created through processes of inclusion and exclusion, and appropriation and dispossession. In a 2006 issue of the Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Adrian Ivakhiv (2006) calls for geographers to understand 'religious' and 'sacred' as discursive formations that dictate how significance and meaning is distributed and created across space rather than as terms with stable meanings.

If places are not inherently sacred, how then do they become sacred? Kong's (1993) study of different religious communities and the state in Singapore examines how many individuals modify and adapt their understanding of sacred space in response to state decisions to close or remove places of worship. In many cases, research participants expressed that though they had become emotionally and spiritually attached to their place of worship, they know that it is not sacred in and of itself. Congregants and religious leaders expressed that the sacredness of

their place of worship was due to repeated ritual and gathering in that same place, as well as structural elements that might invoke certain feelings and emotive responses. Further, Kong explores the ways that parts of the home, or the entire home is made sacred for her research participants. This happens through the type of religious activities that take place in the home and the frequency with which they occur, the rituals and behaviors that accompany this, or the symbolism associated with the form of different activities. Kong's study shows the importance of investigating personal religious experiences, "as well as the social and material relations pertinent to such experiences" in order to understand sanctity and sacred space (1993: 342). As Kong writes, "sacredness is an experience and the experience is not confined to any one particular place" (1993: 351).

Kong's study brings to the fore the important concept of sacralization—how a place is made sacred. David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal (1995: 10) have proposed that sacralization is often accomplished through ritualization. In one of the upcoming subsections on lived religion and embodiment, I will discuss the central role of the body in such ritualization. An excerpt from Stump (2008) explains how this is also true for Muslim sacred spaces:

> …[R]itual space provides a crucial link between religious practice and the concept of sacred space. The causal link between ritual and the sacredness of a place is complex. In some cases, such as an ordinary mosque, a space acquires sanctity from repeated ritual use. Muslims do not consider ordinary mosques to be intrinsically sacred in an absolute sense, for example, but a long history of use can elevate the mosque's religious meaning (304).

Kong (2001: 220) also indicates that with increased technological innovation and mediation, ideas about sacred space will likely alter, as well as the role of the body in making such places.

Another aspect of sacred space is the connection of identities to particular places and how adherents use different spaces. Recent work has explored the role of religious spaces, institutions and practices in shaping identity and subjectivity. Specifically, work by Matt Baillie-Smith, Nina

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Laurie, Peter Hopkins, and Elizabeth Olson (2013); Peter Hopkins (2011); and Giselle Vincett, Elizabeth Olsen, Peter Hopkins, and Rachel Pain (2012) have taken up issues of how youth engage with religious spaces, practices, and discourses and also resist and transform them through the negotiation of their everyday lives. Peter Versteeg (2011) looks at alternate spiritualities in the Netherland, which have increasingly become popular among the middle classes worldwide and have pushed religion to a "liminoid domain" in society. Jason Prior and Carole M. Cusack (2008) argue that the doctrinal separation of church from state in the 20th century radically transformed religion, enabling the sacred to be experienced through what was previously understood to be secular activities, and emphasizing "personal transformation as the primary religious process" (Prior and Cusack, 2008: 271). However, efforts to actually theorize the categories "religious" and "secular" differently usually further reify these categories or superficially highlight times and spaces when there is overlap or complexity.

A review of literature on sacred space in Islam reveals a tendency to discount the social as important for meaningful spiritual experience, and thus to exclude from analysis many religious formations and spiritual modalities. This is problematic, particularly for religions like Islam that are highly community-based and where there is great importance placed on communal worship and interaction. My research challenges the assumptions regarding sacred space, demonstrating how the mosque space in Cincinnati is a site for social interaction (not just communal worship)—something converts identify as important for their understanding of faith and feeling authentically Muslim. However, the social environment at the mosque is not ideal and all-inclusive like romanticized accounts of religious community indicate. Moreover, my research shows how social interaction and a sense of community and belonging is not only found at the mosque, but also at other sites, such as the social spaces created through SC's events and

programs. Converts identify SC spaces as key for facilitating gaining Islamic knowledge to properly live their lives, help them negotiate what they call an authentic American-Muslim identity, and alleviate the continual feelings of loneliness and exclusion that they sometimes experience at the mosque and the greater Muslim community in Cincinnati.

Community and Belonging

Much writing on community predicates its formation on shared aspects of identity. Kong states that research that has focused on places of worship assumes that "as long as people prayed in the same place and 'did things together'" they felt part of the community and experienced a sense of belonging (2001: 221). This is an uncritical approach to studying community and one that is particularly evident in the literature focusing on non-Christian places of worship established by immigrants in the western world (Prorok, 1994; Kong, 1992). I position my research against this type of work; my findings suggest that for some converts who attend the mosque and consider themselves fairly active in the Cincinnati Muslim community, still feel a sense of alienation from the community, as if they are not wholly part of it. This complicates straightforward associations between individuals regularly gathering for worship and the existence of positive, inclusive, and supporting community. Some notable exceptions are Stuart Hall (1992, 1996), Claire Dwyer (1999a) and Doreen Massey (1994), who all engage with various ideological, ethnic, and socio-economic differences in communities to show that communities can be constituted across differences without trying to lessen or subsume them (Dwyer, 1999a: 54).

Other important elements of community are the purposes for which communities are formed, the factors that contribute to the formation of a community, and the dialectical relationship between a group of congregants and their place of worship. Citing Maffesoli (1996)

and Hetherington (1996), Gabriele Marranci (2007: 90) explains that "people form communities in order to share emotions and identify empathetically." Marranci (1996) specifically looks at Muslim women migrants in Northern Ireland who formed women's circles and organizations in response to feelings of instability, insecurity, isolation and displacement. While male members of the Muslim community did not support their agenda and actions, they sought support for their goals from each other. Simon Naylor and James Ryan (1998) show how for one Hindu community in London, the temple constituted part of their identity and offered cultural, social and welfare services and events. The temple was not only important for worship (since most community members had a home altar as well) but served as the center of their community (Naylor and Ryan, 1998).

One of the important factors for community formation is the role of interaction. John Silk (1999) says:

> 'Community' suggests any or all of the following: common needs and goals, a sense of the common good, shared lives, culture and views of the world, and collective action. None of this is possible without *interaction and communication* between community members (8, emphasis added).

The interaction and communication between community members can happen in relation to a particular place, which implicates "face-to-face contact between people" (Silk, 1999: 8) as is most common in traditional communities, or interaction can happen in a different way (e.g. via phone or internet) when community members are spatially separated (Thompson, 1995). The latter is usually the case for imagined communities and ethnocultural diasporas (for examples see Knox, 1995; Miller, 1993; and Davies and Hervert, 1993). Thus, the importance of place for the construction of communities becomes less pronounced for "place-free" or "stretched out" communities (Silk, 1999: 8).

Often traditional communities are romanticized and idealized; geographers have challenged the notion that a community always has shared interests and goals, similar life outlook, and ways of thinking. Communities have been shown to be sometimes oppressive in their maintenance of a chosen value system or moral code (Smith, 1999) and intolerant of difference in their desire for "the same social wholeness and identification that underlies racism and ethnic chauvinism on the one hand and political sectarianism on the other" (Young, 1990: 303). Put more mildly, Silk (1999)—on the topic of community consensus which is an emphasis in Jurgen Habermas' (1981) scheme of community—writes, "The reality is that communities are riven by tensions, conflict and 'difference', and do not escape the structural inequalities and power relations of the wider society" (Silk, 1999: 12). The realization that communities are not picture perfect alerts us to a host of other issues of community politics, which has been the focus of much research on religious communities. Anthropologist Glen Bowman (1993) has written about how different Palestinian groups interpret their relationships to the same holy place differently, but when external oppositional forces threaten their use of holy space they become united. Research on South Asian Muslim Immigrant communities in Britain have shown that community can be both a source of security, support and empowerment, but also can be constraining through surveillance of individual member's actions and behaviors and restriction of their spatial mobility (Dwyer, 1999a; Mohammad, 2013).

Another important strand of research highlights the dialectical relationship between community and places of worship. This is most aptly demonstrated in Malory Nye's (1993) study of Hindu temples in Britain. Nye observes that most Hindu temples in Britain host some type of congregational worship, but only in some temples do the group of individuals who regularly meet at the temple constitute an actual community. In the case of the latter, the temple

is used to "create a sense of Hindu 'community'" (Nye, 1993: 201). "By making an appeal to the community to create a temple, they are at the same time constructing a sense of community, and thus also constructing the community itself" (Nye, 1993: 210). So we see here that the presence of many individuals from a certain faith tradition living in a certain area does not necessarily mean that these individuals form a community, however in some cases this is true. Another example of this dialectical relationship is East Indian mosques in Trinidad, which Carolyn V. Prorok and Mohammad Hemmasi (1993) argue contribute to the consolidation and reproduction of communities since the ability to build and establish a mosque requires that the community appoint a leader, gather resources and sometimes protect and defend their political right to build a mosque.

There has been much research on community in geography, specifically on the intersection of community and religion. However, a sizable portion of this work focuses on external relationships of religious communities with other groups or the greater society. Much less work has explored internal community dynamics and relationships. The little work that has researched internal relationships conceptualizes community dynamics as directly and overwhelmingly shaped by the external social, political and cultural milieu (e.g. when constraining practices of South Asian Muslim communities are examined, analysis usually concludes that surveillance practices are performed as a way to guard and protect community members from perceived social ills and dangers of greater society, or internal community dynamics are in response to anit-Islamic sentiment). The threat of Islamophobia is very real for many Muslim communities in America, however my research participants overwhelmingly expressed concerns about internal community dynamics; the culture/religion dichotomy; belonging; and authentic, sustainable, Islamic practice as most important in their day-to-day

lives. While converts negotiate religious belief and practice and different meanings of sacred

space within the larger American social and political context of Islamophobia, it does not factor

largely in their daily life. As Dwyer (1999a) points out, "What needs to be stressed…is the *extent*

to which Muslim identities are articulated in relation to, and in resistance against, dominant

racialized discourses of national community" (emphasis added, 1999: 57).

With regards to belonging, the literature is vast, so I will only point to a few studies that

address belonging and community in faith-based spaces and have made particularly important

contributions that are relevant for my own work. David Ley and Justin Tse's work (2013)

investigates the support networks that faith-communities provide to Chinese migrants while

Vincett (2013) writes about the ways that Christian women in England challenge the church

spaces from which they feel displaced by creating new ritualized spaces that help them cope with

being marginalized in the church. Patricia Ehrkamp and Caroline Nagel (2012) consider how

Hindu temples and Christian churches are involved in immigrants negotiating citizenship and

social membership, thus tying places of worship and faith communities to political life. There

has been little to no work however on the networks and support provided by religious institutions

and places of worship to converts.

Lastly, one of the most valuable understandings that have risen from geographic work on

religious communities is that there is no such thing as an essential or "self-evident" community.

Rather, "communities must be understood as always constructed or imagined, produced within

particular discursive and historical moments (Brah, 1992)" (Dwyer, 1999a: 64). In my research

on the Cincinnati Muslim community, it is evident that the communities boundaries are also

contested and always being negotiated. Further, boundaries between different mosque

communities overlap greatly, yet there are two distinct mosque cultures at the West Chester and

Clifton mosques. These different mosque communities also overlap with SC's constituents and beneficiaries, especially at the Clifton mosque. When looking at conversion to Islam in general, and convert experiences in particular, there arises the basic question of what it is to be a Muslim? And whom do we include in the larger Muslim community? Some Muslims may identify the public declaration of faith[8] to be the only requirement for considering someone to be a Muslim. Other Muslims would argue that a person must pray five times a day if they wish to be reasonably considered to follow Islam. When discussing who is included in the Muslim community, Muslims may say that they would include those interested in Islam or at the brink of conversion to be included in the Muslim community although on an individual basis they would not consider them Muslim (yet). So we see here that there are varying definitions of 'Muslim' and 'Muslim community', which often causes great confusion in how individuals are treated at the mosque, especially based on quick judgments about who a new person is based on their dress, speech and behavior. These questions will be explored further in the third chapter and in relation to the imagined and contested boundaries of religious community.

Identity

Bound up in discussions of community is identity; members of a community must identify themselves as such to be considered a collective whole, thus giving shape and meaning to a collective identity. Just as there is a dialectical relationship between a community and their place of worship, religious identity and religious communities are usually co-constituted as well. Individuals who share similar self-conceptions can choose to associate with each other, gather and exchange ideas, resources and feelings. On the other hand, individuals who are brought

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[8] The declaration of faith in Islam is to say the following: "I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except for Allah (God), and I bear witness that Muhammad is his final prophet and messenger." In Islamic Jurisprudence, a public declaration of faith constitutes conversion.

together, either intentionally or because of life circumstances, may develop a particular group culture that then molds the individual identities of its members. In both cases, community and identity are closely intertwined.

There have been several edited collections that specifically focus on Muslim identities, such as Cara Aitchison, Peter Hopkins, and Mei Po Kwan's (2007) *Geographies of Muslim Identities: Diaspora, Gender and Belonging*, which aims to complicate assumptions about Islam being a homogenous category by showing the diversity in understandings of what it means to be Muslim. Their book explicates how Islam is only part of how Muslims understand themselves and see the world (Halliday, 1999); Muslims are also parents, professionals, siblings, students, Bosnian, Egyptian, etc. Aitchison et al. (2007) quote Tariq Modood (2003: 100) on this in their introduction:

> Some Muslims are devout but apolitical; some are political but do not see their politics as being 'Islamic' (indeed, may even be anti-Islamic). Some identity more with a nationality of origin, such as Turkish; others with the nationality of settlement and perhaps citizenship, such as French. Some prioritize fundraising for mosques, other campaign against discrimination, unemployment or Zionism…The category 'Muslim', then is as internally diverse as 'Christian' or "Belgian' or 'middle-class', or any other category helpful in ordering our understanding…

The essays in this collection all attempt to show this diversity, highlighting the importance of space in the negotiation and understanding of Muslim identities, and how 'Muslim' markers, (such as dress or behavior) are contested in meanings that vary across space. The second focus of the essays is to "identify and explore the ways in which Muslim identities and geographies interact with, produce, reproduce and rework other significant markers of identity such as gender, race and class" (2007: 2), thus some of the main themes of the text include: diasporic communities and spaces, gender, culture, belonging, and attachment. The intersection of the varied productions and performances of Muslim identities and other axes of difference are

analyzed in everyday spaces of the home, street, community centers, the mosque, and school. Herein lies this books relevance for my research: the focus on everyday spaces and how Muslim identities are produced by and performed in various spaces and localities.

Of specific importance for me are Green and Singleton's study of Muslim women's perception of risk and risk management strategies in leisure settings in England. Green and Singleton conceptualize leisure as both "a site and process" in the production and negotiation of young female Muslim identities. In other words, not only can leisure be understood as different individual or group activities, but leisure also creates place, which becomes a site of identity negotiation. Similarly, I will argue that the social activities and outings that my research participants' take part in create sites that become meaningful on a religious register. Second, Marranci's innovative definition of identity as intricately associated with emotions and feelings about our surrounding environment will be important in analyzing convert experiences of mosque and SC spaces in Cincinnati. In the following chapter I will elaborate further on the distinction Marranci makes between identity as a filter or lens versus identity as a structuring tool, and how these different understandings of Muslim identity map onto gender differences (Marranci, 2007: 89). Third, Ehrkamp's (2007) study of Turkish immigrants in Germany shows that religious places play a key role in fostering religious identities. While research has indicated the importance of the mosque space in shaping religious identities of various groups of Muslims (Dunn, 2001; Gale and Naylor, 2002; Naylor and Ryan, 2002, 2003; Sunier, 2005; Hopkins, 2007b; Kong, 1992; Prorok and Hemmasi, 1993), the data from my research suggests that spaces that are not deemed officially sacred, like the social spaces created by SC, may be even more influential in shaping the religious identities of American-born converts to Islam. Ehrkamp's (2007) chapter shows how religious identities are produced, shaped and enacted in everyday

spaces outside of the mosque like work, the home, school, and cafes and other places of public gathering. Thus, in order to more accurately understand Muslim identities, sacred space, and piety, it is essential to include 'un-officially sacred spaces' (i.e not just places of worship or pilgrimage sites) in our sites of analysis (Kong, 2010).

Another significant text is Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline Nagel's (2005) *Geographies of Muslim Women: Gender, Religion, and Space*, which aims to show the diversity of lived experiences of Muslim women. Unlike Aitchison et al. (2007)—which mostly focused on Muslims in the West (e.g. Germany, England, Ireland, and Australia)—contributions in this volume cover many different regions including Morocco, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Saudi Arabia. Major themes include "gender, development and religion", "mobility and migration" and "discourse, representations, and the contestation of space." In the introduction Nagel states that the headscarf controversy in France is what motivated their book on Muslim women, as it showed that Muslim women are "increasingly visible and active in shaping gender discourses or practices" and that "…the voices and viewpoints of Muslim women and Muslims more generally need to be understood as highly differentiated and not easily reducible to notions of 'religion' or 'culture'" (3). Nagel gives the example that survey data shows that more Muslim women in France supported the headscarf ban than those who were against it (3). Muslim women's experiences cannot be defined in religious terms alone, "and Islam itself serves as a repertoire of social practices and ideas articulated in different historical and geographical contexts, rather than as a monolithic belief system with causal power (Moghadam, 1993)" (Nagel, 2005: 4). Generally however, this book focuses mostly on the various *discourses* and *processes* of gender, religious and cultural difference that restrict and expand, reify and complicate Muslim women's mobility and opportunities. There is little direct engagement with Muslim women's understandings of

their autobiographical self. However, the contributions in Falah and Nagel's book provides a refreshing look at women's geographies, showing that Islamic discourses and practices are only part of what shapes their socio-spatial practices; gender relations (whether stemming from religion or other dictates) and wider political/economic practices also factor into women's spatialities (12). Nagel writes, "The significance of Islam—and indeed, any belief system— varies a great deal between and within societies, and should not be treated as a causal force in and of itself" (13).

As previously mentioned, new geographies of religion have demonstrated the relationships between religion and various axes of difference. In fact, much geographical research has focused on the inseparability of ethnicity and religion in the negotiation of Muslim identities, and many scholars have critiqued the conflation of ethnic identities and Muslim identities that often times happens in this type of research. Studies have shown that informants themselves have a hard time separating their ethnic and religious identities, and the extent of this separation various in different situations. For some, especially children of immigrants, invocations of a distinct Muslim identity or an ethnic identity associated with their host country are stronger than identification with their parents' country of origin.

