INTERPRETING RIGHTNESS AT A U.S. ISLAMIC SCHOOL:
A _____ ADVENTURE TALE

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ABSTRACT

In popular Western culture and media Islam is widely reified, flattened, and treated as a static, monolithic entity. Monochromatically negative depictions of Islamic education betray a lack of understanding of the diverse personalities, pedagogies and purposes found in Muslim schools. Even those presenting Muslim schools in positive light often fail to communicate Islam's socially constructed and contested dimensions, minimize the significance of interpretive disparities among believers, and diminish the associated conflicts potentially experienced by members of Islamic school communities. The United States boasts approximately 250 full-time Islamic schools, serving thirty-two thousand students of a growing Muslim population, and yet little research exists discussing the curricular content, pedagogical methods, and ideological orientations of these institutions. My study took place at Tafsir Islamic School (TIS), a mid-sized K-12 private Islamic school in a metropolitan area in the Midwestern United States, and seeks to answer two questions: (1) by what means are specific versions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy constructed, maintained, and challenged in the Tafsir community?, and (2) how could the general interpretive climate corresponding to these processes be described in theoretical terms? Qualitative field work was conducted at TIS over an 18 month span, involving semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 20 adult participants, including teachers, administrators, and involved members of the community. The study utilizes ethnographic data collection methods, a flexible and collaborative research design strategy, and an iterative, grounded theory-inspired approach to data analysis. My findings suggest that orthodoxy and orthopraxis are constructed and contested through a complex network of

corroborating and competing factors. These include (a) *authorized executive decisions*, (b) *rogue pedagogy*, (c) *theological dialogue*, (d) *peer discipline*, (e) *community reinforcement*, (f) *sanctioned ideological associations*, and (g) *vigilante religious policing*. The distribution of interpretive power within the school community results in a *de facto* system of checks and balances, as intra- and inter-sectarian disputes prevent any one group from gaining explicit prominence. Colliding hermeneutical processes result in a normative balance that fluctuates over time with changing community members and socio-historic circumstances. This balance, referred to as a *dynamic interpretive equilibrium*, characterizes the general ideological climate of the school. The inadmissibility of certain outlying ideas is both the cause and effect of this climate. In examining the diversity of interpretive orientations at an Islamic school, my study demonstrates the active role Muslims play in shaping the character of their faith. It likewise undermines popular one-dimensional depictions of Muslim schools, portraying Islamic education as a living, active and contested phenomenon.

For Abu Talib, Aziza, & Tajali,

Bawangal & Louie, Buckwheat & Birdie.

Thank you God, no thank you. What's next?

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GLOSSARY OF SELECT TERMS

abaya: a robe-like garment covering the full body, arms and legs, worn my some Muslim women, typically with a niqab or hijab to cover the head

Ahl al-Bayt: people of the house, refers to Muhammad's family

Ahmadiyya: a controversial Islamic missionary revival movement founded by Mirza Ghluam Ahmad (1835-1908)

ʿ*alayhi as-salām*: peace be upon him. Often said after speaking the name of a prophet

Alhamdulillah: all praise be to God

al-Haqq: the Truth. One of the 99 names of Allah

al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ: the first three generations of Muslims

al-wala' wa-al-bara': a dualistic formulation categorizing humanity in oppositional camps of alliance (al-wala') and disassociation (al-bara')

al-Zahir: the manifest; one of the 99 names of Allah, while also indicating outward or apparent meaning

ʿ*aqīdah*: creed

as-sirāt al-mustaqīm: the straight path

aya: a verse in the Qur'ān

bid'ah: innovations considered forbidden by some Muslims due to their absence from the Qur'ān and Sunnah

ḍaʿīf: weak [Hadīth category]

deen: religion

dhikr: the practice of remembering God

Dhu al-Hijjah: the twelfth month of the Islamic calendar in which Muslims make their obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca

du'a: prayer

dunya: the material world

Eid al-Adha: Feast of the Sacrifice, held at the conclusion of the hajj

Eid al-Fitr: Feast of Breaking the Fast, held at the end of Ramadan

fana: annihilation of the ego

fiqh: Islamic religious jurisprudence and codes for practical living as interpreted by faithful legal experts, based on Qur'ān, Sunnah, consensus, and reason by analogy

hadīth: a short report, story, or tradition about what Muhammad said or did or about what he did not say or do; *Hadīth* [capitalized]: the body or genre of *hadīth* literature

hajj: the annual pilgrimage to Mecca which Muslims are required to make at least once in their lifetime

halal: permissible, lawful

halaqa: gatherings for theological discussion

hasan: good [Hadīth category]

hijab: head scarf worn by some Muslim women

ibadah: worship and adoration

ilm: wisdom

imam: a leader of prayers who stands in front of the congregation during salat

isbal: lengthening and trailing clothing below the ankles

jahannam: hell

Jannah: heaven

jubba: a robe like garment worn my some Muslim men

jumu'ah: salat prayer held every Friday early afternoon

ka'aba: this large, cube-shaped building in the Grand Mosque in Mecca, also known as "the sacred house," is the holy site toward which Muslims pray

kafir: unbeliever, often used pejoratively

khatib: person who delivers ritual sermon during Friday or Eid prayer meetings

khutbah : in Islamic contexts, the liturgical sermon forming a prescribed part of certain ritual gatherings, most often the Friday prayer service

kuffār: see kafir

madhab: a school of thought or tradition of Islamic jurisprudence

madrasa: a place of education for Muslim religious leaders and scholars

manhaj: the methodology of receiving, analyzing and applying knowledge

Maulid an-Nabi: the birthday of Muhammad

mawḍūʿ: fabricated [Hadīth category]

mazar: shrine built where a saint or holy person is buried, sometimes the site of pilgrimages

mu'min: the faithful. One of the 99 names of Allah, but also refers to a believer

munāfiqūn: religious hypocrites who, according to the Qur'ān, falsely claimed allegiance to Islam

mus'haf: a book

nafs: ego

niqab: cloth face covering worn by some Muslim women

pesantren: Indonesian Islamic boarding schools

pir: a Sufi master or guide

Qadiri: a Sufi tariqa tracing its lineage back through Persian-born Shaikh Abdul-Qadir Jilani (1077-1166 C.E.)

qiyaam: the standing position in salat

Ramadan: the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, a time of obligatory fasting for all able Muslims

Rasool: Messenger, a title often reserved for Muhammad

sahabah: companions of Muhammad

Sahih al-Bukhari: one of the major Hadīth collections, compiled by Muhammad al-Bukhari

Sahih al-Muslim: one of the major Hadīth collections, compiled by Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj

salalahu alaihi wa-salam: "may Allah honour him and grant him peace," often said after mentioning Muhammad's name

salam wa-laikum: a standard greeting among Muslims, meaning "peace be with you"

salat: mandatory daily prayers performed in a state of ritual purity facing the Kaaba

shaikh: [shaykh, sheikh] an honorific title used for authority figures and holy men in Islamic societies

Sharī'a: comprehensive body of law ordained by God

Shariat: see Sharia

shaytan: satan

siratul mustaqim: the straight path

Subhannah wa ta'Ala: glory be to him, most high. Often said after the name Allah

Sufism: a form of mystical spirituality broadly associated with Islam

Sunnah: the body of idealized precedents for religious and moral behavior based on the exemplary words and actions of Muhammad

Taabi'een: the second generation of Muslims

Taabi ut-taabi'een: the third generation of Muslims

taqwa: pious fear of Allah

tariqa: a course or method of religious study which was institutionalized in a Sufi order

tasawwuf: [see Sufism]

tafsir: scholarly exegesis (commentary and interpretation), typically of the Qur'ān

tawhid: the doctrine asserting Allah's oneness

ulama: chief Muslim religious authorities who advise others about God's commandments and prohibitions, and who issue opinions and judgments in matters of dispute

ummah: the worldwide community of Muslims

zuhr: the second of the five salat prayers

CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim

(Lord), guide us to the right path,
the path of those to whom You have granted blessings,
those who are neither subject to Your anger nor have gone astray.
–Qur'ān 1:6-7, Sarwar translation

Since the publication of Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, scholars have been increasingly concerned with potentially harmful or oppressive representations of the Arab and Islamic worlds in Western media and research (Jung, 2010). Though Euro-centric "anti-Islamic sentiments" date back many centuries, they have been sharply magnified in the eyes of many Americans in recent decades (Shaban, 2010). Muslims have long been construed in popular U.S. imagination as "backward and dangerous" (Zine, 2008), stereotypes fueled by such events as the Iranian and Lebanese hostage crises, the Rushdie *fatwa,*[1] Chechnyan uprisings, bombings in London and Madrid, and the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks (Karim, 2010). More recently, widespread fear and contempt have been affirmed and exacerbated by the armed takeover of the Westgate Mall in Kenya, deadly attacks in Boston, Ft. Hood, Chattanooga and San Bernadino, and several massacres in Paris. Years after Al-Qaeda barged into the public spotlight, mass kidnappings by Boko Haram in Nigeria, the Taliban's persistent brutality, and the broadcasted beheadings, retributive immolation and territorial expansion by the Islamic State (ISIS/ISIL) have given quasi-organized Islamic violence a perennial countenance.

The *Islamophobia* that has thrived in the wake of this bloodshed has taken many forms. Immediately following September 11th, profiling and heightened security measures toward those "from nations associated with terrorists" increased substantially (Palmer, 2003, p. 21). Acceptance of U.S. military invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan was strikingly uncritical, as many Americans vaguely conceived of the Arab and Muslim worlds as a collective enemy diffusely responsible for the attacks. Right-wing commentators warned and have continued to warn of the deterioration of the nation's Judeo-Christian heritage, the impending establishment of Islamic theocracies, and the proliferation of secretly fanatical Arab immigrants (Mezvinsky, 2010). High profile news stories such as a reactionary Florida pastor's public Qur'ān burning ceremony, Danish cartoonists' satirical depictions of Muhammad, and the YouTube-circulated "Innocence of Muslims" movie sparked fresh incidents of violence in select Muslim communities, incidents which have exacerbated the matter, predictably heralded as further evidence of the intolerant, explosive character of the religion as a whole.

A subtler facet of Islamophobia, but that which interests me most here, concerns popular images of Islamic education. Islamic pedagogy is widely associated with strict conformity and mindless indoctrination (Kadi, 2006, p. 322), denying student agency and creativity. Top U.S. political leaders and policymakers have been vocally critical of Islamic schools, and dozens of American and British newspaper reports have alarmingly depicted them as dangerous breeding grounds of fundamentalist ideology (Shaban, 2010). The term *madrasa* has become "terror-loaded," and was used by an online magazine in association with Obama's schooling history as part of a smear campaign to discredit his 2008 presidential bid (p. 81). Video images of students "rocking back and forth, memo-

rizing the Qurʾān and reciting it in unison under the watchful eye of stern-looking teachers" (Boyle, 2007, p. 174) have been positioned by media outlets as confirmation of the brainwashing methods with which the madrasa manufactures *en masse* the suicide bombers of tomorrow. My study, based on 18 months of qualitative research at a U.S. Islamic school, builds on a nascent body of literature that complicates these one-dimensional depictions.

Background of the Problem

According to Mezvinsky (2010), after September 11th, George W. Bush assured the U.S. public that al-Qaeda did not represent "Islam's true nature or character," a view echoed by his administration (p. 47). He insisted that the ideology fueling the violence of that day was an aberration, that most Muslims opposed Bin Laden, and that Islam is ultimately "a religion of peace" (Beverley, 2002, p. 32). Others have shared this sentiment, such as Imam Izak-El M. Pasha—who denounced the attackers as apostates—and those who, like Yusuf Islam, quipped that the terrorists hijacked not only airplanes, but also Islam itself (Beverley, 2002; Saada, 2013). From these perspectives, the faith is essentially benign, but has been unjustly besmirched by the perversions of Al-Qaeda and like-minded fanatics. However, this claim is hotly disputed.

According to Gregory M. Davis (2009), a contributor to the prominent Web site *jihadwatch.org*, terrorism carried out in the name of Islam cannot be casually dismissed as the peculiar acts of select fanatics, and is "not some recent innovation that distorted an otherwise peaceful religion." To the contrary, violence lies at the very foundations of the faith, "confirmed throughout the life of Muhammad and the Koran" (p. 342). Author,

pastor, and TV personality Rod Parsley echoes this view, arguing that "what some call 'extremists' are instead mainstream believers who are drawing from the well at the very heart of Islam" (cited in Mezvinsky, 2010, p. 50). Best-selling author and outspoken atheist Sam Harris (2005) argues a similar point, claiming an absence of Christian and Vajrayana Buddhist suicide bombers.[2] Nor is the problem merely one of religious fanaticism, he argues, citing the relative harmlessness of Jainism, whose extremist followers renounce all forms of violence (against humans, animals, insects). In the case of Muslim extremists, he explains, "the difference lies in the specific tenets of Islam" (p. 233). While sharply critical of all manners of faith, Harris finds Islam to be an especially dangerous religion, containing "specific doctrines about martyrdom and jihad that now directly inspire Muslim terrorism" (p. 234). Other figures, such as author and founder of *jihadwatch.org* Robert Spencer, blogger and *American Freedom Defense Initiative* president Pamela Geller, and Dutch politician Geert Wilders have achieved considerable fame through their zealous denigration of Quranic teaching and its modern-day applications. Such binary positions, which portray the faith as either a religion of peace or, in Pat Robertson's terms, "violent to the core" (quoted in Shaban, 2010, p. 77), are astonishingly common. This polarized dispute over the basic nature of the world's fastest growing faith (Lipka & Hackett, 2015) betrays a crisis of interpretation, and is indicative of "a global struggle for the soul of Islam" (Wahid, 2006, p. 6).

Debates among non-Muslims over Islam's fundamental nature appear to rest on the assumptions that (a) such a thing exists, (b) it can be known or understood by non-Muslims, and (c) it can be accurately represented linguistically by non-Muslims in legitimate ways. To declare Islam either "violent to the core" or "a religion of peace" is to as-

sume not only that there is such a single thing as Islam, but that is has *a* core, like an apple does, or a nuclear reactor or perhaps—to take a slightly less tangible and more fitting example—a certain argument. This first assumption is a basic fallacy of reification; that is, either claim about the peaceful or violent essence of *Islam* precariously treats the abstract and contested concept as a concrete reality. Imagine, by comparison, the folly of proclaiming 'culture' inherently violent or 'femininity' the gender of peace. The second assumption is an epistemological one. Not only does Islam exist and have a core, that core can be observed externally, impersonally, as an object of study fundamentally separate from the observer. It is this object that we discuss when we discuss Islam, an entity independent of our own particular interpretive processes or theoretical frameworks. As such, our judgments of it say more about *it* than our own idiosyncratic mental states or representations. The abstract and disputed qualities of the faith are minimized, the interpretive processes of those apprehending it largely ignored. Reduced to a list of bullet points and pull-quotes, the faith is captured, fenced in and put on display for evaluation. It is fundamentally knowable in its singularity, and the words and sentences we use to describe it correspond to its character stable, trustworthy ways.

In short, a single Islam exists, it has a basic essence, and that essence can be both known by and represented with words, even by those outside of its fold. This perspective is a problem of a relatively broad and fundamental nature.[3] It betrays a ubiquitous combination of ontological, epistemological, and linguistic presuppositions that remain typically unspoken, and beneath the radar of popular critical examination. Those holding these assumptions can thereby offer verbal claims and counterclaims as to Islam's essential nature, apparently with the utmost sincerity, and be taken quite seriously. More to the

point, these claims often carry distinct, action-oriented implications, and can tangibly impact the social, political, and educational realities of our world.

Statement of the Problem

Popular discourse concerning Islam's essential character has obvious bearing on widespread perceptions of Islamic education. For those who feel qualified to characterize the fundamental core of a faith consisting of a billion and a half people, pinpointing the basic nature of its schooling could be a short, quasi-logical step away. Moreover, in many Westerners' perception, this nature is emphatically negative. If the faith is violent to the core, what could we expect from its schools? As Cristillo (2009) notes, in the U.S. "the Muslim school" conjures in popular imagination "images of a Taliban-style madrassa, where children are robbed of the opportunity to acquire core moral and civic values of American democracy" (p. 69). By virtue of their Islamic character, these schools are incompatible with Western political culture, placing their students at odds with broader social norms. Not only are children in such schools denied access to positive American moral values, the stereotype suggests, they are actively indoctrinated with decidedly harmful values. According to Boyle (2007), "the basic mission of Islamic schooling has become confounded in the West with ideas of promoting violence and terrorism or inculcating a particularly radical, extremist, or militant view of Islam" (p. 174). Islamic teachings are the counterpoint to freedom and peace, their schools accordingly associated with anti-American values, evoking frightening piecemeal fantasies of terrorist breeding grounds. Those drawing such correlations may view students and faculty at Islamic schools with scorn or mistrust, each a suspect by default, pariah and potential threat.

These monochromatically strident depictions betray a lack of understanding of the diverse personalities, pedagogies and purposes found in Islamic schools. Not only do such institutions differ from one another, but individuals within each school may also interpret their Islamic faith in unique ways—that is, assuming they are Muslims at all, which many are not (Keyworth, 2009). Not only might members of Islamic school communities have dissimilar understandings of what constitutes right belief and practice, these disparities may lead to conflict over issues such as school-sanctioned activities, teaching methods, and curriculum. Despite these possibilities, commentators such as Connecticut pastor Bim Rowley apparently see little difficulty generalizing about the nature of Islamic schools, both at home and abroad. In a 2008 article published in the East Hartford Gazette, he argued that:

> A quick search of what is being taught in Islamic schools around the world as well as in America reveals an indoctrination of anti-Semitism and a blind allegiance to religious leaders that control the minds and hearts of its adherents. (Quoted in Mezvinsky, 2010, p. 51)

According to Mezvinsky (2010), Rowley's disparaging depictions of Islam and its educational practices are "indicative of a growing trend of thought and advocacy within the so-called Christian Right faction of American society" (p. 51). This faction, moreover, has grown both more populous and politically active in recent decades (p. 52).[4] No doubt, the "quick search" Rowley mentions may yield sufficient results to recklessly justify any number of prejudices, or could for some prompt broad, sweeping condemnations of vast populations and complex organizations based on extremely limited data. However, Rowley's generalizations about the morally charged educational activities of countless human beings do not meet even the laziest standards of academic rigor.

Some readers, I hope, will not accept such disparaging and undifferentiated claims about large groups of diverse individuals and institutions. However, these same readers may be likewise unconvinced by saccharine-sweet generalizations about a religion of peace, nonchalantly dismissing unflattering portrayals of Islam and its schools as entirely unfounded. For those hoping to gain meaningful and trustworthy insights into the general character of Islamic education (if such a thing exists), serious and sustained scholarly inquiry into the practices of specific Islamic schools will be more helpful. Only a few years ago, Senzai (2009) described Islamic education in the U.S. as "an increasingly salient issue," while noting that it remained relatively uncharted academic territory, a "nascent field" in which "much more remains to be done" (p. vi). This situation has changed little in the subsequent years, as the body of research on Islamic schools in America is still surprisingly meager. Nevertheless, a few articles are worth mentioning here to help frame my own study.

Many of the popular fears mentioned above are embodied in Jasser's (2011) discussion of the compatibility of Islamic education and basic American civic principles. He asks whether the Islamic schools are "incubators of freedom or radicalism" (p. 25), and compiles a modest share of evidence to insinuate the latter. Not only do some private Islamic schools inculcate a radical "Islamist" ideology, but even some public and charter schools have been co-opted to expressly Muslim ends. Popular news reports by such commentators as Daniel Pipes and Kenneth Adelman have discussed Islamic education in likewise incendiary tones (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013). These negative depictions of Islamic education are exacerbated by numerous other works, including Kovacs' (2014) paper on the proliferation of Salafi education, Alvi's (2014) discussion of the widespread

teaching of Wahhabi ideology, and the Center for Religious Freedom's (Shea & Al-Ahmed, 2006) report of Islamic Studies textbooks from Saudi Arabia—the world's largest exporter of Islamic educational materials—which consistently endorse intolerance, bigotry and violence. The cumulative effect of these texts is to foster a "guilty until proven innocent" atmosphere (Ba-Yunus & Kone, 2006), i.e., to raise suspicions about the intentions of Muslim educators and the pedagogical content of Islamic schools in the United States.

A number of works have been published which help mitigate concerns expressed or implied in these works. However, even researchers committed to challenging negative stereotypes of Islamic schools often fall into the comparably imprecise trap of advancing positive generalizations. For example, Cristillo's (2009) characterization of "the Muslim school" as a benevolent "civil society actor" generalizes a supposedly archetypical example, while Zine's (2007) case for "Islamic schools" as essentially not "religious ghettos" but "safe havens" oversimplifies the matter by addressing the question in a binary fashion. While specific Islamic schools are of course more tangible than "Islam," it is again a precarious reification to speak with confidence about the quality or by-products of the archetypical "Muslim school," just as it presumes an inflated reach of knowledge to characterize the effect on students of "Islamic schools" at large. To their credit, other studies—such as Nasim's (2004) discussion of a K-8 Islamic school and Khan's (2009) account of several adult education programs—focus on specific schools, and largely resist the temptation to generalize from their findings. However, even these studies present individual institutions as considerably homogenous entities, depicting a single overarching spirit or ethos that characterizes the community as a whole. If there is significant herme-

neutical diversity or discord within these schools, the authors do not demonstrate it.[5]

Such depictions fail to communicate the socially constructed and contested dimensions of

what is called Islam, minimize the significance of interpretive disparities, and diminish

the associated conflicts potentially experienced by Muslims in Islamic schools.

Remarkably, the research on Islamic schools that so much as acknowledges this

topic is negligible. However, two works are worth mentioning which most directly ad-

dress the disputed nature of Islamic interpretation in educational contexts. The first is

D'Agostino's (2003) study of Muslims in New York City, which takes a wider view than

most others addressed here, incorporating a broad selection of educational authorities and

pedagogical forms. Her discussion highlights the dynamics inherent to a culturally and

linguistically diverse *ummah*, whose disparate translations and interpretations of central

Islamic texts result in distinct conceptions of selfhood and community. However, though

she addresses several issues of importance to my research, the scope of her paper is rather

broad and diffuse, and so her discussion is more abstract and less focused on a particular

school or tangible community. The second and perhaps most relevant study to my re-

search is Berglund's (2011) on Islamic religious education (IRE) in Sweden. The discus-

sion section of her paper demonstrates considerable insight into the theological "struggle

for space" (p. 509) in doctrinally heterogeneous school settings. Unfortunately, her data

only support this discussion to a very modest extent. Drawing on the practices of two

Muslim teachers with respect to two issues—Quranic pedagogy and gender parity—

Berglund's findings merely scratch the surface of the struggle. My study addresses a

broader range of issues as perceived by a wider sample of Muslims, thereby connecting

her theoretical insights gleaned from Swedish educators to extensive empirical data gath-

ered in a U.S. Islamic school. Furthermore, as the teachers in Berglund's study are presented entirely in isolation from one another, her data contain no account of—and hence offer no insight into—the actual means by which this "struggle for space" takes place interpersonally. My dissertation builds on existing research (mostly reviewed below) and expands on Berglund's discussion, filling a gap in the current knowledge on this important epistemological struggle by detailing and analyzing precise social mechanisms by which it is enacted.

Purpose of the Study

This study examines the processes by which dominant understandings of right belief (called *orthodoxy* below) and right practice (called *orthopraxy* below)[6] are constructed and resisted at an Islamic school. I am concerned with how Muslims in educational contexts interpret their faith, and which beliefs and practices are considered acceptable, by whom, and for what reasons. I also hope to elucidate specific means by which particular interpretations gain traction within the broader community and are established as normative. A failure to understand these processes leads to a lack of clarity about the diversity of purpose and practice possible within Islamic schools. Without recognizing the human conflict inherent to certain views gaining dominance, it is easy to mistake these interpretations, bound by a distinct spatiotemporal context, as timeless, universal or unquestionable. This contributes more broadly to misunderstandings and inaccurate generalizations about the faith itself, which can too easily be construed as static and monolithic, its tenets existing and accessible somehow outside the subjective realm of human interpretation.

Due to the ubiquity of the monochromatic depictions of Islam described above, broader and deeper discussions about the richness and complexity of the faith and its forms of education, rooted in neither apology nor invective, are sorely needed. I am convinced that demonstrating Muslims' sincere and specific disputes over the supposed nature of Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy could in itself help to complicate popular essentialized characterizations of the faith. Depicting the same in an educational context, particularly with respect to pedagogy and curriculum, could likewise help unravel crude generalizations about the content, forms, and purposes of Islamic schooling. Furthermore, as I explored existing literature on Islamic schools, I found a surprising lack of attention to these critical matters. All this led to my primary research question: (1) by what means are distinct versions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy constructed, maintained, and challenged in the Tafsir Islamic School (TIS) community? My second question follows simply from the first: (2) how could the general interpretive climate corresponding to these processes be described in theoretical terms?

Overview of Methodology

My study took place at Tafsir Islamic School (TIS), a mid-sized, privately owned and operated co-ed K-12 Islamic school located in a metropolitan area in Midwestern United States. While TIS's Web site, application form, and written codes of conduct make repeated references to the school's Islamic character, none of these mention sectarian affiliation (e.g., Sunnī, Shi'ite, Ahmadiyya). While all Muslim[7] participants in my study identified as Sunnī, the global majority sect of Islam (87-90%, according to a 2009

Pew Forum report), they came from myriad racial, cultural, and socio-economic back-grounds, and demonstrated considerable ideological heterogeneity.

My initial design was construed as an ethnography, in which I sought to learn how participants understood three pre-articulated concepts, namely, freedom, authority and discipline. This triadic conceptual structure was borrowed from Goodman (2006; 2010), and corresponded to popular stereotypes of Islam as an enemy of liberty (Perry, 2010), authoritarian in its pedagogy (Mezvinsky, 2010), and uncompromisingly harsh in its punishments (Ghassemi, 2009). I hoped to complicate these stereotypes, to encounter and explore forms of Islamic education that encourage student initiative, critical thinking, and compassionate relationships. As a would-be ethnographer, I was primarily concerned with local meanings, participants' understandings of the relationships between the con-cepts in question. However, in the early stages of my conducting interviews, I began to detect a paucity of participant interest in those very concepts, let alone their interrelation-ships. In short, I had taken my conceptual starting point from the academic world and ex-ternally imposed it on the community from the outset, and it was a poor fit.

I grew convinced that a more engaging research focus could emerge if I would abandon my original framework, and so began to reformulate my focus in response to community members' direction. While still leaning on the ethnographic tradition—relying largely on participant observation and interviews, offering thick descriptions, a focus on culturally constructed meanings—I increasingly foregrounded core principles of *grounded theory* to guide my research.[8] Grounded theorists, according to Creswell et al. (2007) utilize a qualitative methodology "in which the inquirer generates a general expla-nation (a theory) of a process, action, or interaction shaped by the views of a large num-

ber of participants" (p. 249). Charmaz (2008) describes grounded theory as an "emergent" form of inquiry, characterized by its "inductive, indeterminate, and open-ended" nature (p. 155). This emergent property applies not only to the theory produced from (i.e., grounded in) the data, but also to the methodology itself, which must remain iterative, both informing analysis and being perpetually informed by it. It is inherently flexible, responsive to participant direction, and respectful of the unpredictable quality of social realities.

This flexible approach left me open to explore unanticipated topics, and I began to notice a theme across several participants' descriptions of their community. Many described school-based pedagogical, curricular, and interpersonal conflicts arising from discrepant understandings of Islamic belief and practice, themselves often tied to sectarian traditions. These were typically—though not always—surrounding a somewhat peripheral issue, but when viewed in the aggregate constituted a meaningful pattern. This prompted me to gradually shift my focus to the topic of interpretation; in this case, questions concerning which religious doctrines and practices were considered authoritative, by whom, and for what reasons. More specifically, I began to examine the mechanisms by which the concepts of right belief or practice were introduced, enforced, or resisted, particularly with respect to pedagogy, curriculum, and school-sanctioned activities.

Significance of the Study

The answers to these questions offer unique insights into the interactional dynamics that shape community-wide views of acceptable belief and practice in a heterogeneous Islamic context. The study's most practical significance is to the field of education, and

more specifically, to those considering or currently working as teachers or administrators in Islamic schools in the United States or comparable contexts. In light of my research, such educators will be better suited to face the myriad potential frictions within their institutions that accompany cultural and doctrinal diversity. Teachers and educators able to foresee struggles surrounding controversies of orthodoxy and orthopraxy are in a better position to address contentious questions openly with parents and concerned community members. More broadly, my research focus could appeal to those interested in the social construction of knowledge and values. My study raises questions concerning tangible processes by which commonly held axiological truths and behavioral norms are established, upheld and contravened over time in an educational field. A detailed account of the processes by which Muslims struggle to establish particular interpretations as normative in an educational context could help to undermine static, monolithic depictions of Islam and its schools.

Furthermore, scholars of Islam may find several points of interest in my research. Firstly, my findings highlight specific behaviors associated with the spread of Salafi/Wahhabi interpretations of the faith. These are relevant to anyone concerned with the effects of conservative (e.g., Saudi government) influence on the worldwide character of Islam. Secondly, certain dynamics—namely, the general tensions accompanying individuals or sects vying for theological hegemony in a doctrinally diverse setting—can be seen as a part of a broader pattern within the global ummah, revealing Tafsir a microcosm of that vastly diverse body.[9] And finally, to the contrary, select data may be found to resist broader patterns; that is, certain participants' views may offer religious scholars unique insights by way of novel interpretations and appropriations of the faith. This could

be seen as the inevitable result of the synthesis of a fourteen-hundred-year-old tradition with a unique, local multicultural organization (TIS), itself embedded in a distinct, contemporary, socio-political and historical climate. These hermeneutical innovations—while condemned by some, as we'll see below—provide evidence for the living, evolving nature of the kaleidoscopic phenomena contentiously subsumed under the title 'Islam.'

Limitations

My study has been subject to several limitations that should be considered when evaluating its conclusions. First, my entrance point into the community, socially speaking, was dean of students Musa Ahmed. I likely spent more time with him than any other participant, resulting in an excess of data concerning him. In many cases, he placed me in classrooms, facilitated my meetings with participants, and suggested exact duties for me to fulfill. This of course influenced the kind of data I collected, as I participated, on any given day, in certain activities to the exclusion of innumerable others. Furthermore, though I did not know him well at the beginning of the study, he often introduced me as his friend, which obviously shaped how I was viewed by the community. This may have skewed my data, as some participants likely filtered their answers accordingly, e.g., by limiting critiques of his administration, or aligning themselves with perceived expectations. In one instance, Musa Ahmed called Ghauth, an upper grades science teacher, to his office so that I could interview him. Our subsequent conversation took place in the dean's presence, and was surely influenced accordingly.

Another limitation on my study is the plain fact that, with the exception of a few common phrases, I cannot speak or understand Arabic. In certain cases, this led to diffi-

culties in communicating with participants. Though most of the faculty at Tafsir speaks English fluently, there were two Arabic teachers—one from Tunisia, the other from Yemen—with whom I had some trouble communicating. Furthermore, I was told that neither the imam nor the mosque secretary spoke conversational English, so I never approached either of them.[10] My ignorance of Arabic also leaves me, according to some, in a questionable position to address Quranic teachings. Several participants emphasized the importance of reading the scriptures in their original language, that much of their power and beauty is lost in even the finest translations. For this reason, I began to study Arabic about half way through the school year, but made very little progress, and basically gave up. At present, I've only read Abdullah Yusuf Ali's English rendition, and brief excerpts of other versions, and so my first hand engagement with Quranic teachings will be restricted accordingly.

To address an issue concerning academic inquiry more generally, I suspect Robert Darnton's claim about reporters holds just as well for researchers, that they "bring more to the events they cover than they take away from them" (quoted in Said, 1981, p. 47). One might find the most serious limitation of the study to concern that same kind of narrowness of understanding—that mountain of biases, prejudices, and blind spots—that affects or constitutes any person. And my concern here goes beyond the usual impossibility of a subject attaining objective knowledge of the social world. I've had a passionate and volatile relationship with the Islam of my upbringing, rendering any hope of impartiality—even were it so desired—hopelessly distant. Obviously, our biographies powerfully shape not only the questions we ask, but also the responses we hear, and of course the stories we construct from these responses. This phenomenon is surely amplified when

dealing with issues of heightened personal importance. However, this same passion and partiality that appears to limit my vision at the same time gives me a unique entrance point through which to experience and engage the Tafsir community (a point I'll return to below). In any case, my hope is to acknowledge and use my prejudices as productively as possible.

Delimitations

At the request of TIS principal Ramzi Malik, the formal interview portion of my study entirely excluded students. My official sample was therefore delimited entirely to adults—mostly school faculty (70%, n=14). Relationships between the school and certain parents were already on unsteady ground, and the principal expressed concern that my attempts to acquire parental consent to interview children might raise suspicions and exacerbate tensions. As such, my data on student perspectives was limited to (a) field notes taken during or based on passive and participant observations, (b) informal conversations, and (c) analysis of sporadic assignments, either posted to bulletin boards or shared with me by select teachers. Even taken collectively, these offered little of direct relevance to my research questions, so for all official and most practical purposes, children were excluded from the study. The same can be said for their parents, with only a single exception, a woman who was both the mother of Tafsir students and a teacher at the school.

Other delimitations worth noting concern my research topic and interview protocol, which neglect to address several key points of sociological analysis, such as race, class, and gender. Several of these—namely race and gender—did emerge spontaneously in my conversations with participants, and so appear as auxiliary themes below. Howev-

er, the matter of social class remains almost entirely unaddressed here. Any one of these issues, if examined at Tafsir, would surely yield data rich and important enough to warrant a study of its own. My decision to omit them from my initial proposal and interviews was born of the hope to focus more explicitly and deeply on my original topic. And while I strayed drastically from that topic, it was to follow the promptings of my participants, who did not themselves—with very few exceptions—lead toward these staple sociological identifiers.

One more point is worth noting here. In some ways, my study takes the cue from Wahid (2006), who detects a "crisis of misunderstanding" in Muslims' divergent interpretations of their faith. However, my own response to this crisis departs sharply from his. According to Wahid, the spread of "extremist" Salafi/Wahhabi views betrays a broad scale "failure to understand the true nature of Islam." This premise logically leads to his solution: that those privy to this true nature take it upon themselves to "explain what Islam truly is to Muslims and non-Muslims alike" (p. 6). Clearly, his diagnosis and prescription presuppose the existence of a 'true Islam,' an important assumption that I will not be making here. As we will see below, certain participants in my study understood Islam in radically different ways. Its precise boundaries are unclear to me, its membership contested, the nature of its "core," as indicated above, subject to intense debate. If there is a single, true version of it, I am in no position to decide what it is.[11] Said (1982) raises the important question: "Is 'Islam' in the end useful as a notion, or does it hide, distort, deflect, and ideologize more than it actually says?" (p. 58). I do not know the answer, and so use the word with reservation, acknowledging from the outset that I have no intention of advocating or implying any actual orthodoxy or correct interpretation of the

religion. In short, at no point will I argue which version of Islam is closest to whatever ideal, but hope instead to faithfully represent participants' disparate interpretative strategies and what they do with them.

Summary

The term "Islam" has been widely handled by Western observers as if it refers to a static, monolithic entity. This imagined entity is frequently considered fundamentally violent and contrary to American values. Islamic schools are likewise often addressed in essentialized terms, as sites of mindless indoctrination or incubators of extremism, and are accordingly viewed with animosity and mistrust. In each case, the fluid, multiform, and disputed character of Islam is diminished, and the active role that individual Muslims play in interpreting their faith is insufficiently acknowledged. I intend below to tangibly demonstrate specific processes by which particular beliefs and practices are established as normative within an educational context. In doing so, I will examine the various hermeneutical strategies and conflicting interpretations concerning right Islamic belief and practice among adult members of the Tafsir Islamic School (TIS) community. My hope is that this will help to complicate popular one-dimensional characterizations of Islam and of schools professing its name. However, before doing so I will briefly discuss existing literature on which my research builds and to which it responds.

CHAPTER 2:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This study addresses the variety of religious interpretive approaches and sectarian identities among teachers and administrators at Tafsir Islamic School (TIS), a medium sized K-12 Islamic school in a metropolitan area in Midwestern United States. More specifically, I use qualitative methods to examine how these diversities impact interpersonal and organizational dynamics within the school. To situate my findings in a broader context, I've built on existing literature in two domains: research concerning (1) Islamic education in North America, and (2) interpretive diversity among Muslim communities and sects.

My research leans heavily on the concept of Islamic education, a term easily misunderstood, as it can apply to dissimilar activities. In light of this, Douglass & Shaikh (2004) advance a typology which distinguishes four forms: (a) education *of* Muslims, specifically in the central tenets of their faith as contained in the Qur'ān and *Sunnah*, (b) education *for* Muslims, including full-time schools which encompass both secular and religious studies, (c) education *about* Islam, i.e., teaching about the faith to non-Muslims, and (d) "education in an Islamic spirit" (p. 12) by which they mean a more holistic initiation into the moral, social, and epistemological aspects of the faith by means of any number of traditional forms of Islamic teaching and learning. Niyozov & Memon (2011) list a handful of institutions[12] and methods[13] that demonstrate the diversity inherent to the concept of 'traditional' Islamic education. While not entirely unrelated to my study, the ma-

jority of these terms were never used by my participants. Furthermore, Douglass &
Shaikh's description of this holistic form of education appears to exclude formal institu-
tions active in the contemporary U.S., and so is of questionable relevance to my research.
Meanwhile, though the third conception, concerning educating non-Muslims about Islam,
has been the topic of significant research (Barack, 2010; Ahmed & Rosen, 2011; Moore,
2012; Hossain, 2014; Eraqi, 2015), it has little direct bearing on my discussion. The first
conception, while constituting one component of Tafsir's curriculum, is too narrow to
fully characterize the school's offerings and overall mission. The second conception,
then, implying the general education of Muslims in secular and religious subjects, most
accurately describes the daily operations at my research site.

One last note on this terminology: Douglass & Shaikh (2004) prefer the term
'Muslim school' for a place like Tafsir, believing that "artifacts, institutions … human
acts and constructs fall short of being purely Islamic, and therefore ought not to be denot-
ed as such" (p. 7). They argue that the adjective "Islamic" should be reserved for what
pertains directly to the religion, such as prophets, scriptures, or doctrines. I do not share
their conviction, and so I typically use the phrase "Islamic school" to refer to my research
site and other schools like it. There are several reasons for this. The first is simply that, in
doing so, I am following the precedent of most other research I've read. When I encoun-
ter an exception (e.g., the phrase "Muslim school" is used in Cristillo, 2009), I generally
follow suit, and use terminology in keeping with a given study. The second reason is that
Douglass & Shaikh's argument implies a pure ideal whose existence I do not here pre-
suppose.[14] The third reason I prefer the phrase "Islamic school" is that my participants
referred to their own school that way.

Part I: Islamic Education in North America

Given the extraordinary religious, political, and ideological diversity within the U.S. alone, it is of limited value to address how Islamic education fits into North America more broadly. Two neighborhoods in the same city can differ dramatically, to say nothing of differences from one city, state, or country to the next. Add to this the dissimilar interpretations of "Islamic education" itself and the task grows all the more daunting. These obvious points being granted, it is nevertheless important to situate my study in a broader context by acknowledging how Muslims' educational efforts have manifested in the midst of relevant historically dominant moral, philosophical, and educational discourses of my own culture, however loosely defined. In this case, I initially limited my search to studies on Islamic education in the U.S., including Islamic schools and Muslim teachers, administrators, students and their parents. However, finding so little research relevant to my own study, I expanded my search to encompass North America. Finding no research on Islamic education in Mexico or the Caribbean, my review is basically limited to research concerning the U.S. and Canada. I also include a single study from Sweden, due to its direct relevance to my topic.

A helpful overview of Islamic education in the U.S. can be found in Grewal & Coolidge's (2013) portrait of the nation's "diverse pedagogical landscape" of organizations and educational practices. While a small minority of Muslim-American children attend full-time Islamic schools (only 4%, according to Keyworth, 2009), many more partake in part-time forms of education of varying degrees of formality, including weekend schools, summer camps, and personal tutors. Adult Muslims likewise participate in various modes of teaching and learning, including retreats, study circles, and conferences

featuring traveling preachers. While the vast majority of full-time Islamic educational institutions in the United States have been established within the past few decades, the nation boasts a rich history of such organizations dating back almost a century.

Islamic Education in the United States: A Brief History

Shortly after immigrating to the U.S. in the early 1930s, W.D. Fard founded the Nation of Islam (NOI), a socio-religious movement combining select tenets of traditional Islam with a unique cosmology underscoring an ideology of Black empowerment (for a fuller discussion, see Berg, 2005). Shortly thereafter, Fard opened the "University of Islam" school in the Detroit home of Elijah Muhammad, a convert to NOI who succeeded him as the movement's leader. As the Nation of Islam spread throughout the Midwest and Northeast, other such K-12 "universities" (so named for the allegedly universal nature of their teachings) were founded—41 by the mid-seventies—touted by their supporters as alternatives to the racist and educationally inadequate public school system. After Elijah Muhammad's death in 1975, his son W.D. Mohammed assumed leadership of the NOI, and promptly began steering it toward mainstream, Sunnī interpretations of Islam, renaming the movement the American Society of Muslims (Berg, 2005). The universities were renamed Sister Clara Muhammad schools, which, though still emphasizing Black pride, "replaced NOI theology classes" with "Sunnī thought and theology" (Grewal & Coolidge, p. 250). While most of the movement's followers complied with these changes, others did not, remaining faithful to the teachings of Fard and Elijah Muhammad. Led by Louis Farrakhan, they began to reopen University of Islam schools in 1989.

While these were these first institutional Islamic educational movements in the United States, they have since been overshadowed by schools established in the following decades. In its 1989 study of Islamic schools in the U.S., the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) counted 49 schools nationwide. Within three years the total had increased by 63% (Haddad & Smith, 2009). Today there are approximately 250 Islamic schools in the U.S., the majority of which were founded in the 90s by recent Middle Eastern and South Asian immigrants (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013). One recent estimate places the total number of students they serve at about thirty-two thousand (Keyworth, 2009). Many of these schools belong to broader, macro-educational networks, such as Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA), Council of Islamic Schools in North America (CISNA), Muslim Educational Foundation (MEF), and the Muslim Education Network (MEN) (Niyozov & Memon, p. 22). These are almost all Sunnī-oriented schools, with only a few identifying as Shi'a. Many of these schools cater to a wide range of Muslims, displaying "far more racial, ethnic, class, and even sectarian diversity than the congregations of the mosque communities that found[ed] them" (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013, p. 251). As of recent data, about half of U.S. Islamic schools were connected to a masjid, 58% of which operate with relative autonomy from the school (Keyworth, 2009).

Throughout the 1980s and 90s, many Muslim educators sought to develop distinctly Islamic modes of teaching (Grewal & Coolidge, 2013). However, in the wake of "the politicization of Islamic education" (p. 251) that followed 9/11, Islamic schools in the U.S. have broadly conformed more closely to public school aims and organizational structures. Many are distinguished from their secular counterparts only in offering courses in Islamic studies or Arabic, and in that the predominantly Muslim population "creates

an Islamic ethos that normalizes Islamic practices and cultivates pride and a strong 'Muslim-first' identity" (p. 251). Other research suggests that some Islamic schools in Western contexts were already markedly similar to their public school counterparts before the September 11th attacks (Kelly, 1999).

