Journal of Interreligious Studies
January 2025, Issue 44, 4–32
ISSN 2380-8187
www.irstudies.org

ARTICLE

Practices, Beliefs, and Identities: Muslim Immigrants' Acculturation in the Southeastern United States

Kylee Smith and David J. Marshall

Abstract
This paper explores how interreligious and intercultural encounters in the politically secular yet culturally Christian southeastern United States shape Muslim immigrants' religious practices, beliefs, and identities. Situated at the intersection of interreligious studies, migration studies, and cultural geography, it examines the experiences of Muslim immigrants in North Carolina's "Bible Belt." These encounters reveal a dual dynamic: positive interreligious relationships rooted in shared family and moral values and Islamophobic marginalization. Using an interreligious and grounded theology framework, this study draws on interviews with Muslim immigrants and second-generation Muslim Americans, alongside participant observation at a local mosque. Findings suggest that navigating life as a religious minority often prompts self-reflection, knowledge-seeking, and intentionality, which deepens personal faith (*imān*). The mosque emerges as a vital space for worship (*ʿibādah*), community connection, and intercultural engagement. This process of self-reflection and community-building highlights how interreligious and intercultural interactions foster resilience and strengthen religious identity, transforming the challenges of migration into opportunities for spiritual growth and communal belonging.

Keywords
immigration, acculturation, Islam, Muslim, grounded theology

Muslim immigrants to the United States encounter a diverse multireligious and multicultural environment upon arrival, one that is nominally secular yet dominated by Christian belief and practice, particularly in the so-called "Bible Belt" of the southeast. For many, though not all Muslim immigrants, it is their first time living in a non-Muslim majority society. Not only do Muslim immigrants encounter a multireligious environment in the US, but they also often encounter an environment of superdiversity within the American Muslim community itself.[1] Three quarters of American Muslims are first- or second-generation immigrants representing myriad languages and ethnicities from throughout the world, as well as diverse expressions of Islam.[2] How does the process of acculturating to a predominantly Christian yet nominally secular and multicultural society affect the religious practices, beliefs, and identities of Muslim immigrants to the US, and how do these practices, beliefs, and identities, in turn, inform this process of acculturation to life in the US? In seeking answers to these overarching questions, this research focuses specifically on Muslim immigrants to North Carolina, a southern state that has experienced a high volume of international and domestic migration in recent decades.

Notions of citizenship and belonging in the US have been tied to race and ethnicity since its founding.[3] White Christians have instilled Christian morality and identity into US laws, governance, holidays, and everyday life.[4] Indeed, despite nominally secular legal and political structures and a highly diverse cultural and religious landscape in the US, White Christian identity, norms, beliefs, and practices continue to dominate definitions of "Americanness" and shape public life and discourse in ways both subtle and overt.[5] This is particularly true in the US south, where socially conservative Baptist and evangelical denominations of Christianity hold particular

1 Steven Vertovec, "Super-Diversity and Its Implications," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 30, no. 6 (2007): 1024–54.

2 Besheer Mohamed, Gregory A. Smith, Alan Cooperman, and Anna Schiller, "US Muslims concerned about their place in society but continue to believe in the American dream," Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017. https://www.pewresearch.org.

3 Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

4 Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, *Love the Sin: Sexual Regulation and the Limits of Religious Tolerance* (New York University Press, 2003). See also Robert P Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

5 Khayati Y. Joshi, *White Christian Privilege: The Illusion of Religious Equality in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

cultural and political sway. In North Carolina, seventy-seven percent of adults identify as Christian, and less than 1 percent identify as Muslim. However, North Carolina is not immune to the growing rise of unaffiliated or religious "nones" in the US, with twenty percent of adults in the state identifying as such. Likewise, although most self-identified Christians categorize themselves as belonging to a particular denomination, most also report not being an active member of a particular church.[6] As such, Muslim immigrants to North Carolina find themselves as religious minority in an environment where their religion is not the norm but, increasingly, "one human possibility among others."[7] Given that religious identity is not static and unchanging, but rather negotiated and evolving in relation to the social dynamics of intersectional identity played out in one's daily experiences and encounters, this paper examines how religious identities and practices transform within the context of transnational migration.[8]

The field of migration studies has tended to focus on religion in a utilitarian manner, emphasizing religion as an individual coping mechanism or marker of group membership. Going beyond static and instrumentalizing conceptions of religion, this present research employs the theoretical lens of grounded theology to understand how everyday interreligious and intercultural interactions affect the religious views, practices, and identities of Muslim immigrants to the US.[9] In doing so, this research addresses deficiencies in migration studies regarding religious identities, while also integrating immigrant voices and experiences into the interreligious studies literature. Interreligious studies seeks to understand how intersectional identities and interreligious encounters shape religious beliefs and practices. The experiences of immigrants from minoritized religious backgrounds can potentially provide profound insights into immigration as a form of interreligious encounter, an understudied topic. In this study, grounded theology provides a framework for understanding Islam not as a monolithic identity or individual coping mechanism, but rather as a dynamic, contested, active, and evolving expression of beliefs, practices, and identities

6 Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. "Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics" (2014).

7 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

8 Kristi Del Vecchio and Noah J. Silverman, "Learning from the Field: Six Themes from Interfaith/Interreligious Studies Curricula," in *Interfaith/Interreligious Studies: Defining a New Field*, eds. Eboo Patel, Jennifer Howe Peace, and Noah Silverman (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018), 49–54.

9 Justin KH Tse, "Grounded theologies: 'Religion' and the 'secular' in human geography," *Progress in Human Geography* 38, no. 2 (2014): 201–220.

that Muslim immigrants continuously negotiate during their everyday interactions with non-Muslims, the American cultural and political context broadly, and diverse communities of other Muslims. Specifically, this paper argues that the new spatial and cultural context of the US and Islam's minority status prompts Muslim immigrants to evaluate their beliefs critically and determine how to practice the *deen/dīn* (religion) of Islam most fully in this new context, often strengthening religious faith (*imān*) in the process. [10]

Islam and Muslims in America

Popular perceptions of Islam in the US often regard it as a foreign religion. However, the historical presence of enslaved African Muslims throughout the Americas and the Caribbean goes back some 400 years, even before the rise of the transatlantic slave trade.[11] Although precise figures are unknown, it is estimated that fifteen- to thirty-percent of Africans brought to the Americas as part of the transatlantic slave trade were Muslim.[12] Enslaved African Muslims formed a significant presence in rice plantations along the Carolina coast, in what is now referred to as the Gullah-Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, spanning the Carolinas and reaching into Georgia and Florida.[13] In North Carolina specifically, Omar ibn Said, a Fula Muslim scholar who was abducted and sold into slavery in the early 1800s, authored the only known surviving Arabic slave narrative in the US.[14] Although cultural and religious practices of West African Muslims left a lasting legacy in this region, it was only in the early 20th century that Black Muslims officially established

10 The remainder of this essay will use *deen*, as it reflects the English vernacular and normative American Muslim spelling as opposed to the standard academic transliteration of *dīn*.

11 Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the new world to the new world order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). See also Brent Singleton, "The *Ummah* Slowly Bled: A Select Bibliography of Enslaved African Muslims in the Americas and the Caribbean," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 22, no. 2 (2002): 401–412.

12 Richard Brent Turner, "African Muslim Slaves and Islam in Antebellum America," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*, edited by Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 28–44.

