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Learning Islam: Identity, Education, and Empire

By

Khalid A. Afsar

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## **Abstract**

Learning Islam: Identity, Education, and Empire

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Doctor of Philosophy in Education

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Situating education within world-systems analysis and in the *longue durée* of capitalist history affords a critical view of public schooling and Islamic education in the US. While the American Muslim community copes with the aftermath of 9/11 and the effects of the war on terror, the business of providing Islamic education to young American Muslims and educating them about the larger world they live in remains a challenge. Public schooling represents democracy, the right to free and universal education, and the prospect of social mobility, but it also hides the underlying historical forces of colonialism, capitalism, cultural domination, cultural genocide, and segregation. Yet, unlike many centuries past, Islamic education during the Cold War also served a geopolitical agenda against communism, distorting and defaming the teachings of Islam. Contrasting epistemological and ontological dissimilarities between California public school standards and Islamic education makes visible the tensions and tendencies that arise out of combining the two in a private Islamic school. Centering on a private Islamic school located in the Silicon Valley, and with a view to serving the learning needs of Muslim children in the US post 9/11, this dissertation surveys the fears and hopes of the Muslim community, and the opportunities and challenges of Islamic education that lie ahead. Effectively, the necessity arises in formulating a new vision of Islamic education that prepares young American Muslims to contribute positively to an increasingly militarized, racialized, divided world. Based on the *longue durée* of Abrahamic faiths, relating modern and Islamic history, Islamic education inside the US must re-conceptualize the understanding of the Qur'an and Islam, so as to develop a spirituality and worldview that prepare young American Muslims to serve the social and political needs of their communities, their country, and the world at large.

## **Dedication**

To all the refugees of the world, especially mothers, who struggle, sacrifice, and wish for a safe, nurturing world for their children to live, learn, and thrive in.

For my parents and family.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Education, Empire, and Islam**

Since the end of WWII, institutions like the United Nations and the World Bank, largely under America's stewardship, have continued to promote literacy around the world as part of the nation-building developmentalist package intended to modernize countries emerging from colonial rule (So, 1990). Since the time of the Renaissance and Spanish expansion across the Atlantic, Western colonial education has been complicit with Western empires seeking conversions of non-European, non-Christians to European languages, culture, and Christianity (Mignolo, 2003). The common thread that emerges from the last 500 years of Western hegemony lays bare the role of Western education, both as a tool of imperialist expansion and colonial subjugation (Willinsky, 1998). More importantly, modern education emerges as a key component of a capitalist world-system, or global capitalism, in the making over the last 500 years (Arrighi, 1994; Wallerstein, 1979). Without Western traditions of "modern" education, the entire global capitalist system would collapse. Working within this long sweep of history, this research examines how a private American Islamic school, modeled on California public schools, pursues the education of young Muslims, and how it negotiates its place inside a Euro-American capitalist nation-state that has effectively declared war on Muslims. Furthermore, using the Islamic school as a case study, this research situates education, Islam, and Muslims in the modern capitalist world-system under Judeo-Christian Western hegemony in order to develop a model of Islamic education that can effectively challenge the hegemonic ontology and epistemology of Western models of education.

#### ***1.1 Islam and Muslims in America***

Islam and Muslims in the Western media, even before the events of 9/11, occupied a position of "threat" to Western civilization because of Islam's "extremist" tendencies and "hatred" for democracy (Said, 1997). Moreover, the historical distrust and the multifaceted hostility towards Islam in the Western world predate the Middle Ages, which partly inspired the European Renaissance (Hall, 1996; Said, 1978; Southern, 1962). Unsurprisingly, since 9/11 the Muslim community and Islam in the US have become the target and topic of many mainstream debates and discussions, mostly intended to distort and condemn Islam for harboring terrorists, for encouraging suicide bombings, and for keeping Muslim women veiled and oppressed<sup>1</sup> (McGreal, 2010). This propagandist campaign against Islam, also known as Islamophobia, continues to offer itself as an effective tool for justifying the protracted war on terror domestically and globally. Hidden behind this tragic propaganda one sees the lives of everyday Muslims in the US who continue to face extreme pressure to take a "moderate" stance by denouncing violence and hostility towards America and the American way of life<sup>2</sup> (Bosco, 2010). The public opinion at large (here and around the world) seeks to undermine any reaction

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<sup>1</sup> Stoking the flames of Islamophobia seems to be the logic and role of right-wing propagandists, backed by an often right-wing and racist political agenda (mainly to justify US foreign policy or the "war on terror"), with luminaries such as Robert Spencer, Pamela Geller, and Geertz Wilder. Such bigots have enjoyed generous space in main-stream media outlets reaching a global audience, as they indulge in a message of racist hatred against Muslims, Arabs, and their societies and culture.