Grewal & Coolidge (2013) address several other trends in Islamic pedagogy, including homeschooling, higher education, and self-identified madrasas.[15] Meanwhile, Bowers (2009) discusses Islamic pedagogy among prison inmates, Moll (2009) focuses on media programs aimed at teaching children about Islam, while Anderson (2002) looks at the proliferation of Islamic teachings online. To this list, Khan (2009) adds books, camps, podcasts, sponsored trips, and *halaqa*s, further highlighting the heterogeneity of Islamic teaching and learning in the U.S. She specifically foregrounds the diversity of adult educational institutions, comparing overseas models with homegrown efforts. The latter include the American Learning Institute for Muslims (ALIM), which emphasizes open debate and critical inquiry; AlMaghrib, staffed primarily by graduates of Saudi Arabia's conservative Islamic University of Medinah; and Zaytuna Institute, a California based organization emphasizing diversity and inner spiritual growth (Khan, 2009).[16]

Popular Fears and Criticisms

In spite of this variety of educational forms, incendiary popular news coverage has treated the matter one-dimensionally, suspiciously and simplistically questioning the motives of Islamic schools. According to Grewal & Coolidge (2013), researchers have answered this by showing many moderate forms of Islamic education, and demonstrating that Muslim schools in the U.S. "place great emphasis on civic-mindedness" (p. 252).

However, the success of these demonstrations is contestable. Many citizens maintain concerns about Islam's compatibility with their own most cherished political and moral principles (Mezvinsky, 2010). At times this leads to suspicion and fear, manifesting in schools, popular media, and quasi-academic research reports. Timani (2006), for example, warns of schools intent on "(re)Islamizing Muslim children," many of whom risk being "alienated and isolated from the rest of the society, and, in some cases, exposed to anti-American, anti-secular, and anti-Western propaganda" (p. 2). In conspicuously vague terms, he accuses "Muslim organizations" of advocating educational strategies intent on "isolationism" (p. 7), a term he uses synonymously with "de-Americanism" (p. 10). These same organizations have even organized "a propaganda campaign" intent on warning Muslim parents about the dangers of public schools (p. 7). With surprising generality, he later claims that "American Muslim educators" are complicit in these efforts, and have themselves "capitalized on the ills of public schools to convince the parents to send their children to Islamic schools where the process of de-Americanization begins" (p. 10).

Taking the cue from Timani's cautionary tones, Jasser (2011) calls into question U.S. Islamic schools' commitment to "American civic culture." Their students memorize the Qur'ān; what about the Constitution? Are students taught to question their religious authorities? How do teachers present Enlightenment values compared to "Islamist theocratic governance"? And do they instill "primary allegiance to our Constitution over the Koran as the guiding document of our government?" (p. 24). While identifying as Muslim, Jasser remains loyal to principles of his own secular education (respect for American

law, individual liberties, a critical stance toward authority), which he finds irreconcilable with the primary agendas of radical political *Islamists*.

These Islamists, he warns, seek to establish religious states ruled by *Sharī'a*, or Islamic law. Such believers espouse an authoritarian, collectivist mindset and an overall ideology "at war with American principles of liberty and equality" (p. 29). They emphasize Islam's incompatibility with liberal democracy, and twist the apparently benign "reality" of "our" invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan (p. 25) in order to enlist new recruits. To a disturbing extent, he argues, their aspirations can well be instilled through Islamic education, a rapidly growing phenomenon in the United States. Jasser raises vehement objections to anything resembling such education being publicly funded. He finds one example of this in the Gülen movement, a powerful global educational and business network responsible for approximately 85 U.S. charter schools.[17] Another controversial example of publicly funded education with an Islamic bent was the Tarek Ibn Zayed Academy, a now-defunct Minneapolis charter school accused by a local columnist of blurring, in Jasser's ill-fitting terms, "the line between church and state" (p. 28).

Other Islamic schools, though privately funded and so operating (in that respect) within acceptable constitutional precedent, have their roots in what Jasser considers dangerous, politically Islamist entities. He cites the notorious example of the Islamic Saudi Academy (ISA) in northern Virginia, which has long been criticized for propagating intolerant views (Strauss & Wax, 2002), and was under federal investigation for endorsing violence and anti-Semitism (Stone, 2007). Other schools, while less extreme, have likewise nefarious origins (his prime example being the Muslim Brotherhood), or teach similarly discriminatory content (he cites non-specific schools in Arizona and New York, and

one school in Potomac, Maryland) or separatist attitudes. After bemoaning the somewhat dubious "fact" that there exists "relatively no counter-Islamist movement within Muslim communities," he concludes that Muslims must "lift the preeminence of our Constitutional freedoms over Islamic governance" (p. 31), calling for increased accountability and transparency to ensure as much. Along similar lines, Timani (2006) brazenly suggests that "American Muslim children should learn and implement … that they are Americans first and Muslims second" (p. 12).

Jasser's negative characterizations are at times based on anecdotal reporting or uncharitable inferences, while Timani's discussion suffers from flimsy logic, tedious style, and at times misinformation.[18] Nonetheless, both raise valuable questions concerning the purposes of Islamic education. How do teachers and administrators articulate and understand their mission? Why do parents send their children to Islamic schools? Which interpretations of Islam are being taught there? Do they pose a threat to established, liberal-democratic political orders? Given the diversity of these individuals and institutions, generalizations can be misleading, and potentially harmful. Unfortunately, few in-depth, qualitative studies exist which shed meaningful light on these important concerns. Our picture is piecemeal, woven together from scattered reports on select schools and communities, particular parents, teachers or administrators.

Civic Engagement and Morality

Some of Jasser's central concerns are addressed by Cristillo's (2009) discussion of Islamic education in New York City, positioning Muslim schools as "civil society actors" in their own right. Such schools, he argues, help to create "a network of social rela-

tions and structures that fosters, rather than fetters, the civic integration of Muslim diaspora communities into American civil society" (p. 70). Muslim schools, like all others in New York, are subject to statewide laws dictating significant portions of their curriculum. Their academic offerings are predominantly secular, and in most cases centered around most of the same textbooks as public schools. Furthermore, teachers and administrators from all of NYC's secondary Muslim schools attend professional development workshops offered by the city's Department of Education, with many also being required to maintain continuing education, often using Title II[19] funding to do so. This not only encourages Muslims schools' harmony with state agendas, but also creates social networks that link private and public school communities. This can be particularly empowering for Muslim women, approximately 80% of the Islamic school workforce, whose opportunities to "develop social capital in ways that promote greater public and civic engagement" can be otherwise limited (p. 76). Immigrant parents are likewise often empowered by their involvement in Muslim schools, which create a "transitional space" for those lacking the social and cultural capital to confidently participate in a wide range of civic activities.

Cristillo further lists Muslims schools' programs and activities geared toward their students, including student government and debate clubs, internship/volunteer partnerships with local and national organizations, and regular interfaith gatherings. One school to facilitate such gatherings is the Islamic Academy of New England (IANE). This Massachusetts-based Islamic school hosts annual "educational encounters" between its own students and those from visiting, non-Islamic schools (Sahli, Tobias-Nahi & Abo-Zena, 2009). The results have been overwhelmingly positive. In addition to helping the

groups learn more about each other's traditions and beliefs, the program has fostered participants' self-confidence, encouraged them to develop a critical stance toward media representations, and helped "eliminat[e] the anonymity of otherness" among students (p. 241). This provides further evidence that Islamic schools may be, as Cristillo (2009) claims, "playing a key role in the development of an emerging American Muslim civic identity" (p. 79).

Saada's (2013) discussion of citizenship education in Islamic schools also addresses some of Jasser's questions, albeit drawing on a quite limited sample. His multiple-case study considers the views of four social studies teachers, all of whom identify as Muslim, from two Michigan-based Islamic private schools. Drawing on Abowitz & Harnish (2006), he situates his findings within three[20] "discourses of citizenship" (p. 250): *republican*, *cultural*, and *transnational*. The first of these most overtly relates to Jasser's discussion, as its conception of the common good implies obedience to law, respect for national symbols, and active participation in the public sphere. The second suggests the importance for minority populations to develop and maintain healthy group affiliations and distinctive cultural identities. The third implies recognition of global interconnectedness, commitments that transcend political boundaries, perhaps allegiance to a broader group or movement not restricted to nation-state (e.g., the Muslim ummah).

The multiple, "hyphenated" nature of personal identity (Sirin & Fine, 2007) carries with it the inherent potential for discord. In the case of U.S. citizens of Iraqi, Afghani, or Palestinian descent, republican loyalties could reasonably be questioned in light of recent U.S. military interventions or political ties with Israel. For example, the legal requirement to report income may be morally suspect insofar as tax dollars are perceived

to fund a war against one's own people. Commitment to one's own cultural group norms might also leave us at odds with broader social mores. Participants in Saada's study pointed to the issue of media representation of Islam, popular codes of modesty in dress, and the relative acceptability of homosexuality and abortion as examples of how some Muslims can find themselves at odds with contemporary American practices and values. At other times, as these teachers both claim and demonstrate, Muslims differ amongst themselves regarding how compatible their faith is with "western culture." One example of this involved the permissibility of music, an open question among the ummah. In another, a Muslim teacher met with resistance from another Muslim for assigning *Frankenstein* on the grounds that its creation theme violated Islamic principles.[21]

While these teachers agreed that Islamic education was effective in teaching morals, they expressed divergent views regarding the nature of morality itself. Saada places their perspectives in two basic categories: *moral absolutism* and *moral pluralism*. According to the former (espoused by only one teacher in the study), moral values are fixed, unconditional, and transcontextual. In the case of Islam, this means that teachings of the Qur'ān and Sunnah apply universally and equally to all people, regardless of temporal, geographical, or cultural distinction. According to Saada, this position is incompatible with significant diversity of faith and interpretation, and is ill-suited to heterogeneous American society. The remaining three teachers are characterized as *moral pluralists*. This is a softer position, seeing morality as open to debate and critical thought. One teacher was categorized this way for her emphasis on diversity, inter-faith respect, and peaceful co-existence. In addition to these values, the remaining two teachers also stressed the importance of interpretive variety within Islam. One argued that "there is no

single understanding of Islamic texts," encouraging students to "develop their own under-standing of Islamic values" (p. 264). The other likewise maintained that "there is no one interpretation of Islamic teachings," adding that theirs was "a universal and flexible reli-gion that adapts to different contexts and different cultures" (p. 264).

His conception of universality is noteworthy. For the moral absolutist, the univer-sality is an *a priori* assertion, a baseline assumption that their rigid truth applies equally everywhere. All the world must be shrunken down, homogenized, made narrow to fit into it. For the pluralist teacher, universality implies the reverse: the existence of a truth that is flexible, multifaceted, and vast enough to encompass a wide array of perspectives. Grounded in empirical reality, it widens, grows heterogeneous, embraces the world as it is, bending and adapting to fit into it. According to Saada, this latter position is better suited to the American context. He criticizes moral absolutism, claiming that it not only fails to prepare students for the diversity of multicultural society, but also refuses to acknowledge the fact of interpretational variety among Muslims themselves. While he endorses the pluralist position, he recognizes it is not without its pitfalls. Namely, in the context of Islamic education, teachers advocating or embodying pluralist principles may face confrontations with parents inclined toward absolutism.

Students and Parents

Parents' ideals have obvious bearing on Jasser's concerns about the basic aims of Islamic education. Private schools in America, being funded largely by tuition dollars, are accountable to their clients' expectations. Merry (2005) discusses the views of Muslim parents concerning Western Islamic schools, primarily focusing on the U.S. He points out

that the majority of Muslim parents choose to send their children to public schools, in some cases based on logic not unlike Jasser's. That is, they're afraid that sequestering their children with other like-minded students will be "divisive and unhelpful" in their eventual hopes of assimilating into the broader society (p. 376). However, Merry acknowledges the opposite rationale, held by parents who expressly wish to maintain or foster such division. They view the dominant secular culture as inherently at odds with their faith, citing materialism (e.g., possessions, fashionable clothing, make-up), sexual extravagance, the collapse of traditional authority structures, and general moral permissiveness as examples. From this perspective, Islamic schools appear a crucial line of defense against the corrupting influence of a spiritually bankrupt society.

The priorities of many parents, however, are not specifically related to faith. Some emphasize cultural identity, fearing the disappearance of native language and ethnic foods, customs, or rituals. Elsewhere, Merry repeatedly underscores Muslim parents' concern with the academic quality of their children's education, a dimension found wanting in certain public schools. This may take the form of low teacher expectations, inadequate curricula, or a chaotic atmosphere stemming from a general lack of discipline. Other parents enroll their students in Islamic schools to avoid or escape racism in the neighborhood school, which, coupled with the underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups in textbooks, could cripple children's self-esteem. In short, many parents turn to Islamic schools hoping to cultivate in their child an "identity consonant with one's home environment, thereby ensuring a positive sense of self" (p. 384). Though Merry's report suffers from frequent generalizations, an over-reliance on vague formulations, and a lack of

clearly articulated methodology, it demonstrates the considerable variation in Muslim parents' motivations and hopes in sending their children to Islamic schools.

Kelly's (1999) conclusions in her study on a Canadian Islamic school corroborate Merry's basic findings. Noting a deficiency of ethnographic accounts of such establishments (a situation that has scarcely improved since then), she conducted in-depth, "exploratory" fieldwork at a Montreal-based Muslim school, interviewing ten students, sixteen staff members, and thirty-two parents and/or community members. Many of her findings undermined the image she had previously encountered "of a cloistered religious institution" (p. 205). Staff members estimated that one third of the students came from families who were not particularly religious, or at least less religious than many who choose public schools. In one case, the parents of a girl enrolled in an Islamic school even opposed certain religious practices, strongly objecting to her decision to wear hijab outside of the school context. Like Merry, Kelly found that many parents prioritized specific cultural forms, either in hopes of preserving family cohesion (for example, if relatives came to visit who only speak Arabic) or in light of plans to return to their countries of origin. Other parents cited the community surrounding the private school, finding it especially intimate and inviting. They found it easier to participate in school activities, to communicate with other parents, and to stay informed regarding their children's behavior. This sense of community was especially important in light of the fragmented social networks accompanying their immigration, which was often relatively recent. One mother's reluctance to send her son to public school, stemming from negative representations of Islam in the media, was especially poignant: "I don't want him one day to be ashamed of me. Now he is little, and when I go to the school he is so proud of me, he introduces

me to everyone." When her son grows older, she feared he would no longer do so, "because everyone will think that I am bad and mean" (pp. 211-212).

Another challenging dimension of Muslims' public school experiences concerned students' ability to freely live out their faith. While their requests for special accommodations were typically granted, the problem was less their ability to observe Islamic practices and more "the relation of power which becomes evident in doing so." The institution decides whether to "permit" the headscarf, to "authorize" a spare classroom for purposes of *salat*, or to make "allowances" in providing *halal* meals. For students and their parents, this entails a "continuing process of supplication which must be enacted with each change of teacher, principal, school" (p. 212). Practicing Muslim students in Montreal public schools, more so than their secular or Christian counterparts, are perpetually at the mercy of institutional approval, an issue to be addressed, a complicating presence. Parents expressed concerns about the effects of such ongoing negotiations, not only on students' psychological well-being, but also on how they are perceived by others.

Safety and Selfhood

Like Kelly, Zine (2007) calls into question popular negative images of Islamic schools, challenging the "narratives" that construe Muslim schools in Canada as "religious ghettos." Her discussion is based on data collected over a year and a half of ethnographic research, including interviews with 49 participants—students, parents, teachers and administrators—in four of the area's Islamic schools.[22] Much of the paper is structured as a debate over the effects of religious schools, which she argues have created "safe havens" for many Muslim students. She addresses the works of "liberal educational

thinkers" (namely, Gutmann, 1996; Sweet, 1997; Callon, 1997), which critically portray homogeneous religious schools as a rejection of multicultural ideals, prone to inculcate a sense of in-group superiority, and essentially separatist (i.e., fostering "religious apartheid"). Zine responds to each of these charges, leaning heavily on lengthy interview excerpts.

To the first critique, she points out that most Islamic schools in the West, catering to the Muslim diaspora community, serve an extraordinarily culturally diverse population. She also notes the shortcomings of the multiculturalism prevalent in most public schools, which fail to go deeper than a "tourist curriculum" featuring "saris, samosas and steel bands" (p. 74). One student memorably reported feeling ostracized by her peers in public school for bringing food from her native culture, and so felt pressured to "stick to peanut butter" (p. 77). In short, some find the public school environments lacking in meaningful multicultural engagement, and find Islamic schools more conducive to cultural diversity. To the critique concerning in-group superiority, Zine argues that most students in Islamic schools belong to ethnic and cultural groups whose historical contributions (scientific, artistic, philosophical) are marginalized in Western public school curricula. Focusing on these groups' accomplishments "reinforces respect and neutralizes the superiority of the dominant culture." She sharply notes a subtle form of ethnocentrism that often remains unacknowledged, arguing that public schools themselves typically impose limiting epistemologies based on secular, Eurocentric assumptions, which "masquerade as universal ways of knowing but are culturally situated viewpoints that are in opposition to faith-centred worldviews" (p. 75).

Addressing the accusation of separatism, Zine echoes the sentiment of parents in Merry's (2005) study who felt that children benefit from having a safe, supportive school environment that harmonizes with their families' cultural values. That is, if school and family can work together to develop children's self-esteem and a sense of belonging based in a strong Muslim identity and the avoidance of destructive practices (drinking/drugs, violence, sexual promiscuity), he or she is actually in a better position to integrate into a pluralistic society. She further argues that separatist positions, when they are adopted by Muslims, are often reactive, responses to the perceived aggression directed toward Islam by Western militaries, media, and societies at large. The onus of reconciliation would therefore be primarily on non-Muslims, to stop demonizing Islam, invading its territories, and supporting their occupation. However, she does acknowledge one strain of divisive thought with origins among the ummah; namely, the binary stance adopted by certain religious authorities who refer to non-Muslims with the arguably pejorative term *kafirs*. Their attitudes create a sharp, in/out-group divide, are typically laced in arrogance, and so considered by Zine "un-Islamic" (p. 85).

A more narrowly focused ethnographic account of an Islamic school can be found in Nasir's (2004) discussion of Bilalian Islamic School (BIS), a K-8 Islamic private school in an unspecified, large U.S. city. Though she organizes her findings around a single student's disciplinary trajectory, her report incorporates perspectives of teachers, administrators and parents to paint a picture of the school's purposes, organizational structures, and relational dynamics. Its simple mission is "to produce a student that is a morally-conscious, literate person, capable of being a leader in a modern society" (p. 157). Nasir portrays BIS as a nurturing, familial environment, valuing interpersonal sensitivity

and critical thinking, where parents and teachers work intimately together to address students' behavioral issues and academic needs. Many teachers viewed their students in similar light to their own children, and it was common for students, teachers and community members unrelated by blood or law to refer to one another as 'sister' and 'brother.' For Jasser (2012) this practice was a red flag (though for reasons he leaves unexplained); for Nasir, it was indicative of her participants' healthy embrace of the "ideational artifact" of their school as a community and family.

The concept of an *ideational artifact* factors heavily into Nasir's analysis. This notion, she explains, "brings to the fore ideas and cultural conceptions of self that play out in the cultural activities within which identities develop" (p. 155). They are thinking tools, patterns and possibilities inherited from the past, and help to both construct and limit our present activities and future goals. The second ideational artifact she describes is the belief that children are essentially spiritual beings in need of external nurturing. Such artifacts (elsewhere called "guiding philosophies") as this "drive action, both explicitly and implicitly, as they inform the meaning people make of themselves, each other, and the setting" (p. 171). In this case, viewing students as fundamentally spiritual in nature allows teachers to distinguish between harmful or destructive behavior and the child's "true self," as their manifest actions can be considered in isolation from their deeper identities, which are rooted in the divine.

In one example that brings these two artifacts together, a teacher prioritized love and compassion in dealing with a misbehaving student, viewing him as he would want another teacher to view his own child. He also saw himself in the child, and was therefore unable to treat him as essentially isolated from his own life. This view of the student as a

member of the school and spiritual family shaped how the faculty "interpreted and responded to his behavior." Despite his undesirable actions, they maintained "a position of closeness, from which it was much harder for them to view him as different from themselves" (p. 163). In this case, a teacher's core moral and philosophical beliefs, based largely on inherited ideational artifacts rooted in his understanding of Islam, profoundly impacted how he understood and related to a student. Students and adults co-create identities of conformity and resistance in school contexts in light of available ontological concepts; as new concepts are made available, new possible identities emerge.

The relation of identity and selfhood with religious education is among the central concerns of D'Agostino's (2003) discussion of Muslims in New York City. Like Grewal & Coolidge (2013), she casts a wider net, expanding her analysis of Islamic education beyond the K-12 classroom to include sermons, fundraisers, student organizations, audio-recorded lectures, and individual *shaikhs* (though several of these are only mentioned in passing). Her conception of educators is likewise expansive, including not only school-teachers but also community leaders, religious scholars, and media personalities; basically anyone who "play[s] a role in constructing a sense of who the community is and what it is like" (D'Agostino, 2003, p. 287). This variety of teachers and learning forums further complicates the already diverse ethnic and theological landscape of New York's ummah. Many immigrants who have not learned English congregate predominantly with their own ethnic group, resulting in greater fragmentation than exists in smaller or more homogenous Islamic contexts. Other Muslims, when able to assimilate into a broader, multi-ethnic community, find greater disparities in religious interpretation, resulting from the variety of cultures, textual translations, and traditions of *fiqh*. In schools, this often results

in students challenging their teachers, interrupting a lesson "to argue over a particular interpretation or translation" which challenges what they've learned in other settings (p. 288).

The Qur'ān and Sunnah, which constitute the two major sources of Islamic theology and law, were recorded in classical Arabic, as were many influential works of early *tafsir,* or exegesis. Since this is spoken by so few Muslims in New York (including native speakers of contemporary Arabic), many rely on translations of the foundational texts of their faith. These documents, taken from their original contexts and often translated or quoted in fragmented form, reach earnest believers already tinged with the interpretive stamp of intermediary scholars. These hermeneutically infused translations are then interpreted by contemporary Muslims in various ways, rendering the original, allegedly unified message all the more difficult to decipher. D'Agostino describes dual movements of believers coping with such variation by pushing toward either greater or lesser tolerance. Some believe that more flexibility must be granted to embrace the myriad religious forms, while others respond with a push to narrow acceptable practice to ensure group cohesion.

The hardships accompanying these disparities of interpretation have been exacerbated in recent years. In addition to their internal difficulties, Muslim communities have faced increased pressure from the broader U.S. society since 9/11 to "present a uniform image of what Islam is all about" (p. 287). In the absence of any centralized power structure (comparable, for example, to the papacy), it's difficult to know who authoritatively 'speaks for' the faith. In any case, such a definitive or uniform picture may be impossible

to produce, given Islam's vast diversity of cultural influences, hermeneutical approaches, and sectarian traditions.

The effect of this diversity on educational contexts is central to Berglund's (2011) discussion on Islamic religious education (IRE) in Sweden.[23] Though brief, her analysis highlights a hermeneutical "struggle for space" among Muslim educators, entailing "the desire to strengthen one or another position ... by influencing the younger generation to adopt the 'right interpretation' of Islam" (p. 509). In the wake of globalization and mass migration, she argues, numerous Islamic interpretive traditions compete in culturally pluralistic contexts for ideological prominence. Broader issues affecting the global ummah combine with local social and political conditions to produce distinct pedagogical dynamics in each Islamic school. Individual teachers with varying hermeneutical orientations present Islam in different ways, highlighting the importance of teachers' interpretations in shaping how students come to understand what their faith is. Berglund acknowledges the efforts of "various groups and individuals to *gain space* for their particular understanding of Islam" (p. 509, emphasis in original), to render their own interpretations normative or dominant.

It is clear from these examples that contemporary Islamic education in North America (and Sweden) is a variegated and hermeneutically contentious phenomenon. This diversity of educational forms and struggle for interpretive dominance has an extended history. It has often manifested in clashes over authoritative sources of knowledge—e.g., revelation v. rationality—or forms of knowing termed "Islamic" or "Western," or dissimilar hermeneutical orientations among Muslims themselves. As today, these epistemological clashes have long played out along sectarian lines.

Pt. II: Interpretation and Sectarian Diversity

Revelation and Rationality

In his discussion of core principles of Islamic education, Halstead (2004) draws a distinction between the *falsafa* tradition, which saw rationality as independent of religion, and that of *al-Ash'ariyya,* who view rationality as acceptable only within the confines of orthodox theology. He describes *falsafa* as an "early import into Islam" (p. 517), facilitated by encounters with Greece during the religion's rapid growth in the first century after Muhammad's death. Tibi (2012) places a similar fault line within Islam between the "two competing traditions" (p. 230) of falsafa and fiqh. The former appeals largely to reason, he explains, while the latter grants absolute primacy to revelation as contained in standardized, authoritative sources.

According to Tibi (2012), the fiqh school has historically triumphed in the Islamic world due to adherents of the *falsafa* tradition lacking "the power to institutionalize their school of thought" (p. 241). Muslims in the fiqh tradition have broadly held control over schooling, and have accordingly been able to more comprehensively establish their interpretations of Islam, marginalizing the philosophically inclined believers. As Halstead (2004) notes, many Muslims have embraced the Aristotelian "pursuit of truth with the help of human reason" (p. 518), at times elevating reason above revelation concerning certain aspects of knowledge. Philosophy thrived in the earliest centuries of Islam, popularized by the works of al-Farabi, al-Kindi, Avicenna, and the "rational theology" of the Mu'tazilite school. These examples notwithstanding, Halsted argues that most Muslims have historically viewed philosophy with mistrust, due to its perceived ability to lead believers to question their faith. Islamic falsafa, he claims, has historically dwindled in

prominence, largely to the publication of al-Ghazali's (1058-1111) seminal work, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*.[24]

Halstead concludes that philosophy is an "alien concept" to Islam, and that those who have tried to render it compatible with the faith have failed. This has obvious implications for education, as he argues that Muslims have been widely suspicious of knowledge developed outside of divinely received channels (p. 518). While the Qur'ān does emphasize the importance of learning, it is not for the sake of knowledge itself, he claims, but ultimately as a means of fostering faith, good deeds, and certainty. One way of achieving certainty, Halstead argues, is for a student to accept the authority of the *ulama*, or learned scholars, regarding scriptural interpretations. "Islam," he claims, "encourages an attitude of respectful humility towards such legitimate authority and trust in the truth of the knowledge that it hands down" (p. 525). In light of such trust, teachers have no reason to encourage students to critically examine their faith. Accordingly, he claims, "independence of thought and personal autonomy do not enter into the Muslim thinking about education," thinking which prioritizes student conformity to Islamic revelation (p. 519). This places a "huge gulf" between Islamic schooling and its Western, liberal counterpart.[25]

Knowledge in Islam and the West

Cook (1999) suggests a similar gulf, claiming that by the 18th century Islamic societies had grown "unable to respond both culturally and educationally to the onslaught of Western advancements." As Europeans colonized the Islamic world, many sought to replace local faith-based worldviews with "secular" principles, elevating rational thought

over revelation. They further insisted upon disestablishing religion from government, an effort "anathema to the Islamic doctrine of *tawhid* (oneness), where all aspects of life whether spiritual or temporal are consolidated into a harmonious whole" (p. 340). These colonialist movements ushered in new political and economic orders, wherein Western education was deemed necessary for significant social mobility. In the aftermath of colonial occupations, ruling elites trained in a European ethos continued to enforce educational policies that catered to Western ideals. As Hussain (2007) notes, these ideals can carry weighty assumptions about not only knowledge and forms of government, but also the foundations of morality, the meaning of autonomy, and the nature of the self and its relationship to society.

In the late 20th century, Muslim scholars such as Naquib al-Attas, Sayyed Hossein Nasr, and Isma'il al-Faruqi popularized the *Islamization of Knowledge* movement, a heterogeneous effort broadly aimed at grounding contemporary knowledge firmly in Islamic metaphysics and moral responsibility (Džilo, 2012). Al-Faruqi diagnosed the "malaise of the ummah," finding its causes in a lack of clear direction corresponding to the secular-religious duality of the modern education system (quoted in Safi, 1993). According to Grewal & Coolidge (2013), thinkers in this current have attempted to articulate a decidedly Islamic pedagogy by "integrating Islamic studies across disciplines," or by arguing for "the harmonization of Islamic scholarly traditions and values with the secular academic social and physical sciences" (p. 257). Niyozov & Memon (2011) portray the movement as adopting a reactionary, oppositional stance with respect to Western, secular knowledge. In their terms, *Islamization* refers to a "broad-based, diverse and evolving epistemological, ontological, and pedagogical strategy" to counteract alternative

worldviews and subsume all knowledge into an Islamic paradigm. This strategy, they claim, is enacted not only toward outsiders, but those perceived as misguided within the Muslim community itself. That is, adherents of competing Islamic sects "have used Islamization to filter out not only Western or scientific knowledge, but also each others' knowledge, values, and practices" (p. 14).

Tibi (2012) seeks to accommodate modern thought into his understanding of Islam in his discussion of *Islamism* and *Islamic humanism*. He describes adherents of Islamism, or *Islamists*, as advocating a highly politicized interpretation of the faith, wherein the governing state is organized in accordance with orthodox fiqh teachings, and moral codes and public laws are based directly on Sharīˁa. Such a model, he argues, would not only erect barriers between Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, but would also foster polarization within the ummah. On the other hand, he claims, Islamic humanists emphasize "universal" values—reason, democracy, human rights—compatible with dominant post-Enlightenment Western ideologies, while maintaining distinctly Muslim theology and cultural forms. This approach can build "cross-civilizational" bridges, contributing to meaningful cooperation and mutual understanding. Importantly, Tibi also argues that neither Islamic humanists nor Islamists can draw a direct lineage from the original falsafa or fiqh schools to which they bear respective resemblances. The latter might be said to "'invent' the tradition to which they appeal" (p. 231), and he candidly encourages the former to do something of the same.

Salafism/Wahhabism

While some Muslims have embraced modern Western forms of knowledge, and others have sought to Islamize them, others still have sought to disregard them altogether. These believers have looked to the pre-modern period for spiritually unified forms of traditional knowledge untouched by the trespasses of the unfaithful and the distorting effects of time. Duderija (2010) focuses on one such movement, discussing how the "neo-traditional Salafi" (NTS) approach to hermeneutics manifests in issues of gender, religious diversity, and violence. *Salafis* take their name from the Arabic term *salaf*, meaning predecessors, ancestors, or forefathers. They call for a return to Islam "as it was practiced and observed in the days of the Prophet Muhammad," specifically as interpreted by prominent religious authorities from the *salaf al-ṣāliḥ,* or first three generations of believers (Alvi, 2014, p. 39) According to Duderija (2010), these interpretations are "normative, static, and universalistic in nature" (p. 76), supposedly applicable to all Muslims regardless of culture, geography or epoch. Conformity to the teachings is non-negotiable, demonstrated "by being faithful to a literal and decontextualized Qur'ān-Sunnah hermeneutic" (p. 76). Fidelity to the teachings of these earliest authorities, according to one contemporary Salafi scholar, guarantees Muslims alignment with "the correct and true Islam" (al-'Uthaymin, cited in Duderija, p. 76). From this perspective, Salafis alone carry the torch from the earliest believers, basing their interpretations solely on Qur'ān and those hadīth deemed authentic. "Everything else," according to another NTS scholar, "is whispers [*sic*] from the shaytaan" (al-Madkhali, cited in Duderija, p. 77).

For Duderija, the neo-traditional Salafi insistence on a literalist approach to Muhammad's teachings results in an impoverished and unduly exclusive account of religious

in-group identity. He addresses select Quranic passages (2:120; 3:85; 3:118; 9.5) and hadīth often used by Salafis to justify religious separatism and villainize Jews, Christians, Pagans, and the *munāfiqūn*, those deemed hypocrites from within the ranks of the believers themselves. These texts are more intelligible in light of the political atmosphere of Medina at the time of the early Muslim community, in which "conflict, friction and hostility prevailed," and "Muslims were constantly concerned about the sheer survival of their community." This climate fostered "a reactionary, antagonistic way of identifying in relation to the religious Other" (p. 79) which would be unsuitable to more auspicious circumstances. In short, these groups were only enemies insofar as they were threats, and when the threat is no longer imminent, the rigid divide suggested in these passages no longer applies. Failure to acknowledge the importance of this context "would result in the construction of a very negative view of the religious Other, which could then come to be considered as normative" (p. 83).

Duderija examines the work of Muhammad Sa'id al-Qahtani, a contemporary Salafi writer who leans heavily on the doctrine of *al-wala' wa-al-bara'*, a dualistic formulation categorizing humanity in oppositional camps of alliance (*al-wala'*) and disassociation (*al-bara'*). Al-Qahani categorically considers Jews and Christians to be disbelievers, placing them squarely among the latter group. He forbids Muslims from befriending the unfaithful, "endorsing the validity" of their religions or ideologies, endowing them with authority above any Muslims, or showing them a host of other signs of trust or respect. Quoting Abou El Fadl, Duderija describes Salafism as "supremacist puritanism" with "a distinct sense of self-righteous arrogance vis-à-vis the non-descript other – whether the other is the West, non-believers in general or even Muslim women" (p. 87).

Politically, he claims, while Salafis typically don't advocate violent revolution to establish an Islamic state, their worldview endorses hermeneutical principles used by others to justify doing so. Duderija concludes by noting that NTS de-contextual, universalistic interpretive schemas offer a "methodological-ideological foundation for developing religious discourses" that assume and uphold "a permanently conflicting relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims" (pp. 88-89). Unfortunately, this leads to the "utter isolation and ghettoization" (p. 89) of countless Muslims living in liberal Western societies.

According to Alvi (2014), much of the violence in the Islamic world is linked to the spread of such interpretations of Islam, which he terms "Salafi/Wahhabi" finding the two sufficiently similar to refer to a single general ideology. Fattah (2003), meanwhile, portrays Wahhabism as an ultra-conservative revivalist strand within the broader and older Salafi tradition. The Wahhabi movement derives its name from Muhammad ibn Abd 'al-Wahhab (1703-1792), an 18th century theologian and preacher whose alliance with the house of Saud bolstered his mission to purify the faith, using violence when necessary. He is widely known for his "uncompromising understanding of the core Islamic doctrine" of *tawhid*, the oneness of God (Rohmaniyah and Woodward, 2012, p. 4), and like Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328) centuries before, he condemned religious and spiritual views and practices that appeared to undermine Allah's unity and sovereignty. This included the concept of "intercession with God, including the invocation of saints, spiritual beings and powers other than that of God" (p. 4), as well as practices considered mystical or esoteric. Both Salafis and Wahhabis, Alvi (2014) explains, reject the "perceived 'adulteration' of Islam by Western lifestyles and values," both are "puritanical and literalist in their inter-

pretation of Islamic laws and principles," and neither endorses adjusting or reinterpreting matters of religion to accommodate the modern world (p. 40).

Significant similarities between these sects are undeniable, and the ideologies and practices of Salafi and Wahhabi Muslims can appear theologically rigid, intolerant, and homogenous. However, entirely ignoring what diversity does exist within Salafism/Wahhabism will leave us with an oversimplified understanding of the traditions. Even in the same geographical region, these movements can take on notably dissimilar forms. The case of Indonesia is particularly telling. Rohmaniyah and Woodward (2012), for example, find stark differences between Saudi Arabian expressions of Wahhabi belief and those in an Indonesian *pesantren*. In Saudi Arabia, they explain, Wahhabi mandates are upheld by religious police, beneath whose watchful eye Shi'ites, Sufis, and other heterodox Sunnī believers are repressed. Genders are strictly segregated, and women are subject to harsh, overt forms of legal discrimination; in addition to being prohibited from driving, they are required to cover in *abaya* and in many cases *niqab*, and are comprehensively excluded from professional and political spheres (p. 5). In the Pondok Pesantren Madreasah Wathoniyah Islamiyah (PPMWI), however, they find a markedly different expression of Wahhabi Islam. Here, certain practices considered *bid'ah* (forbidden innovation) by Saudi believers are accepted. Both the staff and students are co-ed, and females are encouraged to both attend university and "to participate fully in public life." According to Rohmaniyah and Woodward (2012), an essential difference between Saudis and PPMWI is that the latter "sees no need to mimic Saudi social and cultural practice to establish Islamic authenticity" (p. 7). In other words, much of what Saudis claim for

Wahhabi religious orthodoxy is rooted less in a universal theology than their own idio-syncratic, parochial norms.

However, as Kovacs (2014) notes, other groups in the region have adopted cultur-al forms and religious interpretations from Wahhabi-style Salafi groups. The recent rise in intra-Islamic violence in Indonesia, she claims, is predominantly carried out by the Salafi Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam, or FPI), founded in 1999 by Habib Rizieq, a graduate of Saudi Islamic and Arabic College of Indonesia (Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Islam dan Arab, or LIPIA) who later studied in Riyadh on a Saudi scholar-ship. The group is "modeled on the Saudi religious police," and targets night clubs, res-taurants serving alcohol, and liberal-minded Muslims for violent attacks to discourage behavior deemed un-Islamic. The Indonesian Salafi Warriors of Jihad (Laskar Jihad, or LJ) was founded shortly after the FPI by Jafar Umar Thalib, another graduate of LIPIA who ideologically based the group's violent acts on Saudi scholarship. Institutions like LIPIA can be seen as part of a broader Saudi battle for "ideological hegemony" (p. 4) in the Muslim world, a campaign to combat the spread of divergent forms of faith or gov-ernment. Their pedagogy propagates their own strict religious interpretations alongside positive images of the royal family, "opposes free and critical thinking and teaches blind obedience and submission" to Saudi theology and law. Their textbooks take an opposi-tional stance toward various forms of philosophy and government, and endorse hatred of other religious groups, including Jews, Christians, Hindus, and even heterodox Mus-lims.[26] Such teachings are "intended to cement loyalty to the supposedly single, true, and immutable Islam," and specifically target Sufis, whose "mystical religious practices," are deemed "idolatrous" (p. 3).

Sufism

Webb (2013) traces Sufism, or *tasawwuf*, back to the 8th century C.E., when devout Muslims grew critical of the perceived worldliness in early Islamic society. The believers, allegedly called Sufis for their rough woolen cloaks (or *suf*, in Arabic), searched for purity in various ascetic practices, including additional prayers, unprescribed fasts, and the renunciation of worldly goods (p. 191). According to Webb, by the 10th century these ascetics had begun to articulate mystical interpretations of Islam, and by the 12th century began to organize into differentiated orders, or *tariqas*. Each group was structured around a spiritual leader (*shaikh* or *pir*) whose teachings were traced back by personal transmission to the founder of the tariqa, and ultimately to the Prophet himself. Today, the dozens of orders, societies, foundations, missions and study centers in the U.S. alone bear witness to the remarkable diversity of Sufi spirituality (Hermansen, 2000). Some recent tariqas, such as Hazrat Inayat Khan's Sufi Order of the West, have decoupled Sufism from Islam proper, claiming its message as universal, transcending narrow religious forms (Webb, 2013, p. 193). Most, however, maintain some degree of specifically Islamic orientation (Hermansen, 2000), building their practices and beliefs upon "esoteric interpretations of the Qur'ān" (Webb, 2013, p. 190).

Musharraf (2013) compares esoteric Sufi hermeneutical approaches with those of "exoteric clerics." Unlike Duderija (2010), her essential distinction is drawn not between contextualized and de-contextualized interpretation, but subjective/inner and objective/outer knowledge. Conventional Islamic authorities, she argues, endorse and aspire to the latter, claiming "the reader's mindset should not interfere with how the Qur'ān is explained." Their ideal is "scripture objectivity" (p. 34) suggesting a reading that is static,

rational, and literalistic. This may take into account historical context, but primarily to ground the revelations in an objective world that is likewise factual, singular, and impersonally real. Paradoxically, denying interpretation its subjective quality results in a "self-centered" position, characterized by "autocratic claims of those who only accept their own account" of scriptural meanings (p. 47). Such clerics have positioned themselves as foremost custodians of the truth, and so have felt threatened by Sufi movements—which she characterizes as "Gnostic"— that decentralize power of interpretation.

Gnostics, Musharraf argues, place the locus of interpretation within, positing a radically subjective relationship with authoritative texts. Each believer possesses the authority to appropriate the teachings in unique ways corresponding to their own intentions and experiences. Sufis acknowledge various "realms of understanding," of which the apparent, *al-Zahir*, is the most shallow. At times, Musharraf suggests that Gnostics' break from the visible, material world can be so radical that they are "not concerned with the continuum of events" in so-called objective reality. In the deeper realms, "there is no fixed meaning," as "the interpreter enters a surreal arena" where he/she is free to participate in the co-construction of meaning, or "even to create it altogether" (p. 36). In positioning this approach as nearer to the source of divine inspiration, Sufi language and methods have challenged and deconstructed dominant epistemological structures, acting as "a war machine against outward limitations and scholastic power." Certain esoteric interpretations were eventually embraced by mainstream clerics; however, according to Musharraf, many Gnostics in the early centuries of Islam, branded blasphemous or insane, were tortured and killed for espousing unorthodox views (p. 38).

An example of the liberating effects of Sufi interpretation can be found in Q17:18, when Allah asks Moses, "What do you have in your hand?" Moses replies, "This is my stick which I rely on," at which point the staff turns into a snake. The verse could seem puzzling if taken at its most literal level—God, already knowing everything, has no need to ask the question. However, one gnostic reading of the verse sees Moses' stick as "a sign for relying on another" (p. 39). Musharraf cites Mansur al-Hallaj's explanation, which portrays "any support except upon God" as "dangerous in essence," likened to a serpent. This can be seen as a critique of exoteric clerics' pride stemming from their reliance on scholastic knowledge. The literalist account of objective minded scholars places the significance of Moses' staff in its indication of his work (shepherd) and social context (specifically, his relationship to contemporary sorcerers). Al-Hallaj's interpretation "ignored the time and location and other objective references" (p. 41), removed the story from its immediate, literal context, prioritizing the staff's relevance to each individual's faith. The story has potential for personal meaning to everyone who encounters it, offering each of us the ability to identify our own inner stick-serpents, connecting us intimately with Moses across distances of time, geography, and culture. Interpretation, she memorably concludes, "is a struggle for freedom and a battle against alienation," an active resistance to "soulless univocalism" of rigid, mainstream authorities (p. 47).

A more in-depth examination of the historical developments and interrelationships of Salafi and Sufi traditions (see, for example, Blankinship, 2014), while not necessary for this study, would reveal even greater subtlety and complexity than I have indicated above. Muslims, both within and across these sectarian groupings, differ substantially in the degree of interpretive variety they find desirable or permissible. Questions

concerning the significance of context and subjectivity, the legitimacy of various authori-

ty figures, or the proper hierarchy of different sources of knowledge (revelation, rationali-

ty, emotion, ecstatic experience) remain open in the ummah at large. At Tafsir, I found

that individual Muslims' core assumptions or answers to these questions both inform and

are informed by the sectarian or ostensibly non-sectarian communities to which many

belong. However, before elaborating on this, I will describe key logistical and theoretical

aspects of my study—e.g., research site, sampling and data collection methods, my own

positionality and moral/spiritual framework—in hopes of rendering my research process

as transparent as possible.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODS

[T]he way we experience one another, the way we experience historical traditions, the way we experience the natural givenness of our existence and of our world, constitute a truly hermeneutic universe, in which we are not imprisoned, as if behind insurmountable barriers, but to which we are opened.

–Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxiii.