Overall, research on Muslim identities has concentrated on the British context and focused mostly on immigrant women and young Muslim women of the second generation. This focus thus emphasizes transnational identities or Muslim identities and the intersection of age, sex, or ethnicity. Consequentially, such work brings to the fore negotiations of Islamic injunctions on behavior, parental control, feelings of belonging and security, limits on spatial mobility and social activities, and negotiations of identity specifically against the backdrop of societies effected by the discourses of European secularization, anti-Islamic sentiment, anti-

racism and mutliculturalism. There is much less research on the American context where secularization is understood and implemented differently, therefore manifesting in slightly different social organization and norms, particularly in the public sphere. Much of the literature on Muslim identities in America focuses on Muslim responses to 9/11, or theorizes the construction of Muslim identities directly in response to Islamophobia. However, I argue that despite the prominence of Islamophobic discourse in the mass media, this does not factor greatly in the daily lives of converts, in their understandings of self, and in their insertion into the Muslim community and American society at large.

Lived Religion and Embodiment

In 2001 Kong identified the body as an important scale of analysis for geographies of religion (Kong, 2001: 227). In 2006 Julian Holloway also called for geographic research on religion to heed the scale of the body, specifically focusing on affect and embodiment: in his words, "[T]he affectual relations and forms of embodiment that produce and are produced in religious-spiritual space must be given greater attention if we are to develop more complex and nuanced analyses" (2006: 186). Through his case study of 19th century spiritualism and the Séance, he proposes that emotion and corporeal practice play a role in the realization of sacred spaces, as well as the religious identities that produce and are produced by such spaces (182). In my case study, SC's mission very much revolves around the notion of "safe space" where converts and seekers do not feel judged and instead feel welcome and accepted. SC is aware of how much negative emotions can negatively influence converts religious experiences, and thus strive to create both a physical and emotional environment that is conducive to positive and transformative personal and spiritual development.

One way of getting beyond rigid categorizations of space as either sacred or secular, as was characteristic of early research on religion, is by examining religious phenomenon through the concept of embodiment. By looking at individual religious bodies, their relationship with different sites and spaces, and the resulting impact on their religious consciousness, it becomes possible to disrupt normative assumptions and dominant categorizations of which spaces are sacred and which are profane. The literature on lived religion best illustrates how a focus on embodiment can result in greater attentiveness to the presence of religion in unlikely spaces, and the influential capacity of unlikely spaces on religiosity. Furthermore, a focus on embodiment allows us to understand how religious identities inflect and are inflected by ethnicity, age, and gender.

One aspect of embodied approaches to geographies of religion is exploring how the body produces and maintains sacred space through repeated religious behaviors in a particular place, through embodied religious belief that is not bound to a particular place, or through sacralizing spaces that are normally understood to be ordinary or profane. Chidester and Linenthal (1995) assert that the body is crucial in the ritual production of sacred place because rituals code and order space differently than what may be perceived as an ordinary spatial imaginary. Olson et al. (2013) demonstrate how using the spatial approach of embodiment from feminist work can help us understand conceptions of authentic faith in her study of young Christians in Glasgow, Scotland. They write, "What our participants call "authentic" Christianity is intimately bound up in ideas of spatial transcendence through the valorization or religious embodiment; that is, constructing the body as the space in which faith might smoothly extend beyond traditional religious spaces" (2013: 1423).

There has also been considerable research on religion, the body, and dress, which has

illuminated how dress is not merely symbolic, but also a site of representation for conflicting ideologies and paradigms (Dwyer, 1998; Dwyer, 1999b; Gökarıksel and Mitchell, 2005; Secor, 2002). Another strand of research is religion, the body, and affect. Matthew Wade and Maria Hynes (2013) apply affective theory to the Hillsong Megachurch in Australia, and illustrate how the Hillsong mobilizes affect to recruit congregants "who are at once comfortable, enthusiastic and loyal" (173).

Feminist approaches in geography have drawn attention to everyday life as an analytic that counters traditional understandings of space that put boundaries between public life and private life. Examining everyday spaces and practices allows us to see the artificial nature of the private/public dichotomy, which most often corresponds to the sacred/secular dichotomy, respectively. As previously stated, one of the thesis of secularization theory maintains that religious belief and practice has been privatized, has retreated to home and other personal spaces, and is no longer visible in the public sphere. Looking at the everyday helps us decenter the public—and subsequently the political—allowing other factors of religiosity to be considered (specifically the social aspects).

Julian Holloway and Oliver Valins (2002: 8) argue that "Religion and spiritual geographies are (re)produced through a variety of embodied acts and bodily practices." So ritual acts like prayer or a non-religious act like caring for one's child (or any other enactments and performances) are important for the maintenance of religious identities and religious spaces. The body then is not simply a surface on which different discourses inscribe their representations and symbols, but it is key to the enactment of sacred space, through the corporeal body itself and the practices enacted through it. Holloway's (2003) case study of New Age spiritual seekers illustrates how focusing on spatial practices allows us to value everyday spaces in and through

which identities and lives are made and remade. Holloway argues that for New Age spiritual seekers, "embodied practices of the everyday that are sensed as the spiritually 'correct' or 'true' way of doing things" allow them to configure everyday spaces as something extraordinary, and other than profane; thus the everyday loses its profanity when it is "embodied sacred" (2003: 1961-62).

I want to draw attention to John Lindenbaum's (2012) study of the role of contemporary Christian music in sacralizing the non-officially sacred space of a café in a megachurch. Lindenbaum argues that CCM is used to sacralize cafes (which become "sacred social spaces") and in turn spiritualize the everyday lives of Christian youth. Lindenbaum's term—"sacred social spaces"—is a concept I will use in my analysis of the social spaces that converts deem as important to their understanding and practice of Islam. Sonya Sharma and Mathew Guest (2013) look at the dynamic, lived, and continually negotiated religious identities of Christian students during their transition between home life and university. Sharma and Guest (2013) show that while religious beliefs provide a sense of familiarity and continuity in the form of cultural resources and opportunities to meet and befriend other like-minded students, the nature of religion on campus is less stable and highly differentiated, causing students to "question, modify or give up their religious identities" (59).

All these studies show how religion can be located in the body through religious enactments and performances like prayer, doing things in the "correct" or "true way," or making the everyday/profane spaces and practices extraordinary through embodied sacredness. This focus on the body and embodied religion shows us that "there are many ways in which everyday spaces can be implicated in religious meaning-making, legitimating, maintaining and enhancing, but also challenging religious life, beliefs, practices and identities" (Kong, 2010: 757).

Summary

Traditionally, geographers studying religion mainly focused on religion as an object of study through examining its distribution, impact on the landscape, and geographic context. Geographers have also investigated the location and diffusion of various religious groups, as well as explored the ways that religion shapes local landscapes. Following the seminal works by Asad (1993, 2003) and Peter Berger (1999), as well as shifts in cultural geography, more recent research on religion in geography has illustrated how a focus on religion can offer insight into new understandings of secularization processes, cultural and social issues, and politics. Notwithstanding the debate on whether religion is experiencing a revival, or if scholars are simply taking notice of practices not previously included in the scope of analysis (Habermas and Cronin, 2010), religious perspectives have great potential for renewing social and cultural criticism (Mendieta and Vanantwerpen, 2011).

In 1990, Kong said the following of the geographic study of religion:

> …geographers of religion have been caught up overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, with formalized systems of religions, particularly institutionalized, canonical religions of the text. Perhaps this is a bias stemming from Western Christian influences and perspectives, but whatever the cause, there is no doubt that insufficient attention has been paid to folk religions, cults, myths, and the *personal religious experience* (367, emphasis added).

However, to date geographers have broadened their scope of analysis by valuing the body as an important site where religious meaning making takes place; by studying individual personal experiences, especially of minority populations and marginalized groups; and by examining community and cultural politics in relation to religious communities and places of worship.

The above review of literature highlights how my research on convert experiences in America contributes to a body of literature that is characterized by an emphasis on the British context, immigrants, women and youth. In the cases where Muslim identities in the American

context are explored, Muslim identities are mostly theorized as being produced and negotiated in direct response to 9/11 and anti-Islamic sentiment.

In the spirit of going beyond narrow definitions and conceptions of religion and beyond a focus on officially sacred spaces, I have researched the religious experiences of converts and their varied understandings of religious practices and spaces. My findings suggest that the reality of the Cincinnati Muslim community complicates the often idealized and romanticized notions of traditional communities. I argue that the Cincinnati mosque spaces in which a majority of community interactions take place do not account for all its community members' needs, especially converts'. I also argue that mosque spaces are not always welcoming spaces, and as a result make converts feel alienated from the local Muslim community in Cincinnati. However, converts still hold on to an imagined ideal of the global Muslim community, or *ummah*, that sustains their participation in the community and regular attendance at the mosque.

Another visible absence in the literature on Muslim identities is masculine identities. While Hopkins (2007a, 2007b) and Ehrkamp (2008) have made efforts to close this gap, the majority of research still engages with female Muslim identities. Scholars have said that this is due to women's more visible religious and cultural markers (i.e the veil) (Hopkins et al., 2007). The issue of visibility was something also noted by my research participants. One male participant mentioned how exciting it was for him to see a veiled woman in public, and how fortunate it was for her to be recognized as a Muslim from her appearance. This matter of visibility greatly impacts individual conceptions of the religious self and is intertwined with feelings of authenticity. Some of my research participants expressed that being recognized by others as Muslim affects their own self-perceptions and feelings of rootedness in both the local and global Muslim community. For my white research participants, especially males, being

recognized as Muslim is something that is difficult for them to achieve outwardly when their appearance makes them look "just like everyone else."

Lastly, my research fills a gap in the literature on convert identities. American born/raised converts do not have the same experiences as, for example, Muslim youth whose parents are immigrants. They do not face the same experiences of differentiating and negotiating original ethnic identities, religious identities, and American identities in a familial context, but they *do* experience similar negotiations of identity in the spaces of Muslim community in Cincinnati. As previously mentioned, I believe Muslim convert experiences are particularly edifying for understanding sacred and secular space, religious practice, and the processes that inscribe various spaces with religious meaning because of converts' unique socio-cultural position as American-Muslims. By examining convert experiences we can look at the same questions of the religious and secular that have already been investigated by scholars, but with a different lens—a lens that is offered to us by converts' unique position in American society.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOCIAL BECOMES SACRED: SOCIALIZING[9] AS PLACEMAKING

My review of literature on sacred space revealed a tendency to discount the social as important for meaningful spiritual experience, and thus to exclude from analysis many religious formations and spiritual modalities. This is problematic, particularly for religions like Islam that are highly community-based and where there is great importance placed on communal worship and interaction. In this chapter I will discuss the social aspects of religiosity and identity, illustrating the importance of social interaction and community for converts to Islam. I challenge the assumptions regarding sacred space, demonstrating how mosque spaces in Cincinnati are a site for social interaction, not just communal worship or religious classes. Converts identify social interaction as important for their understanding of faith, application of religious injunctions in their everyday life and feeling authentically Muslim. However, the social environment at the mosque is not ideal and all-inclusive like romanticized accounts of religious communities indicate. For this reason, I will illustrate how social interaction and a sense of community and belonging can be experienced at other, non-officially sacred sites. Such sites include the social spaces created through Salaam Community's events and programs, as well as informal gatherings and meet-ups with friends. Converts identify friends and SC event spaces as key factors for facilitating the acquisition of Islamic knowledge to properly live their lives, help them negotiate what they call an authentic American-Muslim identity, and alleviate the continual feelings of loneliness and exclusion that they sometimes experience at the mosque.

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[9] Here and all other places in this chapter (unless otherwise indicated) "socializing" is being used synonymously with social interaction, as opposed to the acquisition of certain attitudes, norms and behaviors.

First, I discuss converts' experiences with, and feelings about, their local Muslim community and the global Muslim community, or ummah. Converts' different community imaginaries map differently onto actual community spaces in Cincinnati based on their different experiences at Cincinnati mosques. I also argue for not overlooking social interaction and community spaces at the mosque in the rush to move beyond officially sacred spaces as reflected in recent scholarship in geographies of religion. Mosques are important sites for social interaction which should not be ignored in the move to focus on individual religious experience and lived religion. Second, I conceptualize social interaction as site (not merely an activity or action) in order to understand the extent to which companionship and community shape converts' religious modalities, regardless of particular locations and places. Third, I examine the various spaces of companionship and community that exist outside the mosque. I discuss SC's organizational practices in creating what they call a "safe space" and the regime of techniques and principles they follow in producing and maintaining sacred social spaces. I show the extent to which socialization and its associated sense of community shape converts' identities, feelings of authenticity, access to Islamic knowledge, and understandings of what it means to be pious.

Different Community Imaginings

In this section I discuss converts' experiences of the Clifton and West Chester mosques as well as different conceptualizations of community: the local Muslim community in Cincinnati and the global ummah. Amidst many calls for geographers to investigate personal religious experiences, 'officially sacred' spaces have become the other to individual religious experiences and lived religion. I justify my partial focus on mosques for two reasons. First, researchers have already shown the importance of the mosque in shaping religious identities and constituting a sense of community, however, no empirical work has been conducted on *converts'* experiences

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of mosques or other religious and social spaces. As discussed in my literature review, much writing on religious community is predicated on shared aspects of identity, with the assumption that people that prayed together, stayed together and felt they belonged to the community (Kong, 2001: 221). Such work treats people praying in the same place at the same time as a homogenous population without considering the very real diversity of the group in general, and the experiences of American-Muslim converts in particular. My findings suggest that some converts who attend the mosque and consider themselves fairly active in the Cincinnati Muslim community still feel alienated from the mosque. This complicates straightforward associations between individuals gathering regularly for worship and the existence of positive, inclusive, and supporting community. Second, I maintain that focusing on mosques is still productive because the social aspects of religion and mosque community are underexplored. While scholars may have investigated mosque location and architecture, the social elements of religious community and places of worship have not received as much attention. Following Es (2012) and Caitlin Cihak Finlayson (2012), I attend to individual religious experiences within houses of worship in order to resist the dichotomy that seems to be forming between an emphasis on officially sacred places and experiences (understood to be manifest at places of worship, pilgrimage sites, and in canonized religious traditions) and individual, lived religious experiences. Surely for many individuals, personal and lived religious experiences can be—and are—produced at and shaped by places of worship (see Finlayson, 2012; Es, 2012). In Es's (2012) study of Turkish-Dutch mosques, he argues that mosques have more than representational value, and as social spaces are the loci of various social practices. For this reason, Es maintains that it is important to examine the "lived and embodied experiences of mosque communities and the role mosques play in the everyday lives of their users".

Local Muslim Community at the Clifton and West Chester Mosques

My research participants overwhelmingly characterized the two major mosques in

Cincinnati as unwelcoming to newcomers and culturally alienating for individuals who are not of

Arab or South Asian descent. They emphasized several factors that contribute to these feelings of

alienation and loneliness. These include: little signage explaining etiquette or taken for granted

cultural norms observed inside the mosque, Islamic classes that use technical religious

terminology or too many Arabic words, and "religious policing" by community elders regarding

how one should dress or act on mosque grounds. Such accounts complicate easy assumptions

that religious communities based in places of worship provide support and security for all of its

congregants. To illustrate this in more detail, I will present a series of three vignettes pulled from

stories converts shared with me of personal experiences or incidents they witnessed at the Clifton

and West Chester mosques.

Vignette 1

*A convert of nine years, Virginia is waiting for her husband with her toddler son in the [West
Chester] mosque lobby after the congregational Friday prayer. She notices that a girl had
entered the mosque and was holding a notebook and was looking rather timid. She was not
wearing hijab [head covering or veil]. Virginia is hovering near the girl, trying to figure out how
to ask her if she needs any help. At this point Virginia thinks that this girl is either a student
coming to the mosque for a school project or someone who is interested in Islam. Before
Virginia could approach the girl two male community members in the 40s approach the girl, one
of the men saying, "It's not respectful."*

"Excuse me?" the girl says.

*"To be here without your hair covered, it's disrespectful. Cover your hair." At that moment
Virginia hurriedly steps in and says, "I'll take care of her. I'll help her out." Virginia steers the
girl away from the two men towards the women's area on the upper level, making sure to grab
an extra scarf from the coat room on their way up. Virginia talks to the girl and finds out that
she is a student doing a school project. Students were assigned to choose a different faith to
research and she had chosen Islam.*

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Vignette 2

When Gary's Pakistani fiancé suggested that he should check out the [Clifton] mosque a half-mile from his house, Gary was terrified. He wouldn't dream of going there by himself, especially being Caucasian and all the people being "Arabic" as he says. He thought: "Would they be asking me questions, why are you here? How dare you come here? Are you a Muslim?" Gary's fiancé found a community member he could meet at the mosque when he went so he wouldn't be alone.

When Gary finally went to the Clifton mosque it was on a Friday during the congregational prayer. Gary did not see his chaperone so he entered the mosque and walked towards the prayer area. A man approached him and asked, "Hey, have you done your wudu [ritual ablution performed before prayer]?"

"What? What do you mean wudu?"

"Your wudu. Have you done wudu in the wudu area?" The man gave Gary a hard time about doing his wudu without really explaining what it even means. Gary still couldn't find his chaperone so he sat in the back of the prayer area and listened to the khutbah [Friday sermon]. Gary recalls, "the person that gave the khubah just rambled; it wasn't very coherent, talking about some history and cavalry. And I'm thinking what? Didn't' really make a whole lot of sense. It was an older person." After the khutbah Gary stayed in the back while everyone else prayed, and then he waited in the lobby after the prayer hoping to find his chaperone. He didn't know what he looked like or if he was young or old. There were a lot of strangers and he felt uncomfortable so eventually he left. Later he called his chaperone and asked him what happened. His chaperone simply replied, "I was there, but you just needed to be more patient and just needed to wait a little longer for me." Gary concluded that he must have been chatting with friends inside the prayer hall as is customary after the congregational prayers, while Gary was waiting outside in the lobby.

Vignette 3

When reflecting on some of her early Ramadan experiences, Hannah recounts the following:

I went to the [West Chester] mosque for jummu'ahs [Friday congregational prayers] and I went for the taraweeh[10] prayers every night of Ramadan in 2012, so not this last Ramadan but the Ramadan before that. But nobody, like people would say salaams to me but nobody would talk to me. Like I managed to go to almost every jummu'ah you know, expect for one out of the month...