13 Jeffry R. Halverson, "West African Islam in Colonial and Antebellum South Carolina," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 36, no. 3 (2016): 413–426.

14 Omar Ibn Said, *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar Ibn Said* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011). See also the recent monograph: Mbaye Lo and Carl Ernst, *I Cannot Write My Life: Islam, Arabic, and Slavery in Omar Ibn Said's America* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

the first known *masjid* (mosque) in North Carolina.[15] Originally founded in 1958 as Muhammad's Mosque No. 34 under the Nation of Islam, Durham's Masjid Muhammad (now known as Ar-Razaaq Islamic Center) was established in 1975 after the death of Elijah Muhammad, representing a shift toward Sunni Islam under the leadership Imam W.D. Muhammad.[16] Today, Durham continues to have a thriving Black Muslim community, as well as a growing immigrant Muslim community in the Research Triangle area between Raleigh-Durham and Chapel Hill.

The Muslim immigrant population in the US began to grow after 1965 when the Hart-Cellar Act abolished the National Origins Formula, originally designed to favor white/protestant immigration. This immigration reform, in part the result of the ongoing Civil Rights Movement of the time, removed barriers for would-be immigrants from Africa and Asia, including Muslims. Muslim communities began to grow as skilled professionals and students from Muslim-majority countries came to the US in the late 1960s and 70s pursuing careers and education.[17] Expansive higher education and research opportunities in North Carolina, along with jobs in the medical, engineering, and technology sectors, combined with a relatively low cost of living, continue to be pull factors for Muslim and other migrants to the state. In addition, for the past few decades, North Carolina has been a top-ten refugee resettlement state, resettling an increasing number of refugees from Muslim-majority countries, with Guilford County (home to Greensboro) being the largest recipient of refugees in the state and one of the largest in the region.[18] There are currently more than fifty mosques in North Carolina, including about eighteen in the Central Piedmont Triangle (spanning the cities of Winston-Salem, High Point, Greensboro, and nearby Burlington) and the Research Triangle areas, where this research was conducted. Although former NOI mosques often serve predominantly Black Muslim communities, and while some mosques cater to specific immigrant ethnic communities, many if not most mosques in this area, including those represented in this

15 In what follows, we use the English words "mosque/mosques" rather than the transliterated "*masjid/masajid*," which avoids the need to impose English pluralizing conventions on the Arabic term *masjid* (for example, "masjids").

16 See Nazeeh Z. Abdul-Hakeem, *The Athaan in the Bull City: Building Durham's Islamic Community* (Lulu, 2015) and Sapelo Square, "Remembering the First Mosque in North Carolina." *The Muslim Vibe* (September 5, 2018).

17 Ilhan Kaya, "Muslim American Identities and Diversity," *Journal of Geography* 106, no. 1 (April 6, 2007): 29–35.

18 Lauren Sastre and Lauren Haldeman, "Environmental, nutrition and health issues in a US refugee resettlement community." *MEDICC review* 17 (2015): 18–24.

research, serve a broad cross-section of the diverse Muslim population in the state, including a growing number of white and Latino converts to Islam.

As a diverse group, Muslim Americans experience racism, xenophobia, and other forms of prejudice unique to their individual backgrounds. Additionally, Muslim Americans also experience discrimination *as* Muslims, a marginalized and racialized religious minority in the US. In recent years, Islamophobia has risen in the US and around the globe. Dominant media portrayals frequently frame Islam as the violent, collective "Other" that is incompatible with "Western values," further isolating Muslim immigrants from acceptance in the mainstream.[19] Such views, rooted in longstanding Orientalist discourses and white supremacy, are reproduced in dominant political discourses, laws, and policies.[20] From widespread surveillance and suspicion of Muslims following the events of September 11th, to more recent attempts to ban sharia law and curb Muslim migration to the US, Muslim immigrants continue to face barriers to belonging and acceptance in the US. Such societal and political forces have sometimes pressured Muslim immigrants to emphasize civic engagement and service provision and downplay critiques of US foreign policy or racial prejudice in the US to prove their loyalty and patriotism.[21] Nevertheless, Muslims across the US, including North Carolina, have undertaken significant outreach, advocacy, education, and interfaith dialogue efforts to overcome prejudice and build bridges of understanding on their own terms.[22] We turn now to an examination of the literature on the relationship between religion and immigration, with a focus on Muslim immigrant communities in the US.

Acculturation, Religion, and Interreligious Encounters

For many immigrants, Muslim or otherwise, the experience of leaving home and creating a new life in a new country is a tumultuous one. In the immigration studies literature, this process, referred to as acculturation, is

19 Yvonne Haddad and Nazir Harb, "Post-9/11: Making Islam an American Religion," *Religions* 5, no. 2 (June 12, 2014): 477–501.

20 K. A. Beydoun, *American Islamophobia: Understanding the Roots and Rise of Fear* (Oakland, University of California Press, 2018).

21 Rosemary R. Corbett, *Making Moderate Islam: Sufism, Service, and the "Ground Zero Mosque" Controversy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

22 Brian Rea, "Local community calls for change to Muslim portrayal in media," *Elon News Network* (September 11, 2019); Sara Cheikh Husain, "Muslim Community Organizations' Perceptions of Islamophobia: Towards an Informed Countering Response," *Religions* 11, no. 10 (2020): 485–509.

understood as a multi-dimensional and multi-directional process in which individuals and groups from different cultural backgrounds come into sustained intercultural contact, resulting in shifting social, cultural, and psychological attitudes, values, and behaviors.[23] Recognizing acculturation as a dynamic process of mutual, albeit uneven, exchange and interaction among multiple cultural groups challenges prior normative models emphasizing assimilation as a unidirectional process of an incoming minority group actively conforming to the dominant culture.[24] Conceptualized as a process occurring at both the group and individual psychological levels, many studies examine acculturation from the perspective mental and physical health outcomes.[25] Research on the role of religion in the acculturation process has shown that religion can help immigrants mitigate acculturative stress.[26] Religious practices provide people with a pattern to conduct their lives during a time of uncertainty, equipping immigrants with a mechanism to gain a sense of stability within a seemingly disjointed life. For Muslim refugees, research has demonstrated how ʿ*ibādah* (ritual worship including salah or prayer) and the moral guidelines provided by Islam can provide stability and solace during the difficult process of resettlement.[27]

In addition to serving as an individual psychosomatic coping mechanism, religion can also serve as an important source of community and identity for immigrants and refugees upon arrival to a new country. Ethnic places of worship have long provided immigrants with culturally familiar spaces to find solidarity and support from those with similar backgrounds and experiences, including in the American South.[28] Religious

23 John W. Berry, "Acculturation: A conceptual overview," *Acculturation and Parent-child relationships* (2006): 13–32.

24 Liliane Sayegh and Jean-Claude Lasry, "Immigrants' adaptation in Canada: Assimilation, acculturation, and orthogonal cultural identification," *Canadian Psychology/Psychologie Canadienne* 34, no. 1 (1993): 98.

25 Shireen Ghaffarian, "The acculturation of Iranian immigrants in the United States and the implications for mental health," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 138, no. 5 (1998): 645–54.

26 Robert Schweitzer, Jaimi Greenslade, and Ashraf Kagee, "Coping and Resilience in Refugees from the Sudan: A Narrative Account," *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 41, no. 3 (March 2007): 282–88.

