



Identity and Muslim Inter/Intra-Faith Dialogue in Atlanta:

A Discourse-Performance Centered Approach

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Introduction

Well before September 11, 2001 the American public, academic institutions and journalistic circles began paying more attention to the role of Muslim minorities in western contexts. Now that Islam and Muslims have captured the attention and imagination of the mainstream public a heightened interest has emerged in the study of Muslim groups and Islamic related activities in the United States. Such interest is exciting in that research opportunities are increasingly expanding while community willingness, openness and support have dramatically increased in a post-9/11 environment where even the most reclusive communities are opening up to their surrounding environments.

However, increased responsibility accompanies increased interest. The current demands placed on the study of Muslims in the United States require answering pressing questions central to public discourse, advancing scholarly inquiry and sophistication, and influencing the policy making establishment. The current study of Muslims in the United States is largely composed of surveys of values and attitudes, case studies, preliminary ethnographies, and disjointed histories. Such approaches do not sufficiently address issues of community trajectory, religious discourse, intra-communal dynamics, and the particularities of the historical development of Muslim American institutions. Increasingly precise questions require increasingly precise methodological and theoretical sophistication in the study of Muslim communities in the United States.

The goal of this essay is to offer a novel methodological approach to the study of Muslims in the United States by applying the technique of a discourse performance-centered approach to the analysis of the role of Muslim inter/intra-faith activity in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Discourse-performance draws upon methodological and theoretical

developments in the field of cultural anthropology which identify the locus of “cultural meaning” in communal activity to be the use of language and its deployment in various natural community settings. By applying this method to the study of Muslim approaches towards inter/intra faith dialogue in Atlanta, this paper demonstrates the critical role of diversity in the analysis of Muslim activity in the United States, the significance of community structures of authority, and the diffusion of discourse at the community level.

This essay is composed of four sections. The first introduces conceptual problems in the study of Muslims in the United States as they relate to the opaque category of identity and offers discourse-performance as viable alternative approach. The second section reviews six dominant discursive themes found in the Muslim American community at large and in Atlanta in particular. The third section discusses Atlanta area Muslim communities in relation to these categories, their interaction with one another and the larger non-Muslim community. The last section reflects on project as a whole, highlighting areas of concern in inter/intra-faith discourse and areas for future inquiry.

Before we begin however a brief note should be made concerning research procedure. This paper presents the summary findings of a one year study of the Atlanta area Muslim community, its interactions with and involvement in interfaith and inter-religious activity, and how these dynamics relate to larger patterns in the Muslim American landscape. The study was composed of two major phases. The first was an extended participant observation of Muslim communities in Atlanta which simply attempted to account for the sheer breadth of the city’s approximated 80,000 Muslims. The second stage (some of which inevitably occurred during the first) sought to account for Muslim engagement with inter-religious activity.

It should be noted from the outset that the use of the terms interfaith dialogue and inter-religious communication are used flexibly and interchangeably in this essay and refer to something much broader than what is typically implied by such categories in the academic literature. Whereas interfaith dialogue and inter-religious communication are typically used as a pretext for conflict resolution or peace building, the terms are used in this essay simply to refer instances of inter-religious encounter. The notion of encounter is much more appropriate for our purposes in that the bulk of what constitutes interfaith activity is actually the public educational efforts of Muslims to their non-Muslim neighbors.

The Atlanta metro-area alone is home to an estimated forty mosques, *masalas*¹ or Islamic centers, which does not include community social service centers or Islamic educational institutions. As such, attempting to observe all communities has become simply impossible in the course of a year. However, a preliminary survey of the groups revealed that identifiable repeating patterns ensured that observation on a smaller scale could account for larger trends and themes in the Atlanta area. As such, I focused energy about half a dozen communities by directly attending mosque and community activities on a regular basis engaging in participant observation all the while tracking developments in the larger Muslim community. I conducted no formal interviews, surveys, or questionnaires, but rather opted simply to observe and listen to community use of language and discourse as they occurred in community settings.

Because the vantage point of the study has been from a ground based ethnographic community level, I have approached the study of Muslim interfaith activity only as it intersects with routine community behavior. If the study had focused only on interfaith activity alone, broader findings would not have been observable. For example, one would

¹ Prayer centers.



not be able to assess from a survey of interfaith activity alone, the relationship of that activity to the broader communities of its participants or the impact of that activity on the larger landscape of Islam in America. As an outsider to the field of peace and conflict studies, communications, and inter-religious dialogue, I hope to contribute the findings of a cultural anthropologist and student of religion which may nurture avenues for further improvement in the area of inter and intra-faith Muslim dialogue.

The Concept of Identity in the Study of Muslims in America²

Research on the range of Muslim communities in the United States has aimed to demonstrate the fascinating dynamics of an increasingly complex religious community and its behavior in an environment presumably at odds with itself. Much has been discussed on the Americanization of Islam and the creation of a distinct Muslim American identity. The literature also attempts, though not always successfully, to make sense of the sheer diversity of Muslims in the United States as seen through divisions of sectarianism, ethnic/national origin, ideology, class, gender and age. While interdisciplinary contributions have benefited the field and account positively for the breadth and depth of material covered, it may be argued that this has simultaneously been the largest impediment towards the field's maturation. There is no common methodology or conceptual approach to tie together the various dynamics that characterize the range of American Muslim activity. Thus, the challenge of configuring a coherent and manageable methodology towards the study of Muslims in the United States is one of the primary goals of this paper.

² I would like to acknowledge my colleague Lee Ann Bambach and professor Richard Martin for their help and participation in this project during the Fall of 2005 in which we convened a practicum seminar for the express survey of Muslims in the Atlanta area.

Research on Muslims in the United States has coincided with the rise of cultural, urban, and immigration studies. The overall trend of such scholarship has been to highlight the cultural distinctiveness of non-mainstream social groups; a goal which has been often expressed by highlighting the category of “identity.” Much of this research is centered on the local community as the point of analysis and lends voice to community members themselves, a seemingly logical move in that it is presumed that they might best represent their own identities. This trend parallels the concept of *agency* that has been stressed throughout the social sciences since the 1960s—the scholarship on Muslims in the United States has followed suit.

Unfortunately, there is little to no clarity, much less consensus, on what exactly constitutes the notion of *identity* in the first place. Amongst the premier scholars on the subject is Yvonne Haddad of the Georgetown Center of Christian-Muslim Dialogue. In addition to her own pioneering work, she along with John Esposito, have edited a number of volumes addressing various issues surrounding Muslim life in the United States. In the edited volume *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, Haddad explains the category of *identity* and its use in the context of the study of Muslims in the United States.