<sup>2</sup> Among many examples of such discourse in the Western press, the subheading of one such article cited here reads: "If only 1/10th of 1 percent of the world's 1.6 billion Muslims are terrorists, that is 1.6 million killers acting in Allah's name. Moderate Muslims and non-Muslims are natural and necessary allies in this existential struggle for tolerance and freedom."



by Muslims to American imperialist ambitions and policies by demanding Muslims promote and practice a “moderate” Islam. The censoring and coercive nature of this discourse dealing with “moderate” Islam and Muslims demands that Muslims condemn violence (except violence committed by Western governments) and hostility towards America and its policies overseas. Cumulatively since 9/11, American public has been bombarded by hysteria ranging from madrasas and Shari’a law in the US, the “Ground Zero” mosque (Hasan, 2010), to home-grown suspected terrorists (of various racial and ethnic backgrounds<sup>3</sup>) who have been entrapped by FBI informants supplying them with fake bombs and weapons (Cook, 2010), falsely imprisoned, abused, and pushed to committing suicide (Knefel, 2016), or threatened and blackmailed to become Muslim informants for the FBI, and faced grave consequences if refusing to do so (Bartosiewicz, 2012). In essence, during these times of war and persecution, Muslims in the US face inordinate pressure to be as invisible as possible. Consequently, for Muslims in America, assimilating fully into the dominant Euro-American, Judeo-Christian cultural landscape becomes a logical step in the right direction.

Unequivocally, life inside a Western democracy and the capitalist world-system, in the wake of 9/11 and the war on terror, has created many contradictions for Muslims who must balance their religious duty with their patriotic obligations as American citizens. In attempting to grasp these contradictions at the community level, this study centers on examining the way a local Islamic school positions itself philosophically and ideologically in undertaking the religious education of its children. Modeled on California public schools, the school in question presents itself as a full-fledged private Islamic school, committed to the teaching and development of a Muslim identity. The most obvious tension for this Islamic school arises from using the California public school model, which represents one version of modern Western education. Keeping in mind both the history of Western colonial education, and the opposing pressures facing Muslims to be religiously “moderate” and culturally assimilated Americans, raises many questions with respect to the goals of Islamic education in the US. Accordingly, the questions this study proposes will examine 1) the tensions between Islamic models and the hegemonic Western model of education; 2) to what extent Islamic and Western education models are viewed to have conflict or congruence; and 3) how does this conflict or congruence, then, translates into the Islamic school’s philosophy, curriculum, and pedagogy that may serve to challenge what it means to live in a Western capitalist nation-state in light of post 9/11, but may also seek to assimilate students into the dominant American culture. While the Islamic school as a research site offers an opportunity to see the contradictions and dilemmas in action, a historical overview of this tension appropriately deserves an analysis here.

## ***1.2 Literature Review***

### *1.21 The Historical Dilemma*

The tensions and dilemmas faced by immigrant Muslims, with respect to Islamic education in America, represent a historical struggle to reconcile Western and Islamic education.

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<sup>3</sup> The wide net of entrapment the FBI continues to spread around the US has thus far indicted both immigrant and African American Muslims. Although there is an element of racism in many manifestations of Islamophobia, the anti-Muslim hysteria in the US does not discriminate on the basis of Muslims’ skin color, Sunni vs. Shi’a, immigrant vs. American born. This demonstrates a pressing need for the Muslim community at large to overcome ethnic and sectarian differences, which continue to undermine its ability to offer a united front against national persecution.