27 Goździak, Elžbieta M, "Spiritual Emergency Room: The Role of Spirituality and Religion in the Resettlement of Kosovar Albanians," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 15, no. 2 (June 2002): 136–52.

28 Charles Hirschman, "The role of religion in the origins and adaptation of immigrant groups in the United States 1," *International Migration Review* 38, no. 3 (2004): 1206–33; Patricia Ehrkamp and Caroline Nagel. "Immigration, places of worship and the politics of citizenship in the US South," *Transactions of the Institute*

activities and services establish social relationships and networks for newly arrived immigrants, making religious institutions hubs of social networking and belonging, particularly for refugees who have experienced the collective trauma of displacement and stress of resettlement.[29]

Although the notion of religion as a beneficial coping mechanism for immigrants is largely positive, this perspective reduces religion to an immutable resource to be used instrumentally, failing to capture how the immigration and acculturation process may transform religious beliefs, practices, and identities. Likewise, though mosques no doubt serve as important spaces of community and belonging, processes of community-building and identity formation are not straightforward given the racial and ethnic diversity of Muslims in the US and the cultural heterogeneity of most American mosques. In examining how religious practices, beliefs, and identities are transformed through the process of immigration within the context of religious and ethnic diversity in the southern US, this article seeks to bridge research on religion and immigration with interreligious studies.

As a subdiscipline of religious studies, interreligious studies aims to examine the encounters between different religions and non-religious worldviews to understand the dynamics of those intersections and their implications on peoples' beliefs and practices.[30] The interreligious interactions can manifest through "interpersonal conversations" and everyday encounters amongst individuals of different religions, including the "intersections of religion and secularity."[31] As such, interreligious studies fits within a lived religion framework, which seeks to examine religion as it is practiced and negotiated within the complex contexts of everyday life, as opposed to how it is conceived of abstractly solely within religious doctrines or institutions.[32]

---

of British Geographers 37, no. 4 (2012): 624–38.

29 Wendy Cadge and Elaine Howard Ecklund, "Immigration and Religion," *Annual Review of Sociology* 33, no. 1 (2007): 359–79; G. Odessa Benson, Fei Sun, David R. Hodge, and David K. Androff, "Religious Coping and Acculturation Stress among Hindu Bhutanese: A Study of Newly-Resettled Refugees in the United States," *International Social Work* 55, no. 4 (2012):538–53.

30 Paul Hedges, "Editorial: Introducing Interreligious Studies," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 27, no. 2 (July 1, 2014): 127–31.

31 Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Kate McCarthy, "(Inter)Religious Studies: Making a Home in the Secular Academy," in *Interfaith/Interreligious Studies: Defining a New Field*, eds. Patel, et al., 4–15 at 12.

32 Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Studying Lived Religion* (New York: New York University Press, 2021).

In recent years, several valuable ethnographic studies have illuminated our understanding of the everyday lived religious spaces and identities of Muslim immigrant communities in the US. For example, Zain Abdullah provides ethnographic insights into how African Muslim immigrants in Harlem negotiate Islam, Blackness, and belonging within the context of racial politics in the US and ethnic diversity in the Muslim community.[33] Similarly, JoAnn D'Alisera's research with Muslim immigrants from Sierra Leone in the Washington, D.C. area highlights the complex ways in which Muslim immigrants negotiate boundaries of sacred space and religious identities within the context of a secular public sphere in the US.[34] Perkins likewise has examined how Muslim Americans in the metro-area of Detroit navigate religious pluralism in the US and cultural pluralism in the Muslim community, emphasizing the compatibility of Islam with public life in the context of American multicultural and secular democracy.[35] Situated in suburban Chicago, Howe's research examines the production and negotiation of an everyday American Islam through the performance of leisure and consumerist practices.[36] What these studies share in common with the present research is a focus on how Muslim spaces and identities are negotiated, performed, and produced through everyday spaces and practices situated in the context of the racial politics of American multiculturalism, Muslim ethnic diversity, and a secular public sphere. The small-scale qualitative study presented in this paper represents an initial attempt to extend such examinations into the peri-urban areas of the American south, with a particular emphasis, not on one immigrant community, but on diverse Muslim immigrant communities and the ways in which their interreligious and intercultural encounters affect the religious views, practices, and identities of Muslim immigrants.

In introducing the voices and experiences of Muslim immigrants into the study of lived interreligious encounters, this research examines everyday expressions and practices of Islam in relation to broader transnational affiliations and transcendent understandings of the *deen*. In adopting this dialectical and multi-scalar approach, this study draws upon the notion of "grounded theology" from cultural geography. Geographer Justin Tse

33 Zain Abdullah, *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

34 JoAnn D'Alisera, *An Imagined Geography: Sierra Leonean Muslims in America*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

35 Alisa Perkins, *Muslim American City: Gender and Religion in Metro Detroit* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

36 Justine Howe, *Suburban Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

argues that grounded theologies are not abstract theories, but rather refer to the concrete implications for how transcendent theologies and worldviews ground themselves within "processes of cultural place-making, the negotiation of social identities, and the formations of political boundaries."[37] Such socio-spatial boundaries include discursive and legal delineations between personal religious belief and a supposedly secular rational public sphere, itself a historically contingent construct that situates religious institutions and believers in particular ways and places.[38] This concept has also been used to examine immigrant religious practices, emphasizing the need to understand religious lives of immigrant communities within the inner logics and language of that community, rather than conceptualizing such communities within the normative secular framework often adopted by immigration studies scholarship. Taking a grounded theology approach, this study examines how Muslim immigrants interweave their religious beliefs, practices, and identities into the new context of Christian-glossed American secularism and multiculturalism. An Islamic worldview is transcendent, yet Islamic practices are grounded in particular places and times. A grounded theology approach draws our attention to how Muslim immigrants reconfigure their relationship to a perceived historically and spatially transcendent Islam and global Muslim Ummah in a new spatial context in the US marked by interactions with non-Muslim and diverse Muslim communities.

Methods

Participants in this study included first-generation Sunni Muslim immigrants and second-generation Sunni Muslim Americans of at least 18 years of age residing in the central peidmont areas of North Carolina between the Triad and Triangle areas of the states. A snowball sampling method was employed to recruit participants by utilizing the researchers' connections within the Muslim community in the area, and by recruiting participants from local mosques and Islamic centers. The researchers conducted twenty semi-structured interviews with seventeen Muslim immigrants and three second-generation Muslim Americans. To gain a diverse array of perspectives, the first- and second-generation Muslim immigrants came from the Middle East and North Africa (12), the Indian Subcontinent (5),

37 Tse, "Grounded Theologies," 202.

38 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

and Sub-Saharan Africa (3), representing the three most prevalent regional backgrounds of Muslim immigrants in the research area. Most participants came from ethnically and religiously diverse societies, where Sunni Islam is nevertheless demographically dominant, or at least constitutes a sizeable and well-established minority religion. Most participants are or come from well-educated, professional, middle-class households. Although the research presented in this paper draws upon a small sample size of participants, this data is supplemented by an ongoing and longstanding personal and professional relationship with Muslim leaders and institutions in the research area, providing deep and detailed insights into one specific area in the American South where Muslims are building community and living out their values and beliefs.