Haddad begins by stating that identity formation and definition are amongst the most important mechanisms by which nation-states have organized themselves in a post-colonial world. She posits that an emergent pan-Islamic ideology, in the place socialism and nationalism, has swept the Muslim world and continues to be a powerful ideological force in the development and maintenance of Muslim communities even in the western world.³ Noticing that many national Islamic organizations have hosted conferences and forums

³ Yvonne Haddad, “The Dynamics of Islamic Identity in North America” in Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito, *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 20.

dedicated to the question of identity, she states that it may even be the “the mother of all issues”⁴ facing Muslims in the United States. Like many observers, she notes that American universities and college campuses have been centers where immigrant students have “experimented with Islamic worldviews” and have sought “to forge links of friendship and common purpose, providing a nucleus for an international network of leaders committed to the creation of an Islamic state or Islamic world order.”⁵

Turning to African American Muslims she curiously cites correctional facilities as a comparable “American institution” of “Muslim reflection and identity.”⁶ She then goes on to state that “prison *alumni*⁷ focus their efforts at home” and that “they seek the redemption of African-American society through the teaching of responsibility, family values, and accountability,” hoping eventually to “save their children from a future of violence and the drug-infested ghettos of America.”⁸

Haddad then introduces three pioneering American Muslim intellectuals, Fazlur Rahman, Isma‘il al-Faruqi, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. In particular she spends time on Isma‘il al-Faruqi and his advocacy of “an adoption of Islamic ideology or vision”⁹ that can help define and give meaning to a Muslim’s experience and identity in the United States being beyond that of a economic sojourner to that of a contributor to an American society that can benefit, if not be “saved”¹⁰ from the contributions of Islam. She concludes that

⁴ Haddad, 22

⁵ Haddad, 21

⁶ Haddad, 21

⁷ Emphasis added

⁸ Haddad.

⁹ Haddad, 30

¹⁰ Haddad, 31



from the perspective of al-Faruqi, “Islam is a unique order of life established by God for humanity, where religion and politics must be intertwined to ensure justice and freedom.”¹¹

I would argue that the reason no clear parameters have been set for the identity question corresponds to a larger trend, often noticeable at the intersection between Islamic studies and a range of the social sciences, which sees Islam as a static and homogenous social system, even a “blueprint”¹² of sorts. Muslims by extension are often depicted in similarly generalized ways, allowing for their descriptions to take expression in grossly generalized forms such as “Muslims believe...” or “Muslims feel...” For example, Haddad states categorically, “Muslims believe that the professed separation of religion and state is violated every time a leader affirms that America is a Judeo-Christian country.” Also, “they wonder why America seems to support the concept of a ‘Jewish state’ in Israel while Muslims are urged...to renounce their...hope for an “Islamic state.”¹³ Here Haddad rests on the dangerous assumption that all Muslim Americans thrive for the establishment of an Islamic polity. Her generalizations that the Muslim American identity is intrinsically connected to American foreign policy in the Middle East imply the presence of a universal fidelity with the Arab world, or the larger Middle East, on behalf Muslim populations in the United States. Such a notion is quickly undermined when accounting for the widespread tension between hosts of African American Muslims and their Arab and immigrant co-religionists, not to mention Muslim immigrants from the non-Arab world who maintain homeland animosity to Arab Muslims. Her comments on African American Muslim attitudes aside from strangely focusing on prison inmates totalize a complex social movement differentiated ideologically,

¹¹ Haddad, 29-30

¹² See Talal Asad, *The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Washington D.C., 1986 and his treatment of Ernest Gellner’s *Muslim Society* p. 2-4.

¹³ Haddad, 23.



historically and otherwise. The discussion of Haddad's article is not meant to simply criticize her pioneering invaluable work, but rather to further its implications in order to advance the sophistication of research on Muslims in the United States.

From an initial read one gets that for Haddad identity is related in some way to the notions of function and purpose. Her discussion of al-Faruqi, the interrelationship between politics and identity, and the notion that Muslim Americans have deliberate goals all suggest that the concept of identity in the scholarship on Muslims in the United States correlates to the notions of "strategy," "course of action" or even "ideology." If then fundamentally we are speaking of *orientation* or *ideology*, we can only use the term *identity* in terms of how a particular Muslim American or Muslim American institution may *identify* with a particular strategy or ideology and thus derive meaning from that experience.

The notion of ideology as used here is not meant to suggest ideology in terms of "-isms." That is, in terms of broad social, political, and possibly metaphysical platforms through which the surrounding physical and social worlds are articulated in a coherent narrative structure. Ideology as used here is employed in the classical Marxist and sociological sense as a system of thought or pattern of comprehension that underlies the reception of, engagement in, and negotiation of the range of processes that constitute the foundation of our social reality. Andrew Rippen amongst others has used this notion of ideology in the delineation of contemporary global Muslim attitudes and political positions.¹⁴

The real concern and aim of research on Muslims in the United States then is for those ideologies and sets of strategies themselves; more significantly, our concern is, or at

¹⁴ Andrew Rippen, *Muslims: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (London" Routledge, 1993) 36; William Shepard "Islam and Ideology: Towards a Typology," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 19 (1987), 307-36. Both of these works are treated as pretext for a larger discussion of Muslim inter-religious encounter in Douglas Pratt, *The Challenge of Islam: Encounters in Interfaith Dialogue*, (Hampshire, England: Ashgate, 2005) 148-68).

least it should be, to better understand how those ideologies are constructed, contested, reproduced and transformed in the landscape of American Muslim activity.

In order to answer such questions, I suggest following Talal Asad's original lead and adopt a discourse-centered approach which focuses on the use of language in everyday events and within natural community settings in order to understand how language, by engaging and interacting with the primary discourses of Islam, such as the Quran, Hadith, *Sira* (Life of Muhammad), Shari'a, or other aspects of an Islamic worldview, "authorizes,"¹⁵ a practice, community norm, or act to actually become and be understood by community members as Islamic. As Asad states, "A practice is Islamic because it is authorized by the discursive traditions of Islam, and is so taught by Muslims—whether by an *'alim*, a *khatib*, a Sufi *shaykh*, or an untutored parent."¹⁶ Thus, discursive patterns function as the building blocks of ideology in our sense by imbuing mundane activity with particular religious meaning. It is in this vein that we advocate the focus on Muslim American discourse as a means of uncovering the complexities and dynamics of the Muslim American experience.