Notwithstanding the glory of Islamic civilizations, after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire, the last remaining and one of the oldest Muslim empires, the way was cleared for the frequently uncontested superiority of the West. Western thought and societies would subsume countless cultures and civilizations, not to mention land and geographies, dividing up the world between the West and the rest, communism and capitalism, the First World and the Third World. The ever-expanding European hegemony dating back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century (Abu-Lughod, 1991) sought to dominate and subjugate the lands of Islam through political and economic policies throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. When the Muslim world began increasingly to confront Western militaries and colonialism, it began to take interest in Western institutions and modernity. Moreover, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western expansionism sought a new weapon against the 1400 years of Islamic history, knowledge, institutions, and culture through a discourse of modernity that sought to expose Islam as a religion lacking the cloak (and clothes) of modernity, making it feel self-consciously anachronistic and inadequate to face the challenges of the modern world. The entire discourse of the “modern West” bringing in its wake the historical (Enlightenment), racial (European), political (nation-state), linguistic (European languages), scientific (objectivism), and epistemological (modern social sciences) supremacies became cause célèbre of modernity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Hall, 1996). In the imposition of the “modern” discourse that sought to place “the West” at the apex of human civilization, and “the rest” at the margins of humanity came the movements to “modernize” Islam, or to reconcile Islam with all aspects of modernity, whether institutionally, politically, economically, scientifically, and ideologically (Donohue, 1982). This led to many attempts and movements to reform education along Western models in early 18<sup>th</sup> century across the Muslim world in such places as Ottoman Turkey, Iran, Egypt, and India. Most movements either attempted to embrace the modern Western sciences without questioning their Cartesian underpinnings, or tried to embrace the use of “modern” social sciences in the better understanding of Islam without understanding the colonial nature of Western social science disciplines (Quijano, 2000; Wallerstein, 2001). Both Quijano and Wallerstein condemn social science disciplines for having a linear notion of human development and progress, for European man embodying this progress, for promoting the Eurocentricism in knowledge production that does not question colonialism or acknowledge the history of colonialism and colonial institutions whose legacies live on in the form of poverty and destitution born out of racial and class hierarchies prevalent in modern nation-states that formerly served as colonies for Europe. In a rather formulaic fashion, the social sciences offer the rest of the world universal solutions to understanding the problems of mankind purely through modernization and material accumulation driven by economic development. The traditional social sciences do nothing but further the reign of Western hegemony through the promotion of either capitalist or Marxist ideologies that claim to be in the service of human liberation through material development. Worse, the discourse of progress hides the actual function of the social sciences: to guard and promote the established social, political, and economic order that benefits the First World (Wallerstein, 2001, Chapter 1).

### *1.22 Western vs. Islamic Epistemology and Education*

In order to examine the conflicts between Islamic and Western models of education, this study explores how modern education as a means of social and economic development serves to promote and spread Western hegemony in an increasingly globalized world. In contrast, Islamic education teleologically, epistemologically, and ontologically seeks to envision and promote a different type of civilization than the one created and promoted by Western educational models.

Education models premised on Western notions of modernity, objectivity, and universal truth produce scientific models in the service of global capitalism and Western hegemony.

Post-Enlightenment Western epistemology rests on the notion of an objective, scientific universe derived from the dualism that separated the mind from the physical world, or a mind disembodied of time and space (Rámon Grosfoguel, 2008, pp. 3–4). The objectivism implicit in Cartesian and post-Enlightenment thought transcends time and space, giving Western thinkers the power to produce objective, universal, scientific knowledge, displacing the universe of divinely inspired knowledge and God. Thus, Western thought and institutions claim their privileged high status as the best among all civilizations, for their objective and rational scientific truths apply universally to all of mankind regardless of race, religion, or nationality. These universal and objective truths endow Western man with pseudo-divine powers of creating scientific knowledge and truths, or a configuration of epistemology ostensibly superior to anything mankind had ever previously conceived of and realized. The Enlightenment gave birth to “modern philosophy,” and its legacy came to be identified as modern and secular, as opposed to traditional (outdated) and religious. After WWII, this universalism evolved further into the modernization theory (So, 1990), which rooted in capitalist expansion informed the “developmentalist” economic package intended to help “develop and modernize” the otherwise undeveloped and “backward” countries of the global South. In this conception, modernity presented itself as a universal and inevitable stage of human and social development that all societies must undergo, while masking its true identity and purpose as representing Western thought and epistemology, which promote hegemony, and the colonial, capitalist world-economy and institutions (the IMF, the World Bank, inter alia).