Due to Covid-19, the interviews for this research mainly took place via virtual platforms, lasting from thirty-five minutes to an hour. Virtual interviewing has limitations including possible distractions in the surrounding environment and the potential for missing out on important non-verbal cues. Nevertheless, virtual interviews have also been found to be beneficial in accessing marginalized or difficult-to-reach populations, establishing rapport, and eliciting rich data.[39] For this research, the flexibility and accessibility offered by communicating with interviewees via a platform commonly used by the community, WhatsApp, required less time and effort from participants, making it easier for them to participate. Moreover, these formal interviews were complemented and contextualized by observations and informal interactions in online and in-person events at a local mosque in the research study areas, facilitated by the researchers' longstanding and ongoing relationship with this mosque. Prior and ongoing relationships between the researchers and members of the Muslim community allowed for a high degree of trust and rapport which, when combined with a private and secure mode of communication, most likely resulted in candid responses from participants. Both researchers identify and present as white, English-speaking, native-born US citizens, with one identifying as a practicing Muslim with Arabic-language fluency and insider community connections, contributing to an insider/outsider researcher dynamic. This, combined with an explicit informed consent process and assurances of anonymity, enabled participants to share detailed views and experiences, be they affirming, critical, positive, or negative.

39 Sam Keen, Martha Lomeli-Rodriguez, and Helene Joffe. "From challenge to opportunity: virtual qualitative research during COVID-19 and beyond," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 21 (2022).

The interview transcripts were analyzed utilizing a grounded theory approach, involving coding the transcripts to identify emergent themes.[40] These themes included a critical self-reflection of how one perceives the central tenants and beliefs of Islam (*ʿaqīdah*) in light of a new cultural context and how one can best practically implement Islam in daily life, including ritual worship (*ʿbādah*) like prayer and fasting (salah and *ṣawm),* and one's manners and behavior (*akhlāq* or *adab*). In the following sections we examine two overarching and intertwining themes. One relates to the process of critical self-reflection, questioning, and knowledge-seeking that is brought about through interreligious encounters with non-Muslims, and intercultural encounters with fellow Muslims in diverse Muslim community spaces. For many, though not all participants, these encounters resulted in a deeper commitment to and belief in Islam (faith, i.e., *imān*) and more meaningful and intentional practice of Islam, even if, for some, this meant letting go of particular practices. A second and related theme emerged which is, for some, the increased importance of one's identity as a Muslim, and differing perspectives on the intersection between national and religious identity. We turn now to these empirical findings in the sections below.

Questioning Muslim Values and Beliefs in the Bible Belt

> I didn't expect to have that same experience when I moved down South [from New York] because as a stereotype of the Bible Belt being conservative with very, very rigid values. But honestly, I feel more at ease and more closely related in values here in the South, in terms of family values, social wellbeing. Politics is different [laughs], but in what makes a household happy, what makes a community move forward together, I feel there's far more warmth down south, maybe because of that open, slowed down pace that we have time to talk to one another.

Jamal, a Kikuyu Muslim immigrant from Kenya who previously resided in New York City, echoed the sentiment of many other interviewees in recounting the positive experiences associated with living in the southern "Bible Belt," specifying the centrality of family and religious values one observes in the semi-rural/peri-urban piedmont region of North Carolina.

40 Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).

Despite the racialization of Islam in the South, where white evangelical Christianity predominates, interviewees expressed an appreciation for the religiosity of their neighbors as providing a sense of commonality. Fatima, an immigrant from Pakistan, said that "in some kind of strange way, it's been comforting to know that the people around me are mostly religious people, even though it's not the same religion, but there are so many similarities between our faiths that I feel like on some level I can relate to where they're coming from." For Fatima, Christianity, as an Abrahamic faith, shares similar values and beliefs as Islam, allowing her to feel some sense of reassurance about her new cultural surroundings. Beyond feelings of religious proximity, Fatima further explained how interreligious interactions with Christian neighbors prompted her to ask critical questions about the status of her own belief in Islam, what Howe calls "everyday interpretive acts."[41] She asked rhetorically: "How can you claim to have the one truth when there are other people who believe in the exact same thing, but slightly differently and hold the same values?" As this section demonstrates, for many of those who participated in this research, interreligious interactions brought about by immigration prompted critical self-reflection that led to a greater appreciation for, and deeper connection with, Islam, alongside a renegotiation of how best to practice Islam in a non-Muslim environment.

Though many regard the Christian environment as a positive aspect of life in the South, other respondents did not shy away from questioning the supposedly Christian values of the surrounding community, contrasting them with Islamic norms and customs. As Hind, a mother and educator from Palestine observed in conversation, "Our neighbors are very connected to the Church, and family, which is good, and they are very nice, but it was also a shock to see how everyone dresses here, and the dating, the drinking, so there are still some cultural differences, but you have to accept that when you chose to live in the US." Overall, many interviewees concurred that most of their social interactions since arriving in North Carolina had been friendly and hospitable, and that their interreligious interactions with their Christian neighbors, specifically, allowed them to better appreciate and understand their own religion.

Although many interviewees emphasized their positive experiences as new residents in the South, a majority also discussed experiences of marginalization and discrimination, resulting from their racialized and minoritized status as Muslims. Many interviewees described verbal harassment in public due to their Muslim identity, but also said that such

41 Howe, *Suburban Islam*, 159.

experiences were "normal" and "expected." As Safa, a college student from Algeria, put it: "Have I been told to go back to my country or whatever? Yeah, I think that's normal. That is almost a coming-of-age experience, being the child of immigrants or being an immigrant here. It's very normal." For better or worse, most respondents demonstrated resiliency in overcoming experiences of discrimination, which are perceived as expected and normal, albeit in contrast with the general congeniality that characterizes most everyday interactions and encounters.

Still, such experiences can take their toll over time. As Hind again recounted: "My daughter was bullied at school because she wears hijab, and kids at my son's school made comments about 9/11 and terrorism, even my colleagues at work have asked me questions about Muslims being violent and I'm like 'look at your country!'" Although Hind observed that such experiences might stem from her particular identity as a Palestinian immigrant, most other interviewees described similar experiences specifically related to their identities as Muslims. Rima, a mother from Syria, described the "constant struggle" to "always have to explain things and always…prove the media wrong" about Muslims. Likewise, Jamal, from Kenya, described how countering negative stereotypes was the most difficult part of living in the US as a Muslim.

According to a 2014 survey, some sixty-two percent of Americans have never met a Muslim, meaning that most of their knowledge of Islam most likely stems from often negative media portrayals.[42] Indeed, while some studies have shown that even short face-to-face interactions with Muslims can reduce Islamophobia, both in person and online, other studies have shown that such interactions can reinforce negative stereotypes, especially when such encounters take place within a socio-political context marked by anti-Muslim and xenophobic political and media discourse.[43] Although the number of Americans who have met a Muslim may have increased in the past decade, most of the participants in this research described experiences of being the only Muslim in their school, workplace, or neighborhood. As

42 Lipka, Michael. "How many people of different faiths do you know?" Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, July 17, 2014.