Grounding the source of religious meaning within the patterns, traditions and speech events of communities also lends agency to the various subjects in a given setting by highlighting the diverse creative potential of human actors thus creating space for the inclusion of multiple Muslim expressions. Thus, one of the most immediate and profound benefits of a discourse-centered approach is its ability to account for differentiation and diversity in a meaningful way. Discourse-centeredness, by freeing the researcher of the tendency to generalize, also allows one to effectively account for the changing and fluctuating nature of social contexts. That is, in the case of Muslims in America, where

¹⁵ Asad, *The Idea of An Anthropology of Islam*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Washington D.C., 1986, 14-15.

¹⁶ Asad, 15



competing forces are actively attempting to define strategies, ideologies and “visions” for community activity, it becomes critical that we understand their production in terms of the contexts within which they exist.

Methodologically this may also be one of the most significant points vis-à-vis the conversation of inter/intra-faith dialogue. The very question of what constitutes the object of our study—that is who counts as a Muslim?—is often a point of contention that one struggles with prior to actually engaging the research itself. By simply surveying how communities define themselves vis-à-vis Islamic notions frees the researcher from delineating the boundaries of Muslim identity—a project perhaps best left to adherents themselves. In fact, under this research paradigm such a process can actually become a research topic in and of itself.

The dispersive, that is non-centered and manifold, character of discourse mandates that attention be given to the way in which it is employed in natural settings.¹⁷ It is on this note that performance analysis becomes an extremely important methodological companion to the discourse-approach. Performance analysis can be understood as a refinement of the discourse-centered approach. It focuses attention on the strategic deployment and artistic use of language and action; it locates the power of language as an agent of social construction in the situatedness and circumstantiality of context.

For example, an analysis of the language of a keynote speaker’s address at a national Islamic organization may be rightfully called discourse analysis. However, without equally owing attention to the moment and context wherein that language was employed may lead a researcher to miss the vital implications and power of that speech and thus its relevance and

¹⁷ John Bowen, *Muslims through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society*, (New Jersey: Princeton 1993) 10-11.

impact on the community as a whole. Also, in terms of research data, the analysis of a series of answers to a questionnaire is no longer simply a “reflection of attitudes and opinions,” instead, the answers are one part of an entire performance of the research subject—the willingness and decision to simply fill out a survey then becomes just as much a dimension of data as the answers themselves.¹⁸ The combination of discourse and performance, or language and action, serves as an invaluable method in the study of Muslims in the United States.

Promoting such a research agenda is not a novel notion, but rather one grounded in larger trends in fields concerned with the study of Muslims. Bruce Lincoln has adapted the work of Talal Asad in the development of a comprehensive definition of religion.¹⁹ A discourse-centered approach has been used by John Bowen in the study of Islam in Indonesia²⁰ and Saba Mahmood has incorporated such a research orientation in the study of gender and piety in Egyptian Muslim women’s mosque activity.²¹ On the American scene, another anthropologist, Gregory Starret, demonstrates the central role of Islamic educational materials and their use in community settings in the creation of a local African American Muslim community.²² These studies all focus on the production of discourse as seen at the intersections of community activity, institutional networks and a various discursive traditions. Thus the role of discussion and debate are at the core of dislodging static and monolithic portrayals of Muslims, a posture expressly adopted in the University of North

¹⁸ One example that neglects this aspect is: Kambiz Ghanea Bassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles*, (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997).

¹⁹ See his chapter “The Study of Religion in the Current Political Moment” in his *Holy Terrors: Thinking about Religion after September 11* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003) 1-18.

²⁰ John Bowen, *Muslims Through Discourse: Religion and Ritual in Gayo Society*, (New Jersey: Princeton 1993).

²¹ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press) 2005.

²² Gregory Starret, “Muslim Identities and the Great Chain of Buying” in *New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999) 57-79

Carolina's *Islamic Civilization and Muslim Networks* series edited by Bruce Lawrence and Carl Ernst.

Discursive Themes Amongst American Muslims

As a precursor to the current investigation, in work conducted on behalf of the Pluralism Project and in part for the completion of a Master's thesis, I conducted a survey of the responses of five Muslim organizations in the Denver metro area to the attacks of September 11th. While the dominant belief was and still is that the events of that day fundamentally changed all Americans and Muslims in particular, I was surprised to find an array of diverse opinions and reactions to September 11th that not only debunked the monolithic response myth, but also revealed certain patterns and postures in various Muslim American institutions and communities that have existed overtime. By exploring this diversity in orientation I was forced to concentrate not on ethnicity, class, conversion, or sectarianism but on community discourses as the primary markers of division.

Continued work across the country and in Atlanta in particular has shown that there exist dominant patterns and themes of discourse that reveal themselves in natural Muslim American settings. Similar to the question of Muslim American reactions to September 11, 2001, the role of interfaith activity and its impact on the Muslim American landscape needs to be assessed along the matrix of dominant discursive themes in the community as a whole. These themes, or orientations, constitute the ideological undercurrents of Muslim American activity; their internal and external dynamics, intersections, and fluctuations need to be accounted for in order to gain further insight into the specificities of how particular questions and concerns are negotiated in community settings.



It is important to stress the diffuse, permeable, and fluctuating nature of discourse. Discourse is the product and function of language, it is constantly shifting because it is produced, debated, transformed and maintained in collective human settings. As such, one can expect that any attempt to circumscribe a body of discourse and pigeonhole it into a contrived category will forever be a tenuous project. Nonetheless, experimenting with such notions may serve as a fruitful heuristic device.

The six dominant discursive themes in the American Muslim community are 1) the Abrahamic-American, 2) the Redemptive-Social Activist, 3) the Salafi-Sunni Ummatic, 4) the revivalist *madhhabi*, 5) the Progressive Reformist and, 6) the Homeland Homesick. Each of these themes maintains distinct uses of language and emphasis but may often overlap with one another in various community settings. Though it is beyond the scope of this paper, it should be noted that each of these themes are connected to networks and discourses of a range of Islamic institutions both in the United States and abroad.

Sociologically, members of the Abrahamic-American theme come from the generations of professional immigrants who advocate for Muslim inclusion in the Judeo-Christian foundation myth of the United States. That is, they advocate for the full adoption of both an American and Muslim identity that is collaborative rather than contradictory. It may also include groups such as that of the Warith Dean Muhammad Community which as since the death of Elijah Muhammad striven for the full fusion of Islamic and American values and ideals. This theme often speaks of the American constitution as an embodiment of Islamic tenets and cites a number of shared beliefs and principles between American and Islamic values. This group tends to be ecumenical towards both Muslims and non-Muslims and often is the public face of a number of prominent Muslim American institutions.