This year however, I went to both [mosques for taraweeh prayers], but mainly Clifton. Because oh my gosh, Shaykh Mahmoud, you know come on, his voice is so awesome! So yeah, I think that—I don't think I felt welcomed in the way that Christians welcome people into church. They make an announcement, "hey if you see somebody you don't know, shake their hand." "Greet

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[10] Extra prayers offered at the mosque during the month of Ramadan, which is the night of fasting.

your brothers in peace," is what they say. They remind people to do that—they take a second out of the sermon to say, "say hi to somebody you don't know. Is there anybody that's new today?" Which for me was okay; so despite the fact that I had not felt welcome initially, I think that's what I wanted, because like I said I was like you're not going to tell me what to do type of thing. So I think I was kind of standoff-ish as well. But then I think after a while I kind of wanted people to talk to me. And seeing other people have friendships. I was actually befriended in the West Chester mosque during taraweeh, but I was befriended by a 9 year old and an 11 year old who always prayed taraweeh next to me and we would always say hi and stuff like that.

These three vignettes represent some of the common experiences of my research participants and paint a picture of the spiritual and social environment at the two major Cincinnati mosques. In Vignette 1 we see a rather dramatic display of how unwelcoming the mosque can be for newcomers. This type of situation does not happen regularly, but the practice of asking new comers, visitors, or Muslim youth to adjust what they are wearing or pointing out faulty dress or behavior happens frequently enough that it can create negative experiences. Virginia was upset about what she witnessed because in the case of the student, she did not know that she should cover her hair, as there was no sign or pamphlet that directed her to do so. Virginia told me, "How are we supposed to be welcome and opening to others if we don't let anyone in or give anyone the benefit of the doubt?" Virginia expressed that lack of signage and directions at the mosque can make the first visit nerve-wracking for a new comer, so in her opinion it is unreasonable to expect converts or visitors to act and dress in whatever way community members perceive as proper. When Virginia walked into a mosque for the first time she was confused and did not know where to go or what she was supposed to do. She was afraid that she was going to offend someone by going to the wrong area, and all the signs in the New York mosque she visited happened to be in Arabic so they were not helpful for her. She says,

> I've noticed this at almost every mosque I visit. There's no signage; if there is signage it's not necessarily in English, or the signs that are in English are like 'no food or drink' or 'keep children quiet.' And like a wudu area—the difference between a wudu area and a bathroom make complete sense to me now, but if I were to go in and see a wudu area I'd be like, 'is this the bathroom?'

While this is not the case at the West Chester and Clifton mosques (all signs are written in English), Virginia feels that the few signs that exist are still not helpful as they do not explain the things that are taken for granted in normal Muslim community life at the mosque, especially matters that relate to ritual worship, interpersonal interactions, and the respective prayer and wudu areas for each gender.

In Vignette 2 we see that Gary was also unsure of where to go or what to do when he first visited the Clifton mosque. He never did meet the chaperone that was supposed to accompany him on his first visit and explain to him the various aspects of the Friday sermon and congregational prayer. When he entered the mosque he was first asked a question which he did not understand. Gary still experiences times when he does not understand something due to the use of Arabic terms in religious classes at the mosque, but he feels more comfortable asking people next to him what the words mean.

In Vignette 2 and 3 we see that both Garry and Hannah held assumptions about the people they would meet at the mosque, which made them put off visiting the mosque or made them nervous on their first visit. Gary's initial anxiety about visiting a mosque for the first time was partially due to his conflation of religion and ethnicity (he recounts thinking "They're not Caucasian, they're all Arabic. You know, it's my physical safety, you know. What if…will I even make it out of there alive?"). He also expressed to me that mosque attendees might question his presence there, presumably on the grounds that he did not look "Arabic." Hannah told me that she too held many assumptions about the Muslim community, expecting that people would tell her what to do and how to act. She wanted to make up her mind for herself about what 'being Muslim' looked like. She said, "[I]t was a conscious decision to stay out of the mosque, in terms of assuming that a certain type of person would go there and they would tell me what to do." She

also told me that she feels that the media fueled her assumptions and she knows now that they were inaccurate. Realizing that she did not want people telling her what to do, she understood that she had better make up her own mind. "I kind of came to my religious decisions often times through reading or watching and listening," Hannah told me.

Upon conversion, converts primarily get socialized[11] into Islamic community life at the mosque, and secondarily at the homes of people with whom they've developed a mentor-mentee relationship. Being at the mosque allows converts to participate in community activities and become exposed to situations that provide opportunities to interact with other community members, worship together, learn the unwritten cultural and religious etiquettes of mosque community life, and sometimes form friendships. Ted felt that the community at the Clifton mosque fully embraced him. He reported that he didn't feel culturally alienated and was able to remain true to his American identity while simultaneously experiencing and sharing in other community members' cultural customs. When asked how he converted Ted answers, "Well, it was because of a free meal." Ted was invited to the Clifton mosque by an Ethiopian co-worker to share a meal with community members during Ramadan when they broke their fast. Ted's friend knew he liked international food and thought he would enjoy the meal and meeting new people. Ted showed up at the mosque and ate with the community; afterwards his friend told him that everyone would be going upstairs to pray. He could join them if he wanted or wait for them to finish in the lower level of the building. Ted decided to go upstairs and lined up with the rest of the community and just started praying. Ted met a handful of people that night that he would later become close friends with after he would convert three years later. Ted felt very welcomed at Clifton and found that he was treated with genuine respect, openness, honesty and happiness.

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[11] Here socializing refers to the acquisition of certain attitudes, norms and behaviors common to the Muslim community.

He has never felt like he does not belong or that community members ever questioned his presence at the mosque.

Ted's first experience at a mosque was pointedly different than most of the converts I spoke to. Although most of my research participants reported eventually feeling comfortable after attending several events, meeting more people and learning names, Ted felt welcomed and comfortable from the very beginning. Other individuals who converted around the same time as Ted and also through the Clifton mosque did not have the same experiences. The fact that a close friend from work accompanied Ted on his first visit to the mosque can explain why he felt relatively more comfortable in such a new environment. Ted's friend was a convert himself, and was thus able to mediate Ted's interaction with the Muslim community since he went through the same process a few years prior—he softened the edges, explained any confusing elements and answered Ted's questions. As described in the vignette, Ted was given the option to pray if he liked, which he accepted. Unlike Gary's experience at the same mosque, Ted was not asked if he had completed the necessary ritual of wudu before praying, or had to navigate the crowd of unfamiliar faces and names on his own. After that night at the mosque, Ted was given a Qur'an to read and became friends with some of the individuals and families that attended the mosque. They became mentors for Ted before he even converted, inviting him to potlucks throughout the year and encouraging him to attend other community gatherings. During Ramadan the following year he started going to the mosque every night of Ramadan to participate in the special prayers the Muslim community does after they break their fast. Ted's experience at the Clifton mosque was facilitated by multiple personal contacts and mentors, something that all the converts that I spoke to indicated they wish they had when they first converted, and even still now.

Gordon's first time in a mosque was also a positive experience at the Clifton mosque. One day he was driving home from work and was listening to a special by NPR on the month of Ramadan. Ramadan sounded neat, and so he started doing some research in order to learn more. A couple of nights later Gordon got on his computer again and somehow ended up on the website for the Clifton mosque. Coincidentally, the mosque was having an open house the following afternoon and he was off from work so he decided to go. Gordon was nervous when he entered the mosque. He explained to me that he is shy, thus going to a place where he does not know anyone is difficult for him. His nerves went away quickly as the members of the mosque went out of their way to make sure he felt welcome and patiently answered all his questions. However, when Gordon had previously tried setting up appointments at the West Chester mosque in order to find out more and get some of his questions answered, he did not feel as welcomed. "I'd never been to a mosque, I'd never been to anything. So, to go over, see it, try to talk to somebody, try to get some information. And it was kinda like when I called, they weren't really, almost like 'we're not really taking applications right now.'" When I asked him which mosque he prefers attending, he emphatically stated that he prefers Clifton, and would be hesitant to go to the West Chester mosque after his first experience with them trying to schedule an appointment. Until now Gordon has never set foot in the West Chester mosque, and if there was a specific event that he would want to attend there, he informed me that he would probably never go without first contacting a member of the Clifton mosque to see if they were going and could meet him there.

Ted and Gordon's experiences also point to the fact that mosque spaces are not experienced in the same way by each individual; what can be an alienating experience for one person can be an affirmative and spiritually nourishing experience for another. Massey (1994:

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186) writes that spaces, and our perceptions of them, are gendered, and this even varies at different times and across different cultures. Virginia told me: "I've never felt truly unwelcome in a mosque until I had a kid, and that to me is a very bizarre experience. And I don't know what I would have done if I were a new Muslim now." Virginia told me that she often felt unwanted at the mosque when she went with her son. Mosque volunteers or older community members would see her son and assume that he would be noisy in the main prayer hall, and direct her to a smaller prayer area in a separate building for women with children. This prayer area was not comfortable and almost always did not have the proper audio set-up for audio streaming of the prayer from the main hall. During the times when Virginia insisted on staying in the main hall, older community members who would warn her about keeping her son quiet policed her. On one occasion, an older community member warned her about her fussy son but almost immediately turned around and spoke loudly to her friend during the Friday sermon. Virginia found this contradictory and made her feel unwelcome, more so than when she was a recent convert but did not yet have a child.

Spaces are also racialized, which means that inclusion and exclusion in certain spaces depends on a racial logic that does not necessarily have to be spoken. An unwanted gaze (Green and Singleton, 2007: 112) is enough to make an individual or group feel unwelcome. Virginia reports the following incident to me when she visited a mosque for the first time:

> [A] woman said salaams[12] to me in the bathroom just as I was leaving. And I'd never heard that before, so I was like hey. I was like hi. And she got insulted. Looking back now she thought I wasn't returning salaams. And I think one of the issues is that I'm what you would call ethnically ambiguous. So a lot of times when people find out that I'm a convert, they're like, you're a convert? I thought you were Arab, I thought you were Iranian, or whatever. I think she couldn't imagine that I was a convert, and she thought

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[12] Short for "Assalamu Alaykum", or "peace be with you". This is a Muslim greeting said in Arabic. It is incumbent on a Muslim who is greeted in this way to respond by saying, "Walaykum Assalaam", or "and may peace be with you".

that I'd just refused to give her salaams. And she was African, so I think she thought I was being snotty, looking back now. So she got very huffy, and was like, do you come to the mosque often? And I'm like no this is my first time, and she was like well I come everyday. And I was like oh good for you, that's great. I had no idea what I had done to make her upset. But I didn't know how to fix it, right? So sort of stuff like that; it's very easy for someone to take shahadah[13] but you can't impart everything you should need to know about every social situation in the future involving Muslims.

The women Virginia met at the mosque ruled out the possibility that Virginia might be a convert based on her perceived ethnicity, thus causing miscommunication and bad feelings. Through this incident we see that there is a presumed level of knowledge about Islamic social etiquette that is associated with what one's ethnicity is perceived to be. In this way, ethnic and religious identities are closely linked and shape how individuals make sense of how they should relate and interact with others, and the expectations with which others greet them. In the next section I will further discuss religious identity and its multiple cultural and ethnic associations.

Finally, sometimes converts might attribute their level of integration to personality. Natalie felt the Muslim community in Cincinnati embraced her fully. When reflecting on why she did not have any problems compared to other converts she knows, Natalie attributes it to her proactive, outgoing nature. She told me,

> I think that in my case I was very proactive, from the day that I joined I immediately said who can I contact, where can I go to learn more information? And they would tell me and I would say who else? I feel that one of the things that myself, as well as new converts who don't have the same experience that I have, is that the community needs to embrace them a lot more than they do. I personally haven't had any problems, but I do see other people who fall off the wheel because they're not embraced, maybe they're shy, they're not as open as I am…I have heard of other converts who have not had such a good experience as me. And I just draw the conclusion that they're not as outgoing as I am, they're not asking questions first, meaning that that's just their personality. They're like, I don' t know them, I don't know what to say, what do I say?

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[13] The declaration of faith in Islam. It is to say: "I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except for God, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His final prophet and messenger." In Islam, a public declaration of faith constitutes conversion.

Although Natalie attributes her ease in joining the Muslim community to her outgoing personality, larger contexts such as race need to be considered as to why the community embraced her more easily than others. Natalie is African-American, and though the African-American population in American Muslim communities has historically been viewed as second-class Muslims (Jackson 2005)[14], their presence and involvement in the mosque is generally more commonplace than white converts. This is not to say that all African-American Muslims are converts; on the contrary, Islam has deep historical roots in America and this tradition is tied to the African American population. African Muslims brought Islamic knowledge with them when they were brought to America as slaves. Centuries later African Americans constitute a major segment of the American Muslim population due to the Nation of Islam and other proto-Islamic black-nationalist movements (Jackson, 2005: 23).

Generally, I observed that older male converts felt more welcomed and comfortable at the mosque, which may suggest that female converts experience heightened "policing" of behavior at the mosque or some other factor that makes them more inclined to seek out companionship and alternative spaces to socialize at SC. With more visible markers defining women as Muslim, there is more ground for policing based on dress. Moreover, past research on mosques and Muslim communities indicate that mosques spaces are usually perceived by their attendees as masculine spaces (Hopkins, 2007: 194; Dwyer, 1999), although this is not necessarily the case for every mosque. This could be another reason that accounts for why women feel less welcomed

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[14] Sherman Jackson (2005: 4) says: "…following the settling of critical masses of Muslims from the Muslim world, the basis of religious authority in Blackamerican Islam shifts to the sources, authorities, and interpretive methodologies of historical Islam. On this development, given their presumed mastery over this intellectual legacy, immigrant Muslims came into a virtual monopoly over the definition of a properly constituted "Islamic" life in America. Meanwhile, Blackamerican Muslims found themselves increasingly unable to address their cultural, political, and social reality in ways that were either effective in an American context or likely to be recognized as "Islamic" in a Muslim one."

at the mosque. Hannah's experience praying in the smaller prayer area attached to the Clifton

mosque is an example of this discomfort:

> I really don't go here because they just have that little house open and I know they have
> the baby gate, but usually there are like guys behind the baby gate and I kind of like have
> to give them a cough in order for them to get them out of my space type of situation.
> None of the other women go so I don't like being the only woman there with like a group
> of guys, despite usually the imam will be very welcoming and I'll see one or two guys
> that are familiar with me. But I don't think I'd go during the day down here. I've been a
> couple times and I've felt really awkward, so.

During the daytime the actual mosque in Clifton is not used for the five daily prayers, instead

community members pray in a little house that is located on the same property. A baby gate is

used to separate the men and women's section (in traditional intention-built mosques women

pray in a raised balcony while men pray on the main floor); but as Hannah indicates, there are

usually men in the women's section which makes it awkward for her especially if there are no

other women with her when she goes there to pray.

Romanticized Community Imaginaries: The Ummah

Despite usually unwelcoming and alienating experiences at the mosque, converts hold

onto a romanticized ideal of Muslim community informed by reading they did on Islam prior to

or after conversion, or from information received from mentors. This imaginary community is

multifaceted and sometimes contradictory when compared to actual local community spaces.

Most interestingly, imaginations of ideal community almost always overlap with notions of

global Muslim community, or the ummah. Converts characterize ideal community as non-

judgmental, supporting, diverse, and unconditionally accepting and inclusive (as Gordon told

me, he feels that no one should have to work to prove themselves to be in the Muslim

community). In this sense, their community imaginary reflects aspects of traditional, place-based

communities (see for example Davies and Herbert, 1993; Lyon, 1987). On the other hand, since

their idealized community is interlinked with notions of the Muslim ummah, it also reflects

qualities of place-free, "stretched-out" community (Allen and Hamnett, 1995; Miller, 1993;

Johnston et al., 1994: 80), of which imagined communities are a part. Though these different

conceptions of community are sometimes contradictory, they are also productive. They keep

converts attached to the local Cincinnati community—albeit sometimes weakly attached—

despite their negative experiences at the Clifton and/or West Chester mosques. This attachment

to the mosque despite feeling unwelcome is important for converts' acquisition of Islamic

knowledge and negotiations of identity, as we will see in the remaining sections of this chapter.

The following segment from Gordon's interview demonstrates how the West Chester mosque,

though less welcoming (and also the mosque that Gordon has never visited), symbolizes a

romanticized Islamic community.

> **Gordon:** If you're a convert, that's where you want to go! When you're driving down the highway and you see that [West Chester] mosque, it's like "oh my gosh!" In your head you always see stuff—at least from my point of view—you see the ideal of everything, and the ideal is that great, big, giant mosque!

> **Interviewer:** Filled with people.

> **Gordon:** Oh my gosh, and that's Islam! That's what you wanted, that's what you're going for. In the beginning for a lot of people it's as much the experience as it is the other. And then to kind of be denied right off the bat is kind of like, "I haven't even met anybody and I'm already getting rejected!"

> **Interviewer:** It's unfortunate.

> **Gordon:** And then you come to Clifton and it is very different. I mean scope and everything, it's very different.

Hannah's account of the respective environments of the West Chester (ICGC) and Clifton

mosques also reveals similar contradictions:

> **Hannah:** I feel ICGC is more formal. I feel like it's so much more beautiful and at times feels a lot more sacred in like the traditional manner. And I really…it's like the aesthetics of the mosque; like the carpeting and just the beauty of it. And I think that that's really like where—I spent my first Ramadan as a Muslim up there, yeah. The people are older though, and I think they're not as friendly, or maybe they're just not my friends, you

know? Yeah, so I guess it's the feeling that I get at ICGC, but down here I think it's like a younger group, and while I think the space doesn't feel as sacred to me, I actively chose to come down here for taraweeh, and it was because ok, we had an amazing reciter, which is a little bit ICGC as well. Did you go up there for taraweeh at all?

Interviewer: I wasn't here during Ramadan.

Hannah: Oh, ok. Well he was good too, but, I don't know, during taraweeh [at Clifton they] would turn the lights down, and I don't know why it just changes the feel of it. And in terms of like people, I can't come to Clifton without seeing somebody that I know. And I think that there's more of a diversity of people, so I feel less like an outsider versus if you go to West Chester—I don't see anybody who really, it's like heavily concentrated in people who are either Arab or Indian-Pakistani, and I don't see like any other mix of cultures up there, usually. Versus down here, maybe I don't see like a white convert or even a convert, but I just feel like there's a wider spectrum of the type of people/cultural backgrounds that go.