If Western thought sees the development of societies and civilizations along a linear horizontal plane, tied to the material progress of human history, or based on a conflict model of dialectical materialism, then Islamic thought and its underlying epistemology present an entirely different non-linear plane of thinking, especially with respect to “human development.” Primarily, Islamic epistemology takes the divine revelations in the Qur’an as its source, which does not propose an idea of disembodied knowledge or the separation between the secular and the religious (premised on the Cartesian disconnect between subject-object), for knowledge (*‘ilm*) constitutes an intimate part of this life (the earthly plane) and the afterlife (the heavenly plane), where both man and God simultaneously coexist (Al-Zeera, 2001). Mankind as a creation is earth-bound, but through an intellectual and spiritual exertion can reach the heavenly plane through reasoned, intellectual reflection upon the miraculous creation of human existence, and nature in all its glory as evidence of God’s ubiquitous presence. Realization of this higher knowledge becomes possible through an empirical and rational knowledge of the physical world, for the physical world carries “signs” that point to a higher truth, or to a path that leads to the “ultimate reality” described as God in the Qur’an. Furthermore, the idea of universal truth found in Islamic epistemology differs significantly from post-Enlightenment universalist truth tied to the materialist struggle and advancement of man. The body of knowledge bequeathed to mankind via the Qur’an constitutes a trust between *insaan* (or a human being) and God, so that *insaan* may serve as God’s representative on the earthly plane of divine guidance emanating from the higher plane of divine knowledge. Thus, spiritual ascension not only constitutes a fundamental but a crucial step in cultivating an understanding of knowledge entrusted to *insaan* in the Qur’an, which then contributes to the development of humans in their entirety, progressing and advancing not only as earthly beings in this life, but spiritually prepared to embrace the afterlife. Of course, the ascension to the higher plane of knowledge takes place through rational

thought, seeking knowledge, contemplating, and embodying the knowledge revealed in the Qur'an and exemplified in the life of Prophet Muhammad.

Since human knowledge in Islam reflects the divine trust between God and mankind, it must be used in promoting the highest levels of mercy, charity, equality, peace, and most of all, justice. Violating this divine trust by placing knowledge in the service of worldly power, material wealth, exploitation of the weak, oppression and setting up of social or racial hierarchies of any sort constitutes a fundamental assault against this trust, and is strictly warned against in the Qur'an with grave consequences and divine punishment (Rahman, 1989). Islamic educational models stemming from this epistemology can provide an entirely different motivation and reason for learning. Premised on this idea of knowledge as a divine trust, Islamic schooling can provide forms of learning that remain ontologically and epistemologically poles apart from Western education models. The challenges that face today's Islamic education models deal with confronting the Western hegemonic dualisms of modern vs. traditional, or secular vs. religious. However, Islamic movements such as the Deobandis and *Ahl-i-hadith*<sup>4</sup> (Rahman, 1984, p. 41) whose genealogies emerge from an attempt to confront expanding Western colonialism and dualisms, along with the Wahhabi movement (Algar, 2001), do so only at the expense of narrowing the broad 1400-year tradition of Islamic practice and learning. In response to the collected empirical data, one component of this dissertation will explore how Islamic education can confront and challenge Western notions of modernity epistemologically without resorting to a reactionary fundamentalism.

### 1.23 *Education and Empire*

I draw on the work of several studies that deal with Muslim students and immigrant communities in the US, notably that of Maira (2005), Abu El-Haj (2007), and Ong (1996). The work authored by Sunaina Maira (2005) provides insight on the political pressures faced by first-generation Muslim high school students in the US post 9/11. Maira's research affords an understanding of the political and cultural pressures faced not only by students of this Islamic school in the heart of the Silicon Valley, but possibly also by the administrators and board members of the school that shaped the curriculum priorities of this school. Maira's work reminds us that Muslim students are not merely subjects in a Western capitalist nation-state, but a nation-state that has emerged as an imperial state (local and global policies aligned to serve a singular imperial agenda), or in a more disembodied way often referred to as globalization. Maira highlights the pressures Muslim youth face inside this imperial state, who are on one hand under state protection, but as a result of the "war on terror," are looked upon with suspicion, subjected to surveillance, and seen as a threat to imperial agenda when they speak out against the domestic and foreign policies as American citizens exercising their democratic right to resist and challenge their country's policies at home and abroad. Maira's research on Muslim youth since 9/11 potentially serves as a way to understand the conflicting subject position of Muslim students: on the one hand, their religion obligates them to spiritually and intellectually struggle against oppression and persecution, while on the other, American citizenship directs their attention to becoming economically successful and patriotic citizens, who must tread the waters of dual identity, Muslim and American, with utmost care and vigilance.

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<sup>4</sup> Here *hadith* means the collected body of sayings of the Prophet (PBUH), and the Ahl-i-Hadith movement gave paramount importance to these sayings at the expense of other Islamic sciences, such as Islamic theology and philosophy.