Working closely with officials from government and active in inter-faith networks and dialogues in order to alleviate public concerns about Islam and Muslims, this group tends to be socially and politically cosmopolitan.

Redemptive Social Activism is largely born out of the African American Muslim experience. It focuses on community building and employing Islam as a social and religious force of collective empowerment which seeks the holistic betterment of the African American community. It maintains an implicit, though quite often explicit, critique of American society for failing to live up to its promise of justice and equality. The language and activity of this group often emphasizes the local: it seeks to establish and develop local communities, programs and services which may serve the needs of the local community. This theme, in contrast to the previous one, is often weary of interfaith ecumenicalism. However, by virtue of being composed primarily by converts, this theme often speaks directly and unapologetically towards their non-Muslim American counterparts.

The Salafi-Sunni theme focuses language and effort on everyday acts of religious obligation and general piety. The theme concentrates on the moral and ethical teachings of Islam as embodied in the teachings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad and his early companions and followers, the Salaf. Born largely out of the theological movement began by Muhammad Ibn Abdul Wahhab, the 18th century reformer of what is today Saudi Arabia, this theme rejects the conventional *madhhab* legal system of Islamic legal jurisprudence and focuses instead on a direct unmediated reading of Islamic texts. The theme regularly speaks of the ummah, or global Muslim community, and its stagnation and struggle, and attributes its decline and subservience not to the aggression of non-Muslims, but to the lack of piety and obedience of the Muslims themselves. Thus, overt political conversations are largely

ignored as are direct political activities. Above all else this is a pietistic and quietist orientation.

The Revivalist-*Madhhabi* theme is also a conservatively religious mode, but stands in contradistinction to the Salafi-Sunni project in that it seeks to revive participation in the traditional Islamic sciences as a means to improve the condition of the *ummah*. In doing so, it emphasizes acquiring Islamic knowledge in a more formalized manner usually through reliance upon a particular set of teachers and conventional systems of knowledge transmission. In this way, it is inclined towards acceptance of Sufi *tareeqas*. A tremendous focus is placed in this group on the presumed grandeur and accomplishments of medieval Islamic civilization, though this stress can be seen in other groups as well. Like the Salafi-Sunni movement, this theme concentrates more upon personal and collective piety than on local or international politics.

The Progressive Reformist theme is perhaps the most diverse of all of the themes in terms of theological approach and ethnic makeup. This theme calls into question the conventional and traditional interpretation of Islamic sciences and advocates for a radical reformulation of Islamic practice and belief. The theme ranges from secular universalists to conservative reformists whose institutions are typically local community organizations, advocacy groups, cyberspace networks, and most importantly western universities—that is, their activities are usually not located in mosques or other established Muslim American institutions. Although this group has received tremendous attention in recent years as it is often the most radical voice which speaks against Islamic extremism, its efforts stem from decades of work of Muslim reformers throughout the Islamic world. At the core of the movement is the belief that Muslims should be able to read Islamic texts individually

unbound by conventional interpretations, and that they have the authority to transform the tradition to meet the various demands of its constituents.

The last theme that I tentatively dub the Homeland Homesick loosely describes the countless Muslim communities around the United States that serve primarily as enclaves of specific ethnic immigrant communities. In these centers one often finds a religious community that aims to replicate as much as possible the traditions and habits as experienced in the country of origin. As such, the language of the community is often exclusive to that country. These groups are often isolated from the dynamics of the larger Muslim community and focus their efforts on simply providing a space for congregants to gather and share homeland experiences in their new and alien environment. These communities most likely resemble those early communities of immigrant Muslims for which we have little to no information. As such careful attention to the dynamics of these small communities yields larger insights into the historical developments of other better established communities.

In an often overlooked article concerning American Muslim community formation, Frederick Denny experiments with church/sect theory as a framework to understand Muslim umbrella groups such as ISNA, The Islamic Society of North America. He notes that church/sect theory in so long as it focuses on doctrine and theology is not heuristically useful in the Christian, much less Muslim, setting. He advocates however, that “if we focus on functional/dynamic aspects”²³ entertaining notions of quasi-denominationalism in the North American Muslim landscape may give way to surprising results. In the same spirit, I experiment with the notion of dominant discursive themes which may be loosely conceived

²³ Frederick Denny, *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: A Memorial to Fazlur Rahman*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press 1998) 238.



of as quasi-denominations. They are quasi in that they do not exist in any official capacity or maintain official doctrinal positions; but they are denominational because they represent official patterns, approaches, and religious orientations and are rooted in differential understandings of Islamic foundational texts—especially in as much as they interact with their environment.

Atlanta Muslims, discursive themes, and inter-religious encounters

Muslims in the Atlanta metropolitan area are said to number approximately 80,000 and represent nearly the entire range of immigrants from various parts of the Islamic world in addition to a vibrant indigenous African American Muslim presence. Sociologically, the most populous ethnic group of Muslims is African American followed closely by South Asians including Pakistani, Indian and Bangladeshi. Other salient ethnic communities are those hailing from the Eastern African region from countries such as Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia. West Africans from Northern Nigeria, Senegal, and Gambia are also present. Arab communities are present but not dominant. There is a large population of Iranian expatriots; however the overwhelming majority of them do not participate in the larger Muslim landscape of Atlanta. Bosnian and Turkish Muslims also have their own centers and organizations in the city.

In terms of the discursive themes listed above, all categories are represented in Atlanta. Many fall under the Home-land/Home-sick theme being that there are a host of

freshly arrived refugee and immigrant communities in the Atlanta area from East African countries and Bosnia. The city's Shi'ite communities, which include about a half dozen Twelver Shi'ite centers and at least two Nasiri Ismaili centers, also fall under this category.

There are few official organizations that would comprise the Progressive-Reformist theme though it should be known that Emory Law school is home to Professor Abdullahi An-Naim, the world renowned human rights activist, scholar and author of *Toward an Islamic Reformation*. In addition, the activist scholar Saleemah Abdul Ghafur author of *Living Islam Out Loud: American Muslim Women Speak* who was also a key organizer of the 2005 woman led joint prayer in New York City resides and operates in the Atlanta area. In this theme, an online community of Atlanta area Muslim homosexuals also exists along with an offshoot of the Rashad Khalifa's United Submitters International movement.