43 For the positive effects, see Kathryn Benier, Nicholas Faulkner, Isak Ladegaard, and Rebecca Wickes, "Reducing Islamophobia through Conversation: A Randomized Control Trial," *Social Psychology Quarterly* (2024); Maisoon Osama Alsebaei,"Facebook as a Safe Sphere: The Influence of Facebook Intergroup Communication on Reducing Islamophobia in the United States," *Global Media Journal* 19 (2021): 1–12. For the reinforcing effects, see Randa Abdel-Fattah, *Islamophobia and everyday multiculturalism in Australia* (London: Routledge, 2017).

such, many participants reported being questioned about Islam by colleagues and neighbors. As Saad, an immigrant from Saudi Arabia, stated, "I have been asked so many times for my input about what's going on [in the Middle East] and how 'Islam' is doing this, and 'Islam' is doing that." For Jamal, such questions about Islam, whether curious or accusatory, prompted him to better educate himself on various topics in Islam, particularly the more "controversial topics" related to violence, gender, and views of other religions. "I found myself always seeking to inform myself to learn more so that I can share about my religion accurately," Jamal said, because "growing up as a Muslim and living in a Muslim predominant area, there's some things you take from knowledge and practice for granted." Other interviewees articulated similar sentiments, that interreligious dialogues with neighbors and colleagues led to a perceived need to study Islam more closely to better explain it to others, rather than taking Islamic beliefs and practices for granted as conventional wisdom.

Although arguably defensive in nature, this process of questioning and knowledge-seeking can, for some, lead to a stronger connection to Islam. As a refugee from Syria, Rana has lived in several different countries. Having only previously lived in predominately Muslim countries, however, she never faced questions about her religion, as she has in the US. Nevertheless, Rana enjoys these questions because, as she put it, "it made me stronger in religion. I learned the value of things, the meaning behind things that I used to do, just because everybody's doing it." As with Jamal, the experience of being questioned about Islamic beliefs and practices lead to a process of learning and questioning that brought him beyond convention toward deeper conviction.

Similarly, Samia highlighted that getting challenging questions about Islam "strengthened my faith and made me feel like, if I'm going to have to justify it and explain it to other people, then I better have a good understanding of it myself." Specifically, Samia recounted how being a religious minority strengthened her *imān*, or faith in Islam:

> [Islam] is very much, almost ritualistic second nature in Algeria because it's the predominant faith there, whereas here, being a minority as a Muslim, it challenges you to truly find faith and commit to it, and I've had to actively choose to be Muslim and to remain a part of that minority faith. Because of those challenges, I think I've chosen the religion for myself, so it means a lot more to me than it does to a lot of my relatives in Algeria, because there, they just kind of go through the ritual because that's just the thing to

> do and that's just how everybody lives. You never really go through a moment of choosing faith and understanding what you believe.

Being in the religious minority, Samia must consciously choose to actively commit to practicing Islam. Another college student, Rami from Lebanon, spoke similarly about finding Islam for himself after coming to the US. He stated that he "started practicing my faith more and trying to learn more about it, learn beyond the superficial kind of cultural aspects that I grew up with but try and discover the truth behind things." Many of those who participated in this study distinguished between an unconscious, habitual, instinctive, or even "cultural" practice of Islam in their home country, and a conscious, deliberate, and intentional practice of Islam where it is not part of the dominant religious environment.

This process of self-examination and re-commitment to Islam is by no means straightforward for Muslim immigrants. In conversation, some participants offered cautionary tales of other Muslim immigrants they knew who, when unrestrained by the societal expectations of a predominantly Muslim community, felt the liberty to date, drink, engage in questionable business practices such as selling alcohol, or abandon the practice of Islam almost altogether. Given the largely secular environment of the US, Koffi, an immigrant from Ivory Coast, feared that immigrating to the US would cause his commitment to Islam to weaken. However, in Koffi's observation, the opposite was true. "I know people here who are not religious back home, but they are more religious here. I see a lot of them." Almost all the first-generation immigrants interviewed in this study shared Koffi's fear that their practice of Islam would be weakened in the US, and all unanimously agreed with his sentiment that immigrating strengthened their faith (*imān*).

Although both men and women in this study reported experiences of discrimination as well as a pressure to represent Islam, the visual association of the veil as a gendered symbol of Islam necessarily situates Muslim men and women differently regarding this topic. Research has shown that Muslim women who wear the veil face greater experiences of institutional and interpersonal discrimination and feel more pressure to represent Islam positively.[44] Many of the women who participated in this research reported shifting perspectives on the hijab after coming to the US. Rima, an immigrant from Syria, stopped wearing the hijab after arriving in the US because she felt that "wearing a hijab was another layer between [her] and other people."

44 Fatima Koura, "Navigating Islam: The hijab and the American workplace," *Societies* 8, no. 4 (2018): 125.

Safa echoes similar reasoning for not wearing the hijab in that she "doesn't mind wearing it when [she] goes to certain events" but that she "doesn't wear it in public [or] to work" because she believes "there is that stigma out there even professionally" with the hijab and Islam. Safa, a second-generation American, had worn the hijab growing up, but said "when I went to college, I realized it wasn't for me. To me, it was almost more distracting to me than it was constructive", so she stopped wearing it. Both Salma (who wears hijab) and Hind (who does not) made a distinction between what they considered to be the surface-level display of Islam as represented by the veil and the enactment of Islamic values of respect and modesty in one's interpersonal interactions, comportment, and physical appearance, arguing that the latter is more important than the former. Hind noted that she feels her daughter wears the veil more as a way of defiantly identifying and signaling to the world that she is Muslim, so she tries to make sure her daughter knows that Islam is more than just a piece of clothing, and that the hijab must be accompanied by an attitude of respect and modesty as well as self-confidence.

Other interviewees similarly conveyed the notion that wearing the hijab functioned as a marker of Muslim identity and sought to instill pride in their daughters not to shy away from wearing it in the US. Rana stated that "I wanted my kids to see me wearing the hijab. I have three girls, and I felt like…you should present yourself as a Muslim woman and be proud of it." Salma further explained:

> Hijab, for me, is more of an identity thing…Islam is such an important and major part of my life that I love sharing this part of my identity with everyone. So when you see me 150 yards away, you would say, "There is a Muslim woman out there." Or I am stepping in for a job interview; I want my potential employer to know that this is a proud Muslim person, and this is part of my identity. So if the practices of this firm, or this university, would contradict with my faith tradition or practices, I would graciously decline or I would want them to choose somebody else who's better suited for the job.

Regardless of their decision to wear the veil or not, the women in this study emphasized that this was an intentional decision brought about by a desire to practice Islam in a sincere and meaningful way in a new cultural environment, rather than merely conforming to cultural expectations, whether of the US or their country of origin. As an older woman from Pakistan commented in a mosque discussion group, "back home, people just

follow the culture, but here in the US I have actively chosen to wear hijab and assert my rights as a Muslim woman."

It could be argued that an idealized spatial division between a nominally secular public sphere and a private, religious sphere brings about a deeper sense of personal spirituality in contrast with a generalized public practice of Islam. However, the cultural, communal and inter-personal context here is key. According to the interlocutors in this research, it was the morally proximate yet nevertheless contrasting cultural environment of the predominantly Christian surroundings that created opportunities for interreligious encounter and dialogue, prompting a process of questioning, self-reflexivity, and knowledge-seeking that, for some, resulted in stronger *imān* and, for women especially, a more intentional process of choosing how to embody the practice and display of Islam. However, this process of knowledge-seeking does not occur in a vacuum. For Rami, his knowledge of, and faith in, Islam grew through his involvement with the Muslim Student Association at his university, and, later, with mosques in the area. This is true for most of the other participants in this research who attend mosque not only for prayers and communal gatherings during Ramadan and Eid, but also for in-person and virtual classes and *ḥalaqa*s, or discussion groups. For some like Samia, who lacked a strong Muslim student community at her university, knowledge-seeking involved relying on the plethora of English-language videos, classes, and other resources that have proliferated online, particularly during the Covid-period. Whether through individual or collective study and religious refinement, many interviewees described practicing a deeper and "more authentic" Islam than they had practiced "back home," raising the question of what constitutes this more authentic Islam in practice. We turn to the question of practicing Islam in a majority non-Muslim context in the following section.