Abu El-Haj's (2007) study of Palestinian youth facing unabashed racism at the hands of students and teachers at an American high school takes Maira's analysis further. As a nation-state whose geopolitical interests are dictated mostly by a corporate agenda, the domestic and global policies of the US towards the people of the Muslim and Arab world has redefined what it means to be an Arab or Muslim American citizen. The US as a nation has come to imagine its Arab and Muslim citizens as "threatening outsiders" by denying them the legal and political "privileges" of American citizenship, because of these communities' suspected ties with terrorism and extremism. This creates a vulnerable position for these communities whose members "imagine" themselves as full-fledged citizens of the US, entitled to the political rights and privileges, which the government has increasingly curtailed since 9/11. While the members of the Islamic community and school that my research examines continue to see themselves as part of the "imagined community" that American citizenship opens up, such an imagined view fails to prepare its students on how the Muslim community is being treated as non-citizens, or outsiders since 9/11. Instilling an "imagined" sense of belonging and citizenship in Muslim students as Americans, could fail to prepare the students to deal with the racist reality they'll most likely face in high school and beyond. Abu El-Hajji's work informs the discussion on how the Islamic school's curriculum can devise ways to help students challenge the hegemonic American identity, and challenge what it means to be a racialized, inferior American citizen inside the US since 9/11.

Aihwa Ong's (1996) work offers perspectives on cultural pressures faced by immigrant communities in the US. It highlights the context in which the Muslim community's relationship with the dominant white culture in the US can be analyzed. It offers an understanding of the notion of cultural citizenship<sup>5</sup> in a "neo-liberal" or capitalist state as applied to the Muslim community, and how the community negotiates with ideas of neo-liberalism in being accepted as productive, law-abiding American citizens. However, Ong argues that cultural citizenship cannot be "unilaterally constructed;" rather, it refers "to the cultural practices and beliefs" produced through a process of negotiation with the state in being accepted as its citizens. Hence, "[c]ultural citizenship is a dual process of self-making and being-made within webs of power linked to the nation-state and civil society. Becoming a citizen depends on how one is constituted as a subject who exercises or submits to power relations" (p. 264). Ong's research points to how immigrant groups undergo a process through a form of coercive discipline (in a Foucauldian sense), disguised as American citizenship, a subjectivity emerges that conforms to the dominant American white class and culture. The private Islamic school presented in this study is not beholden to the standards and criteria set by the local school districts or by state requirements, but happily complies to California State standards, and derives a curriculum from California public school districts, which illustrates Ong's view on how the Muslim community as a subject submits to power relations. It also shows the tensions resulting from accreditation requirements, imposed by the state, where the school must negotiate between "self-making" and "being-made." This situation largely arises from the need to prepare students for high school with a view to attending college, and ensuring their smooth transition into American society. The work of these authors, among others, will illuminate the tensions and contradictions the school experiences with its curriculum, philosophy, and mission that mediate student identity.

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<sup>5</sup> Derived from the works of Latino scholars in the US, cultural citizenship is defined as having the power to construct and express human, social and cultural rights (Flores & Benmayor, 1997, p. 12).

### 1.3 *Research Implications*

Modernity, colonialism, and the rise and expansion of the capitalist world-economy alongside European hegemony have had an incalculable effect on Islam and Muslims. The Muslim world's attempts to reconcile Islam with modernity, unaware that it represents a different epistemology and universalism than Islam, has led to a division between those who embrace Western modernity, and those who resist it. Western epistemology premised on Cartesian and post-Enlightenment genealogies promotes a secular anthropomorphic modernity, objectivity, and universal truth, which produce scientific models that serve global capitalism and Western hegemony. This has implications for American education that embodies Western epistemology. In contrast, Islamic epistemology does not represent anthropomorphic notions of objectivity or universalism. Rather, Islamic epistemology derives its universalism from the role of the Creator and human history detailed in the Qur'an. If Western epistemology has brought the idea of human evolution, development, and modernization as occurring on a temporally linear horizontal plane, then Islamic epistemology represents human development along a vertical plane that transcends time and space. Human existence in its physical and material form represents the lower earthly point, and progress and development of humanity takes place when mankind consciously struggles, intellectually and spiritually, to ascend that plane. Transcending earthly existence and reaching an elevated spiritual plane, where the Creator and hidden truths, obscured by man's earthly nature, await his intellectual and spiritual reach. Similarly, epistemology of Islam premised on the Qur'an has these two dimensions: the material or empirical, and the hidden (*al ghaib*).