Objectivity

For the year and a half period of data collection at Tafsir Islamic School (TIS), I used ethnographic methods, leaning heavily on participant observation and interviews, taking extensive field notes, and analyzing school documents (e.g., textbooks, policy packets, student work). From the beginning, the work was deeply intertwined with my own spiritual life, which led me to engage in a sincere and personal way with its central concepts. Obviously, the virtue of this point is arguable. According to Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte (1999), "Ethnographic research is never autobiographical." The goal of the ethnographer, they claim, is to prevent their biases from interfering with "accurate observation" (p. 72). In doing so, the researcher is able to understand the local meanings of relevant concepts, and to report participants' experiences from their own viewpoints, free from subjective distortion or interference. More recently, however, Atkinson & Coffey (2003) argued a contrary point, that the research process is inevitably "suffused with biographical and identity work" (p. 120). A few years earlier, Stack (1996) had already observed a trend in this contrary direction, wherein "the process of writing ethnography ha[d] turned inward toward subjectivity" (p. 99). In light of this movement, she felt

empowered to "shed the singularity of truth and improvise among shifting voices" (p. 104). While I cannot claim that my research is explicitly feminist in nature, it has been inspired by Stack's and other feminists' epistemologies which, in Code's (2013) terms, "break the thrall of objectivist detachment" by "relocating questions about knowledge and truth to positions within the conversations of humankind" (p. 23).

Despite its abstract coherence, the notion of "accurate observation" employed by Schensul, Schensul and LeCompte is highly elusive, as I know no firm grounds against which to test data for accuracy. While I remain sympathetic (for reasons probably related to my own Islamic upbringing) to Appiah's claim (2006) that "There is only one reality" (p. 43), I have little trust in anyone's ability to 'accurately observe' it, as I view human knowledge as thoroughly infused with subjective interpretation. According to Fay (2008), "all thinking occurs within a conceptual scheme of one sort or another, and thus the idea of cognizing without preconception or without interest is incoherent" (p. 219). The importance of our preconceptions and interests are especially relevant to our observations of the social world, in light of its vast indeterminacy and complexity. Given the politically charged dimensions of contemporary Western discourse surrounding Islam, it would be naïve to presume an objective standpoint. And in any case I was interacting with human beings, not elements of the periodic table. Like Fanon (1952/2008), "I did not want to be objective," and "found it impossible" regardless (p. 67).

Reflexivity

Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2010) define *reflexivity* as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher" (p. 283). They call for researchers to "interrogate"

how our work is "shaped and staged around the binaries, contradictions, and paradoxes that form our own lives" (p. 283). We enact or 'call forth' different selves in different contexts, taking on distinct identities in the field, with various participants, and in the writing process. Reflexive researchers remain conscious of these inconsistencies, evaluating their relevance to both the study and their own personal lives. This can be a humbling (if not humiliating) process, which lends itself to an open, flexible research design. In light of my own multiplicity and internal contradictions, it simply would not make sense to remain too stubbornly attached to the views or agendas of any one of my 'selves.' Fay (2008) calls for "a reflective, self-critical engagement with one's particular cognitive commitments and presuppositions" (p. 216). This must be an ongoing process, undertaken throughout the data collection, analysis, and writing. Since "the entirety of an inquiry is shot through with its conceptual and evaluative premises," the critical self-examination ought to be perpetual, not merely stated perfunctorily "in the preface" (p. 216).

Grounded Theory

My basic thinking about my own role as researcher was deeply informed by Heshusius' (1996) distinction between *alienated* and *participatory* "modes of consciousness." Researchers operating with the former construct and maintain a clear boundary between themselves and their subjects, a conceptual division which "allows the self to believe it can stay in control over both self and other" (p. 620). This is most characteristic, she suggests, of those operating under a positivistic social research paradigm, i.e., those seeking to 'discover the truth,' to accumulate impersonal knowledge of universal laws, typically applying principles from natural science research (objectivity, hypothesis

testing, cause-and-effect relationships leading to accurate prediction and effective control) to the social world. For those holding these assumptions, she warns, "the other" can all too easily become "a property … having been turned into an object of study through our measuring gaze, an object that we now, in an epistemological sense, own" (p. 630). She contrasts this state with the *participatory* consciousness, "a larger unknown but also uncontrollable self-other reality in which they would partake but of which they were not in charge" (p. 641). This is consistent with Madriz' (1998) account of her own egalitarian-minded focus group research, characterized in part by "blurring the boundaries between Self and Other" (Madriz, 1998, p. 115).[27] These descriptions not only resonated with my own values, but also sounded most conducive to complex and relevant research.

In light of this, my hope in the first stage of my fieldwork was to tread lightly, to simply listen to and observe students' and teachers' interactions with one another, and amongst themselves. Doing so allowed me to focus not merely "on members' decontextualized talk," as is often the case in interviews, "but on naturally occurring, situated interaction in which local meanings are created and sustained" (Emerson et al., 1995, p. 140). This initial time allowed me to sharpen my interviews, by not only helping me to feel more comfortable interacting with the community, but also by clarifying the kinds of questions I should ask and the most appropriate language with which to ask them. Several of the questions on my initial interview protocol failed to engage participants, or to seem relevant to daily life at TIS, while other issues I had not planned to discuss emerged as more provocative. This contributed to my decision to substantially change the focus of the research.

Though I began my study viewing Tafsir through a pre-established theoretical lens (informed largely by Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*), I gradually deviated from this framework as I realized its inability to fully account for the data that seemed most important. Unaware of any existing theory that would directly address my specific findings, I began to develop my own theoretical account rooted in the phenomena that (a) my participants were describing, and (b) I was encountering firsthand. In this respect, my research could best be described as taking a *grounded theory* approach. According to Creswell (2007), researchers utilizing this methodology seek to generate unique theoretical insights rooted firmly in the findings themselves. In Hammersley & Atkinson's (2007) terms, this developed as "a movement away from sterile reliance on pre-existing theory, or theory abstracted from any empirical research" (p. 166). My decision to adopt a grounded theory methodology was primarily motivated by this sentiment, a nagging suspicion that clinging to my initial theoretical framework would result in an unduly circumscribed data collection process and a brittle, academically derivative analysis. This choice ended up working to my favor, as my emergent, 'grounded' research focus proved far more compelling than my pre-packaged topic.

Research Site

Before officially beginning my research, I conducted a pilot study at *As-Samad Muslim Academy* (ASMA), a K-8 Islamic school, participating in daily activities, observing classroom dynamics, and interviewing teachers and administrators. Though I did not include any of the data collected there in my report, the experience helped to prepare me for my eventual formal research. This latter re-

search—i.e., this present study—took place at *Tafsir Islamic School* (TIS), a private co-ed K-12 Islamic school located in a metropolitan area in the Midwestern U.S.[28] The school, situated in two large parallel rectangular buildings in a mostly residential neighborhood, strives "to foster the Islamic Identity among students and to protect and sustain the Muslim Community" in the surrounding area (Tafsir Web site, retrieved April 21st, 2013). Adjacent to the TIS buildings is the community mosque, itself comprised of several sections: a smaller 40' x 30' area for women to pray, which is located behind and partitioned from a larger, 70' x 30' prayer area for the men. Along the front wall of the men's prayer area are two doors, one leading to administrative office, and the other to a conference room. Just outside the mosque sit four 8' long raised planter beds painted brightly by students and filled, depending on the time of year, with some assortment of herbs, flowers, and perennial shrubs. About 20 yards east of the mosque, and somewhat less carefully maintained than the other buildings, sits *Rivers of Milk*, a family owned market whose main business was *halal* meats and groceries, with a small section stocked with religious books, tapestries, flags, prayer rugs, essential oils, and other assorted items.

In the southernmost building is the elementary school, 1st through 6th grade classes, one class per grade, and each with its own dedicated room occupied by a single teacher. The school employed one full time teacher's assistant, who rotated throughout the week to help out various lower grade teachers. Most of these classrooms, as well as the Arabic teachers' office and a large, walk-in storage closet, are accessible from a large, centralized open area. This space is used

for organizing students at lunchtime or bus call, and for gathering together for daily *ẓuhr* prayers and Friday elementary school-wide sermons. The 1st and 2nd grade classrooms are set apart from the rest, around the corner from this open area, sandwiched between a fire exit, a drinking fountain, and a small book closet on one side, and the bathrooms on the other. Beyond the bathrooms are TIS's three administrative offices, one for Ramzi Malik, the school's principal, another for dean Musa Ahmed, and a third for the school's administrative assistant, Miss Noori. Just past these are the copy room, which doubled as the teachers' lounge, and a set of glass double doors opening into the school's sizeable library, which doubled as just about anything. Along the perimeter of this floor are rows of lockers, bulletin boards exhibiting student work, and countless posters displaying encouraging slogans, general moral principles, specific school rules, select hadīth and Quranic passages, and the Arabic alphabet.

The junior high and high school, collectively known as the "upper grades," consist of the 7th-12th grade classes, and are situated in the northernmost building. Between this and the lower grades building was the area known as "the courtyard," which was partially shaded by aluminum awnings running the length of the buildings, lined with wooden benches, and filled in with an assortment of sugar maple and river birch trees. Inside this upper grades building, eight full-time teachers work with the students for most of the day: Miss Khudrah and Miss Rabia taught math, Mr. Ghauth and Miss Kessler taught science, Miss Imani taught English, Sister Halima taught social studies, and Miss Naima and Miss Basira each taught sections of both English and Social Studies. The students are not gen-

erally organized according to ability, but stay with their entire grade through each class. The only exception here is for Arabic lessons, where the students are broken into smaller, more specialized ability groups, typically containing 5-7 students each. The school hires four Arabic teachers, one of whom previously served as dean of students but now heads the Arabic department. Her office is tucked away in the corner between the two math teachers' rooms, accessible from a small foyer that also led to the science lab, the computer lab and a large walk in closet. Around the corner, there are two other rooms that are generally vacant: the only exception, again, being during Arabic classes. The centerpiece of the upper grades building is a wide open space commonly known as "the big room." Larger events, such as school-wide poetry readings, plays, spelling bees, or graduation ceremonies, are held here. Lining the outer edges of the room are student lockers, doorways leading to individual classrooms, and educational posters displaying information about Islam or prominent inventions, accomplishments, and scientific and advancements for which Muslims have been responsible.

The main entrances to both the lower and upper grade schools are accessible from the sidewalk on the west sides of their respective buildings. The richly decorated arch-topped, red oak doorways are the centerpieces of the edifices decorated with muted blues and greens, painted golden archways, Arabic calligraphy and the English text "Tafsir Islamic School," all against a light coral-colored background. Around the corner from this entrance is a set of double doors which leads to the school cafeteria, a box-shaped room located in the lower grade building. Just beyond this is a sprawling asphalt area, enclosed by a chain-link fence,

containing a small grass-covered soccer field, a playground, an immobile trailer converted into two auxiliary classrooms, an open-air pavilion, and a sizeable parking lot with room for about 80 cars. The TIS complex, along with the Rivers of Milk grocery store, takes up about half a single city block.

<div align="center">Designations and Demographics</div>

According to Web site *www.greatschools.org*, the school's curriculum follows a "core knowledge" model, save its special focus on Arabic language and religious instruction. TIS is officially associated with the Islamic Schools League of America (ISLA), a 16-year old 501(c)3 which seeks to help Muslim schools to "nurture and encourage America's youth to develop their innate creativity and inquisitive nature," while in the process "anchoring their hearts and souls in a moral framework of a God-centered life" (http://theisla.org/page.php/AboutUs, retrieved September 12, 2013). GreatSchools also mentions the Tafsir dress code, a student newspaper, and the school's intention to strengthen its students' faith in God. The student body is described racially as 46% Black, 45% White, and 9% Asian and/or Asian Pacific Islander (retrieved October 17, 2015).[29] The average student-teacher ratio is listed at 15 to 1. Of the 13 female teachers I interviewed four were African-American, two were from Egypt, one was from Tunisia, one was from Algeria, one from Yemen,[30] one from Morocco, another from Pakistan, another from Afghanistan, and another of mixed European descent. All teachers identified as Muslim with the exception of the European, who identified as Roman Catholic. The only male teacher at the school was of Egyptian descent. The dean was a White male, and the principal, also male, was from United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.). *GreatSchools* describes

the neighborhood surrounding the school simply as "Inner City," with the average home estimated at slightly under $100,000, the typical 2-bedroom apartment costing less than $1,000 to rent. The community ratings, which appear to have been determined primarily by parental review, show 3.3 out of 5 stars (from a total of some 25 postings). Meanwhile the GreatSchools Rating, which is based on aggregated 2011-2012 PSSA test results, is on the low side.

Access and Early Observations

The spring before beginning my data collection I received wholehearted verbal permission from dean Musa Ahmed to spend as much time as was necessary at Tafsir. His support remained throughout my fieldwork, as he appeared to appreciate having an extra adult on hand to volunteer for various tasks. At a faculty meeting early in the year, he warmly introduced me to the Tafsir teachers, several of whom offered verbal encouragement and expressed interest in participating in the study. According to Musa Ahmed, no bureaucratic clearances were required for me to be at TIS, beyond his authorization. No funding agencies were involved, and so no approval was necessary in that respect. I did, however, receive authorization from Temple University's Institutional Review Board prior to beginning my research, and maintained active IRB approval for the duration of the field work.

While conducting my research primarily at Tafsir School, I remained open to collecting data elsewhere. Though I never sought such opportunities, I received periodic invitations from TIS community members to join them off school grounds, be it in their

homes, mosques, or simply for a ride to the train station. Several of these invitations were to sites I had never visited before, such as a masjid in a smaller city within two hour's drive, or a house gathering within a few miles of Tafsir. I also received a gentle prodding to return to the *Batin al-Haqq Study Circle*, a small organization I had once attended more regularly.[31] The group, which consisted predominantly of Western converts to Islam, was dedicated to exploring, practicing and promoting the teachings of its founder, Pir Batin al-Haqq, a Sufi master who died decades before my study began.

Throughout the year at Tafsir, I took numerous opportunities to gradually transition from a passive observer to a regularly active participant in classroom, school or community activities, and to make myself useful in whatever ways possible. I hoped that this would serve at least two purposes: first, I thought it might provide some degree of reciprocity, to help ensure that I did not simply become a burden. For example, Musa Ahmed mentioned that Tafsir was short on tutors, leaving teachers there overwhelmed and spread thin; I tried to lighten the loads of these or other school faculty by adopting various responsibilities, ranging from substitute teaching to janitorial duties, from chess instruction to window caulking. Second, I expected it would help me develop a stronger sense of participants' lived experiences, by taking on, at least to a modest extent, their roles myself. I also relied heavily on extensive "unobtrusive" and "participant" observations (Agnew & Pyke, 2007, p. 212), which benefitted me in a number of ways. First, realizing that various forms of gathering information can highlight different aspects of participants' perspectives (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 93-94), I could triangulate data from my observations with those collected in interviews. This helped to minimize at least certain threats to the trustworthiness of my findings; for example, through time intensive partici-

pant observation, I was able to hear members' casual interactions, less prone to "on-stage effects," to the tendency for participants to give a socially desirable response in a decontextualized interview (Agnew & Pyke, 2007, p. 215). Second, my initial observations helped me to develop a clearer sense of the types of questions to ask members of the TIS community. Though I began the year with an interview protocol already complete, and in some cases continued reading questions from it, my early findings overtly shaped the direction the interviews took throughout the year. My responsiveness to participants' direction was shaped by principles espoused by feminist researchers intent, in Reinharz' (1992) terms, on "avoiding control over others and developing a sense of connectedness with people" (p. 20). The egalitarian principles espoused by many feminist thinkers logically support a participant-guided investigation (p. 21) wherein power hierarchies between 'expert' and 'subject' are mitigated, and researchers surrender attachment to pre-established protocols in exchange for a more collaborative, emergent inquiry.

Participant Criteria

My initial plan was to interview about 25 people at Tafsir, incorporating students, parents, teachers, and administrators. I altered this plan when dean Musa Ahmed expressed his preference that I not interview students or parents, due to concerns of disrupting them, or complicating their relationship with the school. Throughout my field work I interacted with hundreds of people, but only numbered 20 as formal participants in the study, 13 female and 7 male. This included 11 currently employed, full-time teachers,[32] 2 administrators,[33] 2 former students, 1 former teacher, 1 part-time teacher, and 4 non-parental members of the extended TIS community.[34] These participants ranged from ap-

proximately 21-70 years old, but beyond making sure participants were legally adults, in an effort to be polite I did not ask anyone's age. Before beginning my study, I had expected to deliberately find a diverse sample of the population, not only in terms of age and position, but also gender, race, nationality, and educational philosophy. However, due to my inability to interview students and parents, my sample was considerably limited. Though I interviewed the majority of the faculty at TIS, there were a few exceptions. Several faculty members, including the administrative assistant Miss Noori, the elementary school teacher Miss Ruhia, and the high school science teacher Miss Khudrah, declined from the outset my request for an interview. Elementary school teacher Sister Zaharia expressed a willingness to do so, but repeatedly declined my individual attempts to schedule a time to actually talk. I also failed to interview Miss Safar, one of the Arabic teachers, because she took medical leave early on in the year, and was gone for its remainder. Meanwhile, Diane, a reading remediation specialist who was hired by a private agency to work at the school, said she would consider my request for an interview, but ultimately preferred not to participate. There were four participants who were not currently and directly related to the school, selected for various reasons. One was Nabilah, an Arab-American in her 30s and relative of the TIS principal. Though she spent time on the school grounds and knew many of its faithful members, she was not herself a Muslim. I thought this might give her a unique perspective on the spiritual dynamics of school community. Another was Sadiq, an African American man in his 40s who attended the mosque but was not affiliated with the school, and was willing to talk with me over lunch at *Rivers of Milk*. Another, to whom dean Musa Ahmed introduced me, was Sulayman, a recent graduate of Tafsir who was no longer a regular part of the school community. And

finally, the only participant to be interviewed off school grounds was Faqir Muhammad, the shaikh of one of the TIS teachers. These participants each helped me in some way to piece together an overall picture of the community, but on the whole do not factor into my discussion nearly so prominently as the remaining 16 participants who were directly involved with the school at the time of my study.

I had planned to interview four administrators but fell short of this. The only two active administrators that participated in the study were dean Musa Ahmed and Arabic department head Miss Najjar. I invited TIS's principal Ramzi Malik to take part in an interview, but he declined for reasons he never specified. Though I was able to interview one former board member, a robust man in his 60s named Omar who regularly came to Friday prayer services at the TIS mosque, I was unable to reach any of the others. When I asked dean Musa Ahmed about contacting them, he advised me against doing so on the grounds that they were too busy. I followed his advice in this and most other respects, which of course shaped my findings in certain ways. Other times the dean actively assisted my research, by introducing me to faculty, contacting a former student on my behalf, or calling a teacher down to his office for me to interview. Whether discouraging or facilitating my contact with potential participants, my data collection process was likely influenced more by Musa Ahmed than anyone else at TIS.

Sampling and Enrollment

All participants were identified and enrolled in the study on site, with the exception of Faqir Muhammad, the shaikh of Rabia, one of the teachers at Tafsir.[35] Enrollment took place on an ongoing basis, not following any explicit schedule or timeline, and

without any recruitment materials, advertisements, or financial incentives. Since Tafsir is a relatively small school with a closely knit community, I expected word-of-mouth and unplanned introductions to be sufficient advertisement. They were. Participants were enlisted in a subjective, non-probabilistic manner through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling strategies (Creswell, 2007). My sampling was convenient insofar as I began observing in classes headed by teachers to whom I was introduced, and who had invited me. I had already identified two such teachers before beginning my regular visits to Tafsir. I had also planned to employ a purposeful sampling strategy, by intentionally selecting students with outstanding qualities relevant to my initial research questions, who, for example, demonstrated unusual leadership abilities, or were deemed disciplinary problems. However, after my pool of participants was limited, this was no longer possible. Nevertheless, as my research questions sharpened I was able to concentrate my focus on certain participants, requesting follow up interviews when it seemed fruitful. My choice of which participants in this case resembled what Patton (2014) calls "intensity sampling," wherein a researcher "seeks out excellent or rich examples of the phenomenon of interest" (p. 279). The only difference is that I was not choosing who to include in the study, but which participants to pursue in greater depth.

Though I had already visited the school a few times, I could not begin my research proper until I received IRB approval, which was about 3 weeks into the school year. Once this was secured, I began to visit the school 2-3 times a week, typically for at least 4 hours. I had expected to keep my visits to Tafsir as non-intrusive as possible at first, quietly observing classrooms, trying to stay out of everyone's way. According to this plan, I would begin to participate in class activities and conduct interviews after

about 3 weeks in the field. This time, I thought, would allow participants to become more comfortable with my presence, give me time to learn the lay of the land before becoming too involved in school activities, and allow me to promptly begin the interviewing process. This didn't go as planned. My participation in daily activities began from practically the moment I set foot in the school, so no such gradual immersion took place. Meanwhile, the first actual interviewing didn't take place until November, when the study had been fully underway for almost 7 weeks. It took me this long to feel comfortable asking for an hour of anyone's time, requesting that they sign consent forms, engaging anyone so formally.

Once interviews began, I tried to use a *snowball* approach, in that I asked my interviewees for suggestions regarding other classes I might observe, or other TIS community members I should meet with. At times, this provided a convenient conversation starter ('Miss Zainab suggested I ask you about…'), and also in some cases revealed how participants viewed one another ('You should talk to Dawoud, since he's…'). However, in the end, my strategy was not so deliberately selective as any one sampling technique might suggest. The school is comparatively small, and so I basically tried to interview everyone who seemed willing to participate. Of those who were, I interviewed most only once. A majority of the others I interviewed twice—typically one long conversation and a short follow up at a later date in which I asked for clarification about certain points from our initial talk.

I interviewed dean Musa Ahmed more than anyone else—no fewer than three times—and also casually spoke with him more than any other participant. There are several reasons for this. First, since he was the person who had granted me permission to

come to the school in the first place, it was in his office that I felt least like an uninvited guest. Second, he was dean, and though he had many responsibilities, his schedule was typically more flexible than most other faculty members. He spent much of the day in his office, attending to countless needs that arose throughout the school, but generally welcomed me to join him whatever he did. I also felt that his position of authority lent my presence in the school a certain legitimacy; insomuch as I was near him, I was not a total outsider.

The interviews were semi-structured, one-on-one, and almost always conducted in private. The only exceptions here were my conversations with two former students, both of which were set up by the dean and conducted in his office, and a conversation with Miss Kessler during lunch, when we shared the room with a handful of kids serving detention.[36] All interviews were intended to have, in Spikard's (2007) terms, both *hermeneutic* and *explanatory* elements. In *hermeneutic* interviewing, the researcher tries to depict participants' accounts from their own perspectives, "portraying people's worlds as if from the inside" (p. 127). With an *explanatory* agenda, on the other hand, the researcher seeks to detect or reveal patterns within or interpretations of participants' stories that those participants have not themselves reported. I find that both approaches are valuable, and in fact complement one another, together offering a wider and potentially richer interpretive range of the same topic than would be possible with either in isolation.

Sectarian Affiliation

Prior to my research I was already acquainted with three participants. One was Omar, formerly a teacher and member of the TIS board of directors, who was no longer

affiliated with the school but still attended Friday prayers at its mosque, and visited some other days besides. Another was Rabia, a current teacher mentioned above. I had met these participants during a visit to the Batin al-Haqq Study Circle months before visiting TIS, and had grown friendly with both. The third participant I had met was Musa Ahmed, current dean of the school. Rabia had introduced me to him when she found out about my academic interests, and it was ultimately him who facilitated my entry into the school. This fact undoubtedly impacted my findings, as I ended up with more data on each of the three of them than most other TIS community members, both in interview transcripts and field notes. Omar and Rabia were the only two Sufis of the 19 Tafsir participants,[37] which puts them at an 11% minority; and because, according to Rabia, there were no other Sufis affiliated with the school, I assume they constitute an even smaller minority than this number suggests. Given this fact, it may appear in the pages that follow that Sufism receives a disproportionate amount of attention. There are several justifications for this. First, it was never my intention to provide representation in proportion to population. My hope is to explore the variety of belief and practice possible within Islam at TIS, not merely to describe the paradigmatic or typical believer. In this respect, it actually made more sense to focus on the views of the outliers, regardless of their number, the unconventional believers whose traditions were at times marginalized, silenced, or denigrated.

Salafis might also fit this description, but less so at Tafsir. They were also outside of the mainstream at the school and actively marginalized in certain respects, but hardly silenced in any respect I observed. For the same reasons just listed, they too will receive more attention than their numbers might seem to warrant. Of my 20 participants, two straightforwardly identified as Salafi, while two others aligned themselves indirectly with

this label. Several other Salafis—including parents, a former teacher, and a community member with no official connection to the school—factor heavily into my analysis, but were not themselves participants. My data on them is entirely second-hand, a limitation worth bearing in mind. While Salafis only constitute between 10-20% of my participants (depending on how exclusively I define the term), they are a higher percentage of the 'characters' represented in the data than these figures would suggest. That is, several Salafis are featured in my study without having participated in it, while numerous non-Salafi Muslims technically participated in the study but do not factor prominently into my report.

<p align="center">Data Organization and Selection</p>

I organized my findings around prominent vignettes, i.e., stories or experiences from my time at TIS which shed an analytically useful light on my research questions. These vignettes might be described as "critical incidents," insofar as they appeared to me "indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures" (Tripp, cited in Angelides, 2001, p. 431). I do not present the data chronologically or consistently separated according to individual participants. Though certain subchapters deal more densely with one sect or community member or another, the partitions are seldom rigid. The paper unfolds as a series of conversations and observations, interactions and reflections, sermons and stories that help to illuminate some facet of my research interests. I described these vignettes, or critical incidents, in my findings chapters, in an order that seemed to flow logically and clearly, while trying to maintain some literary or narrative quality to the writing. I began by choosing which scenes to include based on the quality of my experiences

conducting the research, in a chiefly intuitive manner, which often corresponded to how engaged or inspired I felt by the events of a given day. After some visits, I left the school detached and bored, wondering with hazy frustration whether I could ever write a coherent paper about TIS. Other days I walked out with my heart pounding, my mind racing, reeling at the day's events, convinced I would have enough data for a half-dozen dissertations. Certain encounters on these days were the phenomenological equivalent of a highlighted passage of text in a novel; they stood out, brighter than the rest, impossible for me not to notice. They had a heightened intensity even as fleeting, momentary experiences, and maintained a glowing clarity in my memory. Most importantly for my current purposes, I could write about these encounters in a way that felt meaningful and sincere. So I did. Once these most prominent vignettes were in place, I used the coding schemas constructed in ATLAS.ti, described below, to fill in supplemental data.

The radiant quality I sensed in these interactions was, of course, deeply subjective. I do not presume they were in any objective sense more luminous or important than other events that I chose to exclude (or failed to notice altogether); they appeared that way to me. My personal interests, priorities, and commitments brought me to Tafsir in the first place, shaped the questions I brought to its members, influenced my sense of which encounters were worth reporting. This did not strike me as a shortcoming of my research, as my paradigm has been informed by postmodern and feminist insights which, in Stacey's (1988) terms, emphasize "an awareness that ethnographic writing is not cultural reportage, but cultural construction and always a construction of self as well as of the other" (p. 24). My own study could be described as a form of "intuitive inquiry" (Anderson, 2004), characterized largely by "an epistemology of the heart that joins intuition

to intellectual precision in a hermeneutical process of interpretation" (p. 308). This style of inquiry affects not only the analysis process, but the initial choice of research focus. "Intuitive researchers," according to Anderson (2004), "explore topics that claim their enthusiasm, honor their own life experiences as sources of inspiration, and invite the research process to transform not only their understanding of the topic but their lives" (p. 308).

Hand in Hand: Researcher Positionality

> FATIMAH: Are you Muslim?
> AARON: Well, my mom taught me that when someone asks if you're a Muslim, say "Insha'Allah. Only God knows." So that's what I try to do to play it safe, because I don't really know, ultimately, what I am. But I'm trying to learn more, and to be open and ask God to help me to know the truth.
> FATIMAH: Absolutely.
> AARON: So that's part of why I'm here, in a sense. I mean, it's an academic project. I'm also, like, studying for my school, but it's also—
> FATIMAH: Hand in hand.

There are two points I'd like to briefly clarify here: First, what are these prejudices just mentioned? An exhaustive list would be exhausting (and probably impossible), but I can at least mention a few facts about myself relevant to this study. I have an eclectic religious background that helps explain my interest in Islam. My mother and father were raised Episcopalian and Jewish, respectively, and found common inspiration in the teachings of the Sufi shaikh Pir Batin al-Haqq. My mother abandoned the church and embraced many common Islamic practices, including the salat prayer, the Ramadan fast, wearing hijab, and studying Arabic and Quranic recitation. My father, while accepting Batin al-Haqq's teachings and embracing Sufism, still identified as Jewish until his death in 2010. I grew up with Hanukkah, Christmas, and Eid celebrations, and have myself

identified at different points with Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I no longer exclusively place myself in any of these categories, but search instead for the common ground of all three (and whatever other religious and moral traditions I'm exposed to), hoping to take the best from each while discarding whatever divisive or oppressive elements. My central concerns in life are informed by values shared by all three traditions—love, compassion, gratitude, humility, kindness, mercy—and have taken from each a firm faith in the goodness, oneness, and unrepresentability of reality, i.e., of that which is called YHWH, G-d, Allah. The son of a Muslim and a Jew, I have a Buddhist uncle and a Christian wife, while my two best friends are a Hindu and an atheist. I also have a baby daughter who, as far as I know, has no hardened ideological affiliation—in this respect I hope to become more like her. I don't know what to call myself, but it's no mystery why I look for common ground in belief systems that appear dissimilar. As hooks (1994) famously observes, "it is not easy to name our pain, to theorize from that location" (p. 74). My own theorizing is informed by an acute pain accompanying the religious and ideological divisions within my own family and immediate community, and a deep sorrow in the face of widespread interpretations of Islam which are used to justify violence and oppression.

As the focus of my paper suggests, in addition to searching for common ground among disparate groups, I'm also inclined to seek the inverse: that is, the ideological diversity within groups that appear in this respect homogenous. I should also admit, in light of my eclectic background and immediate circle, my personal aversion to those who claim a monopoly on truth. My affection for religion carries with it a dread fascination with dogmatic arrogance, which undoubtedly drew me to certain participants whose views seemed especially conducive to cultivating or combating religious plurality. In

mentioning all this, I simply mean to admit that the sectarian diversity at TIS, while undeniably relevant to the school, surely appeared to me especially salient given my foregoing disposition. Again, inspired by feminist epistemology, I have embraced the unique subjective perspective from which my biography allows me to approach my research. In doing so, I align myself with those who have, in Harding's (1991) terms, "claimed the historical realities of our lives as the places from which our thought and politics not only *do* begin, but also *should* begin" (p. 100).

The second point I wanted to clarify concerns the importance of the interactional dimension of the data collection process. I do not consider the data I present as things I simply stumbled upon, as static pieces of information that lay waiting for me to find them; or to the contrary extreme, as something I extravagantly manufactured or projected onto the site, as the straightforward result of the disposition just described. I view them instead as verbal fragments of countless complex interactions shaped by the norms of the specific field in which they occurred, all within a social world jointly constructed and perpetually reconstructed by all those participating in it. The data emerged through relationships developed over time, through the coming together of my perspectives and those of TIS community members. In Gadamer's (1975/2006) terms, the understandings that developed throughout my study could be seen as the outgrowth of many "fusions of horizons," the intermingling and partial merging of my own scope of vision and those of other[38] participants. In light of this, the data collection process appears, as Ellis & Berger's (2003) observe, as "less a conduit of information from informants to researchers that represents how things are, and more a sea swell of meaning making in which researchers connect their own experiences to those of others" (p. 471).

Certain vignettes included below are stories recounted to me of events that took place before I visited the school or began my research. Such events, of course, were not influenced by my presence at TIS, do not bear my interactional fingerprints. Even these, however, were told *to me* in a particular way, and as responses to specific questions or subtle gestures which I brought to the conversation, or in light of what various participants might have known or assumed about my beliefs, given their assorted impressions of me. In other words, I assume that, though I did not impact the events themselves, I did influence which stories were recounted, and how. For example, when one participant indignantly shared the vignette of a Salafi Muslim censoring a book affiliated with Sufism at Tafsir, he had reason to expect—both from our history and my immediate reactions— that I sympathized with his indignation, and he could present the story accordingly. (Also, to state the obvious: that I include *this* story while excluding others, and frame it in whatever way, reveals a formative involvement on my part). Meanwhile, other vignettes I include are not second-hand accounts of prior events passed on to me, but first-hand experiences that emerged through my relationships with Tafsir community members. For example, perhaps the single most formative moment in my study came after a conversation with a Salafi Muslim, when the teacher Rabia advised me to keep my Sufism a secret from him and other like-minded believers. It's safe to assume that she wouldn't have issued the same warning to a researcher with no active Sufism to speak of. This encounter, born so much of my subjectivity, brought to light a specific dynamic of power and hegemony at the school that would not have been visible to a more personally detached researcher. Furthermore, my own uncommon position as a student of Sufi teachings surely

encouraged Rabia to speak openly to me about her own beliefs, and to invite me to intimate religious gatherings which were unknown to the other community members.[39]

Notes on Data Analysis

Needless to say, my biography influenced not only what data I collected, but my analysis as well. This analysis was not an isolated process, neatly segregated from the remainder of my study. Rather, it was integrated throughout the project, underway in the midst of its numerous phases, during literature review, data collection, and conversations with peers, committee members, and especially my adviser. According to Hammersley & Atkinson (2007), this is the "central injunction of grounded theorizing," namely "that there should be a constant interplay between data and ideas throughout the research process" (p. 158). According to Horvat (2013), analysis is already at play before the data collection even begins, underway "when you first pick a site or a topic of interest for your study" (p. 106). My experiences confirmed this. I chose to conduct research at Tafsir with an incipient opinion about the site itself, with specific beliefs about Islam, already thinking about what I would find and how I could write about it. In this sense, I could even say that my analysis of this study's eventual topic was underway years before I came to grad school, from the moment I began thinking seriously about Islam and its various forms.

While I was remarkably ignorant about some of these forms when I began my research, I had for years practiced several mainstream Sunnī rituals, such as the 5 daily salat prayers and the Ramadan fast. I had also pursued the Sufi path in the tradition of the *Qadiri* tariqa for over 7 years, at times with considerable zeal—having come to Temple, as a matter of fact, in obedience to my shaikh's direction—and so had already begun to

think on the relationship between Sufism and mainstream Islam. While I was not, of course, literally analyzing Tafsir data at that point, I was undeniably forming thought patterns, emotional associations, and personal commitments that would later come to bear on this study. During those years, my current research topics existed in anonymous form, in a vague kind of holding pattern: I now suppose I was already engaging a decade ago in hypothetical, incipient analyses of empty ideological spaces my actual data would later fill.[40]

Of course, I also engaged in more easily recognizable forms of relatively discrete data analysis. I originally planned to transcribe field notes and produce a brief analytic memo once a week, and to write a longer memo every three weeks. According to Maxwell (2005), such memos can serve "not only capture [a researcher's] thinking about [his or her] data, but also facilitate such thinking" (p. 96). In actuality, though I did try, I was not so regular in producing these. During more exciting periods of data collection I kept to or exceeded this schedule, while other times over a month would pass without my writing a single memo.[41] My transcription schedule was also irregular, typically consisting of spontaneous, concentrated bursts rather than routine, weekly installments. I reviewed transcripts of interviews as they materialized, searching for overarching themes and trends in participants' experiences or perspectives. I also searched (with surprising success) for exceptions, anomalies, and "disconfirming evidence" (Erickson, cited in Morrow, 2006), data that challenged my preconceived or emerging notions and complicated otherwise harmonious, widely articulated narratives. This process was highly iterative. The data I collected, of course, directly informed my analysis; but my ongoing analysis likewise guided data gathering processes, helping me to more astutely observe, to effec-

tively reassess my interview protocol, reformulate my research question, and to sharpen my overall focus.

Codes and Code Families

All interview transcripts, field notes, and relevant organizational documents (containing, for example, dress codes, disciplinary policies, school schedules and monthly calendars) were uploaded and compiled into a single ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis hermeneutical unit. I began with an open coding process, assigning codes according to important themes. At first, these codes were precise or rarefied to a fault, resulting in over 120 separate labels. After consolidating many of these, I was still left with over 80, which felt excessive and maybe unnecessary. As new data emerged, I unfailingly added new codes during subsequent coding sessions, and the number eventually crept up again into the triple digits. This felt like an ongoing battle, trying to keep my coding scheme within manageable proportions (i.e., fewer labels), while still leaving numerous avenues of analysis open by having access to a wider range of conceptually organized data groupings. In the end, I found the best of both worlds in the use of "code families," clusters of thematically grouped labels that helped organize topical approaches and analytical possibilities. I ended up with five such families, which were as follows (numbers indicating the quantity of codes found within each grouping): *Freedom & Obedience* (17), *Authority/Power* (14), *Discipline & Punishment* (18), *Interpretation/Orthodoxy* (22), and *Islam & 'the West'* (25).

Though this last family contained the highest number of codes, it is the theme I address least in my writing. There are two reasons for this. The first is that a large portion

of the data that emerged on this subject was the direct result of questions I asked, not anything that participants themselves brought up. These questions were largely based on prepackaged notions, either my own or from authors I had read, and came to feel more akin to imposition than inquiry. The second is that these notions, "Islam" and "the West," are precariously abstract concepts, constructions useful at times, but dangerous in how easily they're confused with the realities they're purported to describe. Building on such a framework runs the risk of reifying oppositions I find largely illusory, and shoring up essentialized pocket-caricatures of unthinkably complex socio-historical phenomena. I considered proceeding with this Islam/Western dichotomy in hopes of calling it into question, but this seemed too broadly ambitious for a writer in my position, and in any case not the most pertinent story I found at Tafsir.

The first three code families listed were born of my original framework which foregrounded the relationship between freedom, authority, and discipline. While I did not abandon this triadic structure altogether, it became less the topic of my paper than an analytical lens through which I view my revamped focus. This is in part for reasons mentioned above (basically, that I came to prefer addressing concerns voiced by participants over sticking to my pre-established plan), but also because these topics are each so far-reaching that I feared spreading myself too thin. For example, the "Freedom & Obedience" family contained such divergent codes as *free will, critical thinking, empowerment, self/ego,* and *submission.* The second family, "Authority/Power," included labels like *knowledge, morality, surveillance, politics,* and *religious leaders.* The third, "Discipline & Punishment," contained such codes as *violence, hell, Sharī'a, bidah,* and *classroom management.*[42] Any one of these groups, had I focused on it alone, easily included

enough content for its own research project; trying to fit all these topics into one paper would likely result in a broad discussion of inadequate depth. And so it was the fourth family, "Interpretation/Orthodoxy," that emerged as the most appropriate and manageable focus for my purposes. It developed in a spontaneous way from the concerns of participants themselves, and yet early enough in the study to permit me to explore it in adequate depth.[43] It proved narrow enough to allow ample attention for the topics addressed, and complex enough to invite multifaceted, richly meaningful analysis. The specific codes grouped in this family are displayed in Table 1 below, along with the number of times each appeared in my data.[44]

Table 1: Codes within "Interpretation/Orthodoxy" Family
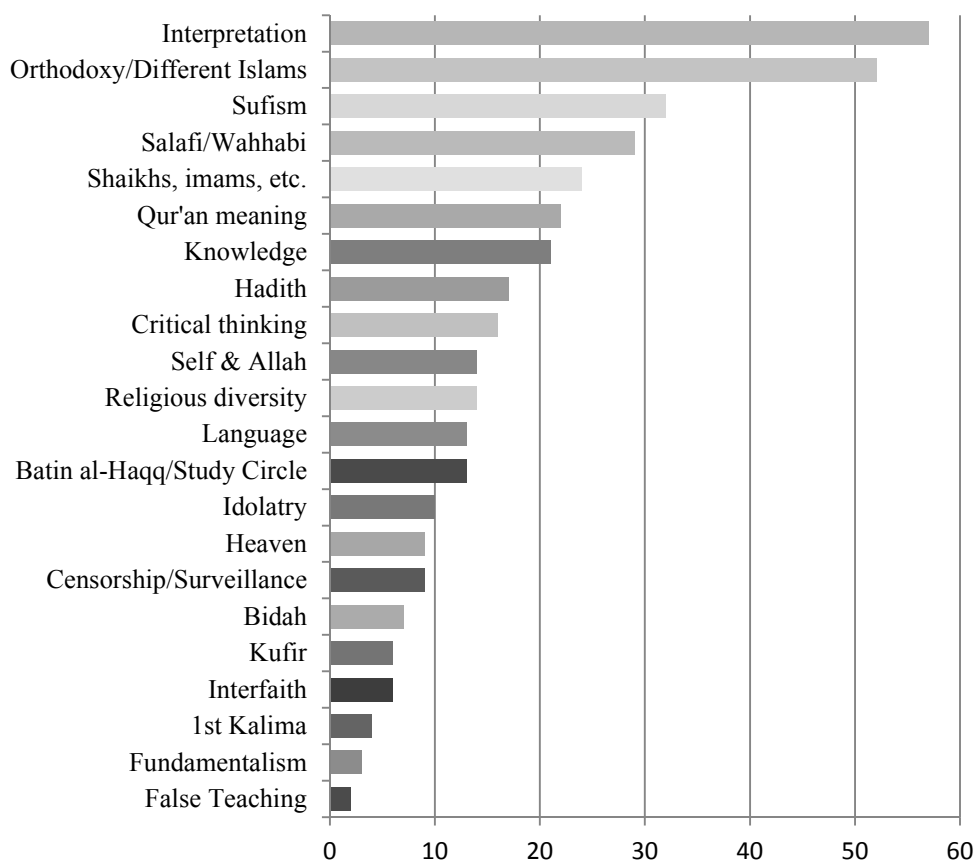
Confidentiality

To secure participants' confidentiality, all data was recorded using pseudonyms, and stored on a computer without Internet connection that was password protected. While I took care not to distort what seemed to me most important about my findings, much of the identifiable information was omitted or changed to avoid any individual or location from being identifiable to readers. I audio recorded all interviews, transcribed and coded them myself. The transcripts were kept on a flash drive in a locked filing cabinet in my home, along with the audio files. The anonymity of all participants has been maintained in all public texts. No data concerning participants was shared with any other participants, or with anyone else, without my having taken the aforementioned precautions to protect confidentiality. Admittedly, some potential readers of my final report who are familiar with the school may be able to recognize certain participants, efforts to protect anonymity notwithstanding. For example, if I include quotes from "an administrator," teachers may be able to accurately infer which administrator I'm referring to, despite the use of pseudonyms or other attempts to disguise her or his identity. One reason for this is that the school is relatively small, so readers may recognize a participant's views or idiosyncrasies. To insure that this possibility does not harm any subjects, I encouraged them to bear it in mind while participating, and offered to omit anything they shared from my final report, should they prefer as much. I also did my best to keep participants updated on the changes to my study's focus, which felt crucial insofar as my central themes deviated from those described on the initial consent forms. I came to view the concept of informed consent as an unfolding process—less a signature obtained on a given day than an ongoing conversation and general position of proactive transparency. No participants

withdrew their consent at any time, but I remained willing to respect their decision had they done so.

Notes on Paradigm

"A picture held us captive."
−Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 1953

As suggested above, my thinking about this project is indebted to the "postmodern turn," which according to Lincoln, Lynham and Guba (2010), "suggests that no method can deliver on ultimate truth" (p. 120). Truth is pluralized (and lowercase), and all truths are partial, locally situated, and hermeneutically infused. Likewise, "realities" are subjective, socially constructed, open to interpretation and re-interpretation. The question of strict validity, so central to positivistic research, becomes somewhat obsolete, as there is no single, objective standard of reality against which to compare findings; it gives way to concepts like "authenticity" and "trustworthiness," i.e., is the research sincere and inclusive and meaningful, and should we act on it? The researcher, no longer the detached observer discovering objective facts or laws, is a "passionate participant" in a co-creative process, facilitating "multivoice reconstruction" (p. 99) in the outcomes. This multitude can refer to both (a) the voices of numerous participants and (b) the numerous voices of the researcher her/himself, the individual person being seen as fluid, fractional, internally divided.