For Hannah the Clifton mosque is more diverse, making her feel less like an outsider. Thus, Clifton mosque more closely mirrors notions of the ummah, which includes all Muslims everywhere and is an imagined community due to the fact that Hannah does not know most of its members (Anderson, 1991). Yet Hannah describes the West Chester mosque as simultaneously more formal and architecturally stunning (symbolizing an idealized Islamic community) and less friendly (not in line with the unconditionally accepting nature of the imagined ummah). So we see that converts' different community imaginaries unevenly map onto actual community spaces in Cincinnati and do not always correspond to converts' actual experiences of these community spaces. Global imaginations of community (i.e. the ummah) are deployed by converts as a way to promote a greater sense of inclusiveness and belonging amidst a sometimes alienating, culturally inflected multiplicity of religious expression found at Cincinnati mosques. For Hannah, experiences outside of the local Cincinnati Muslim community also augment feeling part of something greater. For example, Hannah mentioned being sponsored to attend a week-long Islamic retreat in Tennessee, and felt that this event really helped her to feel part of the ummah, especially seeing other Muslims from all over the US.

Dwyer's (1999) study of British Muslim women reveals how different constructions of

community can be both empowering and constraining. Dwyer challenges mainstream, traditional

multicultural discourses on community that deny differences in groups. She uses Hall's (1992)

work on "new ethnicities" to conceptualize community that is "forged *across* differences rather

than subsuming them" (Dwyer, 1999: 53). Dwyer says,

> Such constructions of community might be compared with Massey's (1994)
> conceptualization of a 'global sense of place' through which she reworks older static
> notions of place-based communities to imagine communities as globalized, or
> 'extroverted' webs of connections through which 'the global' and the 'the local' are
> inextricably linked (53).

When I asked converts whether they felt a part of the wider Muslim community, many assumed I

was asking whether they felt part of the ummah, or asked me to specify whether I meant the

greater Cincinnati Muslim community or the ummah. Before conducting my interviews I had not

even thought to ask converts to share their thoughts about their place within the global Muslim

community—this was something they brought into the interviews themselves. Most of my

research participants emphatically affirmed that they felt part of the ummah, but usually hesitated

when reflecting about whether they felt they belonged to the Cincinnati community. Most of my

informants' responses indicated that they felt part of the community more out of feelings of right

as opposed to actual feelings of belonging, since most respondents indicated that they did not

feel fully accepted at the mosque. This shows that there is a multiplicity of meaning attached to

places of worship (not just unofficially sacred spaces), and often these meanings are shaped and

molded by larger social constructs. In the case of my research, conceptualizations of local

Muslim community intersected with an ideal imaginary of the ummah. This ideal tempers

converts' negative experiences at the Clifton and West Chester mosques, sometimes even

causing converts to justify or dismiss how they've been badly treated or made to feel

unwelcome. Many of my research participants shared that they were personally strong and stuck with the community and are still Muslim, but wish that there was more personal attention given to converts upon conversion because *other* individuals may not be able to cope. This type of deflection was pervasive in my interview data.

In contrast to mainstream, multicultural discourses on community that deny differences, SC's social spaces and community is not built on shared aspects of identity. Rather, SC's goal is to create safe spaces that provide converts with settings in which they can develop meaningful social relationships with others and achieve a sense of belonging and collective identity amongst other converts, individuals recommitting to their faith, or community members that just want a more inclusive, positive, and spiritually nourishing environment. Maryam says:

> A lot of people who come into Islam go through some transitionary periods with friends and family—some experience out right difficulty or challenges with family accepting that they've embraced Islam. And even if they do have family, because a lot of community life in Islam extends to people's homes, and there's a lot of times when the mosques are actually empty, providing a separate space and having people there and having regular programming in an environment that's almost like somebody's living room that's comfortable, we're hoping we'll make people feel that sense of being at home, and being in a comfortable space. Being themselves essentially. Providing a space where people can come in as themselves, and make gradual changes and shifts in their lives.

SC achieves such safe spaces through specific organizational practices. The first is the "No Knowledge" rule that they've borrowed from Ta'leef Collective. The "No Knowledge" rule assumes that there's no common level of Islamic knowledge in the room during any single event or class, "so the basic lowest common denominator is somebody who is not Muslim, who doesn't know any of the Arabic terminology" (Maryam, SC founder). SC does this to prevent confusion or uncomfortable situations on the part of converts who may not know what an Arabic word means and are too embarrassed to ask. SC classes avoid using Arabic terminology if an English word can be used instead. In situations where Arabic cannot be avoided then it is

translated, but Maryam says they're "conscious that people are in all stages of their journey, and they're coming for different reasons." She also emphasizes that it's not just a matter of translation, but also a matter of whether the spirit of the words and teachings are carried through to people so they're not alienated.

Another aspect of SC's spaces is that their events are not strictly gender segregated. However when SC does hold an event at the mosque, they follow the mosque culture, which is to put chairs on two different sides for the men and women. At the same time, SC staff will not prevent people who want to sit with their spouse or sit with their friends. In the case where there is "very flirtatious or suggestive behavior," SC mentors would handle the situation on a one-on-one level, avoiding embarrassing the parties involved or making them feel uncomfortable by public correction of their behavior as sometimes is the case in mosques.

The Faith/Culture Dyad

Before moving on to discussing social spaces outside the mosque, I want to briefly point to some similarities between convert experiences at mosques and recent research on the relationship between religious and ethnic identities in second generation British Pakistani youth (Jacobson, 1997; Dwyer, 1999). Research has found that religion is a more significant source of social identity than ethnicity for some of these youth, namely because religion has a universal appeal and relevance, whereas ethnicity is tied to a particular place(s) and a group of people (Jacobson, 1997). Moreover, the social boundaries delineating expressions of religious identity are less ambiguous than the boundaries associated with ethnicity (Jacobson, 1997). Converts do not personally negotiate ethnic and religious identities for themselves, but they do have to make senses of the "culturally inflected diversity of Muslim practice" found in Cincinnati mosques (Kibria, 2008: 520, found in Mohammad, 2012). As Maryam indicates:

…for people who are converting, you can become kind of alienated, one to your own culture as an American, but also going into an environment that the majority of the community members are immigrants or from a particular cultural background, which in a lot of ways does influence their practice of Islam or the social environment [at the mosque]…And it's easy for people who come in as well to feel like now I have to adapt to this new culture, and everything about my past life I have to leave behind. Or everything about American culture is unsavory. Or just the sheer influence of being around a particular cultural background of people, that okay now I need to eat this food or dress this way.

Robina Mohammad (2012: 1816-17) has found that increased migrant populations in Birmingham has brought together Muslims from different national backgrounds and ethnicities, making young Pakistani women more aware of the cultural diversity of Islamic practice. This awareness allows young women to separate culture from faith in instances where cultural norms are constricting or oppressive, but sustained and justified through the link between ethnic and religious identities which are often almost impossible to separate. Jessica Jacobson (1997) calls this the faith/culture dyad. For young Pakistani women the separation of culture and religion allows them to embrace "religion as an 'alternative' self definition tying the individual into a global *culture free* identity" (Alexander, 2000: 14, emphasis added). Such a religious identity is not so much culture-free as it is cross-cultural and cross-ethnic, allowing individuals to make multiple cultural associations with religion, without delineating one particular cultural form as the correct or better way (Mohammad, 2012: 1817-18).

The greater Cincinnati Muslim community is ethnically, socioeconomically and ideologically diverse. Converts that embrace Islam and become part of the community come from even more diverse religious and family backgrounds. Though there are unifying aspects of a shared Muslim identity, there are many cultural, ethnic, and ideological differences that create internal community tension, which converts become caught up in as they try to find their place as

a new Muslim in community life. Gordon told me that he was able to separate cultural traditions

from religion after conversion. He says,

> I think I very quickly started to separate—at least in my mind—the cultural aspects of the religion and the religion. So I, not that I tailored the religion to me, but I did in some ways. My life, there hasn't been any major changes…other than the few obvious things, you know fasting or something like that. But for the most part, everything has kind of just jelled.

The converts I spoke to share similar stories about having to separate culture and religion on the

spectrum of Islamic practice, and indicated that SC's community outreach events were helpful in

this regard. SC organizes a quarterly lecture series called Community Conversations, which

invites scholars and speakers who travel and speak nationally to address both SC's target

audience (converts and those recommitting to their faith) and the wider community. Maryam

says that the series has covered

> [I]ssues that are specific to the Muslim-American experience, particularly the indigenous experience—people who either grew up here as second or third generation, who embraced the faith, or maybe have some mix in their family, immigrant and somebody born here or a convert. So some of the issues we've covered is creating safe spaces in our community, that's for this year; we're going into our third event this coming month God-willing. We've covered navigating our identity as Muslim-Americans, thinking about topics like navigating culture versus navigating the religious tradition. We've talked about practical spirituality in our everyday lives, so how do we build these kinds of habits into the reality of our daily lives.

Odil (Mustafa), a convert and board member of the Clifton mosque feels that the speakers SC

invites create a bridge between American-born Muslims and converts, and first generation

immigrants. He believes the lectures are aimed at "trying to shape the whole community at large

towards the acceptance of new Muslims and American culture."

> [W]hen you are a convert, or even I would say even an American-born Muslim, if you have this American culture in yourself, you go to school here in that sense, you might feel a little bit ostracized at the masjid [mosque]. You might have this lack of understanding with the first generation of people moving here. And having those kinds of talks, seminars, speakers coming here and trying to, actually more educate the people coming from overseas about what is being Muslim here and trying to understand a different

culture, because in Islam we all have different cultures and we have to accept each other. As long as we all abide by the same Muslim concept, even though there are many of them, they might be different. At the end of the day accepting each other's differences toward our different background, we come from different cultures. I think it's very good. So it's not entirely dedicated toward new Muslims, it's more dedicated toward practicing here, Islam in the US.

So just as participants in Mohammad's (2012) study separate between faith and culture to allow for multiple cultural associations with their religious identities, converts similarly use the faith/culture dyad to allow for American cultural associations with their expressions of religious identity. Whether cultural associations come in the form of material culture like dress and food or in more substantial forms like one's mannerisms or what ethnicity they look like (recall Virginia's story of how looking ethnically ambiguous shaped the level of knowledge community members expected her to have). Lastly, as indicated in the accounts above, SC's Community Conversations series also deploys the faith/culture dyad and is working to change the dominant paradigm in the community through thought leadership lectures.

Going into this project I expected converts to tell me that they had difficulty negotiating an American-Muslim identity. While converts did express sometimes being "lost" at the mosque amongst the dominant Indian-Pakistani and Arab populations, I was surprised that this sentiment was not as prominent as I had expected in the interviews. When converts started to speak about their experiences with SC, this aspect was slightly more prominent, so this will be addressed in the remaining sections of this chapter. Rather, what did surface in the process of converts relating their mosque experiences, was their concern in being able to learn the necessarily Islamic beliefs and practices and "keep the faith". Natalie, Ted, and Gordon each expressed this in the following excerpts from their interviews:

> I think by me being older, trying to be Americanized is not as important as it would be for a younger person because I kinda like "been there done that", especially since I

wasn't a Muslim. And so now I'm on a journey or the quest to focus on Allah and please Allah, whatever that entails, and that's what I try to stay focused on.

(Natalie)

I think if you have some connection with the community, I think you are more likely…I think people by nature tend to do things that their friends do. So if you're already religious or if you're already borderline, and then you have people you're friends with that you get along with who practice, you are more likely to practice. I think that being off by yourself is probably the biggest obstacle for keeping the faith.

(Gordon)

For the first year I felt very much like I was on my own, and there was just so much to learn and it seemed overwhelming almost. I mean I'm still here which is, alhamdulillah [praise be to God]. I'm still here, yeah. But if I were a weaker person in faith, then I may not have stuck around. So that's one of the concerns I had, someone to actually pray with and come to my home or go to their home, or do one-on-one instruction in prayer.

(Ted)

Natalie, Gordon and Ted's testimonials illustrate that one of their major concerns is being able to stay with the faith. More importantly, their accounts indicate that being able to remain a strong Muslim after conversion is strongly dependent on whether they have individuals to support them in their journey and guide them through the often overwhelming amount of information they feel they must learn. As Ted and Gordon indicate, a lack of one-on-one mentorship is what makes it or breaks it for some converts. Because converts indicate such a strong link between maintaining religiosity and community or social networks, the next sections will explore different social spaces outside of the mosque which converts have identified are helpful in feeling authentically Muslim and acquiring Islamic knowledge that is self-transformative and helps them live a life that pleases God.

Socializing as Placemaking

Drawing on feminist work on leisure (Green and Singleton, 2007; Wearing, 1998), I argue for conceptualizing converts' social interaction that happens outside of the mosque as a site and social space, not merely a temporally defined activity. Such a conceptualization offers

insight into the importance of companionship and a social support network in converts' negotiations of religious identity, understanding, and practice regardless of location. Socialization takes place in the mosque, at SC events and classes, and outside these community spaces. Social interaction happens at any moment, in any location, without the help of organizational resources like a specific location in the case of the mosque or facilitators and mentors in the case of SC, (which does not yet have a physical space and instead uses the mosque or other public venues for its classes and events). Faced with an unsupportive and alienating mosque culture, converts seek other, positive spaces of companionship in SC's events and programs, as well as privately organized informal gatherings. Throughout my fieldwork, I was told many stories of how community events and gatherings in the mosque provide opportunities for social interaction and friendship, which often extend beyond the mosque to people's homes or results in friends going out to eat, shopping together, or seeking advice and support for major life decisions and spiritual matters.

When we look at social interactions in only one place—for example at the mosque—we limit our scope of analysis and risk generalizing mosque experiences. Community spaces and events are experienced differently depending on age, ethnicity, and gender—what may be a self-affirming and spiritually nourishing experience for one person, may be an alienating experience for another. As Maryam, indicates, "A lot of community life in Islam extends to people's homes, and there's a lot of times when the mosques are actually empty." Ted's testimonial confirms this: "I converted during Ramadan, and after I became a Muslim, as you know everyone in the whole community is around each other and then after Ramadan it's like, "where did everyone go?" When the site of analysis is community interactions at the mosque, all other social interaction that happens at other sites gets pushed out of the picture. Conceptualizing social interaction as a

site alerts our attention to spaces that are actively sought or produced by converts, aiding them in developing a transformative and sustainable expression of Islam. For converts, personal and community spaces defined through social practices and interaction are meaningful on a religious register. The next and final section of this chapter will explore these various social spaces, and the ways that they are invested with religious meaning.

Sacred Social Spaces Inside and Outside the Mosque

In a 2009 special issue on religion in *Social and Cultural Geography*, Howe (2009) problematizes the notion of secular normativity, arguing that the variety of secularisms makes it inaccurate to speak of a coherent secular spatiality (639). Thus, he encourages geographers to pay attention to "different forms of secular *place making*, not the production of 'secular space'" (Howe, 2009: 641, emphasis added). Similarly, geographers of religion should attend to the various forms of *sacred* place making, as opposed to the production of sacred space. The difference here lies in focusing on the various processes that invest sacred and religious meaning in any kind of space/place, instead of examining places that have already been defined as sacred according to particular criteria. The logic is that such criteria are individual, multifaceted, and are subject to change. I argue that socialization as site (constituted by different events and acts of socializing) creates a site of community and belonging for converts, regardless of where these sites are actually located (i.e. where socialization takes place). These sites are invested with various religious meanings and this happens through different processes, which I will detail in what follows.

I identified two similarities in most responses when I asked informants what about the mosque made it important for them to visit. First, all converts indicated that being at the mosque and surrounded by other members from the community gave the mosque a special feeling that

they enjoyed and felt was fulfilling. Second, the setting of the mosque itself evoked a feeling of

sanctity and reverence. Converts mentioned the architecture (high ceilings, feeling of openness,

and the dome's interior) and aesthetics (carpet, chandelier, tapestries and artwork, and Arabic

calligraphy) as contributing to a sacred atmosphere that was different and more special than the

corner of a room or nook that they used for prayer in their homes. Most converts recalled

memories of how they felt when they entered the mosque for the first time; they were usually in

awe and amazement. Despite these strong feelings, I gleaned from my interviews that, more

important than the physical mosque itself, what rendered mosques special was the fact that others

were around. I will further address this notion in the following chapter. Now, I will elaborate on

the idea that sanctity is found in converts' social practices.

SC's event spaces and the social spaces of informal gatherings are what I will call

"sacred social spaces" (Lindenbaum 2012). These are literal spaces whose boundaries are

marked by the temporal duration and social practices of a particular moment. Like the social and

community spaces at the mosque, these sacred social spaces are sites that provide opportunities

for converts to form friendships, feel a sense of belonging and exchange religious information

and advice. The friendships that converts form through social interaction at gatherings, meet-ups,

and SC events and programs help them form a support network which in turn reminds them that

they are not alone on their journey of conversion. Many times converts form friendships at SC

events and at the mosque, which grow and are strengthened outside of the programs. Natalie

explains:

> [B]ecause I have developed friendships with a lot of sisters, they now come to my house,
> I go to their house, we go out to eat, we go to Starbucks, and it's not just once we attend
> the mosque and leave there. They may send me a text, hey do you wanna do this or vice
> versa or something like that. So, it's quite a few people who definitely are my friends and
> I talk to them and try to see them as often as I can.

Emma says she feels most part of a community when she is spending time with people that are either converts or accepting of converts. She emphasized that it does not matter whether this is at a mosque, at her home, at Salaam Community, or in another location; "It's more about the people in attendance."