Salafi-Sunni communities, as in the case in most major U.S. cities, maintain a dominant presence in the Atlanta area. Most major mosques fall under this theme but is combined with an administrative branch whose activities are more visibly Abrahamic American. Herein also lay the local branches of National organizations such as the Council of American and Islamic Relations and the Islamic Circle of North America.

Redemptive Activism is perhaps most exemplified in the Atlanta area by the West End Community Masjid which falls under the directorship of Imam Jamil Al-Amin formerly known as H. Rap Brown, the prominent civil rights and Muslim leader. It is important to include here organizations affiliated with the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam and the Nation of Islam along with the range of Muslim social service organizations that also fall under this category. Such organizations may include substance abuse, psychological counseling, and domestic abuse services such as those provided by Nadim S. Ali and Ogen L. Davis, the

former a prominent member of the West End Community and the latter one of the Atlanta Masjid²⁴.

Revivalist Madhhabi groups are mostly seen in diffuse networks of scholars and students that operate through study circles and personal relationships throughout the city. A prominent and visible leader that could fall under this theme is Sheikh Muhammad Al-Ninowi of the Al-Madina Masjid. He is known world-wide and draws much attention from area Muslims seeking a traditional Islamic education.

The fact that Muslims in the United States are best understood in terms of discourse differentiation is proved by a number of anomalies in the Atlanta Muslim community. In the Norcross area, a small suburb just outside of official Atlanta city limits but well within the Metro area, there are a number of Muslim business and worship centers. It is ironic that in addition to the proximity of the centers, their ethnic composition is homogenously South Asian yet three different centers exist all within minutes of one another: Masjid Abdullah, Masjid Omar, and Al-Madina Masjid. Upon closer investigation it is clear that each center falls under various categories of the discursive theme matrix outlined above. Al-Madina Masjid can be considered as part of the revivalist-madhhabi theme; Masjid Omar is a satellite of the Masjid Al-Farooq whose administrative dimension at least is Abrahamic American, and Masjid Abdullah which originated as a splinter of Masjid Omar might be considered Salafi-Sunni.

In a similar vein, along I-20, which runs east and west through the heart of Atlanta within a short distance there exist a range of Muslim institutions and centers composed

²⁴ For Nadim S. Ali see: www.nadimali.com. For Ogene L. Davis see: www.humanexcelbehavioral.com. There is also the Marrkazul Irrshaad wa Tawjeeh, Center of Islamic Counseling and Guidance, see: www.islamiccounseling.org, though this organization offers a larger range of services than counseling.

predominantly of African American Muslims: the West End Community Center, Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam and the As-Salafu Saalih Masjid. Again, these groups' differentiation from one another can only be explained by attention their discourse. The As-Salafu Saalih community in its self-description follows a religious orientation largely determined by scholars in Saudi Arabia²⁵, while the Atlanta Masjid follows the guidance of Warith Deen Muhammad, and the West End Masjid follows the leadership of Imam Jamil Al-Amin. All groups here self-identify as Sunni, they are all African American and all within minutes of one another—another example which demonstrates that sociological categories of identity such as class and ethnicity buckle in light of such cases.

Values of religious ecumenicalism and tolerance, some of the standard features stressed in the Abrahamic American theme, accompany a perception that the Islamic religious tradition and the United States are mutually compatible social, political, and cultural projects. As such, it is no coincidence that most, if not all, of interfaith dialogue and activity participated in by Muslims in the Atlanta area falls under this category of Muslim American discourse. Groups in the Atlanta area that represent this category include Masjid Al-Farooq, The Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam, and the Agha Khan Ismaili communities (inclusive of its range of institutions). It is important to note that Masjid Al-Farooq is a Sunni community composed primarily of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent while the Atlanta Masjid is, with minor exceptions, an entirely African American community which follows the guidance and teachings of Warith Deen Muhammad, and the Ismaili community is a Naziri Shi'ite community almost entirely isolated from the larger Atlanta Muslim landscape, nonetheless as will be seen, their common discourse warrants that they be understood in similar light.

²⁵

See their self-description at: www.islamicfinder.org/getitWorld.php?id=33896&lang=.



Ismailis in Atlanta

The worldwide Ismaili community is composed primarily of South Asians from India and Pakistan some of whose descendants constitute a formidable settlement presence in East and South Africa. However, communities also exist in places such Tajikstan, Afghanistan, Syrian, Iran and even Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Countries. The community is organized globally under a network of organizations and councils that essentially functions as a stateless polity in which members adhere to a constitution that is administered by local councils whose leadership is directly appointed by the Agha Khan himself, understood to be the .

The historical dimension of Ismailis vis-à-vis the larger Islamic world is critical in understanding the community in its present context. Ismailis are Shi'ites that believe like Twelver Shi'ites in the primacy of Ali ibn Abu Talib, the authority of the Prophet's authority, and the comprehensive jurisdiction of the Imam (the Imamate), but differ from them in that they dispute over the identity of the Seventh Imam which constitutes the basis for the two groups' historical splintering. Also different from the Twelver Shi'ites, Ismailis do not believe in the occultation of the Imam, but rather identify a current living descendent of the Prophet Muhammad, Agha Khan IV, as his legitimate successor. Without venturing in explaining the complex and dynamic history of this group and its subsequent offshoots, it is important to note that the great Fatimid Caliphate of Egypt and North Africa and the notorious Assassins are historical antecedents of today's Ismailis.

More significant for understanding the situation of contemporary Ismailis is that, as a minority of a minority, for centuries they have been a persecuted group in Muslim lands. As such they have often resorted to the controversial practice of *taqiyya*, or dissimulation, in

which one conceals their faith from the larger community in order to avoid harassment. This phenomenon has led to gross misunderstandings about Ismailis throughout history and feeds directly into the reason for their continued isolation from larger Sunni and Shi'ite communities. One consequence, for example, is that non-Ismailis are not permitted entrance into the worship spaces of community centers (Jama'at Khana) out of fear that Ismaili faith and practice will be misrepresented by outsiders and thus lead to continued maltreatment.

On the Muslim American landscape, the Ismaili community is composed largely of South Asian descended immigrants and their children who hail from communities in East Africa, India and Pakistan. Like their global and historical counterparts, Ismaili Muslims in the United States and Atlanta are largely withdrawn from the larger landscape of Muslim American scene and operate in a virtually separate sphere of social and cultural activity. Community members have informed me that there have been threatening confrontations between Ismaili Shi'ites and radical Salafis in other areas in the United States which has led members to be more cautious and less public about their particular brand of Islamic faith and practice.