This sort of thinking has undermined any hopes that 'I' would verbally express any 'true' or 'valid' conclusions below.[45] I don't deliberately embrace postmodern thought wholesale, but have taken it in with my milk piecemeal; it's in my bones now, deteriorating like a cancer long-embedded certainties, replacing the rugged stone founda-

tions of my old epistemological house with ever-shifting sands. I don't deliberately reject the existence of an "ultimate truth," nor would I assert that "no method can deliver" on it; I simply don't know, or know how I could know. But even if such a truth does exist, I wouldn't presume that language could communicate it with immaculate fidelity. The central picture that has held me captive was just this: that words directly *mean* things, that language effectively describes and essentially *corresponds to* the world. In short, I once felt that language existed somehow as separate from or above of our lived experiences, mysteriously capable of representing reality in an immediate and accurate way. Many hardships followed from this tacit assumption, and in recent years I've tried to let it go in place of a more modest view: that language is primarily *something we do*, a tool that accomplishes things in daily life, whose meanings are entirely dependent on the social contexts in which it is used. People employ words like "Allah" or "Islam" in countless settings to express or explain with relative success a vast range of commitments, beliefs, or practices. For my purposes, this is sufficient. So rather than wondering "does Allah actually exist?" or "who was Muhammad, really?" I am more concerned here with what those words mean to a given participant, what he or she does with these words, or hopes to accomplish by using them. I have no intention of deciding on or advocating one correct understanding of these concepts, or any one approach to religious interpretation; nor do I expect, as I trust will be obvious, to discover anything essentially accurate about a monolithic Islam or a universal narrative of 'Muslim experience.' My primary hopes are to the contrary: to help unravel popular generalizations which presuppose their existence.

CHAPTER 4:

THERE'S GLORY FOR YOU!

Introduction

Throughout my 18 months at Tafsir Islamic School, I kept a low profile due to perennial fears of imposing. Most of my time was spent quietly observing teachers and students in classrooms, offices or hallways. I listened to the imam's weekly khutbas, periodic disciplinarian lectures, and countless daily informal conversations. I passed innumerable peaceful hours immersed in library books and religious pamphlets, official school policy documents, and the ever-revolving selection of student writings on teachers' bulletin boards. Come lunchtime I usually wandered off alone, ordering the same meal every day, a spicy falafel sandwich and a small bottle of guava nectar, savoring the tastes and smells of the nearby market while practicing the Arabic alphabet. I treaded lightly whenever possible, playing chess when challenged, praying when prompted, speaking when spoken to.

Of course I had plenty of interviews to conduct, so I needed to assert myself now and again. Typically on these occasions, I tiptoed sheepishly to a teacher's desk and clumsily made my request for an hour or so of their time. In other instances, I took the initiative to try to pitch in around the school in some modest respect or another, making myself available as a kind of all-purpose volunteer. This often placed me in the rather non-descript roles of hall monitor, cafeteria and recess patrolman, or after-school bus pick up security guard. Other responsibilities were more tangible and janitorial: sweeping and mopping the auditorium following a party, scrubbing the carpet after the rare student

vomiting incident, cleaning the bathrooms after the not at all rare student-urinates-with-apparently-no-concept-that-urine-belongs-in-a-toilet incident. In all honesty, these were some of my happiest moments, confident as I was that my presence at the school was making at least something a bit nicer.

I also took on a number of educational duties, some of which I was better qualified for than others. Teaching science and math from elementary textbooks, for example, was simple enough, while my unplanned foray into 5th grade Islamic studies instruction was downright embarrassing. A few of these jobs were entirely sporadic, like the occasional substitute teaching role or some classroom assistant task entrusted to me during my observations. Other responsibilities were more consistent, such as grammar lessons to a small group of struggling 3rd grade boys or my role as playwriting consultant for the Friday afternoon middle school drama club. By far my most regular commitment, however, was to one-on-one English and Social Studies tutoring sessions with Yonca, an 8th grade student who was new to the school, having recently emigrated with her father from Chechnya.

During these sessions, we typically moved slowly through works assigned to her class, stopping periodically to discuss their meanings. Whether reading a textbook chapter on westward U.S. expansion, a handout on the history of organized labor, or a chapter of the Great Gatsby, Yonca struggled with individual vocabulary words and overall comprehension of the more abstract content. Sensing her frustration, I asked the dean's advice, who suggested I use an ESOL textbook, directing me to the 2nd floor storage closet. The book I found there, whose writings Yonca ended up liking much more than F. Scott Fitzgerald's, had on its cover a drawing of the famous Lewis Carroll scene where Alice

converses with the wall-perched Humpty Dumpty. This apparently arbitrary detail—which I barely noticed at first—developed for me a serendipitous quality, as its subject matter became a loose organizing image for my study.

There are two central reasons for this, the first of which concerns the present chapter. The second pertains to the next, and will be addressed later, but for now, consider the following passage from Carroll (1897) himself, an excerpt from the frustrated Alice's dialogue with the fantastic egg:

> "There's glory for you!"
> "I don't know what you mean by 'glory,' " Alice said.
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!' "
> "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.
> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all." (p. 123).

Parrot-Phrasing, Endless Meanings

One afternoon in November, I was out for a walk on the sidewalk just beyond the chain link fence that runs the perimeter of the parking lot of Tafsir Islamic School (TIS). I was joined by Omar, a former teacher there who went on to serve on the board of directors until his retirement in 2013. He was a coarse but good-humored man with a dark mustache and tortoise-shell glasses, who interacted with the students and faculty of his former place of employment school with a sharp-edged affection. We were about halfway between the soccer field, where some of the upper grade boys were kicking a ball around, and the small cluster of food carts across the street from the school where students con-

gregate at lunchtime. Having recently grown interested in the variety of religious belief at

TIS, I steered our conversation toward the topic of Quranic interpretation. He launched

earnestly into a story from Abdul-Qadir Jilani's book, *Secret of Secrets*:

> There are two scholars that went to hear Jilani talk, and he was speaking
> about one particular verse in the Qur'ān. I don't remember which verse it
> was. And so, after the 1st interpretation, they both turn to each other and
> say "yeah, I know that understanding." And then the 2nd meaning, "Oh
> yeah, I know that, too." They got to the 12th meaning, "Oh yeah, I know
> that one, too." And then the 13th meaning, didn't know, 14—it went up to
> 48 different meanings. This one verse. It just blew their minds.

Even those who have studied the Qur'ān deeply enough to find a dozen meanings from a

single verse have not exhausted its potential. Given this abundance of interpretation,

Omar seemed all the more disheartened by schools that teach memorization of the scrip-

tures without emphasizing any understanding at all. He had recently taken a trip to a "Ha-

fiz[46] school" in upstate New York, and was astonished to meet students—some as young

as 14—who had reached this extraordinary milestone. While this was the exception,

many students were able to recite remarkably long passages from memory. However,

when asked if they understood what they were reciting, the teacher said no, that students

wouldn't learn that until after they'd memorized the entire book. Omar was dismayed,

comparing it to TIS's approach to Quranic instruction:

> What is this? This is crazy. You know, I just don't see the value. But down
> here, what they have here Tuesdays and Thursdays, he teaches, they teach
> the meaning. They talk about what it means. It's not just parrots memoriz-
> ing. Um, and the teachers now, when they're teaching the Qur'ān here,[47]
> they talk about what these words mean here. It's not just parrot-phrasing.

Omar credited this parrot metaphor to his own teacher, Pir Batin al-Haqq, who he

claimed was likewise unimpressed by rote memorization: "Pir Batin would say, 'Sorry

Charlie. That's not where it's at.'" While there was a Saturday Qur'ān class at TIS whose

content Omar was unaware of, he stressed the fact that all of the courses taught at Tafsir throughout the school week emphasized student comprehension. This included both the classes taught by TIS teachers throughout the school day, and the extracurricular lessons offered after school hours on Mondays and Wednesdays. What was important to Omar was clearly not the students' capacity for mindless recitation, but their ability to find meaning in the words they recite.

Continuing to cite Batin al-Haqq's teachings, he claimed that each letter of the Qur'ān has thousands of meanings, and that each verse has infinite interpretive possibilities. Here, he seemed to suggest both that the Qur'ān in a sense contains all these meanings within itself, and that we as readers will bring our own unique understandings to the text. Furthermore, these understandings change over time: "The way you look at something," he explained, "it can change. I mean, every person. You can look at the same verse every day and you'll find something different in it." As we develop as human beings, our interpretations of the scriptures will likewise transform, making our interaction with the revelation active, dynamic, and individualized.

> Naturally, when you look at something, you're not looking at it with the same experiences, the same understandings, the same set of preconditioned ideas. You're a totally different person, every single time you look at the Qur'ān you're a different person … Something's happened. People you talk to, experiences you've had, whatever. So naturally, there are endless meanings to every verse. That's how I interpret what he said.

Far from having a single, immutable message, the Qur'ān has a multitude of messages in differing contexts, meanings which vary according to who is reading it, and at what point in their life. These variations are not neatly isolated from one individual to another, but develop fluidly through interactions between individuals in ever-changing social contexts. Furthermore, Batin al-Haqq's teachings about the abundance of Quranic meanings

are themselves open to different interpretations, as Omar suggests by acknowledging his own subjective role in sharing those teachings.

Lost in Translation?

To make matters more complex, there are numerous variations of the Qur'ān in its original language (Al-Naseirat, 2012), and dozens of translations of it into English alone. Most members of the TIS community are not fluent speakers of Arabic, and scriptures are typically displayed throughout the school (e.g., on posters, bulletin boards, school calendars) in English. While Arabic speaking Muslims might take interest in the differences between Qur'ān translations, the issue is perhaps most vital to those not fluent in the Prophet's native tongue. Since each of these translations is a particular individual or group's rendition of the original text, it might be seen as already a step removed from Allah's original revelations. The English reader must then make meaning of this particularized meaning, is left to interpret an interpretation, to make distinct sense of something that has already been made distinct.

It comes as no surprise, then, that students at Tafsir are required to study the Qur'ān in its original language. Several participants insisted that this was the ideal way to receive the message, considering it "the speech of Allah," eternal and uncreated, "the word of God, absolutely," and "a lifestyle" in itself. It was studied in classes, recited in competitions, discussed in youth clubs, cited on school documents, quoted daily in prayer, and mentioned by practically everyone I interviewed. According to Omar, his own ignorance of Quranic Arabic had diminished his authority in the school, and constituted

his weakest point as an administrator; at least one teacher I spoke with held a similar view.

Sensing the importance the community placed on learning the Qur'ān in its original language, I began to study Arabic. This was partly prompted by my own curiosity, partly compliance with the suggestions of certain participants. One of these was Zainab, a passionate believer who immigrated from the Middle East over two decades ago. "When it comes to the Qur'ān and the Sunnah," she explained, "the best thing is to learn the language, and be able to understand it the way it came. That would be the ideal situation." I never did make much progress, beyond recognizing certain letters and sounding out short words. Even this has since faded, and in any case, I certainly never learned enough to read the scriptures with any significant understanding. Fortunately, she was sympathetic:

> I'm not saying this is easy. It's really hard. So, I guess after that, the best thing is to be able to understand some and get the rest from—don't read one; don't rely only on one source. So, if you're going to read the translation of the Qur'ān, don't rely on just one book. Just read more than one. Two, three, four, so you will get, you know, it will be a bigger picture.

Other participants expressed similar views, advised working toward learning the Qur'ān in its original form, while studying in English as an intermediate pursuit. Zainab's suggestion to consult numerous translations makes sense in light of their possible imperfections. The variety itself carries with it the potential to divide believers into factions, and so no one version should be trusted as whole-heartedly as the Arabic. Since each varies from the original in different ways, the safest approach is to compare several—like eyewitness accounts—see where they corroborate, where they differ. According to Tafsir's former board member Omar, the differences between renditions were in some cases substantial. He expressed his dissatisfaction with a comparatively recent translation

by Muhammad Taqu-ud-Din Al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, sanctioned and distributed by the Saudi government. Teachers used this version for years in Tafsir classrooms, with TIS donating copies *en masse* to prisons in the surrounding area for distribution to incarcerated Muslims and seekers alike. However, over time Omar had grown uncomfortable with the divisive tone he sensed in the phrasing of certain passages. In the Hilali-Khan version, he explained, "wherever you see the word 'believer,' it'll put in parenthesis 'Muslim.'" Elsewhere the translators insert a comparably disputable explanation of the term "ummah," describing in brackets the community of believers as "[Sharia or religion (Islamic Monotheism)]." He compared this with the Muhammad Asad translation, a slightly older version that contains no such parenthetical commentaries.

Omar brought this to TIS principal Ramzi Malik's attention and convinced him to limit the organization's use of the Hilali-Khan translation in the school and prison outreach, and to increase its use of the Asad version. Of course, either edition can be interpreted in a way that fosters division, but in Omar's view, the former promotes separatism while the latter emphasizes unity. In the Asad translation, "A believer is a believer. Well, who's a believer? Well, it says in the 2nd Surah, 177th verse that a believer is one who practices righteousness." Here, our standing with Allah depends not on religious group affiliation, but on the virtue of our personal conduct. This understanding leaves the gates of *Jannah* potentially open to non-Muslims, undermining the exclusionary implications of Hilali and Khan's commentary. Though Omar acknowledged that the Hilali-Khan version was respected by the community at large, and that some copies of it were still in use at TIS, he was glad to have played a part in replacing many of them with copies of the Asad translation.

During his time at Tafsir, Omar had struggled against religious divisiveness on several fronts. In addition to the translation issue, parochial teachings had surfaced in TIS's religious studies program. According to Omar, prominent Saudi book publishers export a harsh, intolerant theology, propagating stringent interpretations of the Qur'ān and exclusionary version of the faith. "The kind of materials they put out," he explained solemnly, "the educational materials, I had to watch out for." He offered the example of textbooks the school once used "in which the author said, very plainly, that if you were not a Muslim you were going to hell. So I had to take them out of the curriculum." Such experiences prompted him to be more vigilant when screening potential Islamic studies texts, and to attempt to provide alternative interpretations to Tafsir students. However, at times these efforts were themselves met with resistance, as we'll see below.

The issue of who might be admitted into heaven was clearly important to not only Omar, but also dean Musa Ahmed. The latter seemed particularly concerned with relations between Muslims, Jews, and Christians, and spoke with pride of his school's interfaith "credentials." The dean sponsored *The Open Space*, an interfaith group at Tafsir. His boss, principal Ramzi Malik, had served on the city's human relations board, and has worked closely with prominent Jewish civil rights organizations to combat religious discrimination. For years, Tafsir has been the primary organizing site for the *Midwestern Forum for Salam/Shalom*, an annual regional "public interfaith dialogue" event that includes Muslims, Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs, as well as those with no religious affiliation. The imam of the TIS mosque has participated in the forum for several years, reciting the Qur'ān and leading salat prayers in numerous venues throughout the area. In light of this, the dean paraphrased Q2:62 to justify his high regard for other

faiths: "the people closest to you are the Jews with their Torah, the Christians with their Gospel, and the Sabians … They'll get their reward in heaven."[48]

According to Musa Ahmed, those who reject the sentiment of verses such as Q2:62 (e.g., publishers of the aforementioned Saudi textbooks) consider such passages "abrogated. They no longer apply." The concept of abrogation, or *naskh*, is important for Islamic theologians, as it can be utilized to help resolve apparent contradictions in the divine sources. Sensing that Muhammad's message changed in some respects over time, Muslim scholars can nonetheless construct a single, consistent revelation by prioritizing his later teachings. To be clear: earlier, abrogated teachings were not erroneous. They were appropriate for their time, expedient for some local purpose, provisionally correct in their own context. By this logic, some Muslims can deny the present validity of Q2:62 by looking to contrary verses[49] or hadīth[50] that chronologically follow its appearance. For the dean, however, the more inclusive verses of the Qur'ān are still entirely valid; rejecting them simply indicates personal rigidity and narrow-mindedness.

A Broad View of Islam?

Musa Ahmed realized that not everyone at TIS shared his views on the relationship between Islam and other faiths. He described Waliyy, a social studies teacher they'd had the previous year, as difficult to work with, and intolerant of those whose spiritual views differ from his own. The dean was relieved to see him go, intent on learning his lesson for having hired him:

> Nobody questioned him. But we got into problems sometimes with him, because he was too strict on certain issues. But he's no longer here now. And I'll tell you, I hope we don't ever have another one like that either. We only want people who have a more broad view of Islam.

Not only was Waliyy intolerant of other faiths, he was even judgmental of fellow Muslims. During his final year, he had numerous collisions with a colleague at Tafsir, who herself was apparently not sufficiently pious for his tastes. However, according to the dean, Waliyy was only strict "in the superficial sense." He himself didn't set a good example of self-discipline for the students: "it was always like, 'do as I say, not as I do.' Because you'd find him on the telephone in class, you'd find him, you know, not really doing a good lesson." In Musa Ahmed's view this was backwards, as we should be more tolerant of others, while focusing on improving our own qualities. The dean's broad view was inclusive of other various expressions of Islam and affirming of sincere followers of other religions. He hoped that TIS's ecumenical programs would prevent legalistic attitudes and parochial mindsets, and ensure that the community would "have a nice interfaith understanding."

However, it was not only former teachers who opposed the dean's "broad view." Miss Naima, a veteran teacher from Morocco, felt ambivalent about his tolerant demeanor. On one hand, she made her respect for him quite clear, and described him in glowing terms:

> He will not blame you for anything, brother Musa Ahmed, and he will not keep anything against you. He does not think negative about anyone. No way … not just us, always he think, this person has a positive intention toward what he is doing. There's no negative intention in his mind.

However, she felt that this benevolence was imbalanced, that he was too permissive at times, and that students took advantage of this. She also opposed his inclusive attitude toward other faiths. Too many people, she complained, "combine" Muslims, Jews and Christians into the same category. "That's not correct." She mentioned this alongside

other heresies, such as venerating religious relics, praying at the graves of saints, or asking for help from Muhammad instead of Allah. "You can't come," she warned, "and say 'because I believe this,' and change something the Prophet says." By her account, viewing Jews, Christians and Muslims on equal terms is a distortion born of personal preference, and violates the *Rasool's* teachings.

Another participant, Dawoud—a Muslim from the *Salafi* tradition—expressed a similar sentiment in even stronger terms. A Caucasian in his early forties with a thick, dark beard, he was wore a cotton skull cap and a matching collared jubba, its bottom seam cropped well above his ankles. He was talkative, articulate, and engaging. With a thick local accent, he earnestly discussed his faith with unwavering conviction, maintaining steady eye contact while gesturing actively with his hands: "I love you for the sake of Allah," he told me. "Because Allah said to. If you was to rebel against Allah and become a *kafir*,[51] I'd hate you for the sake of Allah." I was initially alarmed by this, fearing that he might have already hated me without realizing it. He appeared to assume—like so many others at first—that I was *mu'min*, among the faithful. I generally greeted him, as with practically everyone at Tafsir, with *as-salamu 'alaykum,* a standard Muslim gesture of peace. I also wore a white knit kufi and a beard at the time, which made me look right at home there. I didn't give him cause to suspect that I may actually be a kafir (as I myself don't know), or let on that I identify as much with Christianity as I do with Islam. Fortunately, he tempered his statement, clarifying, "Not *hate*, in like, I'ma throw shit, throw stuff at you, beat you up. No. I hate the action of you becoming Christian, because it goes against being a Muslim." A perhaps even more disturbing expression of this sentiment or religious divisiveness came years before my field work, in the fall of 2001. The

school had organized a memorial art project for the victims of the September 11th attacks, in which students and faculty alike participated. As one teacher recalled with apparent consternation, the following day a Salafi mother approached Musa Ahmed outside in the parking lot and criticized him for the ceremony. In harsh, accusatory tones she asked, "'Did you do this? I never would have sent my children here if I would have known.' She called them all *kuffār*." For this woman, the non-Muslim victims of the attacks were presumably of a fundamentally lesser worth than Muslims, not deserving of the memorial.

These are the most dramatic examples I encountered, and can best be understood as exceptions to the otherwise amiable environment at the school. However, I occasionally sensed that other members of the TIS community felt likewise distant from Musa Ahmed's ideal of Abrahamic unity. One of the middle school teachers, Basira, shared that she'd heard "the students express hate towards Jewish people." However, the reasons were different than those Dawoud expressed; Basira attributed this primarily to their experiences as victims of discrimination and aggression:

> See, we have a lot of Palestinians in this school, and a lot of them go back and forth [between the U.S. and Palestine]. We actually had one of the students who recently went—not this summer, but the summer before last year—she had a gun pointed in her face at a checkpoint.

One of her classmates had a similar story, if slightly less dramatic: while visiting Israel/Palestine, her family was riding on a bus that crossed a security checkpoint. The Israeli authorities separated her family, refusing passage to the Palestinian nationals, while letting in those with U.S. passports. "They had to go a really long way to get to point 'A'," Basira explained sympathetically, "while the other family, because they had that pass, they were, you know, they got there right away."

In both cases, I sensed an important distinction between the Palestinian students' feelings and Dawoud's attitude toward Muslims who convert to Christianity. For Dawoud, the animosity was a religious duty, the logical result of his interpretation of Islam, hatred on principle. Meanwhile, the students' anger was rooted in personal encounters, first hand experiences with particular people, which they then generalized to Jews at large. It was perhaps born of interpretation, but of a different kind: not of scripture or Hadīth, but of direct, personal experiences in the tangible worlds they inhabit. These worlds are neither universal nor absolute, but individualized and ever-changing, and therefore subject to question. In light of this difference, Basira was able to reason with her students, to ameliorate their hostilities:

> Okay, you're not mad at every Jewish person you meet. You're angry at those people who feel this way towards your people, and it's not everybody. And then also, in the same token you have to understand that maybe some of your people aren't doing everything that they should probably do, so it's causing things to keep going, instead of a solution being found.

I interpreted "your people" as either Palestinians in particular or Muslims at large. In either of these cases, she could point to in-group shortcomings—e.g., hatred, bigotry, acts of violence—that might exacerbate or perpetuate the Israeli use of surveillance and force. Like Musa Ahmed, Basira seemed to find greater value in seeking out the faults within oneself, or in this case, the group with which one identifies, rather than the Other. She also felt it was important to learn about the history and plight of the Israeli people, to understand their struggles, which could help to "understand more, um, about that other person, so you're less likely to make a judgment, or less likely to discriminate against them." Here, students can question their views, think critically about the negative emotions associated with their experiences, and potentially draw new conclusions. In Dawoud's view,

inter-religious hatred is mandated by God, embodied by the Prophet, legitimized in scrip-

ture. Such rancor is built on ideologically petrified foundations, more difficult to interro-

gate, let alone dislodge.

A Drop of Water in an Ocean

Fortunately, as we have already seen, Dawoud's understanding of this is entirely

contestable. In fact, I sensed he was in the minority, in part based on a conversation with

a former Tafsir student named Sulayman.[52] He was currently a student in a nearby uni-

versity, and active in the Muslim Students Association (MSA) and Students for Justice in

Palestine (SJP). He had been educated at Tafsir from Kindergarten through 10th grade,

and still came to the mosque there every Friday, and many other days besides. He spoke

glowingly of his time at the school, claiming that it gave him a "positive image of reli-

gion." He clearly appreciated the school's ability to incorporate religious content into the

curriculum, and the practice of daily prayer. This helped prepare him for his later high

school years, which were spent in Jordan, where much of his family still lives. As much

as he appreciated learning about his own faith tradition, he was particularly grateful for

how well Tafsir helped him to interact with those from backgrounds different than his

own:

> The teachers would always tell us, be good to other people, and never be
> prejudiced and never be racist against other people and religions, so that
> was something really awesome as well. It was important to, like, the way I
> got to talk to people, and how those experiences helped me to get to know
> more people and be more comfortable around people, and not be, like, not
> think a certain way.

For Sulayman, the instruction at Tafsir instilled a respect for diversity, and prepared him

to interact fruitfully with those of other faiths. He credits the teachers in particular for

emphasizing virtue and encouraging personal piety while remaining open to new perspectives.

One member of the TIS community who seemed to value such openness was Ghauth, a young science teacher I interviewed during his first year at Tafsir. He was unique among my study's participants in that he was both an employee and a graduate of the school. For Ghauth, being open-minded was a sign of humility, an ability to recognize our epistemological limits. Only Allah possesses complete knowledge, so we should always remain open to fuller and deeper understandings of the world. He described how this perspective affected his work:

> It makes it sometimes almost easier to teach science to a Muslim school than it is teaching to a non-Muslim school, [where] you're not allowed to mention God. So when, you know, a student asks you a question that, you know, a long time ago, maybe in the 1700s, it's OK to say "only God knows." You know, especially in school and everything, you know, "I don't know the answer to that. Only God knows." … So, you know, it's a lot easier, and I would say it's more meaningful when you're teaching.

Ghauth rejected the popular dichotomy of science and faith, finding aspects of each that contributed to his appreciation of the other. Central to both pursuits was the importance of recognizing the depths of one's ignorance, which he found important to model for the students. As a teacher, he did not see himself as a distributor of information, but a facilitator of questioning, emphasizing critical thinking and the process of learning over rote memorization. This lightened the burden of his job, as he felt less pressure to provide answers to every question raised in class, and could in a sense remain a student himself. He cited an interaction from the Qur'ān to illustrate the point:

> When Allah *Subhanna wa ta'Ala* tells Moses that, you know, like, when he went on his voyage with the man,[53] all the way at the end, he told him that, you know, all you know, Moses, he felt like he knows a lot! He felt like he was really smart. And he told him, like, "All you really know is,

you know, like a drop of water in an ocean." And that is, in reality, all we know.

For Ghauth, this scripture was a reminder of the need to remain humble with respect to what we claim to know, and a reminder to remain open to new understandings.

Curiosity and Transmission

I sensed a similar humility in Rabia, a younger middle-aged woman in her eighth year teaching at Tafsir's elementary school. Though clearly in a position of authority over her students, she viewed them as teachers, authority figures in their own right, and empowered them by respecting the knowledge they brought into the classroom. Rabia found that the best way to teach was to remain curious herself, and to demonstrate this to her students. She sketched out for me the basics of her teaching philosophy:

> As a teacher, be here to learn. I learn from the children every day. I've learned don't be hasty. I've learned to be more patient. I've learned a lot of things, and there's not a day that goes by that these children don't teach me something. So yes, you're the teacher, but still be a student. Still be a student.

This propensity to remain a student, to continue learning and growing, surfaced in her faith as well. Rather than claiming the superiority of any particular group, she acknowledged her uncertainty regarding who was closest to Allah. For Rabia, the boundaries between belief and disbelief were not drawn along explicitly religious lines. Though she was herself a Muslim, she claimed that the prayers of some Christians who pray directly to God would be acceptable, as long as they were not worshipping Jesus in the process. She also left the gates of Jannah open to those without any precise religious affiliation: "you could have no religion and still believe there's a creator, and there's one supreme Lord, and even though you're not a Muslim, God may accept that." Here, like Ghauth,

she recognized a limit to her understanding, and allowed for considerable uncertainty on a rather important issue. Meanwhile, she warned that "there's Muslims who will still enter the hellfire," a sobering reminder that "it's only God who truly can say who is and isn't a believer." By her account, those who identify as Jewish, Christian, or even those outside any established tradition could be nearer to Allah than those who claim allegiance to Islam.

Other teachers found this type of openness dangerous. For Zainab, knowledge was less something we discover with children than something we pass along to them. This was particularly true in the religious sphere, particularly among the age group that she was teaching:

> There are certain things that are not age appropriate for kids. And it's confusing for them to talk about. Like comparing between religions. At this age it's very difficult, and very confusing for kids. If you come now to some of our children and talk to them about, try to compare between Christianity and Islam, or Judaism or whatever, you can, you might confuse them, and make them think. Before you do that, you have to strengthen their ʿaqīdah first. You have to strengthen their beliefs. And then after that, you can give them whatever.

As a teacher, she felt a responsibility to transmit knowledge about Islam, to ensure that students develop a strong foundation of belief before addressing any potentially confusing issues. This foundation was built from without, transmitted across generations and accepted without doubt. While it was important for students to raise certain questions in order to learn, others ideas needed to be accepted uncritically, particularly about the existence of God and the nature of his will. Certain issues are beyond our ability to comprehend; investigating them would be fruitless at best, and potentially harmful. Tafsir students' beliefs were especially important insofar as they would be representing Islam to

the non-believing society at large. This endowed her profession with the utmost significance:

> As Muslims, what is more important than teaching our kids the religion, Islam? Allah Subhannah wa ta'Ala will not ask—yes it is important to teach our kids to become something important in the society, because they will carry Islam, because they will represent Islam. But if they don't know Islam, how valuable is that? That will be useless. Actually they will misrepresent Islam. They will be bad examples. So, if we want real Islam to be, you know, or people, you know, if we want to change the image of Muslims in this country, or in the world, we have to teach the kids Islam.

Pure Facts, A Dubious Holiday

Despite this danger of misrepresentation, it was not always easy to know what constitutes "real Islam," what exactly the correct representation of the religion would be. Zainab recognized that a variety of interpretations exist, but did so with some ambivalence. On the one hand, she acknowledged that "the Qur'ān can mean more than one thing. Like English words." This is inevitable. Since no two people are exactly the same, each will interpret any text from a unique perspective. Anything I hear "will carry some of my understanding, and my opinion as well, okay? So it has some, it's not a pure fact … It has something from me with it." Here again, the plurality of meaning correlates with the unique experiences and intentions of each individual. However, she described this plurality in somewhat negative terms, suggesting that, while individual words or phrases might be ambiguous on their own, as a whole "the Qur'ān is clear." Though we can understand it in different ways, this is often the result of our selfish desires, which might serve to cloud or undermine the scriptures' unequivocal message. In reading the Qur'ān, "whatever you want to get, you will get it … You want to take it and change it and do

whatever you want, it's up to the person." A single, clear message exists, but it turns from a "pure fact" into a subjective expression insofar as the reader alters it.

Despite the Qur'ān's overall clarity, not all interpretive disagreements are merely the result of our personal meddling. Some issues, Zainab concedes, simply are inherently ambiguous. For example, the *ulama* are sharply divided on the question of the proper Islamic response to an unjust ruler. One popular perspective holds that Muslims should obey their political leaders regardless of their conduct: "He is in charge of you, so you have to follow him, according to the Qur'ān." The opposing view holds that our obedience to an authority figure is conditional, dependent upon that figure's conduct or the principles according to which they rule. In this case, it may even be the responsibility of the faithful to resist or overthrow the leader. "There are two points," she explained, "and both have valid evidence to defend the point. So both are fine."

However, on at least one occasion, Zainab's willingness to suggest doctrinal ambiguity to students raised criticism from another teacher. Some Muslims at Tafsir believe that the *ummah* are only permitted to celebrate two holidays: *Eid al-Fitr,* which comes at the end of the holy month of *Ramadan*, and *Eid al-Adha,* which commemorates Abraham's willingness to obey God by sacrificing his son Ishmael. Sister Fatimah, a young first year teacher at Tafsir, taught this to her elementary students. Fatimah, while identifying simply as Muslim, aligned herself with the Salafi *manhaj*. Meanwhile, Sister Kabeera, who identified more straightforwardly as a Salafi, held the same view as Fatimah—that Muslims ought not to celebrate any additional holidays—which she taught to her elementary class. However, while teaching a large group Islamic studies lesson to the 1st through 6th grade students, Zainab took a more flexible position. Some Muslims, she

explained, choose to celebrate the *Maulid an-Nabi*,[54] while some do not. Either stance was acceptable.

These Islamic studies lessons took place weekly, during an assembly held for the elementary grades every Friday afternoon. With the exception of the month of *Dhu al-Hijjah*,[55] when she traveled to Mecca for the *Hajj*, Zainab provided the message for the students at these gatherings. Her goals for these lessons were numerous. In addition to trying to influence student behavior, instill proper manners, and teach a fuller understanding of Islamic belief, she hoped to help students relate in a personal way to prominent Muslim historical figures. Many of her messages focused on Muhammad's everyday interactions with particular *sahabah*, his companions. She hoped to "show them they were human, just like us. And, you know, they were nice, and they can joke, and they can do things like us. It's not always a serious, 'Look at them' [in stern voice]." Here, as elsewhere in our conversations, I felt her passionate wish for students to embrace their potential as devout believers who enjoy their lives and serve their community. She encouraged them to follow in the footsteps of the early Muslims, not simply in obedience to the strict rule of ancient traditions, but as sincere, caring individuals who glorify God by living in harmony with one another.

Zainab's role among the elementary grade students is not unlike the *khatib* in the mosque, who preaches at the *jumu'ah* service. She is entrusted by the community to provide spiritual guidance to her listeners, to deliver a morally edifying sermon in accordance with their circumstances and needs. She compared their community to that of the early Muslims, who struggled to establish themselves, religiously, politically and militarily, generally against great odds. Her often passionate tone corresponded with the magni-

tude of the message, which frequently culminated in how the students might fulfill the highest destiny of their otherwise fleeting lives: to live in unity, worshipping only Allah, with sufficient righteousness to one day enter Jannah.

Despite this call for religious unity, issues such as whether to celebrate the Maulid an-Nabi remained open to individual discretion. In light of such instances, she expressed hopes that her sermons might help the students accept greater diversity while maintaining their unity, to see certain aspects of their faith "from different point of views" [*sic*] without splintering into different factions. In validating alternative perspectives, however, she called into question what her colleagues Fatimah and Kabeera taught to their students: namely, that there is one correct position: that Muhammad's birthday is by no means a holiday. In allowing students the option to believe otherwise, Zainab incurred Kabeera's disapproval and, later, a stern reprimand. While I wasn't present for this, I learned about it later that day from Rabia, who was sympathetic to Zainab's open-minded position.

Rabia had come that day to make copies in the teacher's lounge, where I was using the computer, and she took the opportunity to blow off some steam. She seemed frustrated by the conflict, particularly by Sister Kabeera's strict and confrontational approach to a seemingly minor issue. She considered it much ado about nothing, unnecessary "drama," and preferred to steer as clear of the dispute as possible. She refused to involve herself, not only because of the situation's unimportance, but to avoid implicating herself in Kabeera's eyes. Rabia had for years attended the Batin al-Haqq Study Circle, a Sufi group who annually commemorates not only the Maulid an-Nabi, but also maulids of Pir Batin al-Haqq himself and his early predecessor, Abdul-Qadir Jilani. Many of the study circle members celebrate the birthdays of all three holy men, often meeting for ten or

eleven consecutive days, with ceremonial reading, chanting, and singing, followed by the sprinkling of aromatic rosewater and communal feasting. These practices would undoubtedly arouse Kabeera's displeasure, and perhaps Fatimah's as well, so it was little surprise that Rabia kept them secret from her co-workers.

There's a Masjid Everywhere, like here there's a Church

On Fridays when Zainab was unable to be present, Kabeera took over her role in providing the sermons for the assemblies. Her teaching style, in her Friday discourses and classroom lessons alike, was bold and uncompromising. In her sermons, she stressed the importance of personal strength, spiritual righteousness, and unwavering obedience to Allah. Unapologetically immune to student pleas or superfluous tears, she took pride in her commanding presence and unrivaled ability to keep kids on their best behavior. The students show more respect to her than to other teachers, she explained, as a result of her "stern" approach. She preferred not to raise her voice, as this would take her "out of [her] demeanor," but was willing to use "verbal harshness" to assert her authority.[56] This was not for her own sake, she suggested, but to help the students learn to show respect. Even then, she described her callous persona as something of a "façade," a kind of role she played in hopes of facilitating her students' eventual success. American children today, she believed, are different than those of previous decades. Exposed to more "negativity," they're all the more in need of a strong authority figure to keep order in the class, avoid a "constant breakdown." She made her boundaries clear, and would not hesitate to respond to students' trespasses: "If you step beyond that, you take one foot beyond that I'm gonna take the next two feet. Okay, and then we'll get you back in line."

Kabeera had taught at numerous Muslim schools before coming to Tafsir a few years ago, but her fondest memories were of her time living and teaching in Saudi Arabia. She described its leisurely paced life, a more "laid back" schedule, and most importantly, a strong social "aura" of overall submission to Islam. There, her faith is the norm, not the exception, and pervades every aspect of society: "It's just there, every little corner. There's a masjid everywhere, like here you have a church." Islamic education is more effective in the KSA, because "the whole emphasis there is that, and they have the resources, those individuals willing to teach the Qur'ān." However, she did not altogether idealize her time in Saudi Arabia. As an African American, she felt prevalent racial discrimination, an "arrogance" that caused many to look down on her, a division that was "visible" and "known." Unfortunately, her experiences in the U.S. were no different in this respect. With this exception, she spoke of Saudi culture in glowing terms. Were it not for her mother requesting her return to the States, she'd still be there today.

Compared with Saudi schools, she believed, Tafsir simply did not demonstrate a strong enough commitment to teaching Islam. Their focus on secular disciplines, while necessary, cut into religious studies to an unacceptable extent. In addition to optional religious classes on Sundays, Tafsir students spend an hour a day in either Qur'ān or Islamic studies class. For Kabeera, this alternating schedule was watered down, and detrimental to the students' spiritual growth. If she were able, she would extend the school schedule by an hour and make daily Qur'ān *and* Islamic studies courses mandatory. This would better facilitate Quranic memorization, which was central to her conception of an effective Islamic education. While she spoke with pride of one student there who has

"become Hafiz Qur'ān," with a more rigorous schedule a higher proportion of students could achieve this status, and without needing to travel overseas.

Despite these concerns, Kabeera expressed respect for dean Musa Ahmed and TIS principal Ramzi Malik, and otherwise general satisfaction with how the school operates. She expressed her commitment to "follow suit … 100%" with the school's administrative direction, "as long as it doesn't take me outside the religion. Cause if it does then I'll have to question it, and I'll try to handle the situation as I see fit."[57] While longing for a stronger curricular emphasis on the faith, she recognized a limit to the effectiveness of religious instruction. She cautioned that Islam cannot be forced on children, "Cause once they reach that age of understanding, they will then take the path that they are destined to take in life." She saw this play out in her own family. Despite raising her four children to believe in Muhammad's revelations, several have ended up with different beliefs. While two of her children are "on the path, staring straight, Alhamdulillah," one is only vaguely "Islamically inclined," while another has deviated, and is now "into Christmas."

Celebrating Christmas spelled trouble for numerous Muslims at Tafsir, and for various reasons.[58] On one hand, it represented a capitulation to the dominant culture of U.S. capitalism and materialism—a potential hindrance to spiritual progress in its own right. Perhaps even more dangerous, however, was the veneration of Christ inherent to the holiday's origins, a practice which undermines the Quranic injunction to "worship none but Allah" (3:64). For Muslims like Kabeera, celebrating Muhammad's birthday was dangerously similar to this fallacy, and could be seen as a form of bid'ah that threatens to dilute the call to single-minded devotion to God. As we saw earlier, however, for teachers like Zainab the question is not so easily settled. The practice is not clearly for-

bidden in scripture, and much like the matter of how Muslims should approach an unjust ruler, the ummah's position here is divided.

Izars in the Fire: Evidence for Validity

The *ulema*, prominent scholars of Islamic law who significantly shape the views of the ummah at large, have primarily found evidence for a doctrine's validity in two sources. The first is the Qur'ān, the highest written authority in Islam. The second is the Sunnah, or path, of the Prophet Muhammad.[59] It is from this word that Sunnīs derive their name, indicating their commitment to live in accordance with their Prophet's example. This example can be seen in the *Hadīth* literature. The Hadīth are collections of written accounts of the Prophet's teachings and actions, and are used to determine proper beliefs and codes of conduct regarding matters that aren't clearly outlined in the Qur'ān. Muslims differ with respect to which books are included, or how trustworthy they believe various texts to be. Sunnīs and Shi'ites, to use the most notable example, generally recognize different collections as authoritative. And though the chains of oral transmission are well documented, they vary in trustworthiness in accordance with their consistency and perceived capacity for human error.

Furthermore, even if Muslims agree that a certain hadīth is authentic, they may vary drastically in how they interpret it. One example that repeatedly came up at Tafsir was *isbal*, the practice of men wearing their garments below their ankles. I first encountered the issue while talking with a young Salafi man who, despite having no official affiliation with the school, spent a fair amount of time on the grounds. He wore his pants in a manner that exposed his legs from the middle of his calf down to his shoes, even in the

coldest of winter months. This was based on several ḥadīth, perhaps most notably one from *Sahih al-Bukhari*: "whatever of the izar [lower garment] hangs down below the ankles is in the fire." According to this man, Bukhari's is among the most reputable of the six Sunnī collections of ḥadīth, rivaled only by *Sahih al-Muslim.* In his view, teachings included in either collection are *ipso facto* proven legitimate, and must be obeyed literally.

For others in the TIS community, the matter was not so straightforward. Omar, a former teacher and board member at Tafsir who I met on the school grounds, wore full length pants that consistently covered his ankles. He first addressed the issue with a candor I gradually learned was characteristic: "There's a ḥadīth that says if your pants are too long you'll go to hell. Do you know why that is?" In raising the question why, he had already deviated from the Salafi brother's brand of uncritical obedience. The rationale was crucial, and needed to be understood if we are to respond appropriately: "It's because these rich guys, in their arrogance, used to wear these long robes, and the bottom would drag on the ground, and they'd walk through camel shit and make their servants clean it up."

By this account, there is nothing inherently wrong with men covering their ankles, and the length of a garment has no intrinsic importance. Its significance is found in the context in which the garment is worn, depending on the individual's motivation, the effects of the gesture and the message it portrays. For Muhammad to forbid lengthy *izars* might have been understood by his listeners as an egalitarian minded condemnation of excessive wealth, or a warning against all forms of haughtiness and showmanship. This ḥadīth could be read as an incrimination of the privileged who show contempt for those

deemed socially inferior, or simply as an encouragement to be sanitary. In any case, according to Omar, Muslims today who prioritize a teaching's literal wording over its richer, underlying meanings run the risk of arbitrary dogmatism. He seemed to take pleasure in joking (numerous times, in our conversations) that "jackass literalists" today, having extracted the hadīth from its historical context, "wear their pants rolled up to their back sides" without valid reason.

Slavish Imitation v. Prayer Beads and Chess

The prevalence of dogmatic and apparently irrational interpretations of Islamic traditions affected many Muslims at Tafsir. Dean Musa Ahmed collided with such literalism during his attempt in a previous school year to provide students with prayer beads. While some members of the TIS community would have supported this gesture,[60] some believers characterize this use of beads as bid'ah. The dean described his collision with one such Muslim, after seeking permission from a trusted TIS spiritual leader to order the beads:

> I went to Abdul-Aziz, the mosque secretary[61] downstairs, and he backed me. Then this narrow-minded teacher went to him and shows him this 'proof', and the secretary changed. The reason? Muhammad didn't use beads. He counted on his fingers. So now we have to count on our fingers. Slavish imitation.

Musa Ahmed was surprised by the teacher's objections, and claimed that the practice of uncritically following the Prophet's precise example had in this case harmful repercussions. He complained to mosque secretary Abdul-Aziz that the students "aren't gonna think of Allah as much because of this." Muhammad's lack of beads was irrelevant; what mattered was that he was remembering God. If it helped the students to this end, using

beads might actually bring them inwardly closer to the Rasool than they would be if they simply mirrored his outward behavior. While Abdul-Aziz respected the dean's position, he ultimately decided that the teacher's view was more amply supported by the Sunnah.

The dean was dissatisfied with the rationale provided, and so asked for further clarification: "I asked this teacher [who opposed the idea] why it matters. He said because we might start to worship the beads. You see what I mean? Where's the common sense? Slavish adherence to the literal." In this case, while a rationale is provided, Musa Ahmed finds it unconvincing. After all, if the students are in danger of worshipping the beads, what's to stop them from worshipping their own fingers, if they're being used for the same purpose? He did not find the argument grounded in reason, experience or common sense, but more likely reverse engineered to lend legitimacy to the practice of uncritical imitation.