Converts indicated that one of the most important aspects of social interaction and community is how they facilitate access to Islamic knowledge. Respondents indicated that they educated themselves about Islam through self-study, by reading books on Islam that they researched and bought or ones that were gifted to them, and listening to online lectures and podcasts. In situations where they had questions about Islam, especially situational questions about how to apply a particular Islamic injunction or obligation in their life, they asked friends who were more knowledgeable or who had connections to Islamic scholars. Generally, respondents expressed that they would not approach the Imam of the mosque they most regularly attended to get their questions answered, or at least not if they thought they could get it answered by someone else. Virginia expressed: "There's some women that I know where if I have a question that I feel that I just don't understand or I'm embarrassed to ask someone, I might, I directly email them and ask them. But you know, I feel like especially with my friends, we'll tend to ask each other." Converts tended to describe the Islamic websites they visited and the online classes they listened too as "standard American Islam." When asked to elaborate on what they meant by this, my research participants contrasted the type of scholars and resources they sought online or through friends to what was available at the mosque. At the mosque, resources include poorly translated Islamic texts or lectures by individuals serving as the Imam, who were born and raised in a "Muslim" country and often had a heavy accent. With regards to what she sees as American scholarship, Virginia says:

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Scholars whose experience is rooted in the American experience. So, because it's all fine and dandy for someone in Egypt to give a fatwa[15] on whatever, and even they might have the "correct interpretation" or an accurate interpretation, but it's not going to be delivered in a way that is understandable or executable in an American environment…a foreign scholar without familiarity with the lived experience of Americans may have a difficult time relating teachings/messages to me in a way that is understandable. Islam is supposed to be for all peoples and that means that the message needs to be interpretable and understandable to me, but I am a product of a particular time and place.

Thus, instances of seeking Islamic knowledge or getting one's questions answered mostly happened outside of the mosque. Social connections and friends are important resources in this regard. Converts did indicate that SC's events, and classes provided a more comfortable environment for them to ask questions. Convert Hannah said:

> I've taken different classes through Salaam, and that has helped my religious knowledge. So being able to apply things and also having a forum where you can really ask questions, because like everyone's new. You don't have to be like…I know like one time at [a] halaqa [similar to a bible study circle] I asked what the difference between the heart and the nafs was, and I just felt like—like it was totally me, making myself feel this way—but I felt like it's such a basic question you know, everybody else is going to know this, etcetera.

Regardless of whether Hannah's discomfort in asking a question at a mosque class stems from her perception or an actual fact that everybody will know the answer, she does feel hindered by the fact that other attendees at the mosque class are born Muslim, as opposed to at SC's class where "everyone's new". Other women in the class could be seen nodding their heads when Hannah asked her question, indicating that they too had the same question (Fieldnotes, 9/11/13). The factors that lead to such a stark difference in perception of the mosque environment in comparison to the environment at SC's classes and programs is beyond the scope of this paper, however there are real consequences for converts' religious understanding and practice. Converts seek access to Islamic knowledge that they deem is key to their proper practice of Islam.

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[15] A Islamic legal opinion or learned interpretation that a qualified Islamic jurist can give on matters of Islamic law.

Converts' social resources, friendships and relationships provide the opportunities for access to Islamic knowledge. These various processes of learning their faith usually take place beyond locations and times normally designated for religious activities.

In addition to social connections facilitating the acquisition of Islamic knowledge, the social spaces outside of the mosque and at SC events give converts a feeling of being authentically Muslim and belonging to a religious tradition and community, however configured and at whatever scale. SC specifically strives to affirm converts' previous life experiences and the cultures and backgrounds they've come from. Converts have indicated that this helps them accept that their experiences are decreed destiny and are part of who they are. Affirming converts past lives during and after the process of conversion communicates to converts that their particular path is meaningful and authentic.

When asked whether the social aspect of SC's events affects her religiosity or spirituality, converts responded in the following ways:

> I think that being part of the community helped me to become more comfortable with hijab [religious head covering] .
>
> (Hannah)

> …I will admit it, I will only pray in public when I have my sisters with me. Its not typically something that I'll just throw down a prayer mat and do it in the middle of the mall or in a dressing room or anything like that. But when I have my sisters there, sure, we've prayed in the allies, we've prayed in the grass…you know. So I think strength is in numbers definitely. Which I think helps me, strengthens me being more religious I guess, is when I'm with a group verses me trying to do it by myself.
>
> (Adalia)

> I think if you have some connection with the community, I think you are more likely…I think people by nature tend to do things that their friends do. So if you're already religious or if you're already borderline, and then you have people you're friends with that you get along with who practice, you are more likely to practice. I think that being off by yourself is probably the biggest obstacle for keeping the faith.
>
> (Gordon)

These converts' accounts show that sociality affects their religiosity, helping them either to apply the knowledge that they've sought and/or gained, or in helping them assert the religious identities in a public place that's perceived to be intimidating to them carrying out a religious act. So we see through these accounts that for converts, an important part of being Muslim is seeking sacred knowledge, i.e. educating oneself about how one should act and treat others and how one should carry out daily activities in a God-conscious way. Social connections are indispensable to understanding how Islamic knowledge is actually applied to daily life and interaction. Islamic jurisprudence divides all acts into either 'ibadaat (ritual act of worship, or matters dealing with the relationship of man to God) and mu'amalaat (day-to-day activities which if done for the sake of God, are rewarded). Thus, any actions involving interaction and relationships between people (like familial relationships, responsibilities and duties to others, business and civic matters) are a large part of being Muslim, and there are guidelines to how one should act and conduct oneself in such matters.

Not being born Muslim made research participants more conscious of the meanings and challenges of adhering to their religion and how it shapes their identity and sense of self. Of the converts I spoke to, Aida has been Muslim the longest (14 years), and because she married a Muslim man when she was eighteen, she was familiar with Islam even before she converted about five to six years into her marriage. Despite Aida's long history with Islam, I sensed in her an uneasiness and insecurity about being Muslim in public and even within the Muslim community. She quit work after converting because she wanted to wear the hijab but felt uncomfortable doing so in her work environment. A few years later when she started nursing school and working full-time again, she slowly lost her "Islamic bubble" and took a break from the community for a long period of time. In the past year, as her children have grown and

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become more independent, she has slowly been entering back into the community, but she reported feeling lost in terms of where she will fit in, especially given that she does not cover her hair anymore.

> I kind of felt bad, because I had taken off my hijab, and then I wasn't really sure where I was going to fit back into the community…I felt like a fish out of water. And this year is the first year that I've been going to the Salaam Community things, and it's like I've kind of found my place again in the community.

Aida identifies the fact that there are a lot of converts at Salaam Community as the main aspect facilitating her reintegration into the community. She had not realized how difficult it would be to "break back into the community because people have ongoing relationships" which she had not been a part of for some time.

Aida has started to be more public about her faith at work as well. She says, "I kind of hid it for a while because I was so afraid of being judged. And it's actually been liberating for me; it's like yes, I'm Muslim. Yes I pray. Yes I fast…I felt kind of like I was living two lives for a long time. It's been kind of liberating for me, it's like yeah, this is who I am." Aida points to SC as having been beneficial for her in being more comfortable being herself and practicing her faith at work: "…[I]t has helped me to foster friendships outside, which is nice, because you don't feel so alone, and it's like you know that there are other people out there who are converts…" Aida said that the friendships she made through SC programs encouraged her to come around and try to become part of the community again: "It can be a daunting task at first because you are not really sure if you will be accepted and find a 'place' to fit in." Aida is a social person, and said that she was really affected negatively when she didn't have the time to see and be with people as she did previously.

Aida's account mirrors Hopkins (2007) findings of young Muslims men's identities; his research participants indicated that having Muslim friends and access to people who shared their

faith was an important aspect of their identity. Gordon, who lives about 40 minutes from the

nearest mosque, more directly reflects this in the following quotation.

> Lots of times, when the loneliness aspect happens, I feel fake, I kind of feel like I'm not a
> real Muslim, because I'm not connected. It's easy for someone to say, "I'm Muslim," but
> I do what I can do. So I pray every day, and I get up early and I pray and during Ramadan
> I get up and I eat. I'm doing the aspects that I can do that can keep me connected to the
> religion. Like I said, I feel in my heart that I'm Muslim, even early on, but every once in
> a while you do want *that*—you just want the aspects of the religion that you don't get. A
> lot of that is just interpersonal stuff, it's having another person—honestly now that I've
> said that that's probably why I'm sitting here rambling. Because I've talked more about
> Islam in the hour we've been together than I have in 8 months.

So we see here that Gordon ties his own sense of self as a Muslim very tightly with being

connected with others of his faith. What he calls "interpersonal stuff" (belonging to a community

and frequently interacting with others of the same faith) is important and self-affirming for his

Muslim identity—to the extent that he feels that he's not authentically Muslim when he's not

connected with others.

Although both female and male converts emphasized the importance of social interaction

and community for their identity and religiosity, female converts tended to define their religiosity

more broadly. They did not equate their level of involvement in the community with being

religious or authentically Muslim. Aida and Virginia told me that having young children makes it

almost impossible to attend the mosque as frequently as they did before they became mothers.

Also, the majority of SC's events are in the evening, which makes it equally difficult to make it

out to those social gatherings. For Virginia, having a young son has meant that she's had to find

other ways to express her piety outside of attending the mosque and community events. Virginia

says:

> I think that's one of the nice things I feel, about Islam, is because you know we have
> mosques, but because prayer, for instance, which is a way that faith can manifest,
> happens everywhere I think. Like it turns every space into a potential space for
> religiousness.

Virginia has struggled with this since the birth of her son, but feels that recently she's managed

to internalize this. When she used to live in Los Angeles before she gave birth, she and her

husband's Ramadan routine became a ritual. They would break their fast and eat their meal at

home, then walk to the local mosque where taraweeh prayers were offered in the evening. When

she moved to Cincinnati and had her son, she has not been able to maintain the same routine.

This forced her to redefine where she could feel like she was "in the presence of God." Virginia

told me that while she believes that one can be in the presence of God anywhere, she feels that

it's easier to focus in the mosque "because it is designed for focusing your attention."

> I think at first I was feeling like mosques need to be more kid-friendly, what's with
> people, they hate kids, I don't understand. And I've had this really big (sort of in the past
> couple of weeks) change in my point of view in that, hmm, maybe what needs to be
> happening is I need to find other avenues, because you know maybe what needs to
> change is me. I need to be thinking about how can I worship God through taking care of
> my family. So like changing my frame of reference a little. So no, I don't think it [piety]
> necessarily has to be tied to a space, because then what happens when that space
> disappears? Like for me, I can't go to the mosque as much as I'd like, so that space is
> gone, you know.

Virginia and Aida's accounts illustrate more flexible understandings of religious and piety, one

that defines religion as being of the everyday, not just for particular spaces and times. Such

conceptualizations of religion point to the everyday lived nature of religion, embodied religious

practice (like prayer), and the body as sacred space. These themes are important aspects of my

interviewees' religious experiences and will be further explored in the next chapter.

Conclusion

Muslim convert experiences are particularly edifying for understanding sacred space,

religious practice, and the processes that inscribe various spaces with religious meaning. As

illustrated through my interview data, the social-spatial aspects of religion bear significantly on

converts' religious understanding and identities. Different social practices that converts engage

in create spaces of companionship and community that converts identify are important for feeling authentically Muslim, accessing Islamic knowledge, and assisting them in incorporating Islam in their daily lives. This chapter challenged traditional definitions of "sacred" and "secular" by demonstrating how using the concept of socialization as site we can understand various community spaces in Cincinnati as sacred social spaces, therefore decentering the mosque as the primary or sole site of sanctity and religiosity. For converts, socialization and a sense of community and belonging factor greatly in shaping their identities and understanding of piety, religious practice, and authenticity. Beyond the specificities of Islam in Cincinnati, this case study demonstrates the importance of not excluding the social aspects of religion from geographies of religion, and points to the ongoing need to research how social aspects of religion are important for meaningful spiritual experiences. Thus, SC is not unique in its recognition that the social and the religious go hand in hand. Other spaces that function around similar spatial logics as SC are Jewish community centers, fellowship halls in the Presbyterian tradition, and Turkish teahouses adjoined to mosques in Europe. Even within the Islamic tradition there are varying manifestations of "semi-sacred" or sacred social spaces, which despite having similar goals of nurturing individuals and reviving communities, have different activities and programs that reflect the different communities to which they cater. One example is Rumi's Cave in London, UK, which is a community hub and cultural arts and events space. Like SC, Rumi's Cave is "a safe space where people from different backgrounds can come and explore their culture and identity" (rumis.org); however, unlike SC, they are associated with a particular tradition within Islam (Jalaluddin Rumi), are not affiliated with a local mosque, and are tied with a particular religious leader who facilitates personal and spiritual development in the community through workshops, courses and talks.

In investigating social aspects of faith in converts' individual religious experiences, it is important not to create a dichotomy between individual religious experiences and officially sacred spaces. Establishing that the mosque does not have a monopoly on sanctity and religiosity does not mean that individual religious experiences do not take place at the mosque. Personal religious experiences can and do take place at the mosque. For example, converts generally visited the West Chester mosque if they were seeking time to reflect and be alone with God. When they wanted to socialize or be around others, they usually visited the Clifton mosque. I also discussed converts' different community imaginations: that of the local Muslim community in Cincinnati and an imagined global Muslim community. Conceptualizations of local Muslim community intersected with an ideal imaginary of the Muslim ummah. This ideal tempers converts' negative experiences at the Clifton and West Chester mosques and sustains their participation and attachment to the community despite continued feelings of alienation. Converts also separate ethnic and cultural tradition from religion on the spectrum of religious practice in order to assert the validity of an American cultural association with their religious identities. This has implications not only for converts' identities and feeling authentic, but also points to the potential mediatory role that Muslim converts can play between immigrant Muslim communities and the majority American population. Hannah and Gary shared that they had certain assumptions of the Muslim community, which they later realized were inaccurate, and/or were fueled by the media in Hanna's case. Often times these assumptions and stereotypes more closely relate to cultural and ethnic elements of Muslim communities than actual religious aspects. Converts' ability to separate ethnic and cultural tradition from religion can serve greater American society to do the same by educating their own sphere of influence. Many of my research participants expressed that their families, friends and co-workers were initially

unsupportive of their decision to convert to Islam, citing that Islam teaches violence, or that the religion is a cult, not a real religion, or just an "Arab thing." Over time their views changed usually as a result of seeing that their loved one or colleague was still the same person, and in most cases a better or happier version of the person they used to know. In other cases, their exposure to other Muslims showed them that Islam is just a way of life, not a fanatical, dogmatic ideology.

Salaam Community believes that their work serves as a positive, healthy model for religious community, without attempting to replace the established communities that are developed around mosque spaces. Their model of sacred social space has the potential to shift the community culture at traditional faith-based institutions. The social spaces that organizations like SC create enable the coming together of different types of people that would otherwise not meet (or would meet but would filter their individual experiences and struggles before sharing with others) in a more homogenous community space provided by the mosque. However, in presenting the social spaces of SC as positive and supportive for converts in their transition to adopting a new faith, I do not wish to overlook the exclusionary practices that can sometimes result from such initiatives. As Maryam states: "I think any time you have a space and develop a culture around that space, because bonds are formed, and you basically have rituals and routines and things that take place there, it's possible that you become more insular or isolated from the rest of the community." In this sense, SC must be mindful not to create a culture where only an American expression of Islam is valid. In other words, SC must guard against an organizational culture where one cannot be a Pakistani-Muslim, or an Egyptian-Muslim, or a Turkish-Muslim in America. Rather, religious experiences and spiritual struggles should be affirmed on an individual level.

The importance of sociability, community and belonging are also extremely important for born Muslims as well, and certainly many Muslims share similar notions about non-compartmentalized religion as converts do. This is because there is a foundation for this in Islamic teachings and creed. Thus, the conclusions I have reached thus far about Muslim converts are also applicable to born Muslims. The distinction I've made between Muslim converts and born Muslims should not deter us from the fact that both are subsets of the Muslim community, and both are 'equally Muslim'. As I have acknowledged in my introduction, there is a dimension of temporality to my research participant's spiritual paths, experiences, and identities, and I have made the aforementioned distinction in order to address the very real issue of alienation and religious-cultural conflation in Muslim-American communities. Generally, the converts who have been Muslim longer tended to be more integrated into the Muslim community and their religious identity reflected this.

In the next chapter I explore the lived religious practices of converts, with a specific focus on the body and embodied religious practices. Given that social interaction's role in placemaking influences converts religious belief and understandings, it is important to examine how this impacts other aspects of their life beyond social and community spaces. Converts indicated having a deeper understanding of Islam with the personal support and mentorship they are provided through social events and gatherings. This understanding of Islam shapes their daily practice and enactment of Islam in the home, in public, and at work and school. Furthermore, the feelings of authenticity afforded by a sense of community and belonging gives them a feeling of divine purpose that they carry with them in their lives. Their lived religious practices also act back on this sense of authenticity, maintaining it and shaping it further as their religious understandings and practices evolve, and as they themselves mature on their spiritual path.

CHAPTER 4

LIVED RELIGION: THE BODY AND EVERYDAY SPACES AND PRACTICES

> …[P]erhaps, instead of focusing our accounts upon sacred spaces and times separate from the geographies and temporalities of our everyday (re)making of the world, we should seek out the extraordinary as practiced and sustained in the ordinary.
> (Holloway, 2003: 1961)

> Real spirituality is not an escape, but an arrival.
> (Masters, 2010: 14)

In the previous chapter I explored converts' individual religious experiences at various sacred social sites inside and outside the mosque. In this chapter, I will continue to examine individual religious experiences but with a focus on the body as the site of analysis in order to better understand the lived and embodied religious practices of converts in their everyday lives. The sacred social spaces of SC events and informal gatherings help spiritualize converts' everyday lives. This is achieved through a deeper understanding of Islam, which shapes their daily practice in the home, in public, and at work and school. Additionally, the personal support and mentorship they receive through various social sacred spaces gives them a feeling of divine purpose, which they carry with them in their lives.

First, I will briefly discuss different understandings and definitions of religion that scholars doing geographies of religion have considered, and relate this to my research participants' understandings of religiosity and piety. This will establish a foundation from which my following investigation of the body and everyday spaces and practices ensues. Second, using insights from recent scholarship on embodiment and religion I will examine the notion of the body as sacred space and embodied religious practice in my research participants' accounts of their everyday lives. In the third and final section I return to converts' individual lived religious

experiences to consider the differentiation Holloway (2003) has made between religion being *in* the everyday and *of* the everyday.

Religion: Socio-Spatial Practice

One concern of scholars doing geographies of religion is to try to understand the nature of religion itself. Various definitions have been proposed; from an understanding of religion as a group of symbols that signal certain meanings and can be read, to understanding religion as embodied socio-spatial practice. How one defines religion establishes a framework through which research data is interpreted, ordered, and analyzed. The following section will not be a comprehensive review of all prior debates on the definition of religion; I will only discuss several major positions. In some ways it is futile to endeavor to define religion; however I asked my research participants to share their own understanding of religion and piety with me, and will discuss the academic notions of religion that were useful for my analysis of my research participants' experiences.