It is ironic given Ismaili segregation from and persecution by the larger Muslim world that the community actively participates in interfaith dialogue and intercultural communication. Here we briefly review an interfaith dinner event and the charitable Partnership Walk as two examples of the Ismaili sponsored public activity in Atlanta. The discourse and nature of these events demonstrate the community's relationship to the Abrahamic American and Reformist Progressive categories of Muslim American discourse.

The Ismaili community of Atlanta as represented by the Southeastern



Council...hosted a high profile dinner during the summer of 2005 which hosted Dr. Gordon Newby and Abdulahi An-Naim as invited speakers. The dinner was a well organized, formal and invite-only event. In fact, there was no publicity surrounding the event yet in attendance were the British and French consuls, Atlanta area religious leaders, college deans and professors, business professionals and the regional field director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Dr. Gordon Newby began the evening's discussion by drawing attention to the need for Muslim communities to be more involved in the knowledge production industry as not only participants in academic and public discourse, but also as consultants and curators in the production of textbooks used for public education and mass distribution. Being involved as a consultant himself, he was surprised to see that whereas other religious communities were actively negotiating with publishers over content material, the Muslim voice was virtually non-existent.

Dr. An-Naim followed Dr. Newby's conversation by discussing ideas of Islamic reform and the central and paramount role of individual readings of the Islamic tradition. He advocated the reduction of clerical authority in Islam as a precursor to Islamic reform worldwide. The empowerment of non-conventional readings of the Islamic tradition, in Dr. An-Naim's point of view is central to the prevention and furtherance of Islamic extremism.

After the two short addresses, organizers of the event began a general conversation with attendees and the invited guests. The questions centered on the way in which Muslims as active agents in their tradition can prevent the spread of religious extremism and violence. In a striking metaphor the moderator described a scene from nature. He described the way in which a pristine ecological setting was once filled with a great multiplicity of various bird

species whose combined sounds produced a great concert and melody. This concert ended when predatory birds overran the environment devouring the smaller birds' habitats and driving them from the scene. He then asked, "What do we do now that all of the small beautiful sounds of Islamic history and civilization have been overrun by our own type of predatory birds?" Many Ismailis in attendance commented on the charitable, educational and developmental projects of the Agha Khan network and the nature of the community as being far removed from the problematic tendencies seen in other sectors of the Muslim world.

Dinner participants, the total of which numbered close to one hundred, offered comments, suggestions and questions which taken together made for a dynamic and engaging evening of conversation, dialogue and networking. Dr. Khalid Saddiq, a leading figure in the Al-Farooq Masjid, was one of the more prominent guests in attendance along with members from other Muslim organizations such as local Muslim Student Associations and the Istanbul Center for Culture and Dialogue.

At the intersection between Muslim and non-Muslim, the presence of intra-Muslim *others* comes to the foreground creating a space for mutual recognition and host of potentialities. In this vein it is interesting to note that despite the fact that the Ismaili community globally and historically has been persecuted and marginalized by the larger Sunni community, not to mention other Shi'ite groups, at no point did the dinner advance an Ismaili position—the discourse was such that it represented the totality of Islamic history.

Another example of Ismaili American inter-religious activity can be seen in the nationwide organization of the Partnership Walk, a charitable event aimed at raising funds for the alleviation of poverty in underdeveloped regions of Africa and South Asia. The

event took place on September 25 at Atlanta's reputed Centennial Park and included local news channel anchors as MCs along with the distinguished participation of guests such as Georgia Senator Saxby Chambliss and Lieutenant Governor Mark Taylor. Approximately 5,500 people participated in the walk which reportedly raised \$1,000,000.

The Partnership Walk in Atlanta is one of five that takes place across the United States in cities such as Houston, Chicago, Dallas, and Los Angeles. The walks' administrative expenses are underwritten by the AKF (The Agha Khan Foundation) whose global network is coordinated with local grass roots development efforts as well as the highest levels of international charitable organizations. The year's walk was dedicated to the theme of microcredit financing projects, an echo of the United Nations' call for micro-credit financing as method toward empowering local communities. In fact, the United Nations' Secretary General Kofi Annan dedicated a letter of support to the AKF for its efforts with the walk.

A notable absence from the Partnership Walk was the presence of other Muslim organizations as co-sponsors or organizers. While community members from different Muslim backgrounds were undoubtedly present, the sheer absence non-Ismaili Muslims from the public face of the event demonstrates the estrangement of the community from the larger Muslim American landscape. The Partnership Walk was not advertised or known about in Atlanta area Muslim activities. One prominent area Muslim leader even mistook the event for a March of Dimes walk. Given that the event occurred within walking distance of the largest Mosque in Atlanta, it is a telling indicator of the lack of intra-faith relations that it did not include other Muslim groups.

The events covered here demonstrate the elite and international nature of the

modern worldwide Ismaili community. Arguably this dimension of the community harkens back to the trend set by Aqa Ali Shah (Agha Khan II) b. 1830, who became Imam in 1881 and promoted educational and philanthropic activities as head of multi-party Islamic organization.²⁶ Such trends were then solidified by Sultan Muhammad Shah al-Husayni (Agha Khan III) b. 1877 who held high-level relations with leaders in Europe and the Middle East and received the title of Grand Night Commander of the Indian Empire by King Edward the VII of England.²⁷

As far as the global Muslim community is concerned, the Ismaili contingent represents perhaps the most well networked and organized group capable of participating in all levels of society in various contexts and settings. Such versatility has positioned the community to be a forerunner in the fostering of dialogue, communication, and education between Muslims and non-Muslims. Perhaps the only barrier to the furthering of this activity is the Ismaili community's estrangement from the larger Muslim world.

Masjid al-Farooq:

Masjid al-Farooq is one of the most influential mosques in the Atlanta area. It is a Sunni community located in the downtown area and is easily accessible to all Muslims in the metro-area. It is an ethnically cosmopolitan community composed mostly of immigrants from nearly all spans of the Muslim world. The predominant ethnic group in the community, however, is the South Asian population followed by various eastern and western African groups, followed then by various Arab groups. The most significant aspect of Masjid al-Farooq is its public presence. In the Atlanta area it is known simply as the 14th

²⁶ Farhad Daftary, *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 517.

²⁷ Ibid.



street mosque—being that 14th street is a major thoroughfare in the city. The recent construction of a new mosque that exhibits a multi-story minaret and broad copper dome visible from surrounding areas further signals the presence of Islam in Atlanta. Masjid al-Farooq is often the location of visits from educational institutions of all levels and is often quoted in the newspapers and local media when needed.