Musa Ahmed lost the debate over prayer beads, but in other cases he was not so quick to capitulate. One day were talking in his office just before lunch, when he picked up an open duffle bag with six tournament vinyl chess mats rolled up in it, the pieces for each mat in corresponding small blue sacks. He brought me downstairs and outside, criticizing the U.S. government for starting wars it couldn't finish, and American society for overall moral degradation. As he bemoaned the nation's backwards priorities, its lavish military spending and comparatively meager domestic social programs, we sat down on a bench in the shade of a birch tree in the courtyard. "There's a hadīth that forbids chess," he explained, "and the literalists say we can't play chess because of it."

Since we were in the process of setting up chess mats, I already had a pretty good guess how the story would end. Still, I listened eagerly, drawn in by his irreverent charm,

enjoying his subdued but engaging style of storytelling. As with the prayer beads, he had approached Abdul-Aziz to ask permission to buy chess sets for the students, bringing the incriminating hadīth with him (a risky strategy, but not without its logic). Unsurprisingly, the secretary refused, claiming that "chess is forbidden" in light of that very text. Musa Ahmed was disheartened, but approached Abdul-Aziz a second time, "took him another text. He read it and said it's a gray area." The dean refused to give up, and so tried a third time, with yet another text. Once again he failed to receive permission, on the grounds of the matter being too unclear. However, since Abdul-Aziz had not directly refused, the dean talked it over with his then colleague Omar, the latter of whom "said to heck with it and got the chess sets."

For entirely selfish reasons, I was grateful that he had. Despite my mediocre abilities, I've been an avid player for most of my life, and take any opportunity I can to sharpen my game. As the students came outside for recess, many saw the chess sets and gathered around us to play. Musa Ahmed and I both launched into a series of matches against one challenger after another, sometimes playing against several students at once, providing some strategic instruction when appropriate. This, like every time we unrolled the mats throughout the year, brought an enjoyable break in my day, and perhaps more importantly, proved invaluable in developing a friendly rapport with the kids. Sharing in an activity that genuinely engaged each of us helped to break down the awkward distance that came with my unusual role as researcher. I began to feel more at home there, and to look forward to the students' recess periods.

Regardless of my own affinity for playing, I never got the sense that Musa Ahmed's interest in chess was motivated by personal enjoyment. To explain his preoccupa-

tion with teaching the controversial game at Tafsir, he expressed his conviction that it was an effective means of fostering students' intellectual development. Claiming the support of scientific research,[62] he suggested that chess helped build cognitive capacity for strategizing, problem solving, and recognizing patterns and relationships. He also argued that, much like the hadīth forbidding men from covering their ankles, the real reasons for Muhammad's chess ban were entirely contextual. Some early Muslims were using chess, alongside playing dice, as a way to gamble, an act clearly forbidden by the Qur'ān (5:90-91). Other believers, according to Musa Ahmed, were bringing the chess sets into the mosque, and playing instead of doing their salat. In either of these instances chess would be forbidden, not due to any inherent sinfulness, but because of the surrounding impious circumstances. By this logic, when the game is played without gambling or distracting from obligatory religious duties, it is acceptable. Comparably important for the dean, if chess is as effective in aiding cognitive development as his research suggests, it would be educationally irresponsible to outlaw it.

In reflecting on these encounters, Musa Ahmed insisted that his relationship with the literal-minded believers not be interpreted in a negative light. He downplayed any antagonism, stressing the potentially constructive dimensions of their differences. He suggested I view the experiences as part of the healthy challenge inherent to working in a theologically diverse environment. Though he was convinced that their "literal interpretations don't seem relevant for today," he emphasized the benefit of learning different ways of thinking, describing "the Salafi point of view" as "a legitimate understanding" of Islam. For some of the Salafi members of the community, the line between valid and invalid Muslims was clearly drawn, and Musa Ahmed's historically contextualized readings

of the Sunnah placed him on the wrong side of it. The dean eloquently expressed his resolve to rise above these divisions, to "establish an island of sensitivity and sanity," to ensure that his school would be characterized by "love and compassion and all the good qualities."

No Vocab Raps: Reason with Me Why

> I tend to be more of a free thinker. And sometimes I get frustrated a lot
> with some of the things I see here, um, and some of the more stringent in-
> terpretations of Islam that can sometimes be, um, disseminated here.
> (Basira, TIS teacher)

Other faculty at Tafsir encountered similar dilemmas: that is, instances where effective educational tools were a potential affront to certain religious sensibilities. Miss Basira, a friendly young woman in her fourth year at TIS, was among the most beloved teachers at the school. Through observing her classes, watching after-school interactions, or hearing the students read their farewell letter to her at the end of the year, I often felt the kids' admiration for Basira. Whether through her thought-provoking writing assignments, her engaging "literature circle" class discussions, or her role in constructing the set for a school play in the Wednesday afternoon painting club, she worked hard to make learning fun, relevant, and artistically rich. She enjoyed using creative tools to teach, and had a gift for encouraging students' imaginations. Unfortunately, this gift was not always welcomed.

One of her favorite teaching tools was *EdRaps*, an online educational resource that uses animation and hip-hop to present lessons in current events, life skills and all the basic K-12 subjects. One activity she utilized from the EdRaps site provides study packets of vocabulary words and a corresponding rap song that helps students remember what

they've learned. She found this to be an "awesome platform," and began to use it in both

of her English classes. However, four students with Salafi backgrounds—two in each

class—were unwilling to participate. When she pressed them, she learned that their par-

ents forbade them to listen to music. She contacted several of the parents, but they were

unwilling to budge. Her solution was to give all students the packet, and then allow those

whose parents object to music to leave the room while the songs were played. From her

perspective, however, this complicated her job while ensuring these particular students

would not learn the material as well.

Basira tried her best to accommodate these parents' wishes, but refused to "stifle

another learning method because [they] think that it's haram." Frustrated with what she

felt was unnecessary rigidity, she began to do some detective work, asking her students

how many of them had televisions in their bedrooms. One of the Salafi students raised his

hand, and explained that he watches TV while falling asleep at night. Basira was visibly

annoyed:

> So he's essentially going to bed to whatever craziness is coming on the TV at 9,
> 10 and 11 o'clock at night, but you have to step outside because I'm using a learn-
> ing tool? That makes no sense to me.

She saw a clear inconsistency here, and sought an explanation. As it turns out, according

to the Bukhari hadīth collection, Muhammad warned against using musical instruments.[63]

These parents interpreted that as a ban on all music. However, this didn't satisfy Basira,

as it said nothing to address the inconsistency she observed. She asked the student to ex-

plain the rationale:

> Make this make sense to me. Reason with me why it's not okay for you to
> listen to music, but you go the movies, which has music in it. You watch
> TV, which has music in it, whether it's in the commercial or in the show.
> That doesn't make sense to me.

The Hadīth record events from about 14 centuries ago, and so obviously contain no direct references to television or motion pictures. They do, however mention music, and cast it in a negative light. According to a literalistic reading, therefore, a case can be made that the latter is forbidden while TV and movies are permissible. Basira didn't buy it. Her request for the student to reason with her was an invitation to think critically about their faith, to examine the underlying principles that inform the teachings by which they live. It was not sufficient to dogmatically accept the rules handed down by a tradition: she needed to interpret those rules in a way that would "make sense," that would demonstrate logical foundations and internal consistency.

It was not only students and parents who took issue with her teaching methods. She also attracted criticism from a fellow teacher on the issue of music in her classroom. Brother Waliyy, the social studies instructor mentioned above, had according to Basira been one of the "more rigid" faculty members. Basira and he occasionally disagreed, and "got into maybe 2 or 3 big blowouts last year. The last one was, actually it was all about different interpretations. Basically the music. The music thing." This was before Basira had discovered the EdRaps site, when she was experimenting with improvised hip-hop raps to engage her students: "I would just come up with freestyle different raps about history, or whatever kids are learning." When Waliyy found out about this he confronted her: "He came up to me and told me to my face that it was haram, and I was wrong, and [the] parents had to be called in." His objections were based on the same grounds as those of the boy mentioned above, who wouldn't listen to music but watched TV at night: the former was directly forbidden in the Hadīth.

According to Basira, although her interactions with Waliyy were generally cordial, much of their tension stemmed from deep seated, gender-related differences in their understandings of Islam. While expressing a distaste for labels, she identified herself as Sunnī, and Waliyy more specifically as Salafi. According to his tradition, she explained "the woman can't speak. Like, they hate women who are very opinionated. And I happen to be a very opinionated person … I've been called a feminist once or twice." Basira's feminist inclinations aroused Waliyy's resentment, prompting him to monitor her with heightened concern. A battle of wills ensued, wherein "he wanted to put me in my place, and I wasn't going to allow him to put me in my place." His policing grew so overbearing that she eventually saw no choice but to bring in a third party. She contacted a mutual friend, an imam that she had grown up with, who confronted Waliyy: "Listen, [Basira] is like family, and I'm not gonna accept this sort of behavior from you." Waliyy was humbled, and apologized for his conduct. However, his humility was short lived, and before long he began to harass Basira again. If his issue wasn't music in the classroom, "it was something else, and then it was something else."

<center>Big Brother's Blue Bin</center>

Religious surveillance of curriculum and educational practice took several forms at Tafsir, and was sometimes carried out by those with no formal affiliation with the school. Omar described one dramatic example of this that took place a few years back. He had a friend named Phillip from the Pir Batin al-Haqq Study Circle, whom he had helped find a job teaching high school English at Tafsir. As part of his course, Phillip had assigned a book by Keith Hartman called *Divine Luminous Unity*. Hartman, until his

death in 1983, was a disciple of Pir Batin al-Haqq, which is evident in the text's unconventional spiritual teachings. Batin al-Haqq himself provided the book's introduction, which itself contains content that could be viewed by many Muslims as highly unorthodox.

At times Batin al-Haqq provides detailed accounts of spiritual concepts which, as far as I know, are nowhere to be found in the Qur'ān or Hadīth, such as Yogic powers, the internal "resonances and pulsations" that reveal Truth, or humanity's ability to harness trillions of *saktis* (energies) to perform miracles. Elsewhere he reinforces beliefs, such as that of reincarnation, that overtly contradict popular interpretations of Islamic doctrines.[64] To make matters worse, he unambiguously minimizes the role of scriptures in providing seekers with access to God's revelations. He overtly names the Qur'ān among texts that, while granting access to "one small portion" of divine Wisdom, ultimately fail to provide the guidance we need to reach Allah. Those who read religious texts, by Batin al-Haqq's account, "derive meaning from them based on the individual's level of wisdom." Here, the Qur'ān acts less as a map than a mile marker. Its primary function is not to provide wisdom, but to reveal how much wisdom the reader already has.

Divine Luminous Unity suggests that God's revelations are not confined to any one text or tradition, but are hidden within all of creation. According to Batin al-Haqq, "Trees, flowers, insects, the sun, moon and stars, birth, death, everything we see, hear, taste, touch or smell—all become the books from which we can learn. Each thing contains a story within itself." It is up to the individual to pay close attention to the lessons contained within all we see, to "dissect and analyze each story and discover whether it contains a clue to that path which leads to God." We cannot blindly accept the authority

of any book or tradition, but must "constantly analyze with [our] Wisdom to see which is the right path and which is wrong" (xxi). As we analyze the world around us, our journey ultimately leads us to seek God within ourselves. God is not found in books, he explains, but lives inside each of us, "reposes within this flower garden called the heart" (xviii). In short, Divine Luminous Unity contained spiritual teachings that conflicted with mainstream interpretations of Islam. These teachings had the potential to arouse the disapproval of a more conservative, scripturally literal-minded believer. This is exactly what happened.

The former board member Omar described a striking encounter with one such believer, a Salafi Muslim whose name he didn't know, but who he came to refer to as *Big Brother*.[65] He regularly attended a masjid in Mapleton—a poor region on the outskirts of town known for its high concentration of Salafis—but he sometimes attended the TIS community mosque. Omar didn't know how, but this man had found out about the book. The very next day after Phillip had distributed the text, "there was Big Brother, standing right outside on the sidewalk, right in front of the front door. Taking the books from every student, *right from their bags*." By this point, the usually jovial Omar had grown quite serious. He no longer spoke with righteous indignation, but seemed genuinely disturbed. This was an unwarranted intrusion into the school's jurisdiction, not to mention an invasion of the students' own personal property. He remembered the incident vividly: "He had a big blue storage bin on the sidewalk. I'll never forget it. The lid was off and he was taking the books and throwing them in there."

The man was not only policing the students' curriculum; he also kept an eye on the finer points of religious observance within the community. Omar described one such occasion:

> I was praying in the mosque, and Big Brother goes over to the mosque secretary and whispers to him. The secretary comes over to me later and says "that brother wanted me to remind you that when you make wudu, when you bend over, you should wash from your wrists all the way to your elbows." I was maybe washing to here [points to a spot on his forearm a few inches from the elbow].

Omar was unmistakably perturbed by this gesture. "Can you imagine," he asked me indignantly, "being so concerned with correcting other people?" Though his excessive legalism clearly placed him in the minority at TIS, Big Brother was not the only one of his kind. His intolerant, hyper-juridical attitude was indicative of a small subset of the community, which Omar spared no opportunity to lambaste: "we've got some of these self-righteous zealots around here, you know, unless your pant leg is up to your back side they're not gonna call you a Muslim." The man's interest in such a detail was superficial and legalistic, typical of a sect who "dots every 'i' and crosses every 't'." What matters in wudu is our intention, not the exact location we apply water. Furthermore, Omar believed, we're better off trying to correct our own flaws than watching our neighbor's every move, let alone taking minor complaints to the secretary, as this man had done.

We Say "Allah Says." You Made that Up!

While I never had a chance to meet or interview Big Brother, I did speak with several other Salafi Muslims at Tafsir. One of them was Dawoud, mentioned above, the man who was willing to love or hate me for the sake of Allah. Over the course of the year, he became one of the most informative participants, speaking passionately about his

faith on a wide range of topics, including the intricacies of Islamic jurisprudence, and prayer in particular. He listed four *madhabs,* schools of fiqh, that are prominent in contemporary Sunnī Islam: *Hanafi*, *Malaki*, *Hanbali*, and *Shafi'ee*. These schools differ on numerous issues, including appropriate methods of punishment, acceptable forms of artwork, and details of proper physical comportment during salat. While generally opposed to religious diversity, Dawoud acknowledged that some variety was tolerable among these schools. For example, while in *qiyaam*, the erect standing position in salat prayer, followers of the *Hanafi* school clasp their hands together below their navels; according to the *Shafi'ee* school, the hands should be clasped above the navel but below the chest; while the *Malaki* school suggests worshippers leave their arms hanging loosely by their sides. Each was acceptable to Dawoud.

His own madhab, the Hanbali school, was founded by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ḥanbal, a prominent legal scholar who lived in Baghdad, the capital of the Islamic empire, during the 2nd-3rd centuries AH. Ḥanbal was persecuted and imprisoned for his opposition to the *Mu'tazila*, a school of thought embraced at the time by the rulers of the Abassid Caliphate. According to Dawoud, the Mu'tazila were dangerously influenced by Hellenic culture, and believed that human reason was capable of uncovering ethical truth, and understanding the relationship between human and divine will. Such trust in the powers of philosophy was misguided, and in their arrogance these thinkers "came up with their own sect." Their position, he explained, was that "if you see a hadīth, and it doesn't, your rationale doesn't mix, we throw that hadīth away." Religious doctrines were expected to conform with rationality, not the other way around.

According to Dawoud, a particularly heinous Mu'tazila heresy was their denial of the eternal nature of the Qur'ān. Rather than being God's immutable revelation, the Qur'ān was an aspect of creation, and therefore subject to scrutiny. In cases where a literal reading does not correspond with reason, the text can be disregarded. For example, the Qur'ān makes several references to Allah's "hands" (38:75; 57:29). The Mu'tazila took issue with this imagery, arguing that it portrays God in an anthropomorphic light. This appears to diminish his transcendent character, and so did not fit with their understanding of the divine. This caused a theological dissonance, which Dawoud acted out, quoting an imaginary Mu'tazili philosopher: "How are we gonna take this *aya* here and conform it into our methodology? Can't be! Allah can't be saying he has hands! Cause that would be just like likening Him to creation." For Dawoud, this puts the cart before the horse. Our methodology needs to conform to the scriptures, not the reverse. The Qur'ān is the word of God, and its verses cannot be embraced selectively: "No. We say what Allah says. His hands are his hands. They're not like our hands. They befit his majesty. But he still has them."

While the Mu'tazila might have been well intentioned in warning against comparing God with creation, "they went to the extreme." Their denial undercuts certain Quranic passages, an overt sacrilege, while the opposite extreme—to imagine God with actual, physical hands—could be idolatrous. Dawoud sought a middle ground between the two, accepting that Allah has "hands" while interpreting the term to mean something like "power." He recognized that this was a vague explanation, but ultimately felt that people of the Sunnah needed to accept certain beliefs without clearly understanding them: "We don't ask how. We don't ask why. We don't do stuff like that. We just say 'Allah says,'

and leave it like that." The Mu'tazila were not so prudent, intent as they were on questioning their beliefs, and expecting "detailed" understandings: "That's where it screwed them up."

For Dawoud, the Mu'tazila's departure from the mainstream interpretive approach was singlehandedly sufficient to exclude them from Islam. He then cited other tenets that were central to the faith, that were required of all Muslims. Some of these were practices, such as praying five times a day and making Hajj at least once in the believer's lifetime.[66] Others were oriented toward accepting or proclaiming certain ideas, including the oneness of God, the notion that "Allah Subhannah wa ta 'ala rose above his throne," and that Muhammad was the final Prophet. He cited another group whose supposed denial of this last point singlehandedly invalidated whatever other common ground they shared:

> There are things that you don't disagree on. The last messenger is Muhammad (SA). The *Ahmadiyya* say that Ghulam Ahmed was.[67] That makes them, that takes them outside the fold of Islam. Because they say that another man was the last messenger. I don't care if they, they can worship, they can say Muhammad was a great man, he was a prophet, they can worship, they can pray five times a day, but they believe that Ghulam Ahmed was the last messenger and not the Prophet Muhammad, they're not Muslim. It's just like a Christian saying Jesus didn't die for your sins. He's not a Christian. It's like a Jew saying that, um, Moses didn't get the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. It's just not feasible. It's not feasible.

For Dawoud, the belief in Muhammad as the final Prophet was among the fundamentals of Islam, an unarguable cornerstone of the faith. To deviate from this belief was to deny the religion itself, and nullifies whatever otherwise righteous conduct. Like the mandatory nature of the salat, the matter was "clear cut," with "no ifs, ands or buts." This is in stark contrast to Omar's account of the 'believer,' who is characterized not by the profession of a certain idea, but by virtuous conduct and good qualities.

While certain practices and beliefs are non-negotiable, Dawoud recognized some room for disagreement in other areas. He considered the four mainstream Sunnī madhabs to be legitimate, as their dissimilarities were inconsequential, demonstrating an acceptable range of interpretation:

> It's the way they translated the, um, the text. That's it. Some people say this, some people—but it's all in fiqh stuff, stuff that, how to worship, when to worship, stuff like that. Should you pray 2 ra'kahs after dhuhr? The Prophet ʿalayhi as-salām only prayed one. Um, but he prayed 2 another time, so some people say that you pray three. Some people say you pray one.

In Dawoud's view such differences are acceptable, as they reflect the plurality of views among prominent scholars. More importantly, since each school can find evidence for its positions in the Qur'ān and Hadīth, the variety is acceptable. By that logic, other deviations are not allowed: "Alright, let's say instead of going like this [raises hands once] you go like this [raises hands 3 times]. That's an innovation. Prophet didn't pray like that, nobody prayed like that. You made that up!" Forms of worship that have no precedence among scholars and which are not backed by evidence in the Qur'ān or Hadīth are considered bid'ah. They are dangerous novelties, corruptions, forbidden.

I Trust Those Those I Trust Trust

However, other forms of innovation that do not alter essential teachings of the faith are permissible, or even desirable. These include scientific discoveries, medical progress, and many technological advancements. Dawoud even listed certain changes in the religious sphere in positive terms, changes that may have appeared suspicious to some, but were nonetheless benign. These include "things that the scholars have said that people would say is an [unacceptable] innovation but they're not really." He gave the example of

the Qur'ān text itself, originally "written on palm, palm leaves. And they went and put it in a *mus'haf*. In a book. That was an innovation, but it's not a bad innovation, it's a good innovation." In this case, the change in religious protocol concerned only the superfluous detail of a record-keeping medium, the materials through which the message was pre-served, not the message itself. Another example of a positive innovation was the intro-duction of prayer carpets to the masjid: "They used to pray on the dirt, but somebody put the rugs down. That's an innovation, but it's not in the religion in, in, you understand?" He seemed a bit ambivalent here, as of course, this change was related to religious prac-tice. However, he quickly clarified that the modification was "not in the fundamentals of the religion. In the fundamentals of the religion we do not deviate."

Of course, exactly what constitutes the fundamentals is open to debate. Relying on the Qur'ān can lead to disconsonant conclusions, as we have seen—and all the more so with the Hadīth. According to Dawoud, hadīth vary considerably in reliability. While he trusts two collections—Bukhari and Muslim—unconditionally, others are not so clear. Here again, Dawoud deferred to the ulema, scholars who have done the work to trace the chains of transmission, to weed out those that contain dubious links, or those that contra-dict established Quranic teachings. These scholars designate individual hadīth with la-bels, ranging from *ṣaḥīḥ* (authentic) and *hasan* (good) to *ḍaʿīf* (weak) or *mawḍūʿ* (fabri-cated). But here again, uncertainty arises, as scholars might at times disagree on which hadīth fall into which category. I asked Dawoud about this possibility, and how he de-cides which scholars to trust. His answer was surprisingly candid:

> I trust the scholars that have been trusted by other people that I trust. Who have trusted the scholars that their people have trusted. You know, it just went down, it just goes down—you just trust the people that you, that you relate to in the masjid that you go to, or the people that you have come in

contact with, you just follow whatever, you know, they say 'this scholar,
this scholar, this scholar,' and you know, the scholars who are Salafi.

Aside from the apparent circularity of this last point, I found his account to be entirely
clear and reasonable. His method of discernment struck me as essentially intuitive, provi-
sionally subjective, as haphazard and unstable as the world I inhabit. In some ways, my
research at Tafsir was born out of this tension: how to bridge the gap between (a) this
type of intuitive, personal trust and (b) any knowledge claims about the Eternal Absolute?
Obviously, Muslims end up in different mosques, come in contact with different people
within those mosques, and end up relating to each of them in unique ways. These differ-
ences, whether born of chance, personal choice, or divine will, undoubtedly impact the
way Muslims interpret the holy texts and the Prophet's example. These divergent inter-
pretations can in some ways create a rich tapestry of belief in an Islamic school context.
They can also lead to divisions within the ummah, and struggles for doctrinal hegemony
along sectarian lines.

CHAPTER 5:

ALL THE KING'S HORSES AND MEN

> Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall
> Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
> All the King's horses
> And all the King's men
> Couldn't put Humpty together again.
> –Mother Goose Nursery Rhyme

A _____ Adventure Tale

For most of my visits to Tafsir, my first stop was the dean's office. I typically

spent at least a few minutes there, discussing the tentative plans or needs around the

school that day, trying to feel out where I fit into the mix. Other days I stayed longer,

passing the time with casual conversations and brief interviews with Musa Ahmed. On

one such occasion, I asked the dean if he was aware of an episode mentioned above,

when Big Brother had confiscated copies of an unorthodox text from Tafsir students. He

was. In fact, it was not the only one of its kind. The dean stood up and walked across his

office, removing a thin paperback book from one of the shelves. On its cover was a pencil

drawing of a lone bumble bee hovering near a flower with a city skyline in the distance.

The book's author was Mawlana Sinclair, its title, *Queen Bee of the Mango Plantation.*

Beneath the top edge of the front cover was a simple, three-and-a-half word description:

A _____ ADVENTURE TALE. Between the "A" and the "ADVENTURE" was a black,

shoddy rectangular scribble. At first glance it was unreadable, but after a more careful

look, at just the right angle under direct light, a word was mildly legible underneath:

SUFI.

According to the blurb on the back, the story described a "grand quest," written "poetic free verse," an account of a benevolent swarm of bees on a brave mission to save their habitat from destruction at the hands of a corrupt real estate developer. The heroes of the story embark on this quest in obedience to "their ____ sheikh" ("Sufi" is blacked out here in similar fashion). Referring back to the confiscation of *Divine Luminous Unity*, Musa Ahmed explained, "The same thing happened later with [this] book. Omar tried to give it out to the kids, but this guy," referring to Big Brother, "did the same thing." The dean explained Omar's intention to engage the students with a creative story that could present spiritually edifying concepts in a fun, imaginative style. The same man who had confiscated *Divine Luminous Unity* found Sinclair's book unacceptable: "Why?," Musa Ahmed asked rhetorically. "Because it had the word 'Sufi' written on it."

Omar, the dean explained, had scratched out the word in hopes that doing so might minimize controversy, and render the book acceptable to the self-appointed literary policeman: "Nope. It was written somewhere else in there I think. This guy didn't even read the book, just said it was bad because it had the word 'Sufi.'" Musa Ahmed was careful to stress that, though this man happened to be a Salafi Muslim, his behavior was not indicative of his group at large. He was one particular believer, a theologically rigid individual whose actions shouldn't be attributed to his entire sect. After all, this essential-ization of a group under the banner of its label appears to have informed what Big Broth-er had done to the *Queen Bee* book. Here again, the dean faced a "narrow minded" ele-ment of the community, and was determined not to respond in kind.

Be Careful Who You Tell

By this point in my research, I had already begun to realize that the word Sufi carried potentially controversial implications. This was clear from my initial conversation with Dawoud, who I first met on the sidewalk outside of the school, just a few feet from the mosque entrance. He described Islam as a "beautiful" and "wonderful religion of love and peace," but warned against taking this view to the extreme. "It's also a religion of laws," he emphasized, "Like Judaism has their laws, the Talmud and the Torah and the opinions of the Rabbis." The beauty and peace found in his faith does not come through diversity, or by way of following personal preferences, but by strictly conforming to "an established set way of doing things that the Prophet has set down." He was well versed in the history of Islam, its political dimensions in the Middle East, its major theological movements and counter-movements. Sensing my ignorance in these matters, he graciously sketched the landscape of prominent Muslim sects, their influential scholars and reformers, and the various mainstream traditions of fiqh.

When Dawoud and I parted ways after our first conversation, I headed through the main door, grateful to have met someone with so much knowledge, and so eager to share. As I walked down the long, slender hallway toward the stairway that leads up to the school, past framed student poems set to colorful, picturesque crayon landscapes, I heard someone calling my name from behind. I turned around as Rabia, who I had met at the Batin al-Haqq Study Circle, hurried toward me. She had a look of obvious concern, and spoke with a quiet urgency: "Be careful who you tell you're studying Sufism. Some people see it as innovation. Did you tell that brother?" I assured her I hadn't discussed my spiritual path with Dawoud, that I had only mentioned my academic interests.[68] "Good!

Keep it that way! He's very against it." I agreed, thanked her for the advice, and went about my day.

Looking back, I've come to identify this brief interaction as a defining moment in my research. Prior to coming to Tafsir, my experiences with Muslims were quite limited. I was exposed to Sufi teachings from a young age, but this was mostly restricted to children's morality tales, select Arabic prayers, and the scattered writings of a small handful of mystical poets. With the exception of a few brief Surahs, I was unfamiliar with the Qur'ān, and had little knowledge about the history of the faith or the life of Muhammad. Practically all I knew of Islam came from my Sufi teacher, Pir Batin al-Haqq. Although I understood that his teachings were well outside the mainstream of belief, I failed to realize that they might be considered dangerous. Upon being warned to keep my own faith a secret, I began to sense that whatever I might have learned in "studying Sufism" could pose a threat to some ideological agenda or established order within the community. It was at this point that I began to reformulate my study, shifting my focus toward concepts like interpretation, orthodoxy, and the variety of Islamic belief and practice at Tafsir.

<div align="center">Smoke in the Woodwork</div>

Not everyone at Tafsir found my new focus worthwhile. My first indication of this came from Miss Kessler, a hard-working high school science teacher with over 15 years of experience whose family converted to Sunnī Islam when she was 13. In addition to teaching her class, she led "welcome to TIS" meetings for new students and faculty, facilitated parent-teacher conferences, and watched over the study hall class during her lunch break. She was typically the first to arrive in the morning, and often the last to

leave, which earned her the respect of her colleagues and bosses alike. She remained focused on her professional duties throughout the day, and had no interest in being distracted by the fine points of religious sectarianism: "The different sectors, I don't really pay any attention to it, because you still pray the same, you still fast." Simply put, "Islam is Islam," and the devotional similarities among Muslims are more important than whatever differences might exist.

For Miss Kessler, the more relevant divisions at Tafsir were along color lines. As an African-American, she felt an all-pervasive presence of racial discrimination that even the ideal of Islamic unity could not completely ameliorate:

> There's always gonna be a racial problem … it's just the way things are.
> That's always gonna be a factor, you know, if your skin is dark, then I
> guess according to the ones who have the light skin, those with dark skin
> are always lower, than the, uh, you know, the ones with the pure white
> skin.

Though this was not the focus of my research, the subject of racial division emerged periodically throughout the year. Some participants framed this as a tension between Blacks and Arabs, citing flagrant examples of racist language and attitudes which occasionally surfaced at Tafsir. Others pointed to the Nation of Islam, a movement whose ideology has emphasized Black empowerment and, according to one Black teacher at TIS, "the hatred of the White America." In at least one instance I heard a member of the community express plainly racist sentiments about "African-American culture."[69] Meanwhile, another participant, elementary school teacher Miss Nasreen, determinedly downplayed racial tensions. She highlighted instead the race-related legal progress made in recent decades of U.S. history, which she portrayed as part of God's plan.[70] However, according to Miss Kessler not only was racial division still prevalent, similar issues emerged concerning

ethnic and national identity, and could even divide Middle Eastern Muslims within the

community:

> Even with the cultures, you know, uh, even ones with—last year it was a
> real cultural thing, I think with the [non-Palestinian] Arabs and I think the
> Palestinians. One group being better than the other group, you know. It
> was like a power struggle with the countries. I only say that to say, it's al-
> ways gonna be something, you know, that has to do with race … People
> thinking I'm better than you, when in Allah's eyes, it doesn't even matter.
> When you die, you gonna be judged by the heart. Races don't have any-
> thing to do with it, you know?

Here, this desire to claim in-group superiority was ubiquitous, an unfortunate aspect of

human nature. It was not unique to TIS, or any stronger there than elsewhere, but it was

nevertheless a problem, as it ran contrary to God's vision. While people take pride in su-

perficial aspects of our own crowd, Allah is concerned with subtler matters: our hidden

thoughts, the sincerity of our faith, the intentions that motivate our actions. To claim

worldly supremacy based on race, ethnicity, or nationality undermines Muhammad's ide-

al of a single brotherhood of believers (Q2:213; 3:103).

Common Ground v. Public Ground

Despite these divisions, overall Miss Kessler found Tafsir a rewarding place to

work, and especially valued its religious dimension. The school's common ground of Is-

lamic belief was particularly important in light of her previous work experiences. Miss

Kessler spent the first 10 years of her career teaching high school students in a nearby

city's public school system. Sensing a systematic exclusion of religion there, she felt os-

tracized for actively observing her faith, and so finally left. Though she took a pay cut in

coming to teach in a private school, it was worth it to now feel comfortable following the

Sunnah in "an Islamic environment." In contrast to public schools, where the atmosphere

was inhospitable to her *ibadah*, or worship, the Tafsir culture actively supported it. Any doctrinal distinctions within that culture were basically irrelevant. Muhammad taught a simple, holy way of life which included, in addition to prayer and fasting, observing dietary laws, rigorous standards of hygiene, and specific codes of modesty in dress. All this is clearly outlined in the scriptures:

> Me personally, I think the Qur'ān is just straightforward. It tells you exactly what you can and can't do. You know, things that are haram versus things that are not, the things that are halal … To read it is to understand it.

In the few instances when something in scripture was not clearly explained, she felt the Hadīth served as a sufficient supplement. Despite the racial, ethnic, and national divisions, Miss Kessler found in Tafsir a setting conducive to her chosen lifestyle, where she could practice her brand of "straight Islam" without feeling awkward or overly self-conscious.

It's Personal, I Believe

Perhaps a more deliberate aversion to Islamic sectarianism came from Sister Halima, an upper-grades English and social studies teacher in her late forties serving her eighth full-time year at Tafsir. While not in class she was often busy talking with students or watching over the cafeteria or playground, but after a few failed attempts to coordinate we managed to sit down for an interview one afternoon during her lunch break. She described for me her teaching philosophy, which centered on cultivating a safe learning environment conducive to building warm, nurturing relationships. Students in her class should feel "Comfortable enough that they can, um, sometimes they consider me as a friend rather than a teacher." While recognizing the need for teachers to occupy a distinct

position of higher authority, this could be done most effectively by fostering a spirit of comradery, respect, and mutual consideration. "I want them to be happy in class," she said plainly, because "that's when I think they're learning the most."

Halima acknowledged the importance of academic freedom, that students have "the right to intake the information as they want, come up with their own opinions about information." She also valued the rights of students to express these opinions openly in the classroom. However, in order to maintain a positive, amiable learning environment, certain guidelines were helpful. For starters, "they need to be considerate about others when they are trying to share their opinions." She cited the example of certain "out-spoken" students who belittled one of their classmates. This classmate, she explained, takes a little longer to understand instructions, and generally needs extra time to complete in-class assignments. Halima doesn't mind slowing down to help her, "But some students are like, 'Oh my God.' And at that time, I'm like 'No, you're hurting her feelings.'" When students' opinions cause pain to others, or foster disunity or strife in the classroom, they're best kept to themselves.

A similar concern with keeping peace in the classroom seemed to undergird Halima's aversion to discussing doctrinal issues. Islamic sectarian affiliation was a pri-vate matter and potentially divisive, better left unexplored in the school context. Students are free in their homes to practice their faith in any way they'd like, but when they come to TIS, they should check their denominational differences at the door. While she loosely identified as a Sunnī, for her "it's personal, I believe, so it's not supposed to be in your professional life." When I asked what sects her students and co-workers belonged to, she said didn't know, that she'd never raised the question. According to Halima, "it doesn't

matter who you are, as long as you are Muslim." For Tafsir community members to be

Sunnīs, Shi'ites, or Sufis suggested fragmentation. To be Muslims was to be united.

When teaching about their religion, she viewed herself as an impartial conduit of its

standard form:

> I can just guide them of what I know from their Islamic Studies book and
> their Qur'ān. But at the same time I just don't impose on them. I say, this
> is right, this is wrong, according to what you believe in, why you're here.
> Because this is an Islamic school. And then the rest is their decision, be-
> cause I told them, um, you choose. You have a free will.

In her fundamental reliance on the Qur'ān and presentation of the school's *I Love Islam*

textbooks, she hoped to present a neutral version of the faith from a non-partisan perspec-

tive. It was the responsibility of each student to accept or reject these basic teachings.

<center>One Ummah. That's it.</center>

While Sister Halima was somewhat reserved in her endorsement of this non-

partisan approach, one teacher was more adamant about the matter. When I asked Miss

Zainab about the different categories within Islam that exist at Tafsir, she vigorously

dismissed the question: "the thing is, we're Sunnī, okay? We follow the Sunnah. But,

other than that, I personally don't believe in any of that divisions. We are meant to be one

ummah. That's it." The Sunnī label did not indicate allegiance to a sub-category of Islam,

but rather inclusion in the standard, singular group to which all believers were intended to

belong. To be Sunnī means to emulate the Sunnah, the Prophet's example. Deviation

from or elaboration upon this simple description could only lead to fragmentation. Zainab

strongly preferred focusing on the community's similarities, and downplaying their dif-

ferences. She didn't know what the other teachers thought about this issue, whether they

might embrace sectarian labels, and she showed no interest in finding out.

For Zainab, not only do such labels inherently divide, they demonstrate arrogance. Dif-

ferentiating between traditions creates hierarchical relationships, with each group pre-

suming to be closer to *al-Haqq*, the Truth, than others: "if I'm saying that I'm X and

you're Z, that means I'm saying that I'm better than you." For example, the term Salafi

suggests for its affiliates a kinship with the *Salaf*, the earliest believers who Muhammad

described as superior to all others.[71] Meanwhile, many Sufis claim access to esoteric

forms of *ilm*, wisdom that evades the ordinary Muslim. Each group can be seen as claim-

ing a distinct form of superiority, which Zainab rejects, raising the simple but powerful

question, "Who knows who's better?" Whether associating oneself with loftier heights of

righteousness or greater gnostic depths, these groups stray from the middle course of

humble submission, pompously claiming for themselves knowledge and goodness pos-

sessed by Allah alone.

Another danger of these sects, According to Zainab, is their potential to foster un-

critical conformity among their adherents. Those who identify themselves with Sufism,

for example, "have their minds set on whatever the Sufis do. So they follow that. And,

you know, so that affects their way of thinking, their set of beliefs." The same could be

said of Shi'ites, Salafis, and "all these different groups. So, that's a fact." This kind of

surrender is appropriate only with respect to the teachings of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah.

If we allow our faith to be shaped by sources outside of these revelations, we promote

confusion and disarray. The result is an overall discord of the faith, which she believes

contributes to widespread negative feelings towards Islam today. Her solution is for Mus-

lims to "focus on what brings us closer," and "put our efforts together so we can take our nation ahead, rather than we're being looked down from everybody. Everybody looks down on Muslims," she continued, leaning over and glowering at the floor to demonstrate, "like that. Like we're nothing. I hate that."

Salman al-Farsi Minna ah al-Bayt: In Islam, do We…?

Sectarian commitments are divisive, haughty, and counterproductive in any context, but they are especially toxic among school faculty; not only are such believers undermining their own call to unity, they're also setting a destructive example for the children in their care. Muslims should clearly distinguish themselves from non-Muslims, yes, but not from one another, "and we shouldn't teach our kids to do that." This was a perennial theme in Zainab's Friday afternoon sermons. One example of this came in a story about Salman al-Farsi, an early Persian believer who helped defend Medina from horseback invaders by proposing a trench be dug around the city. The idea was well received, and so two groups began to argue over Salman, each claiming his exclusive affiliation. When Muhammad arrived, he denied both claims, declaring the foreigner a member of *Ahl al-Bayt*, his own revered house and family. The moral could be found in the following call-and-response exchange:

> ZAINAB: In Islam, do we care about where we're from?
> STUDENTS: [shouting in unison] No!
> ZAINAB: Do we care about what language do we speak?
> STUDENTS: No!
> ZAINAB: Do we care about what color skin do we have?
> STUDENTS: No!
> ZAINAB: No, we don't. The most important thing is what?
> LUQMAN: The heart.
> QADIR-BIBI: We're Muslim.
> ZAINAB: We're Muslim!

In a sense, her message of unity is implicit in the first four words of this excerpt. All those under the banner of the faith are included, subsumed into a singular group identity with a common set of priorities and concerns. "This is your brother in Islam, and this is your sister in Islam," she continued. "That's all that matters to you." National, linguistic, or racial attributes are potentially divisive, as seen in the argument over Salman, and so dismissed as irrelevant. The *House of Muhammad* is the new, common residence, a solitary organizing signifier, uniting us as family in conduct and belief, prompting us to love one another.

<div align="center">73 Sects, "I call myself Muslim."</div>

The stakes were high for Zainab, as the ultimate goal was to avoid hellfire and reach Jannah. This would require following the Prophet's example in every respect possible, living a consecrated life of diligent piety and compassionate service. Unfortunately, the odds are stacked against us, according to one frightening doctrine she described to me with notable distress. As reported by numerous hadīth, "the Prophet (SA) said 'Yes, that my ummah is going to be split into 73 sects. One is the one who's going to heaven and the rest are not.' Okay? So, who knows which one is that?" Associating with any subcategory of Islam implies membership in one of these sects, and likely places the would-be-believer on the road to perdition. Zainab felt this stone was better left unturned, asking nervously, "why do I need to identify myself as something other than---? I don't know, it scares me so much." To minimize this danger, "I just call myself one thing. I call myself Muslim. That's about it."

Miss Zainab, Sister Halima, and Miss Kessler all valued the common Islamic heritage at TIS, and clearly prioritized the unity of their faith over any sectarian differences. They were not alone in this. While Muslim identity was frequently addressed in school policy documents, curricular materials, classroom lessons, posters, sermons, and conversations, the community seldom discussed incongruent interpretive traditions within Islam. I never did learn what the 73 groups were, as even when I raised the issue, participants only ever mentioned a small number of sects. Furthermore, several of these, such as the Ahmadiyya movement or the Nation of Islam, were only mentioned in passing, as curious aberrations at best, never in a way that had overt significance to the school today. Other groups, such as Mu'tazili philosophers or pseudo-Islamic 13th century Mongol armies, were only cited as defunct heretics or power hungry thugs, cautionary examples whose rightful defeat was proof of their manifest error. Even Shi'ism, the second largest Islamic denomination worldwide, held little more than an academic importance at Tafsir. Shi'ites were the lost sheep of the family, wayward apostates diverted from the narrow path by phony hadīth and a misguided preoccupation with imam Ali. They were significant as an enduring fallacy, a stubborn reminder of the short lived historical unity of the Prophet's legacy, but they were not a relevant force in the daily life of the TIS community.

It would not be entirely inaccurate, then, to claim that the most relevant Islamic sects at Tafsir were Sunnīs, Sufis, and Salafis; but of course there are several dangers in doing so. First, most of the participants in my study would not consider themselves part of a "sect" at all, but a follower of the standard, unified Islam that the Prophet revealed. Second, these labels themselves can be misleading, failing as they do to signify any fixed object or homogenous entity. Members of these 'groups' were quite different, often

didn't know each other, and in any case found unique meanings in identifying as such. Third, these concepts are not neatly partitioned from one another—as members across groups share many similarities—nor are they mutually exclusive. While it would be difficult (not impossible) to imagine a Muslim identifying as both Sufi and Salafi, participants identifying with either group typically considered themselves included under the Sunnī banner.[72]

Despite these dangers, I find such terms useful for our current purpose of better understanding the variety of Islamic faith and practice at Tafsir.[73] Of the three, the Sunnī label, broad enough to encompass Sufis and Salafis alike, will receive the least attention for the remainder of this paper. The banner of the Sunnah stretched over the entire community, was practically synonymous with Islam itself, so inclusive as to recede into invisibility. It said nothing to distinguish any member from the rest, yet carried with it the underlying traces of sectarianism in a way that "Muslim" did not. Many members refrained from identifying as Sunnī until specifically asked, and even then often downplayed this distinction, emphasizing instead their allegiance to a non-descript, undifferentiated Islam. To be a Sunnī at Tafsir meant to follow the way of the Prophet, the baseline requirement for full inclusion in the community. It was important, but imprecise; entirely uncontroversial, typically unacknowledged.

The remaining two constructs, therefore, Sufism and Salafism, emerged as the most prominent 'Islamic sects' in my study. The tensions between them were evident from the day Rabia stopped me in the hallway, advising me to keep my own Sufism a secret from the Salafi brother. This was my first indication that meaningful divisions might exist within the ummah at TIS, that particular adherents to various interpretive traditions

vied for ideological prominence, a competition which I gradually learned entailed peer surveillance, curricular screening, and selective silencing. While this tension was not so simple as a clash between 'Sufis' and 'Salafis,' these terms were often employed by community members to account for religiously charged frictions within the school. This warning about my beliefs, to be careful who I told, raised many questions about the variety of religious views at Tafsir, most notably regarding how my own spiritual tradition was construed by Sufis and non-Sufis alike.

TIS: A Sufi Education?