One influential definition of religion is that it is a system of symbols (Geertz, 1973), a definition that has been widely accepted in the humanities and social sciences (Mahmood, 2006: 343). Clifford Geertz's formulation posits that religion is "webs of significance" connecting ideas and behaviors in a way that makes life meaningful. It "affirms for the believers a general order of existence and provides them with a certain order of meaning" (Mahmood, 2006: 343). This definition has been critiqued by Asad (2006, 1993) and also by Mahmood (2005). Mahmood (2006: 343) gives the example of the veil, writing:

> [T]he plethora of studies aimed at explaining the resurgence of the veil among Muslims remain caught between providing instrumentalist reasons (e.g., women wear the veil to avoid sexual harassment), on the one hand, and a hermeneutics of the social context (e.g., the veil is a symbolic expression of Muslim women's resistance to Western cultural hegemony), on the other. This idea that the veil is a religious obligation, as many Muslim women claim, is seldom, if ever, addressed in these studies. In my *Politics of Piety*, I

show that for many of those who adopt it, the veil is both a means and an end to realizing the "will of God." Such a conception of the veil enables an ethical-political imaginary quite distinct from one geared towards a politics of cultural identity, which most studies of the veil presume.

Thus, for Muslim women, the veil is an embodied practice that realizes "the will of God,"—it does not necessarily signify anything. Also on the matter of dress, Anna Secor (2007) argues that moral subjects are controlled but also *created* through dress (which can be religious, but not necessarily). This means that religious dress, or any other bodily enactment of faith "is not merely a symbol or an instantiation of 'social control'" (Secor, 2007: 153), but also the creation of a religious subject. From this it follows that religious dress, or any other religious phenomenon which would constitute a religious symbol in Geertz's formulation, has a two-way relationship with a subject. Religious enactments are not only read for meaning like a text, but they also produce meaning, subjects, and spaces.

An alternate conceptualization of religion that recognizes the dialectical relationship between religion and subject is the definition that religion is embodied socio-spatial practice. In Secor's (2002) study of veiling practices in Istanbul, she argues that if we conceive of veiling as a socio-spatial practice, we can account for the different meanings and experiences of veiling across various urban spaces, and the historical and political contexts in which veiling is enacted, given meaning, and experienced. Thus, attending to both the social and spatial-geographic aspects of religious practice allows us to move beyond 'reading' static religious meaning from religious practices (i.e. symbols), and account for the ways in which religious spaces and Muslim bodies are created through religious practice.

When I asked my research participants what it meant to be religious or pious, I received various responses that varied from explanations of what it meant to be a religious *Muslim*, to what it meant to be religious in general. However, most responses initially began with the typical

out-of-the-book response, primarily that to be Muslim meant following the Qu'ran and sunnah[16] and abiding by the five pillars,[17] which outline the major obligations for every Muslims. Natasha's response exemplifies this. She says piety "means that it is a person that submit to Allah, prays five times a day, follows the Qur'an to the best of their ability, that is good, kind, do charity work, participate in Ramadan. Do everything that the Qur'an tell us to do, on a daily basis, not just at the mosque." Following this initial response converts' thoughts meandered and eventually reached explanations that a religious person does not just act religious in the mosque, but is religious in every aspect of their lives by being conscious of God and "doing the right thing." Examples of this type of religious formulation are evident in Aida, Ted, Gary, and Odil's responses below:

> It just means, to me, being aware of Allah [God]. Thinking before you make decisions. Remembering Allah throughout the day. Trying to remember your niyyah [intention] when you're doing things. Trying to say bismillah [in the name of God] before you eat. I mean these things might sound simple, but it's just about how, you know, kind of the—I don't know the world in Arabic, I don't know if it's taqwa [God-consciousness] or whatever, but it's like that awareness that Allah is with you at all times.
>
> (Aida)

> I think to me what being religious and pious means is doing what's right, having a good, pure heart and doing the right things when people aren't looking, you know. Not doing it for show but maintaining a good character and just respecting other people, whether they are Muslim, Christian, Jewish, Hindu or atheist, whatever. Just treating people with respect, and practicing of course. Believing in God and striving to live by the laws, and you know, the suggestions that were set forth for clean and pure lives.
>
> (Ted)

> I mean for me to be a good Muslim is to believe in God, and do good things. Just do good, do the right thing. Treat other people as you would want them to treat you. Essentially that's it.
>
> (Gary)

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[16] The teachings and practices of the prophet Muhammad. The sunnah of Muhammad includes his specific sayings, habits, practices, and silent approvals.
[17] The five pillars includes the testimony of faith (shahadah), the five daily prayers (salah), welfare payment from a Muslim's annual savings (zakah), the annual fasting during each day of the month of Ramadan (sawm) and the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj).

Quick answer: taqwa. Consciousness of Allah. That's it.

<div align="right">(Odil)</div>

Converts generally struggled with defining the word pious, either saying it's not in their vocabulary or treating it as synonymous with religiosity. Hannah defined piety as "acting in a way that is in accordance with your beliefs." She went on to tell me that what attracted her to Islam was the orthodoxy, which she felt she was missing from Christianity and the Bahai faith. She said:

> Seeing Muslims practice the faith through the orthodoxy, through following specific guidelines, and holding to those guidelines—I think that would be piety to me. Muslims today, often (not always) like I've sort of mentioned to you, but often do retain the value of those practices, you know? I think they even, if somebody would say I don't fast but I see why you would fast, or finding meaning in the ritual and meaning in the original practices versus people who change up the rules and modify the rules, I think they're more modern interpretations, and I think that's what has happened with Christianity unfortunately, in my personal view. And what has attracted me to Islam is that this piety again, it outlines the boundaries and somebody who stays within the boundaries of that religion.

Here Hannah is not only referring to the ritual practices of Islam, but also the internalization of the Qur'anic principles and the guidelines found in the sunnah. Emma more directly expressed this when she said, "I believe [piety] is the way that a person carries themselves." Gordon and Virginia's more detailed responses reveal similar sentiments:

> I think it's really, you know, walk the talk. I know so many people who are "religious" that there is no way in the world I would consider them religious. I mean, just from their actions, their speech, stuff like that. I would never ever consider myself the holiest of the holy, but I think that in general, I practice what I preach, you know? I think it's part of what makes a person a good person; not necessarily that you have to be religious to be a good person, but those people that have that connection to faith—that true connection to faith—seem to be happier, seem to be nicer, you know, just aren't such downers.

<div align="right">(Gordon)</div>

> I think that religiosity and piousness, it's a more difficult to describe and you can't see it in someone because it's really something that has to do with their relationship with God, and it doesn't necessarily have a manifestation, like outwardly. So, I would hope though,

that part of that [the externally visible actions of Islam] is striving to be a better person, to yourself and to others, and to focus on your intention, and ultimately how what you're doing, no matter what it is, how can it change or glorify or rectify my relationship with God.

(Virginia)

Hannah, Emma, Virginia and Gordon's responses indicate that being religious or pious consists not only of performing physical obligations and rituals (like praying and fasting), but also internalizing their value, spirit, and meaning in a way that transforms one's character and aligns one's life, habits, and desires with the guiding principles of the Qur'an and prophetic way.

Converts' responses to the question about religiosity and piety reveals a deeper consideration about whether one can be considered pious or religious if they simply follow the external ritual obligations but are dishonest, unkind, and otherwise unpleasant to be around. From converts understanding of piety, we can conclude that an individual must attend to both the external and internal aspects of belief in order to be truly pious and a person of faith. Converts indicated that external ritualistic actions make one obedient to God's will and decree, turning one's soul and inner being towards God and the true path. In turn, such an inward orientation motivates one to further obey God and do the external or physical things that please Him. Thus, external religiosity and internal piety are dialectically related, and point to an understanding of religion that cannot be explained by traditional notions that religion is merely a system of symbols. Converts' religious practices in part create their Muslim identities, which directs their desires, actions and decisions in life.

Converts' responses about piety also point to the notion that belief is grounded upon practice. This is explored in Holloway's (2003) study of New Age spiritual seekers. He writes, "...instead of belief (as sets of meaning) directing and inscribing the body, belief here arises out of a bodily practice: make-believe, then, not belief make" (Holloway, 2003:

1966). This is certainly true for my research participants, who identified that through one's adherence to ritualistic and physical religious practices, they engage in a number of thought processes, which helps one internalize the value of a particular practice. These thought processes include reflecting upon one's intention for doing any action and thinking about one's relationship to God and how they might please Him. However, the notion of "make-believe" almost always begins with a particular religious injunction that initially directs converts to a certain religious performance, enactment, or practice that begins the dialectical process between belief and practice. For example, Muslims pray five times a day because they believe that God has ordained such in the Qur'an. Upon conversion, prayer is one of the first practices that converts are taught and many work towards establishing the five daily prayers in their life immediately. Some of my research participants expressed difficulty in establishing this habit, explaining that they also experienced difficulty in focusing during prayer and didn't necessarily feel the benefits or value right away. Eventually, when they were able to establish the five daily prayers, they felt closer to God, which motivated them to seek ways they could please God in other areas of their lives. In this case, a physical ritual has the ability to change an individual's emotional and spiritual state, which in turn leads to increased practices and rituals, and thus the practice-belief cycle begins.

The Body and Everyday Spaces and Practices

In the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, Holloway (2003: 1961) advises geographers to attend to the "geographies and temporalities of our everyday (re)making of the world" when studying religion and the sacred. It is from feminist theory that the body and everyday life have become important sites of study in geography (see Nast, 1994). Following

Holloway's advice as well as Olson et al.'s (2013) approach, I want to explore the notion of spatial transcendence through the body and embodied religious practice. This will help us understand converts' individual, lived religious experiences, which extend beyond the mosque and sacred social spaces of social outings and SC programs.

With the move to studying individual religious experiences, the notion of the body as sacred space has become more prevalent in the literature of geographies of religion. Kong's (1993) study of different conceptions of sacred space in Singapore is one such example. Kong focuses on religious subjects' varying methods of acceptance and resistance to demolition or relocation of their places of worship. One Catholic priest she interviewed said, "…God himself is sacred first and foremost. As long as God is present there is sacredness and the place is immaterial" (Kong, 1993: 350). In another interview, a Reverend expressed that "other things are sacred insofar as they are related to God" (1993: 350). Kong argues that following from this "'Man' [*sic*] is sacred because 'in us, God's presence can be known'" (1993: 350). Research participants in other studies express similar sentiments. Holloway's investigation of New Age spiritual seekers reveals that corporeal practices frame a space-time where spiritual insight can be gained and divine knowledge achieved (2003: 1966).

Additionally, it is well known that many Christians understand the church as the actual community of believers, not the physical building where believers gather and worship. It follows that the collective religious bodies of a congregation together create a sacred space located in the church building. As discussed in the previous chapter, many converts indicated that one of the main factors that makes the mosque special or sacred is being surrounded by others with the same belief with whom one can pray and worship. Although Muslims do not have the same concept of "the church is the community," we can understand from converts' experiences that

there is a special sanctity of the collective body of Muslims when they gather. Islam is a communal religion, and there is evidence in Islamic teachings that there is special status given to an event when believers gather in the name of God and specifically mention His name. To paraphrase a portion from a longer saying of the prophet Muhammad: God has angels who seek those who remember God; when they find a group of people remembering God they call to one another and surround the group with their wings, filling the space between them and the lowest heaven. God then grants his pardon on the members of the gathering, also granting them what they have supplicated for and protecting them against what they seek protection from (Al-Mundhiri, 2000: 1000-001). Thus, the specific act of remembering God, aloud and in unison, creates a sacred space for Muslims that they understand to be particularly pleasing to God.

The examples above have demonstrated how collective religious bodies and the associated religious practice of remembrance of God creates sacred space-times for converts. Additionally, we can regard the individual body as sacred space. Although none of my research participants directly told me that they understood their body was sacred, their religious practices, experiences, and outlook signified such a formulation; their bodies were sacred in so much as they created sacred space through specific embodied rituals or religious practices. Recall that after giving birth to her son, Virginia could not attend the mosque as frequently as she had in the past and was forced to find new ways to make meaningful sacred space in other places, primarily her home—the space where she spends most time caring for and raising her son. Virginia says:

> I think that's one of the nice things I feel, about Islam, is because you know we have mosques, but because prayer, for instance, which is a way that faith can manifest, happens everywhere I think. Like it turns every space into a potential space for religiousness.

The embodied action of prayer[18], wherever it is performed, creates a "space for religiousness." This is also true of participants of Roman R. Williams' (2010) study of lived religion at work, home and leisure spaces. Williams identifies that prayer is a way that multiple spheres of life came together for his research participants. "Through practices such as prayer, contexts are brought together in ways that open times and places to the possibility of divine actors or forces to be present in a social setting" (276). For example, by praying to God for success in one's profession, or facilitation of a family issue that has been difficult to resolve, believers are giving religious significance to their everyday lives.

Other than the sacred spaces constructed through prayer, Virginia constructs her time with her child and husband as sacred space-time, which makes her home sacred through her role as mother, wife, and homemaker. For Virginia, this is the essence of piety. Going back to the example of not being able to attend taraweeh prayers because of her son, Virginia reflects on what she sees as a difficult struggle for many Muslim women:

> And I can imagine this is something that is hard for a lot of women, especially here in the United States, where women do play an active role, more so than other countries I think, in a mosque. To then have to sort of be like, oh, my family comes first and so like it's not appropriate ever for me to take my son to Taraweeh if it's at 11 pm because that needs to be bedtime. And like changing that…I mean like masha'Allah [God willed it] there are women who take their kids to the mosque, and that's fine, I'm just saying that for me personally, I don't think that's helpful to [my son]. And my duty; I need to be thinking about how can I worship God through taking care of my family.

We see that Virginia understands her everyday responsibilities that come with the different roles of mother and wife are a way for her to worship God. By doing the things she must do, but with awareness that she is doing it to please God by caring for her family, every act becomes an enactment of piety. This is what constitutes lived religion. It may be argued that Virginia's situation proves the strand of secularization theory that claims that religion has become a

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[18] Prayer involves physical motions as well as verbal supplications.

privatized and personal phenomenon to be found only in the home or other private spaces. However, I argue that Virginia's understanding of her religion and her life duties supports post-secular formulations of religion and sacred space, namely that religion is present in the everyday lives of individuals and the categories of sacred and secular do not evenly map onto the spatial duality of private and public space, respectively. Virginia's home is made sacred in as much as the duties associated with being a mother and wife take place in the home. Virginia worships God through taking care of her family; thus whether she is taking her son to the park, running errands at a shopping center, or sitting in a doctor's office, the sites at which she performs her responsibilities become sacred, regardless of where they fall on the private/public spectrum. Remembering one's intention when doing anything allows converts to view any and all daily actions as worship if they do it with the intention to please God.

Virginia's experience gives us an opportunity to follow Yorgason and della Dora's (2009) call to let the geographic study of religion be a two-way interaction, allowing ourselves to be open to directives from religion itself with regards to how to analyze and understand it, instead of applying the same disciplinary tools and frames we use for every subject or category we want to study. There have been even earlier calls to this as well. For example, Isaac (1961-62: 17) believed that "the key to a methodology for a geography of religion lies in the study of religion itself" (Isaac, cited in Kong, 1990: 360). There are certain spatial imaginaries that we associate with the public and private spheres, and we carry these assumptions with us in our analysis of new empirical situations. Returning to the example of religious dress discussed earlier, Secor (2007: 155) says that "It is not enough to say that religious dress, for example, both enables and constrains mobility; it is also necessary to understand how these practices make possible and enact particular ways of being in the world." Similarly, for some convert women,

we know that motherhood can enable or constrain religious practice as traditionally understood, and these different processes effect how these women understand their religious selves and being in the world. For women who are able to conceive of religion as something that goes beyond prescribed rituals (and instead as something that permeates their everyday lives, and as always being conscious of God regardless of what one is doing and where one is) they are able to maintain a continuity between their pious self before motherhood, and their pious self even with children. Regardless of their location, everywhere becomes sacred as every moment is an opportunity to position themselves in relation to God.

Secor (2007) says: "…religions not only enjoin particular gendered ways of being in the world but are themselves defined and practiced in gendered ways." My research participants expressed both religious injunctions that informed their specific, gendered spatial practices, and also life circumstances that defined the way in which religious principles became incorporated into their daily lives (e.g. how often they went to the mosque for prayer or SC events to socialize, where they prayed most often and what rituals or individual religious practices they adopted). Williams (2010) formulates a three-part schema for understanding how religion intersects with work, home and leisure spaces in the everyday lives of his research participants:

> Space for God in everyday life is constructed, in part, by combining elements of location, action and time. Features of location may stimulate a feeling, remind of past behaviors, or animate a particular sense of self. In turn, certain feelings, habits, and identities invite people to do something religious or spiritual. Practices lay down new layers of behavioral residue, renew and generate feelings, and reinforce identities (Williams, 2010: 276).

Williams' account of how individuals make space for God in their daily lives puts emphasis on the contextual elements of place at the expense of ignoring factors like religious conviction or adherence. Williams asserts that these contextual elements spark something in participants, leading them to 'do' something spiritual or make space for the divine amidst the

daily pressures of work, home, and family life. While this was the case for some of my research participants, most expressed that religion had a more prominent role in ordering their daily schedules and defining their routines. Williams' language implies that religion is a passive force in his subjects' lives (e.g., "in the event that God *shows* up" or "the sacred finds its way into many corners of everyday life") (all emphasis added, Williams, 2010: 258-76). In contrast, my research participants express their faith as a lens to view and understand the world around them, to make sense of how things play out in their daily lives, to give them patience and perseverance to accomplish the difficult things they must do daily, and to guide their interactions and daily decisions.