The universalism of Islamic epistemology emanates from the ubiquitous nature of the Creator and His attributes, and not from Western rational thinking entangled with material needs and capitalist expansion. The Creator's attributes as just, merciful, and compassionate, boundless in generosity and knowledge, become the obligatory ideals for Muslims to follow and achieve. The achievement of these ideals elevates and transforms man from his earthly state, paving his unification with the elevated Spirit. This epistemology neither promotes world domination, nor scientific models to that end; rather, it seeks to turn man away from the material desires of wealth and power that lead to domination and oppression, and therefore, directs his attention to the spiritual plane where the Most Merciful, the Most Knowledgeable, the Most Generous, and the Most Just and Forgiving awaits him. Modernity does not offer this spiritual elevation, or spiritual liberation from earthly existence, which what Muslims achieve during their 5 daily prayers, during the fasting month of Ramadan, during the spiritual retreat of *Leilat al Qadar* (the night of power), which the Qur'an (97:5) describes as "a thousand months" of worship,<sup>6</sup> and during the annual pilgrimage of Hajj to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, where millions gather from all over the world in a show of spiritual solidarity at the House of God (Kaba) that Abraham/Ibrahim and his son Ishmael/Ismail built. The indispensable, sapiential teachings of the Qur'an provide the spiritual basis and dimensions of human existence, guiding life through its earthly dimensions and existential challenges humanity has always faced.

Of course, any interpretation of Islam that aspires to replace Western domination with an Islamic one goes against the very divine attributes of justice, mercy, compassion, and wisdom, which Prophet Muhammad learned from the divine teachings of the Qur'an. Likewise, liberation from Western notions of modernity compounded by its capitalist, racist, colonial history, and domination logically becomes an imperative that this spirituality must help achieve. This leads to, then, the lives of young Muslims living inside the modern, capitalist world-system, and a post

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<sup>6</sup> Some interpretations of this verse have concluded that by "a thousand months" the Qur'an implies eternity.

9/11 world. Situated as imperial subjects inside the US, and racialized as “unpatriotic” Americans with extremist tendencies and hostility towards the West, poses a challenge for them. Facing racism in public schools, and in public spaces as “terrorists” and threatening outsiders, betrays the American Muslim sense of citizenship and belonging in a country they and their families have embraced as their home. Muslims in America must negotiate their place as American citizens. Condemning the 9/11 attacks, they bear an enormous responsibility also to speak out as Americans against what the war on terror has brought in its wake since President George W. Bush (on September 20, 2001) delivered these unforgettably divisive words, enshrining the racializing binary of the war on terror: “Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Effectively, the Muslim community has faced the social and political pressures generated by the war on terror to dispense with their cultural and religious identities, and to unquestioningly embrace the dominant white American culture and identity of a loyal patriotic American. This, undoubtedly, affects the way the community practices spirituality and empowerment through Islam, and pursues the Islamic education of its children, which this study aims to explore.

#### **1.4 Overview of Remaining Chapters**

Chapter 2 describes the research site, the ethnographic data collection and methodology. The Islamic school as a case study affords the basis for a broader discussion of an Islamic model of education inside the US. Any discussion on Islamic education models must be informed, first, by locating the position Muslims occupy and have occupied inside the modern, colonial, capitalist, Euro-American, Judeo-Christian world-system. Accordingly, Chapter 3 discusses the history and rise of this world-system. It traces the expansion of early colonial empires, such as the Spanish, and the history of this expansion vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims, non-Europeans, and non-Christians. It also traces the rise of European colonial education in the service of colonial expansion through the conversion of natives in the New World to European languages, religion, and way of life. Most importantly, Chapter 3 makes a connection between Western education and capitalism. This will frame the analysis in the remaining chapters as to the tensions created for the Islamic school by using the California public school model of education.

Chapter 4 examines the research site and its location inside the Silicon Valley. It briefly looks at the history of education overall in the US, and what the models of education found in state public schools imply in terms of the historical connection between Western hegemony, colonialism, capitalism, and education inside the US. It explores ominous tensions with the Islamic school modeling itself on a typical California public school, and what this entails in terms of creating tensions and contradictions with its mission as an Islamic school, particularly in light of the current situation Muslims occupy of fear and loathing in much of the Western world today.