My earliest conversations on the topic were with Omar, a long-time member of the Pir Batin al-Haqq Study Circle. Because of his one-time place on the TIS board of directors, I had wondered whether the school might be organized in a manner in keeping with what I understood to be Batin al-Haqq's teachings. In short, I partially expected to be studying at an ever-tolerant, open-hearted, progressive Sufi interfaith school. My research proposal was structured accordingly, and went roughly as follows: (1) Islam and its schools are widely conceived by popular imagination as authoritarian, characterized by harsh disciplinary practices and the absence of freedom. (2) I expect to complicate this picture, showing a form of Islamic education that is egalitarian, merciful, conducive to freedom, and so on (i.e., what I imagined to be "Sufi education"). There were several problems with this formulation. First, Sufism was the exception, not the rule at Tafsir. Of the 16 participants currently employed at TIS, Rabia was the only Sufi.[74] There were no other Sufi teachers, no Sufi administrators currently employed, no Sufis in mosque leadership, or working at the book store or grocery store. Even when he held his position of

relative leadership, Omar had shared his administrative authority with other board members, principal Ramzi Malik, mosque secretary Abdul-Aziz, dean Musa Ahmed, the school imam, and others. In different respects, students, parents, state agencies, private financial donors, and other concerned members of the community also helped to inform the school's character. As we have already seen, even those with no official association with the school were in some instances able to enforce doctrinal filters that limited curricular materials, and thus shape educational content. In short, one Sufi administrator had clearly been unable to singlehandedly shape the atmosphere of the school.

To make matters more complicated, Sufism is itself an elusive concept, its meanings varying widely even among its adherents. As Hermansen (2000) demonstrates, there are dozens of Sufi orders, movements, and societies within the U.S. alone, each with distinct histories, practices, and ideological orientations. Even those who claim the same Sufi lineage can have drastically dissimilar interpretations of its message. In the case of my study, though Omar and Rabia both studied under Pir Batin al-Haqq, their understandings of his teachings were considerably different from one another's, and from my own. I began to realize this during one of my first visits to Tafsir, after asking Omar how he reconciled Batin al-Haqq's message with the formal practice of mainstream Islam which was so prevalent at TIS. He asked what I meant. I tried rewording the question, but he still seemed puzzled. Gradually I realized that for Omar, there was nothing to reconcile. Batin al-Haqq's teachings were, at their core, consistent with those of the mainstream religion. The more rigid, literalistic believers rejected them due to their own imbalance, not Batin al-Haqq's. This Sufism is *as-sirāt al-mustaqīm*, the straight path. It is a middle course

that avoids extremes, the life of moderation prescribed and demonstrated by the Prophet himself.

For Omar, the dividing lines within Islam were never between the Sufi and the Salafi, the Sunnī and the Shi'ite, the Hanbali and the Mu'tazila. Rather, he distinguished simply between "mean-spirited Islam" and "gentle Islam, which is what you and I practice." Pir Batin al-Haqq preached and lived the latter, and those near to him benefitted accordingly. Muhammad himself was a proponent of this gentle religion—those who practiced the mean-spirited version deviated from his message. The extent of this deviation, he explained, could be seen dramatically in the Saudi religious police, citing their response to an infamous fire in a school in Mecca which claimed 14 students' lives. On March 11, 2002 a blaze originating from a discarded cigarette had spread throughout the all-female Intermediate School No. 31, but the girls inside "were not allowed to come out of the burning building. *They died*," he said with strong emphasis, leaning toward me, "and these religious policemen barred the doors, because [the girls] would upset the firemen. The firemen would see their hair." Unlike the U.S. popular media, which tends to sensationalize religiously loaded scandal, the Saudi media downplayed the event. With understandable anger, Omar explained, "the newspaper had an article the next day, 'Oh, we'll investigate it.' Well, it was just swept under the rug. So that's how stupid, how cruel, how narrow these people are."

This narrowness can be traced, according to Omar, to the KSA's wholesale embrace of "the Wahhabi understanding" of Islam, a "stubborn-minded" interpretation based on the theology of 18th century reformer Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. Al-Wahhab's 1744 pact with local emir Muhammad bin Saud marked the founding of the

Saudi state: "the political military guy married with the religious guy, and that's what

created Saudi Arabia as it is today. And his interpretation of Islam is very strict and

mean." 'Abd al-Wahhab was staunchly iconoclastic, insisting that the new leadership

"obliterat[e] every grave" to prevent idolatry, "so that you didn't know where the Prophet

was buried." The popular Sufi practice of commemorating the *mazars* of saints and

revered shaikhs was also outlawed. Moreover, this new establishment was staunchly mis-

ogynistic, insisting that women be "completely subservient to men. They were restricted

to the house hold, they couldn't get educated," and to the present day are forbidden to

pursue professional careers, travel alone, or drive automobiles. According to Omar, cer-

tain influential TIS community members admired 'Abd al-Wahhab and his austere brand

of faith—including a prominent administrator—so some were afraid to criticize the "ass

holes in Saudi Arabia" for fear of stirring up trouble.

Wahhabi: A Name that Don't Need to Be

The terms Wahhabi and Salafi are often conflated, both being characterized by

literalism, severity, and intolerance of religious diversity (Kovaks, 2014). At Tafsir, some

used the labels interchangeably, while others simply described the sects in similar terms.

At least one member of the TIS community, however, found an important distinction be-

tween the two. Dawoud complained to me that though he identifies as Salafi, people refer

to him as a Wahhabi. When I asked the difference, he explained that the latter indicates a

distinct affinity for 'Abd al-Wahhab, and offered a brief biographical sketch of the re-

former:

> In Saudi Arabia, he came there, they had reverted back to worshipping
> idols and statues and stuff. And he called them back to Islam. And a lot of

> people were set in that way, the political thing was set in that way. Every-
> thing was set there. So when he did that he shook a few people's, you
> know, cages. And they didn't appreciate it.

Dawoud clearly respected 'Abd al-Wahhab, viewing him as a defender and preserver of a pure, unadulterated faith. He was not an innovator who sought to establish a new branch of Islam, but a radically conservative reformer whose goal was to rid the faith of innovations and divisions, to restore the ummah to Muhammad's original vision. As his name suggests, he was a slave of Allah, and he condemned the veneration of anything other than God, including saints, angels, or even the Prophet. Having a sect named after him would therefore violate the spirit of his teachings:

> It's a name that don't need to be …basically what they're saying is that
> these people follow 'Abd-al Wahhab, but 'Abd-al Wahhab was just a guy
> who was a reformist. He came to reform, you know, Islam, bring it back to
> the, to the first generations of how you should act. Wahhabi is a, it's a
> misnomer. It's not really a, it's a thing that the enemies of Islam have
> used. Wahhabi isn't really a true—I mean, if you wanna be called "a
> Wahhabi," well we're all, all Muslims are Wahhabi, cause they follow *al-
> Wahhab*,[75] which is one of Allah's names. But they don't use it in that
> way.

Interestingly, Dawoud acknowledges here the flexibility of the term Wahhabi, its openness to completely dissimilar interpretations. As discussed earlier, the same words and concepts can be understood or utilized in drastically different ways, in the religious sphere as elsewhere. Accordingly, a Muslim might at the same time identify as Wahhabi and not-Wahhabi, depending on how the term is interpreted by those in a specific social context. In Dawoud's view, to be a "Wahhabi" in the more legitimate, hypothetical sense indicates an allegiance to al-Wahhab—not the man but Allah H**self—and could be rightfully applied to any believer. This creative co-opting of a phrase otherwise seen as derogatory and divisive encompassed all Muslims, unifying the ummah in a common

identity found in God alone. Nevertheless, because this was not how the term was typically construed, he preferred to avoid it.

Salafis: Follow the Text, Don't Deviate

For Dawoud, the term Salafi was more agreeable, as it hearkened back to a golden age of Islam, and refrained from elevating any one person over others. A Salafi, he explained, is someone who tries to follow "the Prophet and the Sahabas, the *Taabi'een*, which is the next generation and the *Taabi ut-taabi'een* which is the next generation." In this sense, 'Abd-al Wahhab could rightfully be considered a Salafi, insofar as his intention was to return to the example of the early Muslim community. While he recognized that some "have given Salafism a bad name by calling themselves Salafi and blowing things up," they were not true believers, but "sinners" who are "gonna go into hellfire." In fact, if these self-styled Salafis had been more accurately instructed in Islam, they would not have gone down the radically militant path. Dawoud claimed that in general, Salafis should not be thought of as separate group or fringe sect, but middle-of-the-road believers who wish to observe the Prophet's teachings in their original form as revealed in the holy texts:

> Salafis are Sunnī Muslims. It's just that they call themselves Salafi because they're trying to get back to the salaf, which is the beginning of the, the first couple generations. So they're trying to, to be part of that generation when the Prophet *salalahu alaihi wa-salam* first gave the revelation. Follow the sahabas, don't deviate. Cause later on in Islamic history they started to, um, use their brain, reason, to get, you know, answers and stuff like that. Salafis believe that if it isn't in the text, it isn't in the Qur'ān, it isn't in the Hadīth, *then* you can use reason if you have to. But it isn't the first choice.

Reason here is delegated to a backup role, cast as the understudy to revelation's lead. The latter is paramount, the final, undisputed authority on whatever matters it address. It sketches the landscape on all content of serious importance; as for whatever marginal territory it leaves uncharted, the lesser tools of critical thought will have to suffice. This of course differs from Dawoud's account of the Mu'tazila philosophers' approach, which held reason in higher esteem, trusting its ability to even call scripture into question. According to Dawoud, though the Mu'tazila movement is no longer a prominent force in the Islamic world, its traces can be seen in many so-called believers: "A lot of Muslims nowadays say 'well this hadīth goes against my common sense. I can't use it.' We don't say that. We say, 'We follow the text.' So that's what Salafi means." While other Muslims might test the holy texts against their own ideas and experiences, Salafis like Dawoud do the reverse, testing their own ideas and experiences against the holy texts.

So there were two major points Dawoud drove home in his account of the Salafi path: first, that the aim was to walk in the footsteps of the first three generations of Muslims, eschewing deviations and innovations in matters of faith; and second, that the Qur'ān and authentic Hadīth were the highest authority in a believer's life, our clearest and most trustworthy guideposts, their contents transcending reason and impervious to critique. It was in light of these basic principles that I made sense of his attitude toward Sufism. Though Rabia had warned me that he was straightforwardly against it, I found his position to be slightly more nuanced. Much like the term "Wahhabi," Dawoud recognized that "Sufi" can mean very different things, and so refrained from passing value judgment on the concept as a whole.

Good Sufis and the Damn[ed] Raffle

He described Sufism in familiar terms, as "mystical," comparing it to the Kabba-

listic tradition of Judaism. Dawoud compartmentalized these mystics into two simple

groups: "There's good Sufi and bad Sufi," he explained, "just like anything else." As we

saw in his earlier example of hand movements and positions during salat, some variation

was acceptable and some was not. The primary criteria was whether evidence could be

found in the Qur'ān and the Hadīth to support a given belief or practice. Examples of the

good Sufis are those who exhibit *taqwa*, or pious fear of Allah, who practice silent con-

templation of their Lord, and who avoid dangerous extremes even with respect to permis-

sible behavior (e.g., eating halal food). He sketched an overview of such believers:

> The good ones are the ones who stay middle course. They *dhikr*, they
> leave the world alone a little bit, enough. You know they just, they do
> their transactions in the world cause we have to, but they don't stay in the
> world. They stay out the world. They go and they, you know, they do extra
> prayer. They fast a lot. They do things to get 'em closer to Allah. That's
> the good Sufiyah!

They live a life quietly consecrated to God, following the straight path in a modest, unas-

suming manner. They are immersed in their faith, interacting with the *dunya* enough to

get by, but never overly concerned with its business. Most importantly, they are content

to pursue their Lord "by ways that are legislated," in keeping with the precedent of the

earliest generations of Muslims.

Despite these good Sufis, which have included many "great scholars," on the

whole the tradition was dangerously prone to transgression. Dawoud vigorously de-

nounced the "bad Sufiah," those who bring their own ideas of prayer and worship to Is-

lam, and described with a mocking tone the practices of certain such groups: "Let's all sit

around and hold hands and jump in a crowd and dhikr, Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar, Al-

lah!' And everybody dances. That is a bid'ah." The concept of bid'ah was clearly central to Dawoud's taxonomy of acceptable Islamic behavior. Any religious developments following the first three generations of Muslims were dismissed *ipso facto*, could only be concocted distortions, obscuring the Rasool's message and endangering the believer's soul. While the remembrance of God inherent to the Sufi's dhikr practice is commendable, it should be done in a discreet, modest way, and always in keeping with broadly established precedent. Improvisation is prohibited: "The Prophet never did it, his sahabas never did it. The scholars of the ummah never did it. You made that up!" This reasoning is in keeping with his objection to raising one's hands three times during salat, as described earlier. All such practices are a waste of time at best, and more likely counterproductive distractions that undermine the methods Muhammad actually did prescribe. According to Dawoud, these codified, time honored methods are the complete and exclusive teachings guiding us on the true path. Following the Prophet's precise command was imperative, conformity to his example non-negotiable, as "other than that, nothing else will get you close to Allah." They engage in bid'ah who meddle in spiritual practices outside of the Prophet's teachings, who add their own, unsavory ingredients to an already perfect recipe. Such misguided souls "pu[t] things in the religion that weren't there in the beginning," and so change it into something unrecognizable, unacceptable, un-Islamic.

Not only were Sufis often deviant in practice, their beliefs could be likewise misguided. Dawoud took the interfaith issues addressed in the previous chapter as a primary example of this. He complained that many Sufis, and followers of Pir Batin al-Haqq in particular, took the heretical position that Allah might accept believers in faiths other than Islam. He cited Khadija, a member of the Study Circle from Palestine who occasionally

worked at Tafsir as a substitute teacher, as an unfortunate case in point. "I've heard out of her mouth," he said, quoting her with disapproval, "Jews and Christians aren't kafirs. They're not kafir. We can't, like, they're not gonna go to hell. Pir says, Pir-Bah said this and this and this." For Dawoud, anyone remaining a Jew or Christian after Muhammad came denied his message, and unless they repented surely stood among the condemned. While this may not be a pleasant belief, that's no justification for its disregard. Accepting the Rasool's teachings in their entirety is crucial, and we must not leave out the parts that we find unpalatable. He continued passionately:

> This isn't a, this isn't like a, you know, a damn raffle, where you can like, pick which one you wanna go, you know? This isn't like a smorgasbord. Islam is Islam. The creed of a Muslim is the creed of a Muslim. You don't go any further. You believe this or you don't. If you don't you're not a Muslim, if you do you are a Muslim!

Not only are non-Muslims denied a right standing with God, but even those who claim to be Muslim but who are not sufficiently exclusive in their theology. Khadija's faulty doctrines were all the more upsetting to Dawoud in light of her otherwise admirable conduct: "She prays. She fasts. She, um, has beautiful Eid parties and everything … but you have beliefs like that just, it destroys your Islam." Here, like the Ahmadiyya he denounced in the previous chapter, all virtuous behavior was overshadowed by views that failed to conform to his concept of orthodoxy. Like Musa Ahmed, Khadija could easily point to Qur'ān 2:62 to support her view, but for Dawoud this requires disregarding later texts that suggest the contrary.

Above Even the Prophet

No doubt, Khadija's views on heaven were an affront to Dawoud's theological

sensibilities. They indicated a toxic imbalance, an overemphasis on love and mercy, a

failure to recognize Islam's unique status as the true, complete revelation of God's law.

However, these beliefs were not themselves the heart of the problem, but rather were

symptomatic of a deeper and more fundamental issue. At the core of Khadija's error was

her trust in sources outside of the Qur'ān and Hadīth, her reverence for a fallible shaikh, a

misplaced faith in the teachings of Pir Batin al-Haqq. In this respect her sin was indica-

tive of her community as a whole:

> At that study circle they take his words—Pir-Beer, whatever his name is—
> they take his words and they put it above even the Prophet. Because I've
> heard, I've been out there talking to Omar, and a sister who works up
> there, we were talking about religion. You know how I brought up "the
> Prophet ʿalayhi as-salām said"? They say this about this man.

Dawoud's righteous indignation was unmistakable. He had pinpointed the foundational

error of the Study Circle's epistemology, the poisonous wellspring from which countless

deadly doctrines could flow. In elevating a contemporary teacher above Muhammad, the

group's members compromised the purity of their faith, and sacrificed their right standing

with God. Their collective moral compass was miscalibrated, their navigation bound to

blow off course. Dawoud continued, listing some of the contemptible practices that flow

from the Study Circle members' mutual adoration of their teacher:

> You know that his office is still there? The pen that he wrote with is still
> there. His bed has not been made. It's still the way it was when he died.
> His grave's out back. They have a book on a certain day that they read.
> They all dhikr together. They're like, extreme Sufis, man.

Though some details here are apocryphal, others are not, and regardless the essence of his

critique remains intelligible. Not only has the Study Circle mistakenly elevated Batin al-

Haqq's teachings above those of the Prophet, studying his 'book' as if the Qur'ān and Sunnah were not sufficient, they've turned his old stamping grounds into a museum of sanctified trinkets, revering his lifeless old possessions with superstitious awe. Perhaps Dawoud saw, albeit in milder form, a reappearance of the golden calf of Moses' time, the statues of Abraham's father, the idolatrous clutter of the *Ka'aba* before the Rasool cleaned house. More directly, this can be taken as a continuation of the wayward Muslims of 18th century Arabia, the grave-praying apostate targets of Muhammad Abd 'al-Wahhab's purifying mission.

While Dawoud acknowledged some positive aspects of the Study Circle, on the whole the group's reverence for Batin al-Haqq, his teachings and his belongings places them among the 'bad Sufiah.' He recognized their respect for Muhammad, but this was not enough; in fact, it was undermined by their devotion to Batin al-Haqq, whose teachings were often at odds with the Prophet's. Curiously, their 'extremity' was found in their eclecticism, their tolerance, their inability to meet Dawoud's standards of stringency. He remained ambivalent about the group as a whole, but his overall assessment was plainly negative, his tone cautionary:

> The reason why I'm telling you this is that, in religion we have to be strict.
> Now, these people, when it comes to helping their fellow man, they do.
> They have love. Love, openness. Very, like, open and stuff, but they have
> some beliefs that are not Islamic beliefs. I didn't wanna say that to you,
> but since I've talked to you a few times, gotten to know you a little bit,
> and I care about you in a way as a Muslim brother, and I don't want you to
> be led astray by Sufi-ism.

The Study Circle's openness is a double-edged sword. Here it is paired with love, perhaps creating an environment conducive to caring, compassionate service. It could be construed as a kind of humility before God, a recognition of the limits of our understanding,

an eagerness to grow. However, if we remain too open, we risk allowing false teachings and innovative practices into our *ibadah*, corrupting our *deen*. He parodied with a mocking tone an imaginary Study Circle member's overblown fixation on love, and imbalanced focus on the inward dimension of their faith: "love, it's about love. It's in my heart. It don't matter what I do, it's in my heart." He then completed the imaginary dialogue, "Of course it's in your heart. But the Prophet ʿalayhi as-salām said that faith is confessing with your tongue, believing in your heart, *and* doing the action. If you lost one of them, you haven't found your religion." He offered the hypothetical example of a bogus Muslim who claims to love Allah, but does not follow the generally approved Islamic practices. Such people only deceive themselves, as "nothing about [them] is Islamic at all." While he was not directly accusing any specific Study Circle member of this, given the context it was clear that they were the general recipients of his critique.

Outside of Islam: "To Me," or "Islamically"

In Dawoud's view, the group's overemphasis on the internal path helps render their faith void. They've elevated Pir Batin al-Haqq at the expense of Muhammad, a tragic mistake nullifying their connection to Islam. He seemed especially relieved that TIS's board member Omar had recently retired. Given the latter's involvement in the Study Circle, Dawoud was concerned about the impact his views might have had on the younger generation of Muslims at the school. Omar still spoke about his pir in glowing terms to colleagues, and cited his teachings freely to students and teachers alike. According to Rabia, her colleague Kabeera had grown critical of Omar the previous year after noticing him quoting Batin al-Haqq more than the Qur'ān or Hadīth. She feared he was propagat-

ing unorthodox teachings, incorporating into the school doctrines of a sect that was "out-

side of Islam." Rabia described for me their conversation:

> Miss Kabeera just had a couple things to say, like Omar doesn't quote the
> Qur'ān as much, doesn't quote the Rasool as much. He's always saying
> "Pir Batin, Pir Batin. Pir Batin said this. Pir Batin said that." And she
> doesn't agree with that.

Based on what we've already noted, Omar might agree with one aspect of this critique:

he himself considered his inability to quote the Qur'ān to be his primary weakness as an

authority figure in an Islamic school. However, this does not mean he was unfamiliar

with the book's content. Both he and Rabia felt that, in quoting Batin al-Haqq, he was

essentially passing along Muhammad's message. However, at TIS the Qur'ān was en-

dowed with an authority that Batin al-Haqq's teaching, in and of itself, generally lacked.

The legitimacy of the latter was dependent upon its correspondence to the former. Insofar

as it fulfilled this condition, Rabia was able to defend Omar to her colleague:

> I said, "Well, you know, from what I understand of what Batin al-Haqq has said,
> it does relate to the Qur'ān. He may not quote the Qur'ān, but he'll say something,
> and then I'll turn around and open the Qur'ān and see those exact words in the
> Qur'ān. Or in Hadīth." And she was like, "Oh, okay."

By this account, Kabeera seemed to accept this explanation, albeit without much enthusi-

asm. After all, if Batin al-Haqq was simply quoting the Qur'ān and Hadīth, why not cut

out the middle man, go straight to the original texts? As we've already noted, pledging

loyalty to a shaikh or faction carries with it the potential to mislead and ultimately divide.

While I never spoke to Kabeera about Batin al-Haqq in particular, I did ask her

views on Sufism in general. Her response was dismissive, her position based largely on

hearsay:

> I don't even walk into that world of Sufism or what have you. I just don't.
> I leave that part of it alone. Because I know it's outside of Islam. To me.

> To me—not just to me, but Islamically, it's just out of the, what Rasoolal-lah sallalahu ʿalayhi as-salām had given us to follow, so I don't touch base with that, or whatever. I just hear things that people say about them, so that's what they're saying.

While Kabeera did not appear to know much about what Sufism was, she knew what it was not: it was not a part of her faith, not sanctioned by her Prophet, not worth further exploration. It must contain teachings that contradict—or at least add onto—Muhammad's message. In pronouncing it "outside" the religion, she vacillated between two positions. While at first she makes the bold claim that she knows Sufism to be "outside of Islam," she paused to soften the blow, acknowledging her own subjective role in the verdict. In that moment, she suggested that Sufism merely appeared outside the faith *to her*, a fact that may have little bearing on its 'actual' status vis-à-vis Islam. She then paused and upped the ante, declaring the facts "Islamically," assessing the sect's standing with the Prophet from an impersonal position, categorically excluding Sufism, whatever that may be.

We're No Angels

Kabeera was not alone in dismissing Sufism on such imprecise grounds. Others at TIS struck me as similarly uninformed about and unconcerned with the mystical tradition. Aisha, a long-term substitute Arabic teacher in her first year at TIS, praised God for being in the correct group in right relationship with the Prophet's teachings: "I'm Sunnah, *Alhamdulillah*. This is the one. But all the others not the real Islam. There's the one Qur'ān and Sunnah. The other is not real. They are Muslims, but they act, their practice is not like Sunnah." She expressed some ambivalence here; while non-Sunnī believers are still considered Muslims, their version of Islam is counterfeit. Like several others at TIS,

she mentioned Muhammad's warning about the splintering factions into which his faith would inevitably divide: "Rasool ʿalayhi as-salām said this ummah, it is divided into 72 groups.[76] One of them gets Jannah, and all the other get hellfire. Who is the Jannah, is the Sunnah people."

While she did not hesitate to proclaim her own group heaven-bound, she was reluctant to assert the obverse: that all others would end up in *Jahannam*. This makes sense, as part of her critique of certain sects involved their own exclusive theologies and judgmental dispositions. Salafis, for example, make the path unnecessarily onerous with a preponderance of regulations and a propensity to denounce unbelievers. They "give the people hard time, and always say 'this one's kafir.' You can't say that. Subhannah ta'Ala, he punish you if you say that." At least one tension here is clear enough: how to pass judgment on a judgmental attitude without perpetuating judgmental attitudes? If the Salafis' cardinal sin is their readiness to condemn others as kafirs, declaring them unfaithful would be stooping to their level, succumbing to that same sin, fighting hellfire with hellfire. Though she could discredit specific beliefs or practices, it was not her place to decide if any individual was among the faithful. Even Wahhabis, whose creed was "not real religion," and Shi'ites, who she believed "said that Ali is supposed to be a prophet, not Rasool,"[77] were not necessarily kafirs; their views were distorted, but their hearts were unknowable.

While she didn't mention the Batin al-Haqq Study Circle or any particular branch of Sufism, Aisha denounced the tradition at large on several accounts. The first was her belief that Sufis assert for themselves fictitious supernatural powers. Pointing to an inanimate object on the table, she gave the example, "Like if I wanna say to this one 'move,' I

talk to this one, 'move,' this thing it will be moved. It's not real, you know? … We're not prophets or an angel to do this stuff." Through such make-believe parlor tricks, they erroneously place themselves on the upper echelon of the spiritual order. Sufis also, in her view, claim knowledge unattainable to mere mortals, further severing their contact with reality. With an air of superiority, "they always talk about Allah Subhannah ta'Ala, and about themselves. You know, they more than the people. They know more. They feel that. We know more, we know more. But nobody know everything." They're focused on God perhaps, but in a self-aggrandizing manner, violating the spirit of humility and undermining the unity of the faithful. Like Salafis, the Sufis' great transgression is hubris, elevating themselves above other Muslims, in their case by presupposing understandings available only to Allah. In their pride they are brought low, cast down below modest Sunnī Muslims for egotistically assuming a position above them.

If You Ever Wanna Close the Door…

Clearly, many of the TIS teachers had negative associations with sectarianism in general, and Sufism in particular; so it made sense that Rabia kept her views concealed from most of her colleagues. This was a matter of degree, as she felt comfortable sharing more with some co-workers than others. Most, she indicated, were completely unaware of her mystical leanings, but a few teachers were trusted with select details. While discussing with Kabeera Omar's habit of quoting Pir Batin al-Haqq, Rabia disclosed certain aspects of her own unconventional spirituality, while omitting others:

> I just said, you know, "I do attend those meetings, and I do accept the teachings of Batin al-Haqq." She doesn't know I have a shaikh though. She just knows I go to Pir Batin's gatherings and that I do study some Sufism. That's all she knows.

In their conversation, Kabeera had been critical of Omar's devotion to Batin al-Haqq, suggesting it undermined his allegiance to Muhammad. In this context, Rabia's decision to mention her own affiliation with the Study Circle entails a certain risk, takes on a confessional quality. It was a coming clean, albeit not entirely so, as she did not disclose her relationship with her current shaikh, Faqir Muhammad. Another teacher was trusted with more information, that crucial detail withheld from Kabeera:

> The fourth grade teacher, Aminah, she knows that I have a shaikh. She knows. So if you ever wanted to, like, close the door and say "Miss Rabia told me. What's your take on it? What do you think about it?" You know, that's fine, I don't mind.

Rabia's suggestion that I close the door, of course, reinforced the mood of secrecy that permeated our discussions of Sufism. With few exceptions, she found it most prudent to keep this facet of her life neatly partitioned from her teaching career, sensing that "on a professional level, it could interfere. It may cause people to look at you differently, and it may cause hardship, so I don't say anything." And though I never did discuss the matter with Aminah,[78] Rabia indicated that even she was critical, recalling with a hearty laugh, "Whenever I talk to her about it she's trying to get me to change my mind!" Aminah was open enough to warrant Rabia's confidence, perhaps, but was nevertheless intent on straightening her wayward colleague's crooked path.

Though Rabia had told several teachers that she attended the Study Circle meetings, Aminah was the only one who knew about her accepting a shaikh. For some Muslims, she explained, this issue was a line in the sand, a crossroads at which many Sufis deviated from the narrow way of piety. She described an interaction with a group of Salafi girls she'd met at Masjid Hamza, a Sunnī mosque a few miles away from Tafsir.

Rabia invited the girls to dhikr with her, but they refused, declaring it haram. However,

Rabia persisted, citing a hadīth to legitimize the practice, which was sufficient to con-

vince them. It turned out they were more open to mysticism than she would've expected:

> They were like, "yeah we're actually starting to study Sufism. We don't
> believe in a shaikh, but we're reading certain books from, uh, like older
> scholars from 7th century."[79] Imam al-Ghazali, stuff like that. They were
> like "I respect Sufism," they just don't agree with having a shaikh.

Rabia saw their newfound interest in Sufism as indicative of a broader trend in the faith.

According to her own shaikh, Faqir Muhammad, Sufism has lately grown more popular

among groups that were once averse to it. A wider range of Muslims, including some

Salafis, are "starting to follow *tasawwuf*, they just don't believe in *tariqa*, having the

whole order." Rabia sensed clear eschatological implications in this shift, a sign that Al-

lah was preparing the world for the end times, when "a different type of Islam" would

flourish. This would consist of deeper understandings of time-honored doctrines, pointing

believers to a radically intimate relationship with their Creator, and would be taught by

the *madhi*[80] upon his return, in keeping with the Rasool's prophecy. With a certain ex-

citement, Rabia imagined a non-Sufi Muslim awakening to this newfound possibility:

"maybe there is more to life than just praying five times a day. Maybe I can *know* God."

One as Quantity, Oneness as Quality

Unfortunately, she felt, few of her colleagues shared this growing openness to Su-

fism, and so remained at a more rudimentary stage. They accepted Islam on its surface,

but failed to penetrate its rich, esoteric depths. This left them ill-equipped to accept Ra-

bia's relationship with her shaikh, unable to comprehend her views. Hence her restraint:

> I pretty much keep it under wraps here, because most people are really on the level of *Shariat*, which is just praying five times a day, believing that there's one God, not oneness in God. Even though in the surah, Ikhlas, it says "Allah is one," you know? We're supposed to believe in his oneness, not that he's just one. But I don't talk about it here. I don't talk about it here.

Her repetition of this last phrase drove home the point of her silence, a condition she continually made clear. The distinction she draws between Muslims at the Shariat level and her own faith hinges here upon the believer's interpretation of a single passage in one of the final chapters in the Qur'ān. That chapter, which is typically called *Surah al-Ikhlas*, is alternately known as *Surah al-Tawhid*, indicating the unity of monotheism. Its contents, a mere four verses, describe that unity in one of the most concise and oft-repeated declarations of Islamic faith:

> *Qul: hu Allahu Ahad*
> *Allahu Samad*
> *Lam yalid wa lam yulad*
> *Wa lam ya kulahu kufuwan Ahad.*
> Say: He is Allah, the One and Only.
> Allah, the Eternal, Absolute
> He begetteth not, nor is He begotten
> And there is none like unto him. (Yusuf Ali translation)

This passage could be interpreted as a refutation of polytheism, or perhaps as a rejection of pagan reverence for the created (and ever-changing) world. In a Christian context, it likely reads as a reassertion of the Judaic singularity of YHWH in the wake of trinity doctrines or assertions of Jesus' unique status as "begotten son" of God (see John 3:16). While Rabia would not likely disagree with any of these readings, she would find them insufficient to convey the full power of the surah. She explained her own understanding of the doctrine of tawhid:

> When I hear "God is One," I hear "There is nothing else but him," you know? He is the only one that exists. That's what I hear. That's what my

> wisdom tells me. But other people might hear, "Oh, there's no other God but him." Well, of course, but there's more to it, you know? That's what my wisdom tells me. It tells me that part that's more to it.

The interpretation of the phrase "God is One" that others might hear, which she attributes to the Shariat, or entry-level understanding, is roughly that 'there exists only one God.' Somewhere a solitary and incomparable deity resides; there is no pantheon of gods, no triune Godhead, only a singular Creator. Rabia appeared to accept this understanding, but took it as obvious, elementary. Through the wisdom she has gained in her studies of tasawwuf, she interprets tawhid as "oneness in God."

For those "on the Sufi path," she explained, "Islam goes beyond, oh, belief in God. It goes into merging with God and being one with God." She tasted this in small ways throughout the day through the "recognition of something good that might have happened to me or some help I might have received." This might come in the form of an interaction with a friend, a student, or a co-worker, but in any case Rabia sought to focus less on the form of the help than its source, less on the gift than the Giver. This suggests not only obeying Allah's commands and conforming to his will, but opening one's heart to the spirit of kindness, generosity, and love, letting go of all that is contrary. By embodying the divine qualities, Rabia experienced heightened moments of connection to her Lord, both the cause and effect of her spiritual progress.

However, fully merging with Allah is a loftier goal, and so calls for loftier measures: nothing short of "complete submission." We must surrender qualities, actions, and intentions that run contrary to God's character, but this is not enough. The Sufi path leaves no stone unturned, no oil unburned, calling for the surrender of all we think, all we do, all we are. To be one with God requires that all separations be cut away, that we

transcend not merely selfishness, but self*hood*. The chief impediment to progress on the

Sufi path is this 'lower' self, the isolated identity of a personal consciousness, ontologi-

cally distinct from other selves:

> Self is the ego. The thing that convinced us the day we looked in the mir-
> ror and we're old enough to "understand," quote unquote, that this is who
> I am. This shell is who I am. Whatever I identify with, this as, is the self.
> Now, Sufi understanding is that only God exists. And that we are only
> space. We are only a piece of that one Lord.

To further explain the relationship between the self and God, Rabia shared a metaphor

she'd learned from her father. He described separate egos as individual light bulbs pow-

ered by the same circuit which collectively illuminate a single area. While each may be

unique in some ways—e.g., the physical space it occupies, its lifespan, its wattage and

brightness—they are united in not only their mutual purpose, but also in the source of

their power: "We're all forms. And we have the light that shines, and then we have the

current that flows. And the light and the current are all one. It's just the light bulb that's

different from another light bulb." The current represents God, ultimately the source of

light, invisible yet coursing through each bulb, providing illumination through the con-

duit of physical forms.

It Was God!

According to Rabia, to identify as the bulb undermines the unity of the current as

well as the light. In identifying as the self, she forgets her status as a "piece of that One-

Lord,"[81] a mistake with practical ramifications in her daily life. It affects her moods, the

way she interacts with those around her, and how she interprets their actions. She cited a

recent example of an interaction with a 7th grade student, Aziza, at the beginning of a

lunch period. The teachers and students were reciting a prayer in unison, and Rabia noticed that Aziza wasn't moving her lips. She asked her to join in the prayer, but the student refused. Rabia repeated her request, but to no avail. She sensed the beginnings of a tiresome standoff, a fruitless battle of wills, and so paused to reflect on the exchange in light of Sufi teachings. In them, she found higher ground and avoided further bickering:

> If I took it personally then my ego is convincing me, "Oh she's disrespecting me. She's disrespecting the thing I've identified myself as." But that's not, she's not disrespecting me. It's all coming from Allah.

Rabia went on to chronologically recount every step in the incident—Aziza's initial lack of prayer, her own efforts to correct her; Aziza's resistance to correction, her own indignation—repeatedly claiming that each "came from Allah." For either her or the student to take offence to the other's actions would demonstrate a lack of wisdom, to lose sight of God's oneness and sovereignty, regarding the exchange with the eyes of personhood, the lens of separation:

> That's just all egoic understanding, looking at it from the view of the self. You know, "Oh, *I'm* being attacked." I'm not being attacked! You know? I didn't attack her, you know? It was God who made her, who put her in that position to do what she did, it was God who made me realize it, it was God who made me respond, it was God that made her look at me like I was crazy. It was God!

While acting with the mindset of 'a person,' Rabia takes her student's insubordination (understandably enough) personally. In her refusal, Aziza disregards her teacher's command, undermines her authority, perhaps even her dignity. Rabia's initial reaction is defensive; she feels attacked, and might respond in kind. This could escalate the conflict, prompting further hostility from the student, perpetuating a downward spiral. When handing responsibility to God for the encounter, she can remove herself from the stage of drama, view the action as a front row spectator. If she no longer writes herself into the

script, she's able to learn from the incident, unclouded by self-interested stake in its out-

come. In this case, she comes to believe that Allah was already performing every role,

explaining so with unmistakable enthusiasm. There was no need to take offence to Az-

iza's behavior, no need to defend herself, no self to defend. This realization redeemed the

exchange, elevating it from the depths of a petty squabble into the realm of divine learn-

ing.

Levels of Islam

In this example, Rabia framed the ego, or *nafs*, as a fallen, lower state. It is de-

fined by difference, the counterpoint to unity, and hence falls short of our highest calling.

Even so, it plays a crucial role in Allah's plan. It provides the contrast necessary for

meaningful learning to occur, clarifying the nature of unity through the experience of its

opposite. In dense, eloquent terms, Rabia explained this view:

> The self is the thing that makes the truth experience things as separate
> from God to understand the opposite of God, so that we can then learn
> who we are and merge back to what we are, which is Allah. Because only
> Allah even exists.

Her portrait of learning entails a kind of figure-ground shift from commonplace accounts.

Rather than a self who experiences truth, here truth experiences selfhood as a means of

spiritual development. Truth is described in embodied terms, taking on a living, sentient

quality, and is more authentically who we are than the "I" is. In describing Allah as "what

we are," Rabia toes a potentially dangerous line.[82] Her embrace of "truth" as our deeper,

legitimate identity is hauntingly reminiscent of the famed Sufi writer Mansur al-Hallaj,

executed in 10th century Baghdad after a similar claim was attributed to him.[83] Granted,

Rabia's context is different than that of Hallaj, but the sentiment could still be easily con-

strued as blasphemous at TIS. Her secrecy makes sense, as it's easy to imagine these views causing the very hardship she hoped to avoid. Nonetheless, as we spoke in private, she continued in similar fashion:

> We're already merged with him. But we're experiencing all this as something separate so that we can acquire the knowledge that we need to understand what we aren't so we understand what we are. Which is God.

She describes our unity with God less as a feat we must accomplish than a fact we can realize. We're already "living as one," but fail to recognize this, blinded as we are by the internal "veils" which have been "placed in our consciousness." Once we have fully experienced the nafs, whose base desires comprise the greater part of these veils, our dissatisfaction with our life can bring us to a point where we recognize the ego as "what we aren't." However, this is only the beginning of our fragmented soul's journey back to its whole, unified state. To become what we truly are, we must be prepared to give up what we're not, which is everything we've become. This is easier said than done. Rabia's shaikh, Faqir Muhammad, called this process *fana*, which he translated as "losing oneself," or alternately, "annihilation."

Short of reaching this state, seekers are destined to an incomplete experience of God's unity. Rabia explained another of Faqir Muhammad's teachings on the various stages of spiritual enlightenment, accounting for those who fail to 'lose themselves.' Many Muslims are content to "perform the Shariat, which is like, the basics." She described this as "a form of duality" wherein the ego maintains its fundamentally separate identity, distinct from others and from Allah. This characterized "the first level of Islam," wherein the believers view themselves as capable of pleasing God through prayer, aligning themselves with God's will through righteous acts and obedience to divine law. The

attitude of the Muslim at the level of Shariat is, as she put it, "I'm helping because help-ing is right." According to Rabia, most members of the Tafsir community were on this introductory level.

On the second level, the self no longer maintains its distinct ontological status, but comes to identify fully with those around it. These believers literally 'love their neighbors as their selves,'[84] declaring, in Rabia's terms, "I'm helping because I am you." The self still exists, but it is bound up inextricably with other selves, essentially indistinguishable from them. Those at this level act righteously not out of a sense of duty or obedience, much less for hope of reward, but from a realization of their profound interconnectedness with others. Meanwhile, the following—and presumably final—step eliminates the self from the formulation. In Rabia's terms, the believer in this state would realize, "I'm not the helper. It's God who's helping and God who's receiving the help." This, of course, is reminiscent of the understanding reached in Rabia's moment of clarity about Aziza's ap-parent insubordination. Upon reflection, Rabia no longer viewed the exchange as a stu-dent challenging her teacher, but came to interpret it as God's active revelation of truth for those with eyes to see it. In lieu of conflict, she came to see, in terms of her father's metaphor, the divine current flowing through two bulbs in an effort to "teach the light." For those in this state, the self no longer has any active role to play; it is entirely surren-dered, neither the servant nor the master, but "annihilated" into full consciousness of Al-lah's all-embracing oneness. "This is Islam," Rabia concluded. "This is true Islam. We're all one. We're all connected by God…It's all God helping God, and giving help to God. It's all one. It's all one."

CHAPTER 6:

DISCUSSION

> Ask Allah to guide you and give you good and make this the best paper,
> you know, so you can get your doctorate … Lift your hands up to Allah,
> and say "when I go into this threshold," when you go into the office or
> whatever, "Allow me to put all my worried stuff or all my worration out
> the door to deal with this issue to make me a better person, a better Mus-
> lim, and Insh'Allah to help Muslim children."
>
> –Dawoud's advice to me, interview transcript.

The primary research question of this study is "how are orthodoxy and orthopraxy constructed, maintained, and challenged at Tafsir Islamic School?" In short, my data demonstrates that these processes are enacted through a complex network of inherited traditions, divergent beliefs, and hermeneutical orientations; sermons, lessons, and rituals; stereotypes, censorships, and silences; curricular materials, extracurricular activities, disciplinary measures (aimed at peers or otherwise), and other forms of social interaction. Each of these factors is directed or informed by interpretive processes, which are themselves socially constructed and ardently contested. My findings have been organized into two chapters. The first focuses on issues of translation, interpretation, and religious knowledge among members of the community. The second foregrounds sectarian identity and the tension between diversity and unity. Each was introduced by a quotation concerning the children's story character Humpty Dumpty, but for reasons left unaddressed. I would like to address these quotations now, as starting points to a discussion of what seem to me the overarching themes of my research.

Part I: Which is to Be Master?

Chapter 4 began with the excerpt from Carroll's (1897) "Through the Looking Glass," where Humpty Dumpty declares, "When *I* use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." In asserting his capacity to determine linguistic meaning, the egg proclaims the rule of his own will. Though his words are imported from the social field, he is able to creatively co-opt them to manifest original significance. This might represent a conscious break from community, and certainly risks alienating Humpty Dumpty from others, who may not understand his private meanings. Furthermore, he arrogantly imposes these meanings on his listeners, insisting that his words mean no more or less than exactly what *he* intends. In other words, Humpty Dumpty is free to wield and manipulate language as he wishes, while others are forced to trust and accept his interpretations, even if they are unable to comprehend them.

Unsurprisingly, Alice takes issue with the egg's position, raising the question of whether he really possesses this interpretive ability. Humpty responds by reasserting his initial position with greater force: "The question is which is to be master—that is all." The grinning, belligerent egg, a hermeneutical monarch perched on the throne of his wall, drives the obvious point home with chilling clarity: interpretation is a matter of power. Through a series of wordplays and departures from conversational convention, he establishes his own mastery, leaving Alice mystified into silence, "too much puzzled to say anything." He repeatedly berates her for not using language as he deems appropriate, commending her for talking "like a reasonable child" only when she no longer challenges him, but learns to submissively request his explanation.