For example, some of my research participants expressed organizing their daily schedules around the five daily prayer times. Ted is middle-aged but has never been married; after his conversion he has been looking to get married, expressing. He said, "…my goal is to find someone who was born in a Muslim country, who can teach my children Arabic and I could learn a lot from." In a different way, Islam factors in greatly when Adalia and Natalie make decisions about what to wear. When reflecting on how her day-to-day life changed after converting, Natalie said:

> Definitely the clothes that I wear. Used to wearing short skirts, sleeveless tops, and I considered that I had beautiful hair, so my hair was really a big thing. I was the type of person that went to the hairdresser every week, and just took pride, I guess, in my hair or having my hair done. Also another big change for me I would consider is finger nail polish because I love color, and I love to express myself through color, and the fact that I can't wear fingernail polish or get my toes done was a dramatic change for me. However, I just discovered that there's some breathable nail polish out there on the market, so I'm looking into getting some of that. But for myself, even though those are materialistic things, that was a big change for me, and people that see me on a daily basis definitely noticed something different about me as well.

Adalia also mentions the clothes she wears when we were discussing piety. She identified that being modest is part of being pious, and that although she struggles with finding clothes that

suit her beliefs, she believes it is important to be modest in one's clothing. Adalia shares that depending on where she is, she has varying levels of difficulty in finding clothes "that fit." She mentions in the US it is more difficult to find clothes that are loose and long enough to wear, whereas in "Muslim countries" (presumably Morocco as her husband is Moroccan) finding suitable clothes is not as problematic because the norm is more modest clothing. From what I observed of female converts' clothing, they adapted the Western styles available to them to create a specific Muslim-American style. This includes wearing knee-length shirtdresses with pants (as opposed to by themselves or with leggings or skinny jeans) and using fashion scarves as hijabs. Styles like the long three-tiered summer skirts and ankle-length maxi dresses are also popular as they can easily be paired with a matching cardigan or a long sleeved shirt, respectively.

Social gatherings are important sites of cross-cultural exchange, which also shape the process of establishing a distinct Muslim-American style of dress. One of the gatherings I attended was a study circle for women held in someone's home where finger food was served and there was time for attendees to socialize. A visiting female scholar of Islam led the study circle; she was originally from Cincinnati but studied and taught in Jordan and had brought with her various head scarves, jewelry, and Islamic articles of clothing to sell at this gathering. Unless converts are related to, or are friends with, individuals who are from Muslim countries or travel there regularly, they usually do not have access to material goods from overseas. Thus, in social settings like study circles, different cultural clothing can be bought or swapped, creating a cosmopolitan way of dress and a Muslim-cosmopolitan identity. In this way, study circles are similar to the gender-segregated prayer rooms in public sites in Mohammad's (2012) study of young female British Muslims. Mohammad argues that these prayer rooms are "an example of

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the ways in which these sites offer young women a means to integrate Islam in their daily routine, but also new ways to draw on Islam to expand their cultural repertories…" (2012: 1818). Through the examples above, we see that religion is not just a power one can "tap into" when needed (Williams, 2010: 278). Rather, religion structures converts' lives in a much more prominent way, and sacred social spaces play an important role in helping converts integrate Islam in their daily lives in a specifically American context.

Closely related to notions of piety is the feeling of being authentic in one's faith. In Olson et al.'s (2013) study of Christian youth in Glasgow, the notion of ""authentic" Christianity is intimately bound up with ideas of spatial transcendence through the valorization of religious embodiment; that is, constructing the body as the space in which faith might smoothly extend beyond traditional religious spaces" (2013: 1422-23). For Muslim converts, formulations of piety are separate from feeling authentically Muslim. The former is more related to an inward integration of one's new beliefs and everyday life, and the latter is more related first, to finding one's place in the Muslim community, and second, to being recognized as a Muslim by the Cincinnati community at large. Recall converts' accounts of feeling less "phony" or "fake" when they were more connected to the mosque community. This is presumably because others are recognizing them as Muslim, as opposed to their experiences outside the Muslim community. In greater society, converts are not necessarily acknowledged as Muslim, which in large part is due to their ethnicity and race. This is more the case for male converts than female converts, the latter being more easily identified as Muslim because of the visible marker of hijab. Women, who do not wear hijab, like Aida, tend to have similar experiences to male converts in the public sphere. Aida recounts feeling like she was living a double life for a long time after she stopped covering her hair. So unlike Olson et al.'s (2013) participants who associated religious

authenticity with transcending traditional spaces of community, for converts, traditional community spaces were essential to formulating oneself as an authentic Muslim. However, converts' formulations of *piety* closely mirror Christian youth's formulations of being *authentically Christian* (which involve the internalization of the spirit of the religion in addition to external enactments and practices); however being authentically Muslim remains closely bound up with experiences of community inside and outside the mosque.

Religion: *In* the Everyday and *of* the Everyday

In describing the everyday sacred spaces and religious practices of converts, I want to emphasize that rather than expressing that religious is found *in* the everyday, my research participants expressed that, for them, religious is *of* the everyday. In other words, Islam for converts is an "act of identity" instead of a "boundary marker" (Marranci, 2007: 89). Through "embodied, faith-driven identities" (Olson et al., 2013: 1429), converts go about their daily lives with Islam as a lens through which they make sense of the world and hold themselves in relation to others, instead of a static way of structuring events and occurrences. Islam is not something converts must 'carve out' time for in a disenchanted, modern world of secular pressures as Williams (2010) indicates about his informants. Holloway (2003) also posits that sacred space-time is of the everyday, and argues that to understand spirituality in such a way one must lessen "the distance between the sacred and the profane"; the former being extraordinary and enchanted, a break from the latter, which is mundane and ordinary. As my research participants noted, every situation and moment in life is sacred if one maintains a constant awareness of God and their relationship to Him. Similarly, Holloway's informants "hold that everything and every situation we experience can be a sacred ordering," which he names the "spirituality *of* the everyday" (2003: 1969).

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"Distinguishing what is religious and not religious, then, is not nearly as meaningful as understanding how things (bodies, veils, business agreements) assume significance through their insertion into particular localities" (Olson et al., 2013: 1424). One might ask, how then is the sacred different than everything else such that it constitutes an analytical category? For my research participants, every act can be worship if the intention is to please God, which provides a more rigorous definition of what counts as religious or spiritual practice (as opposed to anything at all that is accompanied by an intention). To be religious, spiritual or pious then is to always strive to understand oneself and one's life in relation to God. Converts expressed that an awareness of God guided their interactions in relationships, comportment, and life outlook. Islam provides them with a way to engage with a variety of occurrences and situations as they happen. In essence, Islam is a way of being. For example, when I asked Ted how he felt after converting, he answered: "It felt good. I felt like it was the right thing to do. There was a lot more peace about me, a lot more relaxation and peace and comfort." Ted also mentioned that there were some changes in his daily life that "happened naturally without [his] really trying," particularly his diet. He stopped drinking diet soda without any effort, and generally feels much healthier. Additionally he claims feeling that "a lot of things have been magnified," such as family issues and the fact that he was always so different from the rest of his family.

Gordon emphasizes that embracing Islam was not just adopting a list of dos and don'ts, which sometimes his family or coworkers make it seem like he's done. He recounts situations where family and friends have asked him about fasting or praying, expressing how "crazy" or difficult it is to do what he does, sometimes even saying what he does is "stupid" or "dumb."

> My family doesn't see that that's the faith…Yes, this is who I am now, this is me. Yes, there's mornings when I don't want to get up at 4 am in the morning, because that's natural. In the scheme of things, it's not a burden; it's not a hassle. When we're all together for whatever reason my family gets together, for memorial day or whatever, and

I have to go and pray and I'm back 5 minutes later, how does that seem like such a drag and such a hassle?

We see here that Gordon understands religious obligations (e.g., getting up early to pray) as he would any other obligations of life; they are not an extra hassle or burden and are part of who he is. Furthermore, he does not understand the feeling of sometimes not wanting to "get up at 4 am in the morning" as a sin, rather he attributes it to being human. Being religious in this context means that God is priority for Gordon, as opposed to anything else that could be a priority (one's career, education, and so on).

Gary also expresses that Islam is a way of being for him, and is helpful in reminding him to be patient, forgiving, to do good, and to do the right thing. He contrasts this to his wife:

> [My wife is] more worldly too. Religion is not a huge part of her life, so I always kind of wonder, why she wanted me to convert? I think that it was more for her family. Her family would be more accepting; I think she was concerned that she would be disowned by her family if she married a non-Muslim. So I think just to maintain the harmony in her family. But yeah, she's more worldly. So if I talk about, hey lets go to this Muslim event, I have to make a pretty convincing argument. She'd rather go to a movie, go out and listen to some music, go to dinner somewhere.

Gary's wife uses Islam more as a tool to sanction her marriage to Gary for her family. Although Gary initially converted in order to marry his wife who is a Pakistani Muslim, he told me that he has grown to think highly of Islam, fully embracing its tenants and practices, and is grateful to have found this path.

So we see from converts' accounts that spirituality and religious practice is *of* the everyday, not separate from the geographical and temporal (re)making of everyday life. In Ted's words, "[I]t's something you do in everyday life; whether it's at work, at the grocery store, or at the mosque or the church or the synagogue."

Conclusion

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Converts' understanding of religiosity and piety reveal that religion is not merely found in the everyday, but is of the everyday. In contrast to geographical and sociological research that attempts to show how religious individuals 'still' make space and time for spirituality in a disenchanted, modern, secular world, I argue that for converts religion constitutes a way of being and living. My research participants' experiences illustrate that religious practice and visible religious markers on the body are not simply symbols that can be read like a text, but are socio-spatial practices that are particular to specific contexts and locations. Religious belief and practice are dialectically related in that religious practice creates religious meaning, moral subjects, and sacred spaces. This then acts back on belief and creates particular conceptions of the self, and specific understandings of being in the world in relation to God and others.

My research participants indicated that piety meant that one does the right thing not just at the mosque or when people were watching, but is to act upright in every situation. Thus, being conscious of one's niyyah before acting, and having taqwa helps them live in an Islamic way, and makes every act an act of worship if it pleases God. Converts also indicated that piety included not only performing physical obligations and rituals (like praying and fasting), but also internalizing their value, spirit, and meaning in a way that transforms one's character and aligns one's life, habits, and desires with the guiding principles of the Qur'an and prophetic way.

Additionally, both individual and collective Muslim bodies can be conceptualized as sacred spaces. Prayer or gatherings where God is praised aloud and in unison give meaning to any location through embodied religious practices. In addition to these spaces, time spent caring for one's family or doing the duties associated with one's various life roles is also sacred when one remembers that they are pleasing God by fulfilling their responsibilities.

The discussions in this chapter point back to Howe's (2009) instruction to attend to the various processes of secular and sacred place making, as opposed to secular or sacred place proper. In other words, it is a matter of function of places and locations, not merely the form of a material building or façade—it is the *actions* of worship and devotion, not the location where such practices are (supposed) to take place. Second, it is a matter of individual experience, which as I emphasized in chapter three, is present in both official and non-official sacred spaces. My research participants do not oppose sacred spaces, practices and identities to secular ones. Their belief and practice is not different from the everyday; it does not permeate the everyday; it *is* the everyday. However, this is not only the case for my research participants or converts to Islam. Megachurches, for example, have a unique relationship to the everyday lives of its members. Although it is what we may consider an officially sacred space that is traditionally separate from everyday life, its role in the everyday practices (that are functionally spiritual or religious) of believers makes it of the everyday.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

To conclude this thesis, I want to briefly summarize my research findings and gesture to some persisting questions. I will also suggest future directions for research on religion, community, and identity. The authors of *Retheorizing the Postsecular Present* (Olson et al., 2013: 1424) contend that recent scholarship that claims the city is a postsecular space tends "to focus on discrete and discernable religious organizations and more established traditional religious categories," resulting in the "reproduction of taken-for-granted secular categories." While this thesis partially focuses on the sacred spaces of the mosque and the religious organization Salaam Community, I also focus on individual religious experiences of converts. Furthermore, I justify a focus on mosques because recent research on individual religious experiences has formulated an artificial boundary between two important sites of religious experience: traditionally defined places of worship and everyday sites like home, work and leisure where presumably individual religious experience is found. Personal religious experiences can and do happen at the mosque. Furthermore, a review of the literature reveals a tendency to exclude social aspects of religion from study, and that is precisely what I have focused on in this project.

I have demonstrated how social interaction, friendship and community factor greatly in shaping converts' religious beliefs, practice, and identities. This impacts other aspects of converts' lives beyond the social and community spaces inside and outside the mosque. Converts indicated that they were able to develop a deeper understanding of Islam through the personal support and mentorship they were provided at social events and gatherings at the mosque, through SC, and at informal gatherings. Their understanding of Islam shapes their daily practice and enactment of Islam in the home, in public, and at work and school. Furthermore, the feelings

of authenticity afforded by a sense of community and belonging gives them a feeling of divine purpose that they carry with them in their lives. Their lived religious practices also act back on this sense of authenticity, maintaining it and shaping it further as their religious understandings and practices evolve and as they themselves mature on their spiritual path. Rather than religion only being evident in specific practices or behaviors, remembering one's intention when doing anything allows converts to view any and all daily actions as worship if they do it with the intention to please God. Such a formulation was the definition of piety and uprightness for my research participants.

The importance of SC's social spaces, and the friendships made through SC, are highlighted by the fact that many converts are willing to travel (however frequently their schedule allows) to the city, or across the city, in order to attend SC events or to meet up with friends to take part in leisure and social activities. Research participants seem to appreciate SC's new approach to cultivating transformative religious practice through community building and social events, but at the same time they express desire for the traditional notion of mosque community, which is often steeped in nostalgia and tradition. However, in presenting SC as a more inclusive and nurturing environment than the mosque, I do not suppose that it is experienced as such by every participant. As Maryam indicated, anytime an organization develops rituals and a culture around its mission, there is a danger of creating an exclusive atmosphere. Although SC certainly provided many more opportunities for converts to connect with others and make friends or establish mentor-mentee relationships, SC still largely focuses on regular programming and one-time events. Without a physical space of its own, or an established mentorship program, those who cannot make it to the events for various reasons, or who are unable to make connections on their own at events, sometimes miss out on the valuable

support that friendships and a support network provide. Even converts who do regularly attend SC events have mentioned that having a mentor to help them along their individual spiritual path would be beneficial (recall Garrett and Ted's stories). Additionally, creating a community that caters specifically to converts runs the risk of keeping them insulated from the wider community and vice versa. Converts may feel comfortable at SC event spaces, but when they leave this community bubble they may not feel as confident and comfortable in their knowledge and identity. Although SC's stated constituency includes other groups besides converts, the greater Muslim community has a very narrow perception that SC only caters to converts. This could potentially lead converts to identify perpetually as converts (a label that may be associated with little or incorrect knowledge about Islam and carry other negative connotations) instead of just Muslim. Furthermore, community members need to internalize that converts are just as much Muslim as themselves. So while there is a great need and benefit in convert groups to help socialize new Muslims in a healthy way and teach them the fundamentals of the religion, great caution needs to be taken to ensure separate and unconnected communities are not formed through these efforts.

My main focus in this project was the experiences of American-born converts to Islam. However, through investigating their experiences, I have also come to discuss various aspects of mosque community and culture, which I believe require more exploration. My research data and own long-standing personal involvement with the Muslim community in Cincinnati reveals that mosques are a site of various activities beyond communal worship and are in fact important sites of social interaction and community socialization for converts. However, community members experience the mosque differently based on their age, race, ethnicity and gender; such experiences do not always point to an inclusive, positive community culture. I want to emphasize

that by showing the multiple activities that go on at the mosque, and also the religious identities and practices that are extended beyond the mosque, I am not claiming that the mosque blurs the boundary of sacred and secular. Instead, I am trying to show how traditional understandings of the mosque as a place of worship are mistaken, as they are also sites of socialization and friendship, education, welfare assistance, leisure and sport, business, and so on. There is a danger in claiming that conceptualizations of the mosque (or any other 'officially sacred' space) as hybrid or multipurpose are new and innovative claims, since community members, especially converts, understand social and other aspects of religion as part of their faith. Yet scholars, even in the post-secular literatures, still seem keen on parceling out the various facets of faith and religion, when clearly many believers see their faith as a way of life, and as such unquestionably including the different activities and spaces associated with different life spheres.

I also wonder about the utility of empirically showing how the religious and secular are blurred categories when these categories have, in many cases, always been blurred. I am also weary of the very word 'blurred', as it indicates that various aspects of religion and non-religion were once separate. This all points to an inadequacy of the spatial and religious grammar we use to speak about such matters, even within epistemological and ontological camps that are trying to get past compartmentalized language and thought for understanding matters of religion, society, and politics. I do not have any answers. I acknowledge that I have resorted to such formulations myself: one of my research questions was phrased "how does the social aspect of SC bear on converts' spiritual modality and to what extend do the spaces that SC create blur the secular and sacred?" Where some may argue that SC practices do or do not blur the secular and sacred, most community members in Cincinnati would argue that these same practices are not a question of the sacred/secular binary but rather a question of which interpretation of Islam one follows.

Before we can begin to speak about religion and space the way that I am proposing, we must first change the still-dominant understanding of religion and society/politics as essentially separate spheres, spatially and ontologically. This is often done through the very identifying of 'exceptions' and instances of religion in 'secular space' that I am critiquing. Perhaps what we can do is transform material spaces and discourses about religion and the secular to better align with the reality that they are indeed not separate, instead of imposing our pre-defined frameworks on the world that we observe and study. Here I want to again invoke Yorgason and della Dora (2009) when they say that we should "rethink the relationship between geography and religion as a two-way dialogue rather than a one-way 'colonizing process.'" This means understanding the meaning and value of religion for people but not through a pre-given lens.

Kong (2010: 763) says "there is value in understanding the micropolitics of religious expression, if this understanding is allowed to be drawn back onto a larger canvas to help understand some of the larger conflicts and tensions in the contemporary world." This statement also rings true in postsecular theory, where religion is not a monolithic phenomenon with homogenous manifestations. Thus, in order to understand the macroscale of religious change and expression as well as social and political conflicts and events, we must necessarily closely examine the local, particular instances of religious belief, discourses, practice and space. This is what I have attempted to do in this thesis by examining the experiences of American born converts to Islam. I have tried to understand how converts' different experiences and understandings of sacred space shape their religious practice and identity. In the process I've come to understand that for converts, "religion"—in their case, Islam—is variously defined as a way of life and/or a way of being. While my interview data does not speak directly about the larger socio-cultural context in America, and specifically the insertion of Muslim individuals and

groups into the American social fabric, after completing this research project I have developed some insights about the implications for the development of an expression of Islamic identity in America.