The public affairs and outreach of the community are largely managed by Dr. Khalid Saddiq a physician who has resided in Atlanta for over 25 years and has witnessed the growth not only of Al-Farooq, but also other Muslim groups in the area. Dr. Saddiq regularly hosts a range of visitors to the center for public education about Islam and tirelessly attends public meetings, press conferences and inter-faith dialogues. Although al-Farooq is well-established and large, its inter-religious activities and outreach efforts are mostly managed on an ad hoc basis. There is no standing committee that seeks out occasions to either propagate Islam or systematically offer public education about the religion. Instead, there are a core of volunteers that answer public requests for speakers and site visits.

The nature of interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims at Al-Farooq is typically of public educational nature. While other groups may be involved in the cultivation of interfaith values of dialogue and cross-cultural communication, the type of discourse that dominates the activities of the center often simply introduces the key characteristics of Islam to an eager audience. Such conversations exist along a backdrop of a range of socio-political concerns and are of a rather general nature.

Because of the ad hoc nature of such meetings, in depth conversations and substantive dialogue do not occur. In addition, the settings usually involve large numbers of

participants which further reduces the possibility for active engagement. Dr. Saddiq is typically present for such activities as is the community Imam who answer basic questions the guests may have. Non-Muslim groups that attend the mosque for educational purposes include area churches, K-12 schools, university students and members of the media.

Dr. Saddiq continually combats negative stereotypes of Muslims as expressed in the media and concentrates heavily upon demonstrating the commonalities between all monotheistic faith traditions as well as the essential similarities between Islamic and American values. In one setting, Dr. Saddiq expressed his confidence that the American constitution was essentially Islamic in that its core message seeks the same ideals for human society as does Islam. It is interesting to note that this type of rhetoric occurs in similar settings involving similar actors. The work of M.A. Muqtedar Khan as expressed in *American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom* which largely appeals to this line of thinking. The message of similarity between Islamic and American values is repeated by a number of Muslim American intellectuals, elites and leaders around the country and is a fundamental component of the Abrahamic American discursive theme.

The inter-faith activities of al-Farooq are rarely expressed outside of the activities of the elites involved in them. Although there is not an a priori aversion to inter-religious communication at al-Farooq, one will rarely hear the interfaith message in the broader discourse of the community. Having to serve a broad constituency of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, al-Farooq, like many communities similar to it around the country promote general aspects, ideals and messages of Islam. In this vein, it is best understood as a Salafi-Sunni pietistic and quietist center whose administrative and outward dimension is Abrahamic American.

Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam

The Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam is the oldest Muslim community in Atlanta. Originally founded by Elijah Muhammad under the auspices of the Nation of Islam, the Atlanta Masjid is now a community under the general leadership and guidance of Imam Warith Deen Muhammad. It is perhaps the best organized and developed of all the Muslim communities in Atlanta being home to the Warith Deen Muhammad High School and the Sister Clara Muhammad Elementary and Middle Schools which are fully accredited institutions with a track record of accomplishments that have drawn attention from academic observers.²⁸

Since the original Nation of Islam began its transformation upon the death of its founder in 1976, the nation-wide community under the leadership of Imam Warith Deen Muhammad has striven for the full coalescence of an American and Muslim identity. For community members this has been seen as a natural progression, one that was actually anticipated by Elijah Muhammad himself. As such, engagement in civic and political affairs has been a central component of the community's self-perception. On the whole the community therefore sees itself as a pioneer in the establishment and promotion of Islam in the United States as a positive and natural contribution to American society and culture. Naturally then, the community's posture to its Christian and Jewish neighbors is highly ecumenical.

²⁸ See Na'ilah Suad Nasir, "Halal-ing the Child: Reframing Identities of Resistance in an Urban Muslim School" in *Harvard Educational Review*, Vol. 74 Num. 2, 2004, pp 153-74 and; Hakim M. Rashid and Zakiyyah Muhammad's "The Sister Clara Muhammad Schools: Pioneers in the Development of Islamic Education in America" in *The Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 61, No. 2, Spring, 1992, pp. 178-185.

The community's efforts and activities with regard to inter-religious communications have been most exemplified by Imam Plemon El-Amin, Atlanta Masjid's leader and spokesperson. More than any other Muslim leader in the Atlanta metro area, Imam Plemon has integrated his community into the inter-religious landscape of dialogue and cross-confessional community building. Imam Plemon currently serves as the head of the Faith Alliance of Metro Atlanta (FAMA) and a lead coordinator and participant of the World Pilgrims, an Atlanta based network of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim interfaith leaders, that takes tours throughout the year to historic locations of inter-religious encounter such as Turkey, Jordan, Palestine and Spain. In addition to having formal relationships of varying capacity to a number of universities in the area, he is also a board member of Atlanta Interfaith Broadcasters, a local television studio that records, produces and disseminates Atlanta area faith-based activities. Imam Plemon is thus not only an influential Muslim leader, but a critical member of the city-wide religious landscape. In June 2005, he participated as a panelist in an international teleconference moderated by Dan Rather which discussed the topic of Middle East peace and inter-religious dialogue.

Imam Plemon, by virtue of being the leader of the Atlanta Masjid, is able to disseminate and cultivate the goals and ambitions of inter-religious dialogue at a community wide level in way that other Muslim American elites can not. At an organizational and administrative level, Imam Plemon is also able to recruit a cadre of participants for interfaith activity as well as nurture that participation by incorporating it into the formal discourse of the community whether it is through *khutbas*, writings, or other means. One example of this dynamic can be seen through Imam Plemon's discussion of his World Pilgrims trip to Istanbul which he delivered as a Friday *khutba* (sermon). In this setting, Imam Plemon



discussed the details of the trip in which Muslims, Christians and Jews had to partner with one another for ten days and tour the historic religious sites of one another's traditions. In this way, Imam Plemon is able to cultivate the messages of dialogue that are typically experienced only by participants in interfaith forums themselves in a larger Muslim setting. This performative aspect of the discourse is critical in that it breaks down the elite/general community divide dimension of interfaith activity that exists in communities such as the Masjid Al-Farooq seen above.