What most concerns me—as I hope is obvious—is not any individual or group's actual ideological proximity to a fictional anthropomorphic egg, but the exercise of power concerning or by way of religious interpretation, i.e., the question, "which is to be master" in the realms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and by what means. My interest in this question began after my hallway conversation with Rabia, when she warned me to keep my Sufi studies a secret on the grounds that "some people see it as innovation." I found myself outside of the boundaries of right belief and practice as understood by these people, e.g., the Salafi brother Dawoud. In a very straightforward respect, I felt an overt element of power at work, a roundabout censorship rendering my spiritual life unacceptable for common knowledge. In encouraging my secrecy, Rabia was obviously not carrying out her own personal agenda to marginalize Sufism—she herself is a Sufi. Her request can be understood rather as the outgrowth of a distinct dynamic of normative sectarian identity within the school community, and demonstrates one mechanism by which a specific range of orthodoxy is maintained. That is, some spectrum of interpretations has been collectively deemed tolerable, and as a result, non-conforming community members are pressured into silence. This silence reinforces the standardized range, which ossifies into an apparently neutral and non-denominational Islamic worldview in a *cycle of normalization*.

A Smorgasbord of Meanings

Some at TIS were more instrumental than others in altering this spectrum of acceptable religious views. Among the clearest expressions of the flexibility of spiritual meaning came from Omar, in his discussion of the school's approach to learning the

Qur'ān. Too many schools, he lamented, employ "parrot-phrasing," a memorization-first technique which places no premium on cognitive understanding. He was proud to note that Tafsir emphasized comprehension, while mentioning Abdul-Qadir Jilani's oration detailing 48 meanings contained within a single verse. He described the individual as an ever-changing entity who brings continually fresh interpretations to the text under ever-changing circumstances. The result is "endless" meanings to each verse, the result of the active, dynamic relationship between the scriptures/traditions and those who encounter them. This lends legitimacy to our subjective states, a sense that we as readers bring something of value to the text; the individual interacts with the Qur'ān in a personalized and authentic way, and need not appeal to recognized experts, established schools of thought, or early generations of believers. In Musharraf's (2011) terms, this leaves room for the Gnostic's "realm of understanding," is reminiscent of the "surreal arena" of radical subjectivity which precludes the fixation of meaning. This represents a form of resistance to the notion that a single orthodoxy at the school should exist, as the notion of a solitary right belief is undermined by the validity of countless subjective viewpoints.

This flexible position can clearly be characterized as hermeneutically open, as it leaves room for an indeterminate variety of interpretations which might vary between individuals, across cultures, or over time. More to the point, it accommodates spiritual novelty, original beliefs and viewpoints considered dangerous by some participants. Perhaps the clearest expression of this sentiment came from Dawoud, who verbally berated Khadija, a substitute teacher at Tafsir, for her having denied that Jews and Christians would be sent to hell. In fact, in his view this denial alone was enough to exclude her from Islam, and would lead her to perdition alongside the other renegade People of the Book.

Dawoud's attitude exemplifies Salafi writer Muhammad Sa'id al-Qahtani's simplistic

concept of al-wala' wa-al-bara', a Manichean framework sorting humanity into two

groups, either allies or enemies (Duderija, 2010). His dismissive image of Khadija's the-

ology as a "smorgasbord" lampoons a buffet-style conception of faith, where the con-

sumer casually chooses which doctrines to believe, passing on whatever he or she finds

disagreeable. Such an approach appears to minimalize the submission required of the

Muslim, leaving the individual in control of drawing his/her own religious conclusions.

This could render unlikely the prospect of attaining truth, given the clouding effects of

our base desires, the shaytan's tricks, and the dunya at large. Meanwhile, Dawoud's other

metaphor portrays Khadija's faith in no better a light. Comparing her approach to a

"damn raffle" suggests a chaotic quality, irrationally governed and inherently unstable.

Doctrines are selected at random for acceptance while others are discarded in a process

with no apparent order, impossible to predict or control. Likened to a form of gambling, a

practice forbidden by the Prophet, this strategy can be condemned as haram from the out-

set, to say nothing of its contestants' unfavorable odds of success. The contrast between

Dawoud's rigidity and the dean's hermeneutically open position mirrors D'Agostino's

(2011) account of the ummah in New York City. There, some Muslims felt that more

clearly defined criteria were necessary to resolve doctrinal disputes, while others called

for greater flexibility to accommodate the variety of religious understandings.

Alvi (2014) describes Salafi Muslims in general as "literalist in their interpreta-

tion of Islamic laws and principles" (p. 40). By this account, meanings of words are

fixed, precise, and not subject to creative negotiations. Believers who, according Kovaks

(2014), reject the concept of "free and critical thinking," might understandably chastise

those who take semantic liberties with the holy texts. Leaving the scriptures open to end-less meanings, we might use them to justify all manner of innovations, or effectively de-cide which teachings are binding and which are optional. We must not pick and choose our meanings or doctrines like browsers in a shopping mall, but must accept the totality of Allah's linguistic revelation as literally true and universally applicable, regardless of our personal preferences. Salafis who claim to espouse, in al-'Uthaymin's terms, the one "correct and true Islam" (quoted in Duderija, 2010), would see themselves as custodians of a message that transcends their individual wills. From this perspective, the Muslim can only find orthodox faith by returning to the pure Islam of the salaf al-ṣāliḥ, the earliest, best generations of believers, who drank the pure teachings directly from the source, un-contaminated by modernity and the "adulteration" of Western individuality (Alvi, 2014).

Vigilante Religious Policing

Other teachers at TIS likewise earned the disapproval of Salafis in the community concerning questions of orthodoxy. Phillip, Tafsir's former high school English teacher, had assigned the book *Divine Luminous Unity* to his students. The book was written by Keith Hartman, one of Pir Batin al-Haqq's closest devotees, and contained esoteric doc-trines which failed to conform to literalist interpretations of standard Islamic texts. Batin al-Haqq's teachings in the book's introduction warn against an over-reliance on scrip-tures and traditions, and encourage seekers to investigate the natural world to find clues leading to divine truth. God, who exists everywhere and communicates directly to the human heart, cannot be contained by a single religion, let alone one of its narrow sects. The book's teachings repeatedly violate mainstream interpretations of Islam, and so were

judged unacceptable by a local Salafi with no formal association with the school. This Salafi, nicknamed "Big Brother" by one participant for his authoritarian disposition, took upon himself the task of confiscating these books from students, presumably in an effort to protect them from its heretical contents. One Salafi's conception of orthodoxy, in this case, was openly challenged at Tafsir by the combination of Batin al-Haqq's teachings, Keith Hartman's writings, and Phillip's decision to assign *Divine Luminous Unity*. Big Brother suppressed this challenge, asserting Salafi hegemony by banishing the innovative text in a purifying mission worthy of Abd 'al-Wahhab himself.

As we have seen, Big Brother did not limit himself to censoring teachers, but in another instance even confiscated books distributed by an administrator. Omar passed out Mawlana Sinclair's story, *Queen Bee of the Mango Plantation,* in hopes of providing students with creative and spiritually edifying poetic literature. Unlike *Divine Luminous Unity*, the book the book contained no explicit teachings which could reasonably be deemed heterodox, but Big Brother confiscated it all the same. According to Musa Ahmed, it was deemed inappropriate by sole virtue of the word "Sufi," which was insufficiently obscured despite Omar's efforts. Big Brother's conduct, of course, is not without its precedent. It mirrors the example is Saada's (2013) study, where a teacher met with opposition for assigning Frankenstein on the grounds of its supposedly un-Islamic content. In her case, like Sinclair's text, the issue was less an explicit teaching of heretical spiritual doctrines than a symbolically-oriented expression of human creativity. In each case, the text was apparently perceived by its opponents as an affront to a particular religious ideology.

In a more general sense, Big Brother's penchant for actively patrolling a religious community to monitor its members' beliefs can be observed in the Saudi religious police (Rohmaniyah & Woodward, 2012), and their Indonesian offshoot, the Salafi Islamic Defenders Front (Kovaks, 2014). With disturbing irony, these groups use intimidation, threat, and violence to dissuade 'sinful' behavior, as well as to eliminate competing interpretations of the faith and establish the dominance of their rigid conception of orthodoxy. Big Brother's interventions can be seen as an active expression of Dawoud's exclusionary, literalistic, anti-Sufi rhetoric. While the latter appeared content to verbally ostracize innovative beliefs and condemn non-conformists to hell, Big Brother took arms against the sea of heretical troubles, determined to rid the community of its doctrinal impurities. These intrusions constitute a kind of *vigilante religious policing*, unsanctioned by the school, probably illegal, but ostensibly effective. Not only were the books successfully removed from the curriculum, but select proponents of "gentle Islam" were sadly cowed into silence by such maneuvers, hesitant to speak out against the like-minded Salafi contingent for fear of backlash. One could only speculate as to the bully tactics those like Dawoud and Big Brother would employ in a context where greater religious repression was allowed, or even encouraged.

Saudi Textbooks and Hilali & Khan

However, the hermeneutically open community members were not merely the passive victim of curricular censorship, but were themselves active combatants in the textual struggle for orthodoxy at Tafsir. During Omar's tenure on the board of directors, he wielded some authority over instructional materials, and was able to utilize his influence

to screen out ideas he deemed unfit for student consumption. The most palpable instance of this was his response to the Saudi textbooks once used by the school. When he discovered their crude message that all non-Muslims end up in to hell, he decided to "take them out of the curriculum" to prevent his organization from endorsing this bigoted attitude. This gesture supports both Kovacs' (2014) claims and the findings of the Center of Religious Freedom's (2006) study which portray Saudi educational materials as divisive and intolerant. Clearly, Omar's action could be considered its own form of censorship, as it entails the suppression of supposedly dangerous views. This suggests that, though his conception of orthodoxy is comparatively wide, there are limits to what he would allow within his school. People were free to interpret their faith as narrowly as they wish, but when he worked at the school he would not permit "mean-spirited" views to thrive unchecked under his jurisdiction.

If the Saudi book publishers' exclusionary teachings were allowed to run rampant, students may be indoctrinated into a rigid, elitist interpretation. This would undermine both Omar and the dean's hermeneutic openness, threaten the community's spiritual diversity, and in my view, quite likely harm children. This was the reverse side of Big Brother's confiscational coin; only so much intolerance could be tolerated. Taken as a whole, the vignette implies numerous actors—the producers of the Saudi textbooks; whoever at Tafsir initially approved them; Omar; whoever produced the replacement books, and so on—whose perspectives and actions collectively provide another example of how various orthodoxies were constructed and resisted in association with the school.

A similar dynamic was clearly at play when Omar approached TIS principal Ramzi Malik requesting that the school switch from the Hilali-Khan to the Asad transla-

tion. The parenthetical commentary contained in the former attaches the word "Muslim" wherever the word "believer" appears, and in *Surah al-Fatihah*—the scripture's opening chapter, quoted atop this paper—explicitly associates Jews and Christians with those who have earned God's anger and who have wandered astray, respectively. These embellishments can be seen as an effort on the part of the translators to unambiguously restrict the boundaries of right belief to Muslims. Insofar as TIS used this version (despite Omar's partially successful effort to remove it), Hilali and Khan's commentaries are yet another element which influenced the construction of normative ideology within the school, perhaps all the more dangerous because of their inclusion in the translation of the highly revered Qur'ān itself. This exemplifies D'Agostino's (2003) observation about the challenges faced by Muslims in New York City, most of whom are unfamiliar with classical Arabic, and so are dependent on the translations and commentaries to explain the source texts of their own faith. These believers rely on the interpretations of others, and so must trust in the wisdom and good will of those undertaking the task of translation. In light of this observation, TIS elementary school teacher Zainab's advice that I compare numerous translations appears all the more reasonable. In doing so, the individual may have a stronger chance of drawing her/his own conclusions, and may have a better approximation of the scriptures' original contents based on the principle of triangulation. In any case, by removing the exclusionary textbooks and substituting some of the Hilali-Khan translations with those of Asad, the former administrator Omar attempted to maintain a theologically open, tolerant atmosphere, thereby challenging the rigid Salafi/Wahhabi orthodoxy endorsed by Saudi book publishers and narrow-minded Quranic translators alike.

Theological Dialogue: Prayer Bead Bid'ah

While these may be the most overt examples of hermeneutically-open community members vying for doctrinal prominence, several other conflicts followed a similar enough pattern. In dean Musa Ahmed's efforts to sanction the distribution of prayer beads to students, for example, we are offered a unique insight into one mode of TIS doctrinal decision-making dynamics. Unlike Omar in his response to the Saudi textbook, the dean apparently did not feel at liberty to make a unilateral decision here, to dole out the beads by fiat. In choosing to approach mosque secretary Abdul-Aziz, he sought the approval of a respected community member with a clear position of religious authority. Though Abdul-Aziz initially endorsed the plan, he recanted under the influence of a Salafi teacher who considered beads bid'ah, a forbidden religious innovation, by virtue of their absence from the Prophet's own practice. The use of prayer beads may also be an example of the "mystical religious practices" mentioned by Kovacs (2014), deemed "idolatrous" by Saudi religious scholars; by a similar logic, they may be eschewed by those sympathetic with puritanical 18th century reformer Muhammad ibn Abd 'al-Wahhab who, as Musa Ahmed explained, obliterated popular sacred sites such as graves, shrines, and any physical relics that Muslims were associating with prayer. However, the Salafi teacher's fear that the students might worship the prayer beads revealed, in the dean's terms, a lack of common sense, the use of which would challenge the uncritical literalist position. Regardless of the underlying justification, in this case, Abdul-Aziz's religious authority in conjunction with the Salafi teacher's counsel was sufficient to stymie the dean's plan. This is an example of another means by which religious norms are constructed at Tafsir: namely, through the spontaneous, at times unsolicited discussion

among parties concerned with a given issue. In this case, the dean and the teacher had an active stake in the outcome; the mosque secretary was placed in the position of judge, arbitrating between the competing agendas. His involvement attenuated the hierarchical superiority of Musa Ahmed's position, and in a sense rendered the two disputants on equal footing in a mediated *theological dialogue*, armed primarily with the evidence of the Qur'ān and Sunnah.

Guerilla Gaming: The Gray Area of Chess

A comparable example was the question of chess, where once again the dean consulted mosque secretary Abdul-Aziz in hopes of receiving spiritually-grounded approval. In this case the secretary's initial refusal was reconsidered in light of Musa Ahmed's subsequent visits and varying Hadīth evidence, but ultimately he never granted his blessing on the "gray area." The dean spoke privately with his colleague Omar, whose ability and willingness to say "the heck with it"—to disregard the Abdul-Aziz's misgivings and buy the chess sets—demonstrates the informal, improvisational quality to certain interpretive decision-making at TIS. Apparently the dean did not ultimately need the Abdul-Aziz's blessing the bring chess to his students (his colleague Omar did so regardless of its absence), but he sought it anyway, possibly in hopes of strengthening his own position in anticipation of being challenged, e.g., by parents committed to a decontextualized hermeneutical stance. In the case of the prayer beads, where he faced eventual opposition from both the mosque secretary and a teacher—the latter of whom worked within the school itself—Musa Ahmed accepted defeat. When it came to chess, he brought the matter to a

like-minded colleague, who subverted the secretary's ruling and fulfilled the dean's educational agenda.

Though this was carried out within Musa Ahmed's own institution, it was done in a guerrilla fashion, below the radar and without the sanction of a contending authority figure. This incident calls to light yet another facet of the construction of orthodoxy and orthopraxy at TIS. Educators may unilaterally initiate unsanctioned activities or lessons which overtly or implicitly communicate theological or behavioral norms. This phenomenon may be difficult to accurately document, as many such efforts would likely be carried out surreptitiously—e.g., by individual teachers when their classroom doors are closed—due to their potentially controversial nature. The content of such unauthorized teachings could be as diverse as the community itself, challenging or reinforcing any number of interpretive positions. However, it is worth noting that Musa Ahmed was working within the "gray area," not transgressing a clear cut ruling. Had Abdul-Aziz declared chess haram outright, it is questionable whether the dean would have proceeded as he did. That is to say, the ideological spectrum of such rogue pedagogy is likely circumscribed not only by the school's formal affiliation with Islam, but in this case its physical and social proximity to the masjid as well.

About half the Islamic schools in the U.S. are connected to a masjid. In just over half of these cases, the operation of each is ostensibly autonomous from the other (Keyworth, 2009, p. 34). Tafsir is one of the approximately 29% of U.S. Muslim schools that falls into both categories. However, in the case of TIS, the autonomy of the school from its contiguous mosque is partial. While they each possess their own distinct leadership structures and board of directors, these examples suggest that the school's decision-

making processes were at times still under the sway of the mosque. While in this case, the

issues were not core theological doctrines, I believe that such decisions and subsequent

actions do send messages to students, messages which might confirm or undermine what

they've learned at home. In a broader sense, the aggregate of numerous peripheral is-

sues—each arguably minor in its own right—could betray the underlying epistemological

stance of those controlling school policies. As we've already seen, the dean denounced

epistemologies characterized by "slavish adherence to the literal." He advocated a plurali-

ty of interpretations and historically contextual readings of the Qur'ān and Hadīth. In

these respects, his position exemplifies what Saada (2013) refers to as *moral pluralism*.

In this most recent example, some believers deem chess haram based on some disparag-

ing words against it in the Hadīth, regardless of their initial intention. This exemplifies a

moral absolutist position, a commitment to universally homogenous rules governing ac-

ceptable conduct (Saada, 2013). To apply those teachings uncritically today suggests a

hermeneutical approach that, in Duderija's (2010) terms, is "decontextualized," "static"

and "universalistic in nature" (p. 76). Those who see the Muslim dean playing chess, us-

ing prayer beads, or wearing his pant legs below the ankle (as in male students' own

school uniforms, save those who cut or roll them) may sense a hermeneutical stance that

is context-aware, dynamic, and particularistic in nature. Muslims need not be slaves to

the literal, but may consider the socio-historical circumstances of the revelations, and

creatively apply Islamic teachings to their own unique lives. This would present Islam, in

the words of one morally pluralist teacher in Saada's (2013) study, as a "flexible religion

that adapts to different contexts and different cultures" (p. 264). Various interpretational

stances are available, and Muslims have choices in how they approach or appropriate their faith.

Peer Discipline and Doctrinally Differentiated Instruction

I spent a disproportionate amount of time with Musa Ahmed and Omar, and so encountered more examples of their efforts to construct or challenge concepts of orthodoxy than those of anyone else. However, other participants had similar enough doctrinal collisions with contrary-minded community members which deserve some attention. One such instance, which bears some resemblance to the previous examples, was the dispute between Basira, Tafsir's middle school English and social studies teacher, and Waliyy, who had taught social studies the year before my arrival. Her use of freestyle educational hip hop and later the EdRaps materials raised the hackles of several Salafis in the community, corroborating Saada's (2013) observation about the disputed status of music within the ummah. In this case, Waliyy's moral absolutism, based on a literal reading of certain hadīth, forbids music for all Muslims. Basira's position was more flexible, based on critical readings (or perhaps disregard) of religious texts, and a greater concern with underlying processes than universal rules. It could therefore be considered morally pluralist, and is another way that right belief and practice are construed. That is, in addition to the specific, surface-level question of whether music is permissible, teachers' embodiments of various axiological positions may communicate norms of a more fundamental nature.

In this example, four students refused to participate in the activities, echoing D'Agostino's (2003) observation that Muslim students reared in certain schools of

thought may raise objections in class or challenge their teachers' views. This in itself highlights another aspect of the social construction and contestation of rightness: namely, that students can feel empowered by their faith—prompted by their parents or otherwise—to challenge school authority figures, insofar as the latter deviate from the *siratul mustaqim*. Meanwhile, Basira's co-worker Waliyy rebuked her actions as haram while insisting that the Salafi students' parents be called in. In Waliyy's intervention, Basira detected misogynistic undertones, taking his attitude as indicative of a general Salafi contempt for "opinionated" women. This perspective provides support for an inference drawn above: namely, that high school teacher Rabia's relative secrecy about her Sufi beliefs, particularly when compared with Omar, may possess a gendered dimension. If teachers like Waliyy are more inclined to reproach women than men, feel entitled to 'put them in their place' on doctrinal issues, Rabia's silence may be a logical effort to preclude chauvinistic admonishments. In Basira's case, Waliyy was severe enough to warrant her enlisting an imam from outside the school to ameliorate her colleague's police tactics. This further illustrates the spectrum of forces shaping right belief and conduct at Tafsir, being in some cases so tangibly broader than the immediate community.

Niyozov & Memon's (2011) describe the *Islamization* movement as an internally multifarious, evolving effort to submerge all "knowledge, values, and practices" into a specifically Islamic paradigm. While this is largely aimed at secularism, proponents of this movement turn their sights to other Muslims whose conduct does not fit their distinct criteria (p. 14). While I am not aware of anyone at TIS using this term, Waliyy's efforts can be seen as an attempt to *Islamize* Basira's pedagogy; seeing music as outside of Islam, he apparently felt it unfit for students at TIS, even as a means of teaching vocabu-

lary. In this case, Waliyy lobbied for support, so to speak, from like-minded parents in an effort to shut down the lesson. Despite these efforts, protestors remained in the minority, and regardless Basira was not easily pushed around. Their objections were found unreasonable, inconsistent, and ultimately unconvincing, and she refused to let a few agitators dictate her teaching. Her solution to dismiss the objecting individuals from the activity and carry on with the remainder of the class surely accentuated for all parties TIS's underlying hermeneutic diversity. The student partition, otherwise utilized for gender or age grouping, was in this case erected on doctrinal grounds. Basira's four Salafi students, excluded by virtue of their teacher's and parents' incongruent convictions, were a testament to yet another way the school grappled with the question of orthodoxy: in this case, there was no reconciling compromise, no single activity to include all parties. A line of demarcation was drawn, and the teacher utilized doctrinally differentiated instruction in an effort to accommodate the Salafi stance without fundamentally disturbing her own pedagogical trajectory.

Another example of inter-teacher doctrinal friction was elementary school teacher Zainab's conflict with her colleague Kabeera. Zainab, who typically delivered the Friday afternoon sermon to the students, downplayed the question of whether to celebrate Muhammad's birthday, suggesting that students could decide for themselves. From Kabeera's perspective, this could be seen as encouraging the sin of Study Circle member Khadija, i.e., a smorgasbord-style faith, where individual preference reigns supreme over the clear word of God. Besides this, she may have felt that Zainab was selling out, making a concession to the dominant culture, whose emphasis on Christmas could pressure Muslims to allow their children some parallel excitement.[85] A less generous interpretation

would be that, having taught her own class that the maulid celebration is forbidden, she may have seen Zainab's open-ended teaching as an affront to her own authority, calling into question her religious expertise. Whatever her motivation, Kabeera's critique of Zainab's doctrinal posture, like Waliyy's dispute with Basira, highlights a contentious practice affecting the construction of orthodoxy and orthopraxy at Tafsir: simply put, when teachers disagree on religious matters, some utilize forms of *peer discipline*—with varying degrees of success—to shape how and what their colleagues communicate to students.

Part II: Humpty Dumpty's Great Fall

According to the nursery rhyme, Humpty Dumpty plummets from a wall and, we infer, shatters into an untold quantity of irreparable fragments. All silliness notwithstanding, this image serves as a metaphor for my findings in two ways. The first—tangential, but sufficiently intriguing to warrant mention—is its allegorical representation of a shattered God in a distinct Sufi cosmology. According to Rabia, "Sufi understanding is that only God exists," and we are each "a piece of that One Lord." Her shaikh, curiously enough, lightheartedly used the image of Humpty Dumpty's fall to illustrate the existential journey of Allah, who allegedly traveled from a state of unity into the consciousness of separation, the shattered pieces of the egg. In doing so, he explains, God both creates and attends a "school of contrast," wherein the primal consciousness of oneness adopts the form of its own antithesis in order to gain deeper realization of its true identity. Experiencing the state of separation which characterizes the ego, we are currently living as countless broken fragments of the once singular eggshell, and are thereby able to com-

prehend firsthand, in Rabia's terms, "the opposite of God." While in this school, we can realize the incompleteness of our identity as a broken shard, awaken to the truth of our primordial and potential unity with all other broken pieces, "and merge back to what we are, which is Allah." This cannot be accomplished by human effort; neither the king's horses nor men (i.e., human power or effort) can reunite the shattered egg. A miracle is required, which, as Rabia's shaikh happily pointed out, is no problem for God.

This provocative interpretation of what otherwise might appear a trivial children's rhyme illustrates the creative power of the interpretive process; a point by no means irrelevant to my study. However, a fuller discussion of this metaphor may prove tangential, and in any case too ambitious and esoteric for my current purposes. The second and more tangible respect in which the image of Humpty Dumpty's fall represents my findings is as a simple metaphor for an ummah fragmented along sectarian lines. The ideal of unity among believers is explicit in Muhammad's teaching, and yet he ominously predicted that the Islamic community would be fractured, and into 73 groups. The group instructed to live as a single egg so soon thereafter plunged down from this lofty height, shattering into apparently irreconcilable pieces.[86] While considerably less inventive than the allegory offered by Rabia's shaikh, this image of a fractured ummah corresponds more directly to my commonplace experiences at Tafsir, and so requires more attention.

The Fractured Ummah

I have already discussed at some length the tensions arising from divergences in interpretations of select aspects of the Islamic tradition, as well as from disparate approaches to the process of interpretation itself. An entire chapter is organized primarily

around the community's views on sectarian identity, and even the findings and discussion focusing on interpretation are laced with factional undertones. Though several participants claimed that over seventy subsets of Islam exist, the vast majority of these were never once named by anyone, and the exceptions were mostly in passing. In my analysis of sectarian divisions within the school I focused on the school's three most prominent (if problematic) categories: Sunnīs, Salafis, and Sufis. While we should take care not to unfairly generalize about these groups, certain patterns can be detected among some of their adherents, the examination of which could prove analytically fruitful.

Sunnī Responses

To begin with, I would like to revisit the previous example of Zainab and Kabeera, addressing it in light of the issue of sectarianism. In her Friday sermons and our interview alike, Zainab repeatedly emphasized the ideal of unity among Muslims, while minimizing the significance of racial, ethnic, linguistic, and national distinctions. More than any other participant, she seemed concerned with popular opinion of Islam, and aware of the pressures discussed by D'Agostino (2003) for Muslims in the U.S. to present "a uniform image" of the faith to attentive outsiders. In setting aside differences and banding together, she felt the ummah could work to reverse negative stereotypes and improve its social standing. Her reluctance to take sides on controversial issues—e.g., the question of whether Muslims should be obedient to corrupt leaders, or whether to celebrate the Maulid-an-Nabi—can be interpreted as an expression of the same basic impulse. The story of Salman al-Farsi, her denigration of sectarianism, and her call and response student interactions (which tirelessly emphasized the group's common status as Mus-

lims), can be seen as efforts to bolster the children's sense of spiritual solidarity, to thwart potential divisive arguments, and to cultivate what Grewal and Coolidge (2013) call a "Muslim-first identity" (p. 251). Her strategy for constructing a unified religious orthodoxy seems to have been a *less is more* approach; that is, the less anyone clearly defines the right answers to controversial questions, the more students can be counted members of the community.

Halima, the high school teacher who prioritized student comfort and happiness, took a similar, doctrinally minimalist stance. Even when teaching from the Qur'ān and Islamic studies textbook, she tried to present the content as it appeared, without adding her own slant, leaving it up to students to interpret it as they wish. When I asked if she identified as Sunnī, she answered yes, but went on to emphasize that such a distinction "doesn't matter," that being a Muslim was the important detail. Hers was a more thoroughgoing avoidance of divisive issues, considering sectarian affiliation a "personal" matter, best left unaddressed in the school context. Though she did not identify as Sufi, Halima's emphasis on the private dimension of belief is reminiscent of Musharraf's (2013) account of Gnostic faith, recognizable by its propensity to prioritize subjectivity and inwardness. Halima did not require her students' faith to conform to objective standards of accuracy or specific external historical traditions. She trusted each with her/his own process, striving to create a classroom atmosphere of tolerance and harmony born of limited disclosure. Her position bears some resemblance to the Clinton administration's military policy on homosexuality, i.e., *don't ask don't tell*, and constitutes yet another approach to the subject of orthodoxy: namely, to not vocally approach the subject of orthodoxy.

Veteran elementary school teacher Miss Kessler took a similar 'non-position,' while seeming motivated less by a desire for student comfort and more by a genuine dis-interest in the matter. Espousing a non-descript "straight Islam," she trusted that the Qur'ān was sufficiently clear on major issues to guide students' lives, and expressed no motivation to embellish on the fine points. Her concerns appeared to lay in more tangible matters, such as maintaining a quiet cafeteria, a clean hallway, an orderly classroom. In this respect her priorities appeared in line with those of certain parents in Merry's (2005) study. While these parents' motivations were diverse, some expressed greater interest in a well-disciplined environment than any explicit religious instruction.

After years of feeling ostracized in the public school system, Miss Kessler was grateful to work in an "Islamic environment," where she was free and even encouraged to practice her faith. Her feelings here were reminiscent of Kelly's (1999) observation of Muslim students in Montreal public schools, whose perpetual need to negotiate a physical and ideological space in which to practice their faith took a psychological toll. Another parallel can be found in Zine's (2007) Toronto-based study, in which she defended the general "narrative" portraying Islamic schools as "safe havens" for otherwise marginal-ized believers. Miss Kessler's perspective demonstrates that these dynamics are not ex-clusive to students, but can apply to adults in school environments which systematically neglect their convictions.

Several other participants, whose views are largely excluded from the previous chapters,[87] took similar, ostensibly non-sectarian stances. Miss Nasreen, for example, re-fused to affiliate herself with any school of thought, beyond "whatever is in the Qur'ān, whatever is in the Sunnah," identifying this approach as normative at Tafsir. Sulayman, a

TIS graduate I briefly interviewed during one of my last visits to the school, explained that members of the TIS community "tend just to be Sunnī. Everybody wasn't really a part of the Sunnī/Shi'ite conflict." Ghauth, who was both a TIS graduate and current science teacher, identified as Sunnī, but explained, "I don't really go down to the details about the sects, about this and that one … To me, it's just, if you believe, and you do the right actions, and the good deeds, then Insha'Allah, only Allah can judge you."

Of course, in each of these apparent non-positions (Miss Zainab, Sister Halima, Miss Kessler, Miss Nasreen, Ghauth and Sulayman) the effect of professed impartiality is not necessary neutral, but may be seen by students, parents or colleagues as indirect reinforcement of the status quo. By working in an environment with overt ideological commitments, teachers' refusal to assert a position on controversial topics can amount to an implied support for the present order of things, whatever that may be. In the case of these and other Sunnī teachers, the ubiquity of their particular tradition endowed it with an air of non-partisanship, a placid invisibility. Like men's basketball, a heterosexual nightclub, or white history of the U.S., the adjectival qualifier of Sunnī Muslim was *de facto* unnecessary, mutely implied in its absence; meddling in specifics is necessitated only by deviation from the dominant group.[88] The very phrase "Sunnī Muslim" was generally redundant at TIS, as each term unequivocally implied the other. This dynamic facilitates a commonality between these teachers' response to the issue of the fractured ummah; namely, it allows each the relative luxury of sweeping it under the rug, downplaying its importance, or ignoring it altogether.

Salafi Responses

Of any group in my study, the Salafi Muslims appeared the most keenly aware of TIS's sectarian disunities. It would not be unfair to note that they were disproportionately represented in the selection of incidents mentioned above, that in an unusually large number of cases they played a key role in school conflicts surrounding interpretations of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Examples include Big Brother's book confiscations, Waliyy's pedagogical policing, Dawoud's condemnation of Khadija's interfaith tolerance, Kabeera's doctrinal rebuke of Zainab's acceptance of the maulids, and the unnamed Salafi teacher who opposed Musa Ahmed's prayer beads. A clear pattern is detectable here. In each example, Salafi Muslims responded to the fractured ummah with efforts to exclude other shell-fragments, or deny their legitimacy. These believers apparently viewed the diminutive shard of Salafi interpretation as tantamount to the entire egg. Their responses to divergent beliefs were consistently characterized by efforts to (a) correct them, thereby elevating others to their own level of moral purity, or (b) stamp them out, like glowing embers in a dry wood. In each of these examples, their interventions suggest a narrowing intent: fewer books permitted in the curriculum, fewer pedagogical methods employed by teachers, fewer acceptable views concerning holidays; fewer ways to pray, fewer souls in heaven, fewer kinds of Muslims. In several ways, these examples substantiate depictions of Salafi movements in the literature discussed above (Duderija, 2010; Alvi, 2014; Kovacs, 2014). More specifically, my findings provide examples of Salafis' misogyny, intolerance of other faiths, opposition to mystical practices and religious innovation, binary interpersonal positions of alliance and disassociation, and commitment to decontextualized, literal interpretation and emulation of the Qur'ān and Sunnah.

This rather consistent corroboration notwithstanding, it would be a mistake to generalize these findings to all Muslims affiliated with the Salafi manhaj. One teacher at TIS, Sister Fatimah, aligned herself with Salafism, and yet in several ways deviated from the aforementioned patterns. She granted students "a lot of freedom to use their voice, to share their opinion," and rejected "narrow" forms of unidirectional teaching in favor of classroom collaboration, emphatically claiming to "love, love, love student democracy." She criticized certain gender inequalities—an overprotective stance toward women, gender-differentiated standards of conduct, inconsistent male/female punishments for identical transgressions—as explicitly un-Islamic. Fatimah found these disparities to be "purely cultural within the Arab community," having "nothing to do with the Qur'ān or the teachings of the Prophet," concluding that "the whole, you know, boy and girl, gender differences is absolutely crazy." She even warned against popular Salafi hermeneutical positions, claiming that "not everything is literal, especially in the Qur'ān." Although she, like Kabeera, taught her students not to celebrate Muhammad's birthday, she did not, to my knowledge, ever criticize Zainab for presenting the maulid holiday as optional. And unlike Dawoud, she made no use of the binary al-wala' wa-al-bara' ontological formulation (Duderija, 2010), claiming instead that God is our judge and the only one fit to categorize humans in such a way. This indicates that considerable interpretive divergences can be found even within a sect known for its epistemological rigidity. In short, Salafi orthodoxy was, in Fatimah's case, challenged from within the ranks of Salafism itself.

Sufi Responses

That being the case, the most drastic deviation from the general consensus of orthodoxy at TIS—be it that of Salafīs in particular or Sunnīs in general—came, unsurprisingly enough, from a Sufi. As we have already seen, Rabia took pains to ensure that most of the TIS community remained unaware of her Sufi beliefs and practices. No other participant made mention of them, no overt collisions with colleagues betrayed them, nor did any of her interactions with faculty or students overtly reveal her heterodox interpretations. Whatever I know about her spiritual views was gathered during our interviews and informal conversations; and the more I learned about these views, the more I understood her efforts to keep them quiet.

It is worth noting that I never had the impression that Omar, who also identifies as Sufi, felt the need to keep his faith a secret.[89] One might speculate that this was because of his position of authority, that as a board member he held more sway, commanded more respect, and would not be so easily intimidated. However, the exact opposite could be the case; given his higher position in the school's bureaucracy, compared with a teacher like Rabia he might be under closer scrutiny from parents, faculty, and community members alike, and so be more secretive. There may be a gendered, racial, or age-related dimension to his relative transparency. Omar is a white male in his 60s, whose position of privilege may leave him less of a target for rebuke than Rabia, a somewhat younger woman of color.[90] Unfortunately, given the time limitations of my study, I never did have the chance to explore these options in any satisfactory detail.

Regardless, I believe Omar's openness can be explained in large part by the fact that his spiritual understandings did not actually deviate drastically from those of most

other Muslims at Tafsir. While his openness to "endless interpretations," could have raised the ire of certain hardline literalists, on the whole, he did not seem to take many hermeneutical liberties with his own faith. His Sufism was simply "gentle Islam," distinguishing from its "mean-spirited" counterpart less by esoteric teachings than its focus on personally manifesting Allah's beautiful qualities of mercy, compassion, and love. His line in the sand was drawn not between Sufis and Salafis or Sunnīs and Shi'as, not between people or groups but between contrary attitudes, opposing dispositions, the formless, transpersonal spirits of kindness and cruelty. Omar's views are less likely than Rabia's to be deemed flagrantly heretical, and so naturally he would have less reason to be guarded.

Rabia's secrecy did not in every way prevent her from practicing Sufism within the school context. According to Musharraf (2013), the Sufi path is largely characterized by a radical subjectivity, an inward-facing orientation. From this perspective, the Gnostic is not confined to external forms of spiritual observance. An example can be found in Rabia's interaction with the 7th grade student Aziza in the TIS cafeteria. Rabia initially perceived that the student was not joining in with the group prayer, and so instructed her to do so. When Aziza refused, Rabia took offence, sensing disrespectful intentions. The situation quickly escalated to the point where each party found fault with the other, and neither appeared willing to budge.

Rabia then reflected on the interaction in light of her Sufi studies, and decided that the conflict was characterized by "all egoic understanding, looking at it from the view of the self." She concluded that "All these actions," whether her own or Aziza's, "they come from Allah," and therefore serve a higher purpose. If Rabia were to continue

to act from a state of ego, she would likely continue to drive a wedge between herself and the student, and may even resort to punishing Aziza. In this case, as in countless others, it would be difficult to disentangle to what extent such a response would be motivated by a genuine concern for correcting the student and/or preventing future misdeeds, as compared to exacting retribution for a teacher's damaged pride. Rabia's initial mindset is reminiscent of what Heshusius (1996) called an *alienated consciousness*, a mindset characterized by personal ownership, distance and control. By viewing the exchange as God's responsibility, she was able to release her sense of command over the interaction, her personal stake in its outcome. In doing so, her position resembled Heshusius' (1996) *participatory consciousness*, "a larger unknown but also uncontrollable self-other reality in which [she] would partake but of which [she was] not in charge" (p. 641).

It is important to note that this focus on inwardness and shift into a participatory consciousness need not imply outward passivity. Rabia's decision to surrender her nafs, or ego, to the will of Allah does not suggest that her interaction with the student would cease, her mouth would go silent, or that no disciplinary action would ensue. In this case, the teacher did back off and leave the student alone, but this is not the point. Rather, whatever happened externally, the teacher's nafs would no longer experience itself as the driving force. By Rabia's account, this level of understanding would preclude the element of wounded pride, the personal offense taken by an authority figure scorned. Obviously, this does nothing to guarantee student compliance; Aziza may yet flout the rules in whatever respect, but this is also beside the point. With the conviction that Allah controls the situation, Rabia might take no more personal offense to the student's behavior than she would to a cloudy day.

In another respect, she came to accept Aziza not only as acting on behalf of God's will, but part of her own life; that is, as an aspect of the same God who constituted her own true identity. In this way, her attitude is reminiscent of Nasir's (2004) account of the faculty at Bilalian Islamic School (BIS), who emphasized their closeness to students in ways that undermined perceived differences. More specifically, Rabia's perspective parallels a particular BIS teacher who recognized himself in a misbehaving student, and so was able to remain compassionate towards him. By Rabia's own account, this change in perspective toward surrender and unity led to her ability to deal with Aziza in a positive, productive manner. It can be seen as part of a broader development in her spiritual life, in which she was "learning not to take things so personally and just accept every action as something for me to learn from." This further demonstrates the power of interpretation, whereby the individual can construe the same interaction as either dramatic conflict or edifying lesson (or other ways). Like Musharraf's Gnostic, Rabia was able to transcend the apparent "continuum of events" (p. 36) through an exercise of contemplative subjectivity, fashioning a distinct and original spiritual meaning which freed her from the cycle of reactionary egoism. We have already noted above Musharraf's quasi-paradoxical observation that the exoteric clerics' denying the subjective quality of our knowledge results in a "self-centered" (p. 47) disposition. That is, by failing to recognize the ego's role in constructing our worlds, we presume ourselves possessed of pure knowledge, and mistake our subjective perceptions for truth. Here we see a concurrent paradox: that radical inwardness and subjective interpretation can serve a self-*decentering* function. In asserting the thoroughly subjective quality of our knowledge, we are freed to restructure our

perception of reality in terms that dethrone the divisive nafs and promote a consciousness of ontological unity.

There are at least two respects in which this interaction points to the construction of orthodoxy and orthopraxy within the community. The first and most obvious concerns Rabia's initial efforts to persuade Aziza to make *du'a*. Students were required to pray daily at Tafsir. They were expected to participate in salat, taught which prayers to recite before partaking in daily activities (e.g., eating, going to sleep, entering a bathroom), instructed how to repent in their hearts after committing a sin. They were reminded of the importance of prayer by teachers, administrators, and peers alike; school calendars, posters on bulletin boards, and Islamic studies textbooks reinforced its centrality to the school's intended ethos. These prayers are practices, internal or otherwise, carry with them definite doctrinal implications, if not outright assertions. Whatever other potential benefits of prayer, the administrative decisions to include the teaching and practice of prayer into the landscape of the school can be understood as an effort to instruct students in proper Islamic belief and practice. However, Aziza's resistance to reciting the du'a indicates a potentially contentious element of this ritual. Students who do not wish to join in whatever prayer may feel pressured to do so, and faced with a stark choice: to participate insincerely or face negative consequences. As we have already seen, researchers like Kelly (1999) and Zine (2007) have demonstrated that Islamic schools can serve as safe places for students to live out their faith, free from the marginalizing effects of secularized public school contexts. Rabia and Aziza's interaction illustrates a concomitant phenomenon: students who do not wish to practice the faith to whatever degree[91] may at times feel marginalized in Islamic schools. Such students may not have actively chosen to

attend their school, and could in certain respects feel safer to follow their irreligious convictions in a secular school context.

The second way that Rabia and Aziza's interaction points to the construction of right belief and practice is subtler than the first. As we have already seen, Rabia largely kept her Sufi-orientation a secret from the TIS community; to my knowledge, she never explained her internal process to Aziza, so the 7th grader would likely be unaware of the specific theological framework surrounding her teacher's shift in perspective.[92] However, insofar as Rabia was learning not to take student insubordination "personally," even coming to see it as a learning opportunity, I expect that many students would sense a change in their interactions with her. This is based on a more general assumption: that teachers' internal states—beliefs, attitudes, motivations, interpretations—are often tacitly sensed or overtly observed by their students and colleagues alike through myriad visual or audible cues. Rabia herself, for example, mentioned the importance of her demeanor in the interaction, citing Aziza's sensitivity to teachers' tones of voice. To whatever extent students are affected by teachers' internal states, these are themselves means by which right belief and practice are construed within the school. We have already seen several ways the school attempts to directly influence student spiritual conduct or belief (such as Waliyy's "do as I say" approach, Kabeera forbidding the maulids; Zainab's Friday sermons). We have also seen numerous examples of Tafsir faculty modeling tangible behaviors with specific ideological or epistemological implications (Ghauth's demonstrating humility by claiming "God only knows," Musa Ahmed's open chess matches, Basira's raps). In a subtler way, however, I would argue that the internal mental and spiritual processes of teachers play an active role in modeling distinct moral attitudes and dispositions. This is

not easily measurable, and a sufficient discussion of the subject could find little support in my data; nevertheless, in my view these intangible processes are no less important in shaping conceptions of right belief and practice than the more explicit means of instruction and influence addressed above.

Part III: General Interpretive Climate

So far this discussion has focused on answering my study's primary question; that is, on depicting the processes by which orthodoxy and orthropraxy are constructed and contested at Tafsir. My secondary question was less tangible: how could we describe in theoretical terms the general interpretive climate corresponding to these processes? The first question was answered predominantly with specific empirical examples, which will themselves ground the more abstract discussion of the second. In the remainder of this chapter I will briefly provide a theoretical account of the ideological atmosphere at Tafsir, an atmosphere which both results from and contributes to the interpretive conflicts described above.