As I already mentioned in earlier chapters, the majority of social science research on Muslim identities is on the British context and focuses on the construction of Muslim identities in relation to a wider backdrop of Islamophobia. Social science researchers have realized that research participants in various studies do not necessarily experience or express reacting to anti-Islamic sentiment, and instead day-to-day recollection of their lives bring other salient points to the drawing board. Using the Islamophobic metanarrative has become a reflex, but it does real work for those who it implicates. As Ian Hacking (2006) states, academics constantly create categories or kinds of people, and these categories then shape the very people they try to understand. He calls this the "looping effect." In my own research, it remains unclear whether discourses on Islamophobia and national belonging play a crucial role in the negotiations of religious identity for converts. My research findings suggest that converts are most concerned with making their conversion sustainable, and "staying on the path" or "keeping the faith." However, it should not be understood from this that Islamophobia is gone; there certainly exists very real violence and hatred towards Muslims, however this narrative did not factor greatly in my interviews and I am left wondering why. When the overwhelming majority of research on Muslims post-9/11 is framed against the backdrop of Islamophobia, I cannot help but question this narrative. Is it a question of macro vs. micro scales of geographies of religion? Or have we been wrong to project such a narrative even in situations where research participants do not articulate one? There are a few factors that may contribute to little role that Islamophobia plays in identity negotiations for my research participants. Some of my research participants have not

been Muslim very long and so they may not notice discriminatory or exclusionary sentiments. For converts who live and/or work in or near West Chester (where people are generally of a higher socioeconomic status and are usually more informed or educated) it may not be socially acceptable to show anti-Islamic sentiment even if it does exist. Similarly, although Clifton is a poorer neighborhood, it is a diverse, urban, and gentrified one—all factors that contribute to decreased Islamophobic environment.

Second, I believe my research points to the social role of the mosque and other "Muslim spaces" like SC. When I spoke to Maryam she told me the story of a college student who regularly attended SC's gatherings. This student expressed that she liked to socialize and be with friends, but she is deterred from the opportunities to socialize with her peers that are available to her on campus and elsewhere by the fact that a lot of these events are centered around alcohol— an environment that she does not want to put herself in as a Muslim. Maryam feels that SC offers relevant spaces for people like this college student, saying,

> She may not be marginalized in the mosque community most of the time (she may or may not), but socially, as a young Muslim-American, she can experience that feeling of isolation. And because the mosque doesn't really cater to that part of our lives, except in small, limited quantities. The socializing, which is also part of our being human, part of our life (Muslim or not Muslim), providing a space that also embraces her and allows her to experience that I think would be one of the benefits of having our own space. And would also be how our mission could be much broader than converts as well, because there are people like those groups who have crossovers in terms of what their needs are, and what some of their experiences are.

Maryam's comment points to the fact that there are multiple groups of people whose needs are not all being met at the mosque. However, because the mosque is one of few "Muslim spaces" in America, it has taken on many roles. It could be argued that it's not in its place for a mosque to provide so many services and fill so many roles, and for this reason there needs to be more

research on non-mosque spaces that serve various community needs and that are still meaningful on a religious register.

Finally, and not surprisingly, there needs to be more in-depth study of converts' experiences, and across different communities. My research participants ranged from converts who had recently converted in the past year since conducting my fieldwork, to ones that had been Muslim for more than ten years. Newer converts spoke to me both about their mosque experiences, and experiences with SC since it was founded around the same time of their conversion. Individuals who had been Muslim longer tended to be more integrated into the community, and in most cases had made the transition from new Muslim to "regular Joe Muslim" (in Virginia's words) before SC was established. Thus, these converts had a different relationship with the organization. Converts who had been Muslim for at least a few years also expressed that they wished there were more resources for mid-level converts, as classes at SC and the mosques were either too basic or too advanced.

To write this thesis I've had to artificially construct a coherent narrative from an agglomeration of stories, memories, and moments. I've given priority to certain aspects of my data, and left out others. This is one of many possible interpretations of the experiences of a small group of individuals in one city, however I hope that it has expanded the way that we understand religion and its associated community, identities, and spaces. As many opt to configure religion as a part of culture or ethnicity, it is ever more important to pursue scholarship that seeks to formulate religion simply as another way of assigning meaning and holding oneself in relation to other people, things and the world. The only way we can hope to do this is to examine everyday practices. To quote Secor (2007) who paraphrases Asad (1993: 54): "if we unpack the comprehensive concept of what we call religion, we are thus more able to situate

everyday practices with regard to broader, historically contingent fields of practice and discourse." This means that religion, like any other axis of identification, is simply a part of how some understand their being in the world and relationships to others and God.

Appendix A: Table of Interviewees

Adalia	
Gender	Female
Year of conversion[*]	2010 (4 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	At home
Religion before converting	Non-denominational Christian
Has Muslim family?	Yes; husband and his family
Background	Adalia's husband is a Moroccan Muslim and she converted in their 7th year of marriage. Adalia has not changed her name but her husband's family calls her by the Arabic equivalent of her birth name when she visits Morocco.
Aida	
Gender	Female
Year of conversion	2000 (14 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	At a mosque
Religion before converting	Baptist
Has Muslim family?	Yes; husband and children
Background	Aida has been a Muslim a long time but until recently she felt like she was living two different lives. She was comfortable with her Muslim identity at home with her children and husband and initially at the mosque when she wore hijab and regularly attended classes and events. After starting nursing school and working again she stopped wearing the hijab and became more removed from the Cincinnati Muslim community. She feels that SC has given her encouragement, helped her reintegrate into the community and makes her feel renewed in her faith despite being Muslim for so long.
Gordon	

Gender	Male
Year of conversion	2011 (3 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	At a mentor's home
Religion before converting	Baptist
Has Muslim family?	No
Background	Gordon lives in a rural farming community about 40 minutes away from either major Cincinnati mosque. His wife is an atheist but extremely supportive and accepting of him. Due to living far from the community, he often feels secluded and struggles with "feeling fake" with regards to being Muslim.

Gary	
Gender	Male
Year of conversion	2008 (6 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	At a mosque
Religion before converting	Presbyterian
Has Muslim family?	Yes; wife and her family
Background	Gary converted in order to marry his wife, but after reading the Qur'an and learning more about Islam he's come to think highly of it and is grateful that he's found this path. Gary is on the board of the Clifton mosque. He feels that his wife is more worldly and sometimes experiences some resistance from her when he suggests to attend activities or events at the mosque.

Hannah	
Gender	Female
Year of conversion	2011 (3 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	At home
Religion before converting	Christianity then Bahai
Has Muslim family?	No
Background	Holly path to Islam was as much an intellectual journey as it was a spiritual one. She embraced the Bahai faith but was dating a

	Muslim man who started to challenge her on some of the basic beliefs of the faith that were contradictory. Because of this and other factors she eventually converted to Islam.
Emma	
Gender	Female
Year of conversion	2010 (4 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	At a friend's home
Religion before converting	Baptist then agnostic
Has Muslim family?	Yes; husband and his family
Background	Emma married at 18 to a Mauritanian Muslim man. Emma started studying Islam to disprove her husband's beliefs but when she started reading the Qur'an she realized she agreed with most everything she read. All her previous stereotypes of the faith were dispelled and she met and became close the wife of one of her husbands friends. She helped guide her on her path to Islam as she was finding her own (she too was a convert).
Natalie (Zaynab)	
Gender	Female
Year of conversion	2013 (1 year a Muslim)
Location of conversion	At a mosque
Religion before converting	Baptist
Has Muslim family?	No
Background	Natasha became interested in Islam and made an effort to learn more but did not make the decision to convert until a year after due to discouragement from her family. At the beginning of the year she was reflecting on how she could become a better person and felt that there was something missing in her life. She started reading more about Islam and met with a Muslim woman from the West Chester Mosque that lived close to her, after which she decided to convert.
Odil (Mustafa)	
Gender	Male

Year of conversion	2002 (12 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	University dorm
Religion before converting	Deist
Has Muslim family?	Yes; wife and children
Background	Odil's path to Islam was an intellectual and spiritual journey. He was interested in having a close relationship with God and communicating with Him, which he did not see in the ritualistic practice of his Christian and Buddhist family members. The first time he saw a Muslim praying it affected him greatly and he started researching Islam, learning that there is a strong ritual connection between all the movements and the communication with God in the Muslim prayer. This led him to convert.
Virginia	
Gender	Female
Year of conversion	2005 (9 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	In a prayer space at a university
Religion before converting	Catholic
Has Muslim family?	Yes; son, husband and his family
Background	Virginia was part of a book club during university and suggested the group read *A History of God* by Karen Armstrong (she got the idea from a TV program she watched that mentioned the book). She had been struggling with faith prior to this and the section on Islam piqued her interest. After a year of exploration she met with the Muslim chaplain of her university, asked him questions, and converted the following week.
Ted	
Gender	Male
Year of conversion	2012 (2 years a Muslim)
Location of conversion	At a mosque
Religion before converting	Catholic
Has Muslim family?	No

Background	Before converting Ted worked with and friends who were Muslim, some of which were converts. This worked to expose him to Islam and dispelled many of the stereotypes and assumptions he had about Muslims growing up, particularly that all American Muslims were part of the Nation of Islam and hated white people. He was invited to the mosque by a co-worker to share a meal and attended other events and potlucks at the mosque throughout the year. The following Ramadan he converted. Ted has not yet told his family but plans to when he gets married. He hopes to marry someone who was born in a 'Muslim country' so they can teach him and his children Arabic and whom he could learn a lot from.

*When they said the shahadah or testimony of faith.

Appendix B: Glossary

Alhamdulillah Arabic for "praise be to God."

Bismillah   Arabic for "In the name of God." This is said by Muslims before beginning any action as a way to remember that everything one does should be to please God.

Fatwa   A Islamic legal opinion or learned interpretation that a qualified Islamic jurist can give on matters of Islamic law.

Five Pillars   The five pillars of Islam outline the major obligations for every Muslim. These include the testimony of faith (shahadah), the five daily prayers (salah), welfare payment from a Muslim's annual savings (zakah), the annual fasting during each day of the month of Ramadan (sawm) and the pilgrimage to Mecca (hajj).

Hijab   The head-covering worn by Muslim women. While the word hijab connotes not only physical modesty, but also the way one carries themselves in a dignified and modest manner, in the American context, the word hijab is usually used to refer to the physical veil that women use to cover their hair.

Iftar   The meal Muslims eat after sunset to break their fast during the month of Ramadan (see definition below).

Imam   Religious leader of a mosque whose main role is to lead the five daily congregational prayers at the mosque, deliver the Friday sermon, teach various religious classes and generally be available to advise members of the mosque community.

Halaqa   Literally translates to "circle". A halaqa refers to a study circle or gathering whose main purpose is to remember God, worship or learn Islamic knowledge. A halaqa can be held in the mosque or at someone's home, and usually have a social component where members can eat together and/or socialize with one another.

Jummu'ah   Weekly congregational prayer offered at the time of the mid-day prayer on Fridays. It is obligatory for Muslim men to attend the congregational prayer.

Khutbah   The short sermon given before the congregational prayer on Fridays. The khutbah is delivered by the Imam if there is one, or by knowledgeable community members if there is not.

Masjid   Arabic word for mosque.

Niyyah   Arabic for "intention."

Qur'an   Holy book of Islam.

Ramadan	The ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar in which all able-bodied Muslims fast from sun up to sun down. Muslims abstain from all food, drink, and sexual relations during sunlight hours, as well fast spiritually by refraining from gossiping, lying, fighting, etc.
Salaams	Short for "Assalamu Alaykum", or "peace be with you". This is a Muslim greeting said in Arabic. It is incumbent on a Muslim who is greeted in this way to respond by saying, "Walaykum Assalaam", or "and may peace be with you".
Shahada	In Islam, the shahada, or declaration of faith is to say the following: "I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship except for Allah (God), and I bear witness that Muhammad is his final prophet and messenger." In Islamic Jurisprudence, a public declaration of faith constitutes conversion.
Sunnah	The teachings and practices of the prophet Muhammad. The sunnah of Muhammad includes his specific sayings, habits, practices, and silent approvals.
Taqwa	Arabic for "God consciousness". This includes both an inward orientation to God as well as well as an outward manner of conduct.
Taraweeh	Extra prayers offered at the mosque during the month of Ramadan. These prayers are held in the mosque after the evening prayer, but can also be offered privately in one's home.
Wudu	Ritual ablution or washing performed in preparation for prayer and touching or reading the Qur'an.

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Young, I.M. (1990). The ideal of community and the politics of difference, in Nicholson, L.J., (ed), *Feminism/postmodernism*. Routledge, 300–23.

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EDUCATION

MA, Geography
Certificate in Social Theory
University of Kentucky, August 2014
Advisor: Dr. Anna Secor

BA, International Affairs
Magna Cum Laude
University of Cincinnati, December 2010
Concentration: Middle East and North Africa
Thesis: Urban Agriculture: Cases of Implementation in North and West Africa

Continued Education:

"Critical Theory, Culture and Citizenship", *Utrecht University Summer School,* August 2013

Permaculture Design Certification Course, *This-Land Organization*, April - May 2012

Rihla Summer Programs, *Deen Intensive Foundation*
Studied abroad in Saudi Arabia (Summer 2008), Spain (Summer 2010) and Turkey (Summers 2011, 2012, and 2013) through an Islamic Studies program that also focused on manifestations and practice of Islam and Islamic culture in each host country; extensive study of historical, cultural and religious sites in Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Spain

PUBLICATIONS

(2014) "Exploring Mapping: Discussions with Swati Chattopadhyay and Derek Gregory," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*: Vol. 23, Article 9. Available at: http://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol23/iss1/9

AWARDS, GRANTS AND HONORS

David E. Sopher New Scholar Award (3rd Place), Association of American Geographers GORABS Specialty Group, 2014

Research Grant: Barnhardt-Withington Fund, University of Kentucky, 2013 ($650)

University of Kentucky Graduate Assistantship, 2012 - 2014

Pi Sigma Alpha National Political Science Honors Society, University of Cincinnati, 2008-2010

Cincinnatus Century Scholarship, University of Cincinnati, 2008 - 2010 ($8,000)

RESEARCH PRESENTATIONS

April 2014. "Finding Community: Identity and Belonging for American-Born Converts to Islam", The Association of American Geographers Conference. Tampa, FL.

SESSIONS ORGANIZED

April 2014. "Connecting the Social and the Religious: New Spaces of Inquiry", The Association of American Geographers Conference. Tampa, FL.

April 2013. (With UK Critical Pedagogy Working Group) "Tales from the Neoliberal University", The Association of American Geographers Conference. Los Angeles, CA.

DEPARTMENTAL AND UNIVERSITY SERVICE

Editorial Board Member, *Disclosure: A Journal of Social Theory*, Jan 2013 – May 2014
Conducted and transcribed interview with guest speaker; peer reviewed submissions for volume 23 of journal

Graduate Student Liaison, *Geography Graduate Student Union,* Aug 2012 – May 2014
Served as the department representative on the Graduate Student Congress; created needs assessment and satisfaction surveys polling the graduate student body; active in voicing collective graduate student concerns in forums on university budget and restructuring

Committee Member, *Geography Department Diversity Committee,* Aug 2013 – May 2014
Helped develop survey for undergraduate majors with the aim to diversity the undergraduate student body and develop a more open and accessible department

Working Group Member, *UK Critical Pedagogy Working Group,* Aug 2012 – Present
Co-planned and facilitated a TA orientation about best practices in geography education; established TA peer evaluation system to help improve teaching practices; participated in bi-weekly reading group discussions, and reflected on teaching practice; recorded podcast with HIVE (can be accessed here: http://www.as.uky.edu/podcasts/intentional-instruction-critical-pedagogy-working-group-uk)

RELEVANT PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Teaching Assistant, *UK Geography Department,* Fall 2012 - Winter 2013
Attended lecture and led three discussion sections weekly for an introductory medical geography course; taught online summer and winter sessions

Teaching Assistant, *Rihla Summer Program*, Summers 2011-2013
Led discussions sections for Islamic Jurisprudence class; collaborated on exam development and grading; created review material for students

Clinic Assistant, *Individual Care Center*, Jan 2006 – June 2012
Organize patient charts and files, including scheduling and billing information; produce new and revise existing office forms and documentation methods; assist in helping patients better

understand administered treatment; facilitate communication with clinic therapists, other facilities and physicians and pharmaceutical representatives

Administrator, *Deen Intensive Foundation*, Nov 2010 – Oct 2001
Edited educational materials and publications; created retreat application and served on application review committee; developed and edited internal and external online and printed documentation and forms; provided program and public relations support; conducted basic bookkeeping; managed quarterly newsletter, member listserve and student and organizational correspondence

Administrative Assistant, *Islamic Association of Cincinnati*, May 2010 – June 2011
Provided basic spiritual education to new members and converts; established relationships with local university faculty, neighboring houses of worship and interfaith and cultural organizations; planned logistics for major events and functions; oversaw volunteers; managed donor correspondence, weekly newsletter and announcements; developed, revamped and edited internal and external online and printed documentation and forms

SELECTED LEADERSHIP AND VOLUNTEERISM

Committee Member, *Association of American Geographers GORABS Specialty Group*, April 2014 – Present
Co-directed efforts to establish an online research bulletin for geographic research on religions and belief systems

Personal Development Committee Chair, *Muslim Youth of North America,* Jan 2008 - Present
Counseled youth ages 12-18 3x/yearly at youth camps; advise youth on program development and event planning; conduct interviews with religious scholars and leaders; develop youth curriculum, including bi-weekly podcasts, book clubs, learning circles and a 2-yr youth group curriculum; provide content and design feedback for parents portal on the organization's website; create and facilitate mentor training

Program and Curriculum Committee, *Deen Intensive Foundation*, 2009 – present
Collaborate on curriculum and exam development for Essentials Certificate Program; co-organize annual month long retreats for 150+ students; provide English-Arabic editorial/translating support for educational materials and course books

Treasurer, *University of Cincinnati Campus Antiwar Network,* Sept 2009 – Dec 2010
Organized regular teach-ins, documentary viewings and discussions on conflict, war and international political issues; created all organizational budgets and sought approval with campus funding board; led fundraising efforts and book drives for local and international charity organizations and refugee camps

TRAVEL AND LANGUAGE

Language Proficiency: proficient in Arabic; working knowledge of French and Turkish
Independent travel: Spain, The Netherlands Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey
International Experience: observed session with Turkish Prime Minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, July 2011