Reflections

Thus far this essay has offered a descriptive rather than prescriptive account of American Muslim approaches to inter-religious dialogue and interaction, or perhaps more properly inter-religious encounter, in the Atlanta metro area. Whereas the bulk of scholarship on interfaith dialogue focuses on elements that influence its efficacy in an effort to improve existing models and highlight obstacles, this essay has sought to examine the nature of American Muslim interfaith activity as it stands and how that activity relates to larger inter/intra community concerns and dynamics. The result has been the exposition that American Muslim inter/intra-faith activity is largely a marginal and elite engagement of a small sector of the overall Muslim community in Atlanta. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that little of this activity constitutes what is typically understood as interfaith dialogue—that is as a step towards conflict resolution or peace building. Instead, the majority of inter-religious Muslim activity might be subsumed under the category of public education.

Another striking realization of this study is the lack of intra-faith Muslim dialogue.



The Partnership Walk of the Ismaili community demonstrates that although ethnic, class, and even ideological commonality may exist between Muslim groups, coordination and interaction is not guaranteed between the groups. In fact, it may be the case that the mere awareness of internal others may not exist. A painfully obvious example of this occurred during an interfaith dialogue at Al-Farooq Masjid between a local Church and some members of the Mosque. It was clear by the depth of the questions Church members were asking of their counterparts that they knew more about internal Muslim differences, particularly those of Shi'ites and Sunnis, than did some of their hosts. It may be the case that Muslims in America have abused the privilege of not having been forced to confront their own internal differences. In this way, Muslims have simply avoided internal conflicts in lieu raising awareness of them. As has been noted by Marc Gopin, "Conflict avoidance is one of the most popular methods of peacemaking...and one of the most dangerous in the long term"²⁹ In the context of the United States where the public at large is grossly misinformed about Islam and in dire need of cross-confessional communication, the lack of intra-faith Muslim dialogue constitutes a serious impediment towards the cultivation of interfaith ethics, values and education.

It has also been interesting to note from the study that out of the three groups surveyed, the two more marginal Muslim groups, the Atlanta Masjid of Al-Islam and the Ismaili Community, were more integrated in the pre-existing interfaith networks and charitable activities of the city than Masjid Al-Farooq, which is often taken as representative of "Orthodox" Islam. Here Marc Gopin also notes that "A separatist community is deeply aware of the experience of Otherness and of being outsiders. The history of persecution as

²⁹ Marc Gopin, *Between Eden and Armageddon: The Future of World Religions, Violence, and Peacemaking*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 116.

outsiders leads...to a deep respect for Otherness, for the stranger”³⁰ The Warith Deen Muhammad Community in Atlanta is the largest community under a central system of leadership, however, they are often marginalized for their unique brand of Islam that has been cultivated almost entirely in an American context and thus diverges from conventional practice overseas. The Ismaili community's isolation has already been noted. It could be that because marginalized groups have had to deal with themselves as others, confronting a non-internal other, is almost like second nature. In this respect, marginal internal others can be of great service to dominant Muslim groups in navigating through the journey of inter-religious dialogue and communication.

The challenge of engaging the large section of the Sunni community in the United States in inter-religious dialogue is nuanced by a number of factors; one of most critical being the diffuse nature of religious leadership therein. Because the predominant form of Sunni Islam practiced in the United States does not recognize formal structures of leadership but rather focuses on personal relationships of authority, the hierarchical structures that have had great affect as seen in the case of the Atlanta Masjid and the Ismaili community are inapplicable in the dominant Sunni case.

A critical challenge for inter/intra-faith organizers will be to identify structures of leadership and systems of communication in various American Muslim settings and then employ them towards the purposes cultivating interfaith values. As can be seen in the cases of the Ismaili and Warith Deen Muhammad communities, the role of religious leadership is critical to the diffusion of interfaith values into the larger community of Muslims. Institutional systems of hierarchy and their proper employment thus become one of the most important factors in ensuring that the goals and ideals of inter-religious communication

³⁰ Gopin, *Between*, 148.



become cultivated and sustained beyond the event of the encounter itself. Thus Marc Gopin's call seems to be right on point: "We need to examine what are the minimal steps within each religious hierarchy that can be recommended for elicited that will give permission to lower-level actors to proceed more boldly along a path of engagement."³¹ Without the dimensions of leadership, community dissemination and context, that is, discourse performance, interfaith activity will remain the discourse of voluntary elites.

One of the most recurring facts encountered in this study has been the circular nature of interfaith dialogue amongst Muslims in the United States. It is most often the case that those engaged in interfaith activity are already predisposed to its ecumenical and liberal values and goals, thus creating a "preaching to the choir" phenomenon that quite often employs the same participants. While such repetition undoubtedly builds relationships of trust over the long-term that can be used for beneficial purposes in times of crises, the fact remains that those sectors of the community that are resistant to inter-religious communication and often are dangerously insular are left out of the conversation. This short coming has been noted by Gopin in a larger context:

Universal commitments...may play a crucial role in achieving...consensus on basic civil values...But this may not be a sufficient common denominator for people who are defining their religiosity in opposition to the universal, secular values. Good conflict resolution strategy requires a method of reaching out to even the most intractable and parochial religious adherents by engaging in a serious examination of their values and culture."³²

Thus, tolerating the intolerant will be one of the most formidable challenges for Muslim inter and intra-faith organizers. Future similar studies may lay the ground work and mapping necessary for such a step by simply identifying commonalities, points of divergence, and potentialities.

³¹ Gopin, *Between*, 200.

³² Gopin, *Between*, 199.

It has been noted by Muhammad Abu Nimer that the power of interfaith dialogue lies at the fact that religion strikes at the core of one's own identity.³³ As has been argued, when dealing with a community as diverse as the American Muslim one, identity can not be assumed to be a homogenous or static fixture. Rather, identity like all other personal experiences is clothed in a series of fluctuating discursive and non-discursive constructions—a discourse-centered approach thus accounts for such dynamism and can potentially advance pre-existing understandings and models of interfaith dialogue and discussion. It can also lay the foundation for which the particular viewpoints of a community are incorporated into the dialogue session, without which efficacy is almost surely compromised.

Finally, it should be said that Muslim communities in the United States today are in a truly historically unprecedented situation. Only on occasions of the annual *Hajj* might Muslims from every corner of the globe and from every confessional background confront one another in such a close setting. Recognizing the great diversity of the Muslim *ummah* in the United States may create the possibilities for intra-faith Muslim dialogue and encounter in homeland settings; it can also further foster the path of communication between Muslims and non-Muslims. Though this is perhaps an overreaching and unrealistic hope the promise and reward of its potentiality are far too great to ignore.

³³ Muhammad Abu-Nimer, *Miracles of Transformation through Interfaith Dialogue: Are You a Believer?*, in David Smock (ed.), *Interfaith Dialogue and Peace* building, (Washington D.C.: United States Institute of Peace) 16-18.