Median of Interpretation

As we have seen, Tafsir is host to a wide spectrum of interpretive approaches to Islam. Participants in my study disagreed about how the faith should be presented, particularly to students. Believers actively vied for ideological prominence in myriad ways, including disparate instruction, theological dialogue, administrative intervention, curricular censorship, and peer discipline. Despite these disagreements, these individuals collectively constitute the community who staffs, supports, and surrounds a single school or-

ganization. This organization in many respects presents a unified image of itself to outsiders, on its Web site, in policy documents, mission statements, and pamphlet advertisements. We can reasonably assume that this unified image corresponds to the community's ideological common ground, a rough consensus of the views, intentions, and self-conception of the members at large. This is a two way street. Those who constitute the community shape how it is presented to outsiders, and this presentation shapes the kind of people who will want to join the community. Evidence for this point can be seen in the Salafi mother's objection to the September 11th memorial service: "I never would have sent my children here if I would have known."[93] The presence of moral absolutism and an al-wala' wa-al-bara taxonomy might be diminished by a public presentation of an inter-faith-tolerant school atmosphere. Clearly, such presentation can be a self-fulfilling prophecy. At TIS, the image offered in the aforementioned media is unmistakably Islamic, which distinguishes the school from its Christian, Jewish, and secular counterparts. However, the school is sufficiently vague in depicting its Islamic character so as to attract a wide range of Muslims.

Though this wide range of Muslims can functionally meet on a common Islamic middle ground, this exact location of the middle is subject to change. The presence of sects whose views lie in some respects outside of the mainstream could have the effect of shifting what might be called the community's *median of interpretation*.[94] In the case of Tafsir, one effect of Salafi and Sufi presence appears to be a kind of mutual neutralization of outlying beliefs. It was, of course, a Salafi who confiscated copies of the flagrantly heterodox *Divine Luminous Unity,* ensuring that Keith Hartman and Pir Batin al-Haqq's spiritual eclecticism would not propagate unchecked. And it was a Sufi, Omar, who

pushed to supplant copies of the Hilali-Khan translation of the Qur'ān with the Asad version, and to remove the Saudi textbooks, ensuring that intolerant Salafi-endorsed interpretations would no longer receive the school's stamp of approval. It was another Salafi whose opposition to prayer beads thwarted dean Musa Ahmed's plan to distribute them to students, hence preventing the innovative idolatry of bead worship; and yet it was again the Sufi administrator, Omar, donning long pants and a clean-shaven chin, who bought six chess boards for the dean to play the game forbidden by a decontextualized reading of the Hadīth. It was a Salafi, Dawoud, who most adamantly warned me to steer clear of Sufism, while Rabia, a Sufi, warned me to steer clear of Dawoud.

In light of these examples, it is tempting to see in my data the familiar story of an inter-sectarian struggle for religious hegemony (see, for example, Isherwood, 1989; Howell, 2001; McGilvray, 2011): on one side at Tafsir are the comparatively open-minded, tolerant Sufis, on the other, the conservative, domineering Salafis, while the ordinary, non-sectarian Sunnīs are caught in the middle, struggling to keep the peace. This would not be an entirely inaccurate or unfair account, and yet despite its partial empirical grounding and simplistic appeal this is obviously an insufficient picture. Straightforwardly conflating the qualities of interpretive flexibility and tolerance to sectarian affiliation can be misleading, as it fails to capture the countless nuances, qualifications, and exceptions that complicate social and spiritual realities. Several interpretive conflicts pitted Sufis or Salafis against 'non-denominational' Sunnīs, i.e., not against each other, demonstrating that such tensions were not directly tied to sectarian outlier identity. We have also seen exceptions to the aforementioned stereotypes: Fatimah aligned herself with Salafism while warning against misogyny, intolerance, and literalistic Quranic interpreta-

tions, while Omar's Sufi orientation failed to preclude a relatively abrasive, judgmental disposition. And while the Sufi Rabia and the Salafi Dawoud were clearly at odds over divergent sectarian-associated interpretations, their resemblances should not be over-looked: each claimed affinity with an exclusively "true Islam," suggesting for themselves proximity to elite forms of knowledge or virtue, consigning others to lower stages of spir-itual development. Furthermore, as one participant noted, sectarian labels themselves are inexact, carry conflicting meanings, and can be co-opted to entirely divergent ends. In short, a straightforward correlation of personal qualities with sectarian identity would fail to account for intra-group diversity, inter-group similitude, and semantic imprecision.

A Dynamic Interpretive Equilibrium

Regardless of sectarian labels, plurality of religious interpretation is an obvious fact in the life of the TIS community. It is likewise obvious that there are limits to this plurality. The umbrella of Sunnī belief, entailing a twofold commitment to the Qur'ān and the example of the Prophet, was a largely unspoken consensus, widely considered synonymous with Islam itself. Those on the outer fringes of the hermeneutical spectrum often found conflict with those otherwise inclined. The subsequent resolutions and lack thereof constitute, piece by piece, the finer points of a broader, approximate consensual presentation of orthodoxy and orthopraxy within the school. In some cases, such as con-flicts over the permissibility of music or the legitimacy of non-Islamic faiths, divergent viewpoints managed to co-exist among faculty. In other instances, questions of tangible curricular elements appeared to require a more overt and singular verdict. Fringe beliefs were the primary casualties of this battle, as texts espousing outlier views were lopped off

from school syllabi like unruly branches on a neatly manicured terrace shrub. The presence of "gentle Islam" in Omar's ideology was sufficient to weed out textbooks and Quranic translations espousing intolerance, while the retrogressive elements of Big Brother's interpretive tradition justified the pruning of texts endorsing dangerous innovations. To use a political metaphor, each organizational segment of the community (parents, teachers, administrators) could be compared to various branches of government, each mitigating the others' potential for sovereignty. Within each branch are those committed to various sectarian traditions, not entirely unlike political parties. The distribution of interpretive control within the school community results in a *de facto* system of checks and balances, where the collective will exercises veto power over radical departures from the consensual right path. Those playing an active role in school decisions constituted, over time, a dispersed kind of motley panel of Supreme Court justices. Though largely self-appointed and never meeting together as a whole, their sporadic individual rulings served in quasi-collaborative fashion to interpret for the school community its constitutional texts, the Qur'ān and Hadīth. These cumulative, distributed interpretations and de facto checks and balances have a stabilizing effect at TIS, coalescing into an *interpretive equilibrium* which characterizes the general, open ideological atmosphere of the school.

This interpretive equilibrium and its limits change over time as members enter into and depart from the community, enrolling and graduating, joining and leaving the faculty. Even long-term, stable members undoubtedly change within themselves, reinterpreting old beliefs in light of fresh experiences and socio-historic circumstances. The approximate consensus of rightness is negotiated and renegotiated with each conflict. Its precise contestations, ranging from questions of 'eternal damnation for whom?' to the legality of

board games, give tangible form to the fantastic egg's fantastic question: *which is to be master?* The school functions with relative coherence, colligated under a single name, a single location, possibly a single God, and yet the balance of mastery is in perpetual flux, even moving simultaneously along divergent courses with regards to distinct controversial issues. In short, the approximate consensus of orthodoxy and orthopraxy (i.e., interpretive equilibrium) I have described is dynamic, and the variety of means by which such rightness is constructed and contested culminates, broadly speaking, in what might be called a *dynamic interpretive equilibrium* among the school community members.

Obviously, each setting within the school complex may develop its own unique normative equilibrium. Business as usual in one classroom may be off limits in another, and the same joke told on the soccer field might elicit different responses in the masjid. Insofar as I was forbidden to enlist students in this study, my data drastically overrepresent adult perspectives, and the lack of parents in my sample likewise inaccurately minimizes their influence on the school's ideological climate. Also, I spent far more time with some participants than others, which surely shaped my depiction of Tafsir's hermeneutical norms. However, these shortcomings do little to undermine my basic theoretical conclusions: that TIS's ideological diversity leads to conflict-driven negotiations which collectively contribute to an ever-changing, general and imperfect consensus regarding the acceptable range of Islamic interpretation and practice.

What results from this, of course, is that certain ideas falling far enough outside the range of acceptable belief are excluded from open discourse, tacitly or otherwise. Questions of whether or in which cases this is desirable are not my present concern, but two examples will suffice to demonstrate the limits of orthodoxy at Tafsir. First, the an-

gry mother's objections to the September 11th memorial fell on utterly and willfully deaf ears, and I heard nothing resembling her view ever once expressed or implied within the walls of the school. Judging from the Center for Religious Freedom's (Shea & Al-Ahmed, 2006) account, the old Saudi textbooks may have come close, but belonged to a distinct equilibrium long passed by the time I arrived. Their expressed sentiments of intolerance were found to be disturbing the then-present balance, and so were expelled from the curriculum.

The second example is Rabia's belief that we are all "a piece of that One-Lord," that human beings are in truth various aspects of Allah. This was expressed, to my knowledge, on only a single occasion within the school: during a one-on-one interview with me, a fellow heretic, and behind closed doors. Her claim to human "identity with God" would undoubtedly place her on the blasphemous side of many a Muslim's litmus test, including that of her fellow Sufi al-Ghazali (Howell, 2001 p. 707). This reading of Surah al-Ikhlas' doctrine of Allah's oneness was flagrantly heterodox, off the charts of acceptable belief, inadmissible given Tafsir's current equilibrium. In Nasir's (2004) terms, it was an "ideational artifact" (p. 155) that, like the poet's *Sufi Adventure Tale*, could not be tolerated as an offering to students. Such beliefs were effectively unspeakable, consigned for the time being to Rabia's inner world, shared only through subtle manifestations of their quiet remembrance.

CHAPTER 7:

CONCLUSION

> Each society has its régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is,
> the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the
> mechanisms and instances which enable each one to distinguish true and
> false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques
> and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of
> those who are charged with saying what counts as true.
> –Foucault, Power and Knowledge, p. 131

Summary of Findings

Media outlets, religious leaders, and politicians have expressed concerns over the

content of Islamic education in the United States and elsewhere (Grewal & Coolidge,

2013; Mezvinksy, 2010; Jasser, 2011). America alone boasts approximately 250 full-time

Islamic schools, serving thirty-two thousand students of a growing Muslim population

(Grewal & Coolidge, 2013; Keyworth, 2009), and yet little research exists discussing the

curricular content, pedagogical methods, and ideological orientations of these institutions.

My study raised the question of how these and other factors work together to construct

and challenge dominant conceptions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy—i.e., right belief and

right practice—at a single site, Tafsir Islamic School (TIS), a medium sized K-12 private

Islamic school in a Midwestern U.S. metropolitan area. Qualitative field work was con-

ducted at TIS over an 18 month span, utilizing ethnographic data collection methods, a

flexible and collaborative research design strategy, and an iterative, grounded theory-

inspired approach to data analysis.

My findings suggest that these forms of rightness are constructed and contested

through a complex network of corroborating and competing factors. The most obvious of

these are the contents of teachers' lessons in association with Islamic studies textbooks and the Qur'ān and Hadīth themselves. Each of these is contested in its own right, as the school's Sufi board member Omar had exercised direct influence, via *authorized executive decisions*, over teacher hiring processes, textbook selection, and the school's choice of Qur'ān translation. In other cases, dean Musa Ahmed's rejection of certain popular hadīth as context-specific (i.e., not universally binding) resulted in the unsanctioned, guerrilla-style use of chess in what might be described as *rogue pedagogy*. Other efforts by the dean to introduce controversial elements met with less success, as his hopes to distribute prayer beads to students were thwarted by a *theological dialogue* mediated by the school mosque's secretary. More precisely, the latter withdrew his support for the action under the influence of a teacher committed a literalist approach to emulating the Sunnah.

Doctrinal and behavioral norms were also maintained and upheld through the interactions among teachers themselves. When confronted with controversial beliefs or practices, some utilized forms of *peer discipline* to dictate their colleagues' pedagogical methods or content. In at least one of these cases, a teacher enlisted like-minded parents to buttress his critique of a colleague, who herself called on an imam from outside the school to defend herself. Both teachers utilized forms of *community reinforcement* to legitimize their own interpretations of the conflict. This resulted in the defending teacher's use of differentiated instruction to accommodate the objections of select parents. Meanwhile, other parental objections were less effective, as seen by a Salafi mother's critique of the school's September 11th memorial service. She was disregarded as fanatical, being so drastically at odds with the school's reputation for religious tolerance. This reputation is demonstrated by the dean-led interfaith study group, the principal's ongoing coopera-

tion with Jewish organizations, and the annual, TIS-based *Midwestern Forum for Salam/Shalom*. These organizations and affiliations constitute an assortment of *sanctioned ideological associations* which further shape orthodoxy and orthopraxy at Tafsir.

Other attempts to direct the consensus of belief came from those with no official association with the school. These at times forceful efforts utilized forms of surveillance, censorship, and intimidation, constituting what I have termed *vigilante religious policing*. The most blatant example of this was a local Salafi Muslim's decision to confiscate books deemed unacceptable by virtue of their heterodox teachings or Sufi affiliation. Another Salafi ardently sought to stigmatize a local Sufi study circle as a den of idols, while threatening hatred for Muslims who converted to another faith and hellfire for the insufficiently intolerant. His attitude contributed to the general atmosphere of Sufi marginalization at the school, which influenced a Sufi teacher's secrecy about her own esoteric faith. This secrecy reinforced the invisibility of mysticism, perpetuating a *cycle of normalization* which largely excluded Sufi paths from the spectrum of legitimate expressions of Islam at TIS.

Summary of Discussion

These inputs and mechanisms contributed to a distinct overall religious climate at Tafsir. Despite the diversity indicated by the community's conflicts discussed above, the school offers a unified image of itself on Web-based and printed presentations of its mission and character. This image embodies the common ground of community belief and intention for the school, a middle-of-the-road approach to Islam. The exact location of this middle, however, can shift over time, particularly as new members join and leave the

community. Members committed to outlying hermeneutical positions can shift the general *median of interpretation*, effectively altering what appears normal or constitutes extremism. The actions of certain members mutually neutralize one another's views, as expressions of outlying belief—espousing, for example, unusual degrees of spiritual innovation or rigidity—are suppressed by their opponents. In many cases, the data fit a predictable pattern: the proponents of most of the innovations were Sufi-oriented, and most of those espousing the most rigid theology aligned themselves with Salafism. However, this is not to be confidently generalized to all Muslims associated with these sects, as several exceptions were noted, and regardless the labels themselves are inexact, failing to correspond to any monolithic group or essential disposition.

Certain political metaphors are useful to convey organizational ideology-making dynamics at TIS. Various segments of the community—parents, teachers, administrators, spiritual leaders—correspond roughly to discrete branches of government, each entrusted with distinct responsibilities for the greater good. The distribution of interpretive power within the school community results in a *de facto* system of checks and balances, as intra- and inter-branch disputes prevent any segment from gaining unchallenged prominence. Certain individual actors, informed by or committed to disparate hermeneutical traditions (read: political parties) exercised veto power—in authorized or vigilante fashion—over radical departures from the popular opinion, i.e., the consensual right path. Other actors utilized improvisational forms of law enforcement by way of surveillance and discipline to prevent or correct perceived deviations, particularly when these directly affected students. In other instances, community members lobbied for support, seeking reinforcement of their positions from like-minded parents or influential religious authorities. Immoder-

ate positions in whatever directions were effectively excluded from respectable discourse—were not invited to the debate, so to speak—narrowing the bandwidth of viable hermeneutical positions. Those most influential on hermeneutical norms could be roughly likened to a dispersed Supreme Court, serving to collectively interpret the scriptures for TIS community at large.

These checks and balances have a stabilizing effect on the school, broadly ensuring that the collective will is represented in sanctioned activities, pedagogy and curriculum. The above processes coalesce into a normative balance, or *equilibrium*, which characterizes the general ideological atmosphere of the school. This balance is the outgrowth of colliding hermeneutical processes, and fluctuates over time with changing community members and socio-historic circumstances. In short, I found the school's ideological equilibrium to be dynamic and thoroughly interpretive in nature, and so for the sake of simplicity refer to it as a *dynamic interpretive equilibrium*.

This term is abstract, perhaps clumsy, and unabashedly etic, i.e., should not be taken as representative of participants' language or views of their own community. It is also potentially misleading in its semantic singularity, as each school sub-context could be viewed as containing its own distinct equilibrium. Nevertheless, the concept offers a general and concise theoretical backdrop to the empirical examples discussed above. This abstract equilibrium and our empirical examples are mutually formative: individuals' perceptions of the general climate shape tangible actions, while the aggregate of tangible actions constitute the general climate. As such, they exemplify a Giddensian *duality,* constituting social norms even as they are constituted by them (Allen, 2010). The general

unspeakability of outlying ideas—e.g., a Salafi mother's dehumanization of kuffãr, a Sufi teacher's super-humanization of humans—is both the cause and effect of this climate.

The dynamic and contested quality of TIS's interpretive atmosphere complicates static, monochromatic representations of Islamic schools in popular media and academic research. TIS belies the Western stereotype, noted by Boyle (2007), of a Muslim school instilling "radical, extremist, or militant view of Islam" (p. 174). Most teachers, administrators and community members proclaimed and demonstrated a commitment to moderate forms of Islam, and even those identifying with outlying, exceptionally conservative interpretive traditions denounced violent and militant ideologies. I detected none of the "indoctrination of anti-Semitism" described by pastor Bim Rowley (quoted in Mezvinsky, 2010), none of the "anti-Western propaganda" Timani (2006) warned about, no sense of the "Taliban-style madrassa" (Cristillo, 2009, p. 69).

To the concern regarding whether the school was an "incubato[r] of freedom or radicalism" (Jasser, 2011), I would resist the provocation to answer on Jasser's terms, i.e., in binary fashion. The Manichean framework of 'freedom [us] vs. radicalism [them]' is unduly divisive, self-aggrandizing, and intellectually muddled. It is a Western equivalent of NTS al-Qahtani's cherished principle of *al-wala' wa-al-bara',* the crude absolutist formulation of alliance and disassociation taken up by some member of the TIS community. In either example, the intended effect appears to be the rendering of the vast social, educational, and spiritual complexities of human life into neatly compartmentalized ones and zeroes, safely classifiable, comprehensible, controllable. As we deprive ourselves of the epistemological security accompanying such black and white thought patterns, we risk more aspects of our worlds becoming, like the mosque secretary's chess, "gray area."

In this case, Tafsir did not incubate a single disposition, but given its dynamic and internally contested interpretive orientation, myriad elements within the community could be seen as simultaneously fostering vastly disparate conditions.

Recommendations for Practice

My research is most practically relevant to teachers and administrators currently working or aspiring to work in doctrinally heterogeneous Islamic schools. Administrators may see in my findings cause to reflect on the potential conflicts accompanying divergent interpretations of Islam among members of the school community. If they wish to minimalize such conflicts, I have two recommendations: (1) bear in mind issues of interpretation when interviewing or hiring new teachers, even inquiring into applicants' hermeneutical alignment, or directly asking their ideal responses to conflict, interpretive or otherwise. This could help weed out domineering personalities, and reinforce efforts to cultivate a flexible yet sufficiently like-minded faculty who works collectively in relative harmony. And (2) draft and promote as clear an articulation of the school's official interpretive orientation as seems prudent. This need not imply an exhaustive list of rulings on controversial issues—though some may be in order—but may be as simple as a formal declaration of commitment to a general hermeneutical stance vis-à-vis the Qur'ān and Sunnah (e.g., historically contextualized, literalist-decontextualized). Such a declaration would surely impact the kinds of parents and teachers attracted to the school, and likely result in a more hermeneutically consistent climate.

Some administrators, to the contrary, may not wish to minimize collisions of the nature I have described. These conflicts could be seen as beneficial, fostering open dia-

logue and critical thought, a healthy atmosphere of public debate, perhaps encouraging more active engagement in civil society more broadly. Furthermore, the variety of interpretation underlying these collisions may be seen as desirable in itself, more indicative of the diversity of the global ummah than would be a more like-minded sample of Muslims. To administrators so inclined, I would still suggest considering interpretative processes when interviewing or hiring new teachers, although perhaps with a contrary aim: to avoid an objectionably homogenous faculty. I would also recommend that certain official school documents (e.g., pamphlets, Web site, policy packets) either (a) contain an articulation of the school's commitment to relative hermeneutic and sectarian neutrality, or (b), following Tafsir's example, effectively communicate relative neutrality via silence.

A more general recommendation, for aspiring administrators and teachers alike, would be to intellectually and emotionally prepare for conflict, including but not limited to the kinds I have described. Despite Tafsir's generally cordial atmosphere, it was not entirely without friction, e.g., among or between faculty, parents, students, or other concerned community members. TIS did not strike me as the least bit unusual in this respect, but to the contrary, as utterly normal for a K-12 school. However, what is normal may be nonetheless difficult, a fact supported by alarming turnover rates of urban school faculty. Teachers and administrators who have reflected meaningfully on the potential benefits and dangers of various forms of school conflict may be in a better position to navigate turbulent waters in fruitful ways. Furthermore, contemplating in advance multiple perspectives on specific, potentially controversial issues may help school faculty productively engage those holding disparate viewpoints. While the conflicts I have documented are, by nature of their content, largely particular to Muslims, teachers and administrators en-

tering non-Islamic schools can pre-emptively reflect on the manner of tensions that may arise in their distinct contexts.

My final recommendation is the most abstract, yet no less important for it, and is based on a specific interaction described above between a teacher and a student. The tone of Rabia's attempt to correct Aziza changed dramatically when the former ceased to view the latter as essentially separate from her own life. While initially viewing herself as a distinct person administering discipline to another person, Rabia underwent an epistemological shift, coming to interpret the exchange in terms of a fundamental unity between herself and Aziza. This was alternately expressed as a realization of (a) divine omnipotence, i.e., God's all-powerful role in shaping reality, and (b) divine-human identity, i.e., that humans are each "a piece of that one Lord." Either perspective could, I believe, destabilize what Heshusius (1996) calls an *alienated consciousness*, a frame of mind characterized by interpersonal distance, objectification and a felt need for control. Rabia's shift brought her nearer to a *participatory consciousness*, a realm of perception in which the personal need for control is released and the ontological lines between self and other and blurred. I recommend educators contemplate these "modes of consciousness"[95] and consider by what spiritual or philosophical means they might most authentically experience their diverse effects, internally or otherwise.

Directions for Future Research

`   The most conspicuous shortcoming of my study was surely the absence of student perspectives. Examples of conflict over interpretations of rightness point to processes by which morally imbued religious knowledge is socially constructed within the school; and

yet students, by far the most populous social group in the school building, are practically invisible. Future research can examine their relationships to processes like those I have discussed. How do students interpret presentations of faith in school-sanctioned forms of instruction? What meanings do they find, for example, in Qur'ān classes, sermons, or Islamic studies lessons and textbooks? In what ways do students embrace, reject, or co-opt teachers' hermeneutical strategies, and for what reasons? How aware are they of conflicts within the adult community concerning acceptable interpretations, and how do these conflicts affect them?

Other research might examine relationships between Muslims' interpretive orientations and other aspects of their identities. W.D. Fard, for example, explicitly incorporated racial ideology into Nation of Islam's (NOI's) doctrines. While no one at Tafsir aligned themselves with NOI, several acknowledged tensions within the school community along racial lines. What relationships might exist between racial identity and sectarian affiliation or interpretive orientation? My data also reveal gendered patterns of interpretive dominance which might bear further attention. In almost every instance of conflict, the initiating party was a male, taking action to correct the beliefs or practices of males and females alike.[96] Future studies might ask: how does gender-identity influence individual Muslims' felt ability to interpret their faith, or to challenge or correct peer deviation? And how might sectarian affiliation or interpretive orientation shape gender identity? One participant argued that gender-specific expectations are more the product of cultural background than Islamic religious doctrine. This raises questions of how Muslims interpret the Qur'ān and Sunnah in light of distinct cultural mores to shape their views, concerning gender or countless other issues.

Other research might examine in greater depth relationships between formal authority and interpretive influence in Islamic schools. How might interpretive prowess influence one's official position of authority within the school? Or, conversely, in what ways might authority figures exercise, by virtue of their position, greater influence than their subordinates over commonly accepted religious interpretations? Several participants emphasized the importance of submitting to authority figures, at times even suggesting this be done unquestioningly. Another defiantly proclaimed, "I'm Muslim, and there is no man or woman I believe in." Yet another teacher expressed her complete allegiance to the dean and principal insofar as none of their commands took her "outside the religion." This variety raises the obvious questions regarding how various interpretations of the Qur'ān and Sunnah justify both obedience and disobedience to human authority figures or structures.

As my participants illustrated, the symbol *Islam* could be used to justify not only obedience or disobedience, but also misogyny or gender equality, linguistic elitism or irrelevance, religious intolerance or interfaith harmony, free will or determinism, literalism or critical thinking, knowledge or our lack thereof, separation from God or union with the same. The difference in every case lies in the matter of interpretation. Surah al-Iklhas proclaims *Allahu Ahad, Allahu Samad*: God is One, the Eternal Absolute. Yet as we have seen, interpretations of this verse and other scriptures are themselves fragmented, mutable and bound by time. The *ummah* at Tafsir appears likewise diverse, kaleidoscopic, no more monolithic than the fallen Humpty Dumpty. If there is a right path, it is no more visible to me now than when my study began, and the egg's question is wide open as ever, horses and men notwithstanding.

NOTES

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[1] On February 14, 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini of Iran issued a unilateral legal proclamation calling for the death of British novelist Salman Rushdie and all those knowingly complicit in publishing his *Satanic Verses*. This sparked waves of debates on the appropriate Muslim responses to the book, the reach of Islamic legal authority, and the conflict between anti-blasphemy laws and the principle of free speech (Lewis, 1991), which continue in various forms to the current day.

[2] Harris acknowledges on his blog that Kamikaze pilots in WWII were "influenced by the doctrine of Zen Buddhism," a distinct tradition with "a more martial and more paradoxical view of ethics" than the Vajrayana system (http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/response-to-controversy, retrieved October 2, 2015).

[3] In Kilbourn's (2006) terms, it is a problem in the "primary source sense" of the word (p. 543).

[4] Rowley is reportedly one of approximately 50-60 million Christian Zionists (Mezvinsky, 2010), alongside such influential public figures as Texas Senator Ted Cruz, Christian Coalition founder Pat Robertson, Republican National Convention prayer officiate Franklin Graham, and countless other pastors, pundits, and high-ranking political advisors.

[5] Of course, it may be that no such significant conflicts existed within these communities. But even if this is the case, they *did* exist at my research site, countering the image of a single, doctrinally united Islamic school, while further undermining homogenous generalizations about beliefs and practices within "the Islamic school" archetype.

[6] In this study I use the loanwords *orthodoxy* and *orthopraxy* in a manner completely interchangeable with their most direct and literal meanings: "right belief" and "right practice," respectively. I employ these terms in the most modest sense possible, in keeping with the Oxford English online dictionary definitions, without capitalization (as if to refer to a specific religious sect, e.g., Orthodox Judaism or Eastern Orthodox Christianity) and without intent to imply that Islam or any other religions is essentially characterized by either.

[7]Ten percent of participants (n=2) identified as non-Muslim. One was Joan, a part-time Math educator employed by a private tutoring company hired by TIS; the other was Jamira, who had no affiliation with the school, but spent time on its grounds due to her familial relation to TIS's principal, Ramzi Malik.

[8] To be clear, this does not indicate a significant departure, as grounded theory is sufficiently consonant with ethnographic methods. As Hammersley & Atkinson (2007) note, a common characteristic of ethnographic research is its "concern with *developing* theories, rather than with testing existing hypotheses" (p. 21, emphasis in original).

[9] This pattern can be seen, for example, Isherwood's (1989) report on "faqirs" and "fundamentalists" in India, McGilvray's (2011) account of conflicts between local shaikhs and mainstream reformers in Sri Lanka, and in numerous aspects of Howell's (2001) discussion of Sufism in Indonesia.

[10] The imam led the prayers and delivered the *khutbah* at the TIS mosque each Friday, while the mosque secretary, according to one participant, headed up just about everything else related to the masjid.

[11] Following DeGenoa (2005), I am suspicious of "descriptions that rely on notions of self-enclosed, bounded, thinglike 'cultural' realities posited as separate, distinct, and relatively autonomous spheres of social life" (p. 27).

[12] In addition to *masjid*s, they list "*jamia*s (mosque colleges), *dar al-ilm*s and *bayt al-hikma*s (academies of knowledge or wisdom), *khizana*s and *maktaba*s (libraries), *zawiya*s, *khanaqah*s and *ribat*s (sufi gatehrings [sic]), *mashhad*s (shrine colleges), as well as *hawzeh*s and *madrasa*s (theological colleges)," the variety of which reflected the diversity of the believers' interpretations of the religious injunction to acquire knowledge (p. 9).

[13] Including "*taqlid* (imitation) … *istidlal* and *istridrak* (deductive and inductive reasoning), *qiyas* (comparative/analogical reasoning), *rai* (informed opinion), *nass* (transmission), and *ijtihad* (independent interpretation)" (p. 11).

[14] I assume for the purposes of this paper that all language is socially constructed and open to various interpretations, and do not maintain any exceptions in religious language. So in using the word 'Islamic,' I don't intend to suggest proximity to a singular, absolute entity; I simply mean 'that which is generally referred to as Islamic,' imprecise though that may be. I don't deny that a unified, pure and ideal Islam might exist, I simply don't know.

[15] The authors define madrasas simply as "traditional Islamic seminaries" (p. 253).

[16] According to Grewal & Coolidge (2013), Zaytuna's ethos was significantly shaped by co-founder Hamza Yusuf's hopes "to revive Islam's mystical tradition of Sufism and its pedagogical model of initiatic transmission" (p. 259).

[17] These schools are rooted in the thought of Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish scholar Jasser hazily portrays as an Islamic extremist. The title of a recent Wall Street Journal article by Gülen (2015) himself assuredly suggests a contrary position: "Muslims must combat the extremist cancer; denounce terrorism, defend human rights and promote education."

[18] To cite one example, his claim that "it is a requirement today in Muslim schools that teachers must be adherents of the faith" (p. 18) is an inaccurate generalization. Keyworth's (2009) study undermines this sweeping claim, as did my own data.

[19] A component of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that seeks to improve student outcomes "by elevating teacher and principal quality through recruitment, hiring, and retention strategies" (http://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg20.html, retrieved November 16, 2015).

[20] Abowitz & Harnish delineaned six discourses, but Saada found the remaining three—individualist, reconstructionist, and queer—less relevant to his data.

[21] As we'll see below, these latter two examples echo my research findings more directly than the others.

[22] As of 1999, there were 18 Islamic schools in the Toronto area, just over half of the 35 across Ontario. According to Niyozov and Memon (2011), Toronto boasts North America's highest concentration of Islamic schools.

[23] Though it took place outside the North American context, I include it here due to its keen thematic relevance to my research.

[24]Corbin (2014) finds this sentiment both exaggerated and ironic, noting that al-Ghazali relies on philosophical methods to demonstrate the ineffectiveness of philosophy (p. 182).

[25] Halstead's tone, which appears at times to reify the abstraction of 'Islam' (portraying a singular 'it' as actively 'encouraging' things) and to essentialize Muslims (presenting the static thought of an imaginary, archetypical believer), is of course open to criticism.

[26] For a fuller discussion of Saudi textbooks, see the Center of Religious Freedom's report (Shea & Al-Ahmed, 2006)..

[27] Also, at its most thoroughgoing, Heshusius' account of this is harmonious with certain spiritual principles discussed below: namely, the state wherein "the self, with its demands for separativeness and control, is temporarily forgotten" (p. 627).

[28] The vast majority of data were collected here. The only exception was one of the participants' homes, in which I conducted a single interview.

[29] When I first accessed this site in 2013, it described the racial breakdown as 50% Black, 18% Asian, 11% White, and 22% "two or more races." This dramatic disparity, particularly in the number of reported White students, probably resulted not from a radical shift in racial demographics but rather from a change in how the school chose to classify or report (as obviously there are no clearly defined boundaries of whiteness). For my part, I noticed almost no students who appeared to be of European descent. Based on conversations with the staff and my own observations, my impression of the students was that about half were Black and half were from the Middle Eastern/North African region. At least one student I met was from Albania, and another was from Indonesia, but as I was not especially concerned with the exact student racial breakdown, I have no precise data on the subject.

[30] The year before my research, the teacher from Tunisia had served as lead disciplinarian. Due to faculty cutbacks, the year I interviewed her she no longer filled this role, but adopted a heavier teaching load and position as head of the Arabic department.

[31] My parents met in the mid-1970s at one of his gatherings, and accepted him as their shaikh. I grew up immersed in his teachings, which largely accounts for my current interest in Islam.

[32] Of these 11 teachers, there were 5 who were each responsible for teaching a single group of elementary aged students (between 1st-6th grades) throughout the day. Three others taught specific subjects—either math/science or English/social studies—to middle school students (6th-8th grades); one was a math remediation tutor, one a teaching assistant in the 4th grade class, and another taught Arabic to students of various ages.

[33] One of the participants I consider an administrator was Miss Najjar, who had acted as lead disciplinarian the previous year, and head of the Arabic department the years of my field research.

[34] This adds up to 21 because one of the full time teachers was also a former student, and so is listed twice.

[35] I met him after being invited to his house by Rabia, at Faqir Muhammad's own request. Apparently she had mentioned to him my interest in Sufism.

[36] Several other interviews were periodically interrupted, most often by students coming to visit their teachers; but these were the only three where others were present for much or all of the conversation.

[37] Of the 20 total participants, I only consider 19 to be affiliated with TIS. Rabia's current shaikh, Faqir Muhammad, was also Sufi, but I met and interviewed him off of school grounds.

[38] I myself was, of course, a "participant" in the study, in a very straightforward sense.

[39] Of course, my unorthodox religious background might have prevented other participants from sharing certain views with me, but the point remains: my lack of epistemological neutrality was not a thoroughgoing hindrance to the research.

[40] This feels a bit like falling in love with the idea of a person you haven't met, then meeting someone that roughly fits the bill, and laying all your expectations on them: serious adjustments are required to transition from hypothetical fantasies to present day realities.

[41] If my methods appear in this respect disorganized, I will cite Lejano's (2013) vivid advice, that "one should approach analysis as a pig might approach a mud puddle—just politely introduce one's self to it, and then proceed to splash around" (p. 16). In my modest defense, I was not this messy.

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[42] Certain codes, such as *critical thinking* and *censorship/surveillance* belonged to several families; while other codes, such as *community* and *expectations* did not fit neatly into any family.

[43] The event that I identified above as the turning point of the study (an interaction wherein a teacher at the school advised me to keep my own spiritual views a secret from certain community members) took place on October 7th, 2013, only about three weeks after my field work formally began. After this, of course, my exact focus still took time to develop, but the process had already begun within the first month.

[44] In many cases, the frequency with which these codes appear corresponds more or less directly with their importance to the paper. This is the case, for example, with the top four most common (*interpretation*, *orthodoxy/different Islams*, *Sufism*, and *Salafi/Wahhabi*) and two of the least common codes (*1st Kalima* and *fundamentalism*). However, there were exceptions. For example, the code *shaikhs, imams, etc.* shows up 24 times, but did not ultimately feature prominently in my discussion, as many of these cases addressed circumstances outside the immediate school community. Meanwhile, though the code *censorship/surveillance* appears only 9 times, these instances were generally emotionally dense and analytically fertile enough to warrant serious attention.

[45] Apparently it also lends itself to an abundance of scare quotes.

[46] *Hafiz* translates to "preserver," and is one of the 99 names of Allah. It's an honorable title bestowed upon someone who has memorized the Qur'ān in its entirety, someone who, at least in the early days of the faith before many written copies of the book existed, was crucial to preserving its message.

[47] Here he refers to teachers employed by the school

[48] The full verse in Asad's translation reads, "Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians - all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds - shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve."

[49] "And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be one of the losers." The Noble Quran (Muhsin-Khan), 3:85.

[50] "By Him in Whose hand is the life of Muhammad, he who amongst the community of Jews or Christians hears about me, but does not affirm his belief in that with which I have been sent and dies in this state (of disbelief), he shall be but one of the denizens of Hell-Fire." Sahih Muslim, Book 1 - Faith, hadīth number 284.

[51] Kafir and other similar variants (e.g,. kafr, kufr, kuffãr), is an Arabic term for an 'unbeliever,' often used pejoratively.

[52] Though I was not granted permission by the principal to include current students as participants, I was able to interview Solomon because he had long since graduated. He was over 18, and so no assent forms were required.

[53] This story is contained in Q18:60-82.

[54] The birthday of the Prophet Muhammad.

[55] In 2013, this lasted from October 6th to November 4th.

[56] This assessment is her own, not mine, but I was able to see a few examples of this. Several times she accused talkative students of "listening to the whispers of *shaytan*." In another interaction she scolded a student in a forceful tone of voice: "You have to be better than that . You have to be stronger than that. You have to acknowledge the fact that you are your own self. You are you own individual self." Para-

doxically, she contrasted this student's behavior to that of another, model classmate, who "Most important-ly … was obedient."

[57] This has its precedent in the hadīth, "There is no obedience to a creature if it involves disobedi-ence to God" (quoted in Şentürk, 2013, p. 48).

[58] The school did not officially recognize the holiday, but takes time off for "Winter holidays" to accommodate parents with other children in public schools.

[59] A poster in Tasfir's 3rd floor auditorium area displayed this information, in question and answer format: "Apart from the Qur'ān, it there any other Sacred Source? Yes, the Sunnah--the practice and exam-ple of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) is the second source of inspiration and instruction for Muslims. Belief in the Sunnah is part of the Islamic faith."

[60] I have in mind the two participants affiliated with Pir Batin al-Haqq's Study Circle, Rabia and Omar. Many of Batin al-Haqq's disciples have long used such beads as tools to improve concentration on their spiritual path through daily routines of contemplative prayer: praising God, asking forgiveness, or reciting any number of Allah's divine attributes. Study Circle members even hand out beads in the Pir's former room during some Eid celebrations.

[61] According to Musa Ahmed, the long-time mosque secretary at TIS held a respected position of bureaucratic authority, was often consulted for his religious expertise, and even had the power to hire and fire imams.

[62] I never did learn which research he had in mind; though I remain curious, it's irrelevant for my purposes here.

[63] "There will be people of my Ummah who will seek to make lawful; fornication, wine-drinking and the use of ma`aazif [musical instruments]" (Bukhari, Volume 7, Book of Drinks, hadīth no. 5590). The *Sunan Ibn Majah,* another canonical collection contains a more unsettling warning: "Some people from my nation will drink wine, calling it by different names and musical instruments will be played for them … Allah will cause the earth to swallow them up and He will make some of them turn into apes and pigs."

[64] The belief that a person dies once and faces resurrection as opposed to reincarnation is based on such Quranic verses as 29:57, 36:31, 23:99-100.

[65] A reference, of course, to Orwell's omnipresent totalitarian leader.

[66] Though even here some room for interpretation could be found, as this was only required for those who could afford it: a condition with contestable parameters.

[67] According to Saeed (2007), not all Ahmadiyyas consider Ghulam Ahmed a prophet.

[68] Though I have since come to suspect the two are not so clearly distinguishable.

[69] Dean Musa Ahmed was among those who detected racial tensions, namely between Arabs, who "don't see it," and African Americans, who do. "Racial prejudice is like smoke in the woodwork," he sadly quipped. "Takes a long time to leave."

[70] She taught her class that Allah worked through historical figures like Thurgood Marshall to bring about His ideal of unity. Born in a refugee camp in Pakistan after her family fled the Soviet-Afghan war, Nasreen immigrated to the U.S. at a young age. In our interview, she spoke highly of the United States, citing her ability to maintain her cultural values and practice her religious faith in a general atmos-phere of tolerance and respect. This highlighted the compatibility of Islamic and American identities, a point she emphasized to her students.

[71] Sahih Bukhari, 50:833.

[72] Further dangers are not difficult to imagine, e.g., fourth, Sufism is not necessarily affiliated with Islam, let alone an "Islamic sect"; fifth, according to certain Sufi interpretations, "Sufism" is less a discreet group of people than a state of consciousness available to all; sixth, I am not the arbiter of relevance at Tasfir; and so on.

[73] I further explain my rationale in the first and last chapters, so won't do so here.

[74] Khadija, a Batin al-Haqq Study Circle member from Palestine, served as a substitute at Tasfir on rare occasion throughout the 2013-2014 school year. And though I knew two other Study Circle members who had worked there in years past, neither were still active in the community during my research.

[75] The Giver.

[76] Other participants mentioned the existence of 73 groups. Perhaps Aisha meant that there were 72 misguided groups.

[77] It is unlikely that many Shi'ite Muslims would agree with her Aisha's account.

[78] I never met her. This quotation was taken from an interview with Rabia conducted during the school year following the majority of my field work.

[79] A.H.

[80] The Messiah, a generous, radiant spiritual leader sent in the last days to restore justice and peace to a world succumbed to corruption.

[81] The hyphen and capital "O" are my own embellishments, added in hopes of further clarifying the distinction Rabia drew between one God and oneness in God; that is, pointing to a being whose fundamental character is unity, rather than simply one whose quantity is singular.

[82] She probably crosses this line, and flagrantly so.

[83] The passive voice here is helpful, as it leaves the speaker of the infamous claim "Ana 'l-Haqq" (I am the Truth) intentionally unspecified. Though the claim is typically attributed to Hallaj, Rabia might argue that the Truth itself made the claim by way of Hallaj's form.

[84] I hope the potential awkwardness of my phrasing here will help highlight what I took to be her intended meaning.

[85] While I am not aware of Kabeera mentioning this point with regards to Zainab's teaching, it was clearly an important issue. She and other participants cited the Christmas holiday as a problematic and divisive aspect of raising Muslim children in the U.S. Some bought their children presents to avoid alienating them, while others found the practice clearly unacceptable. This difficulty calls to mind parents in Merry's (2005) study, who sought relief in Islamic schools from materialistic values of the broader society.

[86] The adverb "apparently" deserves comment. Firstly, Dean Musa Ahmed objected to the image of an ummah shattered beyond repair, as he maintained hope that the differences within the Muslim community could be reconciled, that unity might yet prevail. For another, Rabia's shaikh, upon telling me the story of the shattered egg, altered the ending: "All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again," he recited, before adding with a smile, "but God can!"

[87] The reason for this is that they did not offer substantially different insights into my research topic than were provided by other participants.

[88] The clearest exception I noted came from Basira, the teacher who was criticized for using the EdRaps lessons. When I asked if she was part of any sect, she replied, "I really hate to put labels, but I

guess if I really had to I would say Sunnī. I mean, even with Sunnī Muslims, there's that level of rigidness that comes into the religion." This statement was highly atypical in suggesting that the term "Sunnī" could have anything other than benign and essentially non-descript implications.

[89] Omar's decision to scratch out the word "Sufi" was the closest I ever saw to him adopting the kind of self-censorship that daily characterized so many of Rabia's professional relationships. However, even here it was not a case of him hiding his own faith, but editing curricular materials in an effort to help them pass through to the students.

[90] The only other Sufi who was still somewhat actively involved at the school was also a woman of color, the regular substitute teacher Khadija, but she refused my request for an interview. I learned more about her supposed views from Dawoud than from her.

[91] I do not mean to imply, based on one interaction, that Aziza does not want to be Muslim. However, teachers made clear that students differ substantially in their personal commitments to Islam. My argument is simply that students less committed to the school-sanctioned versions of whatever faith may face specific hardships in confessional contexts.

[92] I assume that Rabia never shared with the student her father's metaphor about 'the current, the light bulbs, and the light which shines,' or explained her esoteric views concerning the soul's Hegelesque process of learning about its true identity as united God by way of contrast with its experience of its own opposite (i.e., the separateness of ego, or false self).

[93] This example provides support for Saada's (2013) warning that teachers espousing moral pluralism may have to content with parents inclined toward absolutism.

[94] Median here can be understood roughly in a non-numerical sense of the standard statistical usage, i.e., a middle position with equal number of figures on either side. To extend the statistical imagery, outlying beliefs might also be said to affect the *mean* of interpretation, while leaving the *mode* unaffected.

[95] See Heshusius' (1996) paper for a fuller discussion.

[96] The only exceptions were a single instance in which a female intervened to correct a female, and an unsuccessful attempt by one mother to rebuke the male dean (which happened over a decade ago).

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