Practicing Islam in a non-Muslim Context

For some of the participants in this research, the process of questioning and reflecting upon one's previously unexamined religious beliefs extends to an examination of how they put those beliefs into practice on a daily basis. Practicing Islam in a non-Muslim majority context poses certain practical challenges, as addressed in classical and modern Islamic *fiqh al-aqallīyāt* (jurisprudence of minorities).[45] Most participants in this research, however,

45 Munazza Akram, "Issues of Muslim Minorities in Non-Muslim Societies." *Islamic Studies* 58, no. 1 (2019): 107–26.

emphasized the simplicity and adaptability of Islam that allows it to be practiced anywhere, having historically adapted to new cultural contexts as it spread throughout the world.[46] As Saad put it, "Islam is very flexible. You can be Muslim anywhere in the world, and you should have no problem." For Saad and others, the ability to buy halal food and find a mosque to pray in on Fridays during a lunch break was all he needed to be able to practice Islam fully in his adopted home of North Carolina.

Other participants in this research described needing to be more conscious and mindful of salah in a cultural environment and spatial context that does not reinforce or easily accommodate the five daily prayers. Echoing the sentiments of others, Amadu, from Ghana, observed: "back home the places of worship are within walking distance, you also hear the call for prayer all the time," but in the US, "we don't hear anything, you have to figure out the time by yourself and go." Similarly, Mohammed, from Jerusalem, stated that he knew a lot of Muslims who stopped regularly going to the mosque because of the distance and conflict with work hours. However, Muhammad said that he made a point of asking his employer for flexibility and additional time for prayer on Fridays, even if he must make up the work time later. He said that doing so would, hopefully, make it easier for other Muslims at his workplace in the future. Fellow interviewees echoed similar sentiments, in that they worked with their employers to establish a prayer space in their workplace to take time throughout their workdays to pray. Others discussed the permissibility of delaying or combining *zuhr* and *ʿaṣr* (noon and afternoon) prayers if one cannot pray them at work. Although interviewees recounted a variety of responses to the challenge of upholding a foundational practice of Islam, salah, most emphasize the ease, flexibility, and adaptability of Islam and, crucially, discussed the increased intentionality needed to maintain prayer in an environment that is not always conducive to it. Likewise, most also indicated that such additional effort and intentionality resulted in an increased sincerity and, ideally, reward. To underscore this point, at a hybrid masjid gathering, the imam addressed this challenge and importance of attending prayers in the masjid and discussed how God rewards Muslims for travelling greater distances to pray congregationally, and that the effort and intentionality required to do so is a special opportunity to which Muslims in the US have access.

As Muhammad indicated, however, some Muslim immigrants find the hectic, work-focused lifestyle of the US as a barrier to prayer. As Fatima

46 Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, "Islam and the cultural imperative." *CrossCurrents* (2006): 357–75.

explained, "I haven't even bothered trying so much [to pray five times a day] in the US because I know how difficult it would be to find the time during work hours." For Fatima, who does not normally wear hijab, doing so to observe prayer in her workplace could serve as an additional barrier, particularly as such a conspicuously spiritual practice in an overtly secular environment might bring about further unwanted attention. Although she prays occasionally at home, reads Qur'an, fasts during Ramadan, and tries to provide her children with a grounding in Islam, immigrating to a non-Muslim majority environment prompted her to pick and choose which aspects of Islam to emphasize:

> Well, in some ways it has made me more of, I guess, a cherry-picker. There are some aspects of Islam that I still fundamentally really believe in, that guides the way I think, politically, ideologically, socially, in terms of equality, egalitarianism and charity and those things…But then other things like rituals, or you have to do this this way, you have to use your right hand to do this or that. Those kinds of things, a lot of those things, I don't believe in or care about anymore, because they seem trivial or in some ways, it's not really meaningful.

Here, Fatima describes focusing more on Islamic values rather than practices, be they prescribed (*farḍ*) or customary (*sunnah*), ranging from prayer to etiquette. In conversation, Fatima contrasted what she considers to be the more rigidly "religious" outward expressions of Islam and a more "spiritual" inward, reflective, and values-based understanding of Islam. In doing so, Fatima reproduces a growing distinction that many within the secularizing US make between organized religion and a more individualistic and supposedly more authentic expression of spirituality.[47] Likewise, the "cherry-picking" of religious practices reflects a more consumer-oriented approach to religious practice not uncommon in the contemporary American context.[48] Nevertheless, Fatima said she would not go so far as to call herself "unmosqued," in the way that some American Christians have become "unchurched," stating that, if anything, the mosque has become not only more accessible to her here in the US as opposed to in Pakistan, but also more important to her and her family as a locus of religious worship,

47 Nancy T. Ammerman, "Spiritual but not religious? Beyond binary choices in the study of religion," *Journal for the scientific study of religion* 52, no. 2 (2013): 258–78.

48 Graham Harvey, "If 'spiritual but not religious' people are not religious what difference do they make?" *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 6, no. 2 (2016): 128–41.

community engagement, and cultural belonging.[49] In the US, she says, "there is a much more concentrated effort from the community to go to the mosque, to take your children to the mosque," than back home in Pakistan, and she values this.

Indeed, although interviewees differed somewhat in their views and approaches to salah, all emphasized the increased significance that the masjid has taken on in their life in the US.[50] For Amadu, and about half of the other interviewees, the difficulty in "finding a mosque, finding a community of Muslims…and finding a place of worship here in North Carolina" proved "the main challenge" of moving to the US. One interviewee expressed how if she and her husband wanted to pray at the mosque, they would have to drive over an hour to Raleigh. Noor immigrated to Greensboro from Jordan in 1990 when, "There was not yet at that time a big Muslim community, just a few students there, and there was not much, there was no masjid, there was not much, like, community like we used to have back home" and for her "it was kind of hard, especially being lonely." Interviewees note that although they can pray anywhere, in the US, only a mosque provides them with a sense of community and unity. Muslim immigrants describe how coming to the US encouraged them to spend more time in the masjid to stay connected to their religion, build a sense of belonging with fellow Muslims of different backgrounds, and connect with members of the Muslim community with shared cultural backgrounds. Likewise, the mosque can provide an important space for newcomers, especially refugees, to make connections for housing, employment, and everyday survival in a new context.

Even for participants like Fatima who report being more relaxed about daily prayers in the US, the mosque remains a central point for community and worship, especially during Ramadan and Eid holidays. As previously acknowledged, the US cultural calendar revolves around Christian holidays, presenting difficulties for those in the US following minoritized religions, including Islam. Most interviewees discussed at great lengths the drawbacks of celebrating Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr in the US compared to their home countries, where the solidarity of fasting and breaking fast together form part of the communal cadence of everyday life in a Muslim-majority country. In

49 Joseph O'Brian Baker and Buster Smith, "None too simple: Examining issues of religious nonbelief and nonbelonging in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48, no. 4 (2009): 719–33.

50 For more on the nuances of salah among Muslims in America, see Rose Aslan, "Salah: Daily Prayers in Muslim America," in *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction*, Edward E. Curtis, ed. (New York: NYU Press 2017), 15–35.

contrast, as Fatima explains, "none of that exists [in the US] so you have to really be very disciplined and motivate yourself to wake up and prepare your own morning meal and wake up your family and do all of that stuff that would be so much easier in a Muslim country." School and work schedules present obstacles for Muslims celebrating Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr in the US. As Abdul, an immigrant from Pakistan, notes, "Unfortunately the holidays, especially Eid, our equivalent to Christmas, those holidays are not recognized. We have to take the day off, or sometimes you can, sometimes you can't. You tend to only take one day off rather than taking two or three or four days off, just to really celebrate that." About half of the other interviewees discussed how work and school schedules proved an obstacle to observing Ramadan, and others, in conversation, discussed concerns about how to make Ramadan feel unique and important for their children, in contrast with what they perceived to be the more commercial and secular expression of holidays in the US, like Christmas.

Despite added difficulties, most interviewees stated that they found ways to observe Ramadan and Eid, with some touting the special benefits derived from such special efforts. Salma said she finds Ramadan in the US to be even more spiritually meaningful and fulfilling than in her home country of Egypt, famous for large-scale communal iftar meals on the streets of Cairo. For Salma, the quiet and contemplative solitude of being the only one at work fasting, and completely shifting one's schedule while the surrounding world carries on at its usual pace, can be a profound experience. Others echoed the sentiment that there are greater heavenly and earthly rewards to be accrued from the extra effort needed to observe Ramadan in the US. As Jamal explained, because "you have to put so much effort to bring community together, there is a greater sense of belonging and being together and practicing together, and sharing in the benefits and joys and the teachings of Ramadan" in the US. As with daily salah and attending communal prayer and events at the mosque, practicing Ramadan within a largely secularized Christian-majority spatio-temporal context potentially yields greater spiritual insights and benefits, as well as stronger community bonds.[51]

51 See also Jackleen Salem, "Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, and Eid al-Adha: Fasting and Feasting," in Curtis, ed., *The Practice of Islam in America*, 83.

Encountering the Ummah and Being Muslim in North Carolina

As noted above, for the participants of this study the mosque took on heightened importance in their social and religious lives upon moving to the US. This is particularly true for women who may have only rarely attended mosque in their countries of origin but who reported feeling a strong sense of belonging and connection in mosques in the US, giving them opportunities to engage with other Muslims. Although many Muslim immigrants come from ethnically diverse countries, American Muslims encounter a context of "superdiversity" in most American mosques, given that the US has the most ethnically diverse Muslim community in the globe. As an example, the imam of a medium-sized mosque in the study area reckoned that their membership included about 200 families from over forty different countries throughout the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and South Asia, as well as white, Latino, and Black American Muslims. Encountering this kind of ethnic, national, racial, and linguistic diversity in one's local mosque is a unique experience for many Muslim immigrants, which some equated with the kind of diversity one might encounter on hajj. As Rami explained, in Lebanon, "everyone's the same. You go to the mosque. And in the village, they all know each other. It's like they're the same people in the mosque for years and years and years," but in the US "there's people from Pakistan, from Africa, Arabs, and all different kinds of people." For many participants in this study, this diversity reinforces that Islam is a global religion with the ability to be practiced in any culture.

For Rana this internal ethnic diversity within the Muslim community affirmed and deepened her faith in Islam. As she put it, experiencing this diversity "made me value that we all have different languages, we all look different, we all come from different backgrounds, but we still have one Imam saying 'God is great,' [in] the call for the prayer, we all line up and we start praying together." Most of those interviewed in this research shared similar feelings about how diversity in the Muslim community has had a positive impact on their view of Islam and that, as Rana states, "it just made me love my religion more…it just makes me very happy, and it makes me a strong believer." The affective experience of praying alongside those from diverse backgrounds serves as a grounded theological embodiment of what Muslims believe is the universal message of Islam open to all regardless of background. Likewise, the physical act of lining up in straight rows shoulder to shoulder with people of different backgrounds also serves as a manifestation of the egalitarian ethos of Islam that Fatima emphasizes.

While most interviewees described positive experiences of intercultural interactions in the mosque, others indicated that their mosque could do a better job at encouraging inter-ethnic interaction, as well as greater diversity and inclusion in masjid leadership. Jamal, for example, noted that "internally as Muslims, we need to do a better job of not just looking diverse but practicing diversity in terms of leadership at the mosque, in terms of the image and message we want to send to the community," noting that mosques in the area sometimes have a diverse membership that is not reflected in the masjid leadership, which remains dominated by a one immigrant community. At his mosque, board members are chosen to represent different identity groups, including the Arab, South Asia, African, and American/convert communities, though it lacks explicit representation from Black American Muslims. Jamal described the disagreements that sometimes come up between communities in the mosque because, as he put it, "people want to do things the way they did it back home." From typical disagreements about sighting the moon for Eid al-Fitr and the number of *rak'ah* to perform in *tarāwīḥ* (nightly Ramadan prayers), to questions about gender segregation, Jamal said that the community had to work to overcome and accommodate people's differences and preferences, and separate cultural preferences from religious mandates, for the sake of unity. Indeed, many participants differentiated between the "cultural" expressions of Islamic practices back home and a purer more "authentic" form of Islam they feel they are learning about through the process of questioning and knowledge-seeking prompted by immigration. Such appeals to a pure or stripped-down Islam cohere with more Salafist understandings of Islam, an issue that was raised by one participant in conversation at a masjid event.[52] Others, however, point to the emergence of a culturally inflected American Islam through this process of sifting through and negotiating prescribed Islamic practice and cultural custom.

Although cultural and ethnic diversity in mosques comes with its challenges and shortcomings, for most participants in this study, the diversity within the Muslim community re-affirmed their commitment to Islam. Many also described a process of intercultural exchange at the mosque. In conversation, many fondly recalled the delicious assortment of delicacies that marked Ramadan iftars in pre-Covid times, representing Middle Eastern, South Asian, and typical "American foods" like pizza and fried chicken, symbolizing the diversity of the mosque and constituting a kind of typical American iftar. Hind talked about being gifted beautiful scarves and clothing from Pakistan by a friend from the mosque, and how she loves to see when

52 See also Howe, *Suburban Islam*, 7–8.

people of the masjid wear *kufiyeh*s (keffiyehs) in solidarity with Palestine, "even if they aren't Arab." Others are concerned about maintaining a balance between cultural representation at the mosque and keeping the focus on religious refinement. For example, a proposed Palestinian cultural and solidarity night at a local mosque was transformed with an "Ummah Solidarity" event, featuring talks about the political situation in Palestine with an emphasis on its religious significance, as well as discussion and *du'ā'* (prayer of supplication) about other places in the world where Muslims are facing oppression, such as China, Myanmar, and the Central African Republic. Similarly, at one of the first in-person events at the mosque as Covid restrictions were easing, the event organizers urged people to sit with and get to know community members from different countries, evoking the *āyah* (verse) from the Qur'an explaining that the purpose of ethnic diversity is to "know one another."[53]

This topic of inter-ethnic diversity and solidarity in American mosques led to discussions about how such interactions affect one's own identity as a Muslim immigrant in the US. Does the ethnically diverse environment offered in the mosque, the focal point of community for many Muslim immigrants, contribute toward a shift of emphasizing one's religious identity as a Muslim over one's ethnic or national identity? Does the ethnic diversity of the masjid contribute to the production of a specifically American Muslim identity? Salma, from Egypt, stated that, regardless of whether she was living back in Egypt or in the US, her identity as a Muslim "takes the front and center position" over her national or ethnic identity as an Egyptian, American, or Arab. In this way, she argues, the place she finds herself in has no bearing on her primary identity as a Muslim. However, she did state feeling that "America provides so much room for individuality, that [she] can celebrate [her] Islamic identity within or along with [her] American identity with no problem, absolutely none" and she goes so far as to say that she "enjoys the interweaving of [her] Islamic identity with her American identity more than [she] does interweaving my Islamic identity with [her] Egyptian identity." Although this perspective might seem to contradict statements by others in this research who expressed difficulties in openly practicing Islam or identifying as Muslim, Salma spoke with specific reference to the secular Arab nationalist context in Egypt, where overt expressions of religiosity are viewed with suspicions as conspicuous displays of potentially political Islam. For Salma, in openly and proudly displaying her visible "Muslimness" she

53 Quran 49:13, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another" (Sahih International).

is also embodying what she most values about the US and her American identity, namely, personal religious and political freedom and protections. In this, Salma echoes the sentiments of most others in this research who express a "fragile optimism" in the "American political project," as Howe put it.[54]

Although for Salma the question of her Muslim identity taking precedence over all other identities was not a question at all, this question prompted a diverse array of discussions and responses from other participants. Jala, a second-generation Pakistani American, considers herself to be "an American who happens to be Muslim," stating that being American and being Muslim mean many different things and cannot be limited to a single definition. Fatima, from Pakistan, expressed similar feelings: "Muslim American is a much more inclusive, a much more American term" because "you are American, who just happens to be Muslim." She specifically contrasted this with being "Pakistani American," which she characterized as being less inclusive due to its connection with national identity. Ali, a Muslim immigrant from India, also downplayed national identity, but emphasized his Muslim identity without qualifiers. Rather than being an American who happened to be Muslim, instead he considers himself a Muslim who happens to be American. As he put it: "I can't call myself an Indian Muslim, I am a Muslim from India. Or, I'm a Muslim from China. Similarly, I'm a Muslim in America." Likewise, Aisha, a second-generation Arab American, identities first with Islam because "it just means identifying strongly with my religion in a country that's not...and I don't want to say very welcoming of Muslims, but I want to say the Muslim presence has not always been the most welcomed." For Aisha, the fact that her Muslim identity has historically been marginalized and threatened in the US prompted it to come to the fore over and above her American identity. For the other participants in this study, being Muslim in America or American Muslim functioned as the two primary identity markers for interviewees, with most prioritizing their Muslim identity over their national or ethnic origins. Many, though, emphasized that American and Muslim were broad and mutually compatible umbrella identities, and that there were many ways of expressing or enacting these identities.

Conclusion

The above findings demonstrate the value and necessity of interdisciplinary approaches to better understand the complex acculturation process of

54 Howe, *Suburban Islam*, 219.

Muslim immigrants in the southeastern US. Specifically, this paper illustrates how the acculturation process affects the religious views, practices, and identities of Muslim immigrants and how, in turn, this process contributes to the emergence of an indigenous American Islam, as negotiated among Muslims from diverse backgrounds in their co-production of Islamic community space. To do so, this paper draws upon the concept of grounded theology to examine the dynamic interaction between transcendent religious beliefs and everyday spatial contexts and practices. This concept helps to highlight how Muslim immigrants' religious identities transform through their interactions with their new surroundings, communities, and broader societal forces, including intercultural and intra-religious encounters, showing religious identity formation and acculturation to be mutually constitutive. This approach offers a holistic view of acculturation that includes not just economic and social factors, but also spiritual and religious dimensions, beyond the view of religion as mere coping mechanism, cultural retention tool, or domain of social capital accrual.

Muslim immigration to the southeastern US has produced a form of interreligious encounter between Muslim immigrants and their non-Muslim neighbors, friends, and colleagues. Such encounters are situated within a political context of secular democratic multiculturalism and a cultural context dominated by white Christian Protestantism, both of which are infused with a mix of Islamophobic and xenophobic discourses alongside values of tolerance and hospitality. Although experiencing anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant prejudice is seen as being a "normal" part of the acculturation process, such experiences are also outside the norm of most everyday encounters. Indeed, the study reveals how many Muslim immigrants feel at home within the so-called "Bible Belt" due to cultural values centered on religion and family. Everyday interactions within this context, for the participants in this study, prompted a process of reevaluating assumptions about Islam and, for many, inspired a deeper commitment to the intentional practice of Islam. As part of this process, the mosque emerges as a site of central importance, not only for worship, but for belonging, knowledge-seeking, and identity formation.

In addition to the role of interreligious encounters in shaping the beliefs, practices, and identities of Muslim immigrants to the US, this research has also shown the importance of intercultural encounters within Muslim communities in contributing to the emergence of new feelings of Muslim identity rooted in place. In this research, participants described how their local mosque served as an everyday site where the universality of Islam and the diversity of the global ummah manifested itself. Although

mosques continue to serve as sites of national and ethnic affiliation and cultural belonging, participants also described how in the superdiversity of mosques, in which no one ethnic group predominates, one's Muslim identity takes precedence over and above national identity. Likewise, the context of political secularism, the surrounding cultural influence of Christianity, experiences of religious discrimination, all contribute to an emphasis on one's Muslim identity.

Limitations of this research relate to the remote nature of the interviews and the small and selective sample size. Due to Covid-19, the interviews largely took place via remote platforms, potentially limiting the ability to engage with and observe participants in their everyday environments. Then again, the remote nature of the interviews also allowed interviewees with the ease and comfort of participating from home. The context of social distancing could have also provided participants with time and space for self-reflection. Moreover, interviews were supplemented by ethnographic participant observation and informal interactions in online, hybrid, and in-person events at local mosques prior to and following completion of the interviews for this research. However, using mosques for recruitment could have skewed the sample toward more religiously observant Muslim immigrants, overemphasizing the role of mosques in the acculturation process. Still, snowball referrals partially mitigated this. Some participants were identified outside of any connection they might have to a local mosque, and participants varied in their level of mosque involvement. Although this study contributes new empirical insights by focusing on an ethnically diverse population in peri-urban areas of the southern US, more research is needed in the diverse spaces of the south to better understand the practice of Islam in this cultural region, how Muslims have and continue to shape southern cultures, and how racialized southern identities are negotiated by Muslims in this cultural region in ways that contribute to particular expressions of American Islam.

RR

Authors

Kylee Smith holds a Doctor of Law (JD) from American University Washington College of Law, where she served as an editor at the American University Law Review. She completed the research presented in this paper as an Elon College Fellow and Multifaith Scholar at Elon University, from which she graduated with a BA in Policy Studies. She currently serves as an Assistant Public Defender for Pinellas County in St Petersburg, Florida.

Dr. David J. "Sandy" Marshall is an Associate Professor of Geography in the Department of History and Geography at Elon University, where he also teaches in the International and Global Studies and Peace and Conflict Studies programs. He holds a PhD in Geography from the University of Kentucky, an MA in Middle Eastern Studies from the University of Arizona, and a BA in Politics from the Queen's University of Belfast. A political and cultural geographer, he specializes in the geographies of children, youth and families; migration and refugee studies; and sacred space.