Chapter 5 begins the process of examining the ethnographic component of this study. Particularly, it presents the content of the monthly school newsletters, interviews with the president of the Islamic center, the school board members, the school principal, teachers, parents, and students. The chapter also presents the contents of Friday sermons in order to show the ideological position the Muslim community maintains with respect to America, its culture, and institutions. This, then, begins crystallizing the school’s actual mission, philosophy, and the ideology of the larger Muslim community the school serves.

Chapter 6 adds to the ethnographic data by reviewing the class lectures of the eighth grade Qur’anic Studies and the Islamic Studies classes. It examines the pedagogy, the content of

lectures, the class textbook, and Islamic themes to trace the continuity from chapter 5, and the implications for student identity and acculturation. I also draw on the scholarly works that look at the study of the Prophet's life (*Sunna*) and *hadith*, and the exegetical approach to understanding the Qur'an. Overall, this chapter brings into view the ontological and epistemological effects generated by the tensions and contradictions of a western model of education in the service of teaching and learning Islam. Lastly, the conclusion offers a discussion on shifting the goals of Islamic education to one of spiritual resistance and liberation, rather than assimilation into a capitalist world-system.



## **Chapter 2: Research Site and Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Site**

The case study component of this research looks at an Islamic school, founded in 1988, serving grades K-8. The school is located in a semi-industrial, corporate area of Silicon Valley. The building houses both the school and a mosque, or an Islamic Center, which also serves as a venue for various religious events, holidays, lectures, and fundraisers. The Islamic center was founded in the mid-1980's, and a few years later the community felt the need to provide an accredited Islamic school serving the surrounding communities. The board members of the Islamic Center worked together in the late 1980's to establish the school, inaugurating its first year in 1988. It located to its current, permanent location in 1994. Beginning as a modest student population of 40, the school at the time of research boasted a growing population of 400 students, costing around \$6,000 annually to attend. The school's mission and philosophy envision providing quality academic and Islamic education, one that "nurtures strong Muslim identity, fosters brotherhood, and strengthens moral character" (school principal). The school's website provides a section entitled "Expected School-wide Learning Results," also referred to as "graduation outcomes" which essentially capture the school's philosophy and mission.

The philosophy, mission and curriculum of this Islamic school appear to cater to an epistemology of Islam that emerges out of the eagerness to embrace the American way of life, especially in the economic and cultural spheres—a typical pattern among immigrant Muslim communities even before the events of 9/11. There also exists an attempt to modify the understanding of Islam to not only convince the Muslim community, but also the mainstream American society, that Islam very much seeks harmony, coexistence and tolerance towards the American way of life and its institutions. It is with a view to the world-system, the American culture and institutions that I examine how this American Islamic school pursues the "Islamic" education of young Muslims, and how it negotiates its place inside a country that has increasingly come to view Islam and Muslims as an external threat. More specifically, I examine how the philosophy and curriculum try to mediate the cultural and political pressures the community faces at the hands of the dominant white, Judeo-Christian culture and capitalist institutions.

### **2.2 Methodology**

The research site, as described above, serves as a case study, providing ethnographic data for the purpose of engaging in multi-leveled analyses of Islam and Muslims in a local community inside the modern, colonial, capitalist, Euro-American, Judeo-Christian world-system. Merriam's (1998) discussion illuminates the role of the case study as a site of ethnographic data. A case study describes a bounded/integrated system or phenomenon represented by an entity ("a complex, functioning thing") that's "fenced in" with clear boundaries. The building complex, housing the Islamic school and an Islamic center, certainly represents a bounded social system, or a phenomenon, with distinct physical and social boundaries (as defined by its religious practices), hemmed in by industrial/commercial, secular space in the service of capitalist production. The ethnographic data in its totality attempts to make sense of this bounded social system, examining its ominous tendencies and tensions with the larger surrounding space and society.

In view of examining this bounded social system, then, the perspective and orientation of the researcher whether as an outsider (non-Muslim) vs. an insider (Muslim) also merits some

attention. Aguilar (1981) gives a detailed look at the critics and proponents of insider vs. outsider researcher. Insider researchers, mostly coming out of ethnic studies fields, are accused of biasing their research in favor of their communities. Critics implicate insiders as lacking the objectivity and ability to observe things on their own terms, while neglecting to notice phenomenon that outsiders, otherwise, would. This makes insiders biased in their selection of data. Aguilar admits that such bias among insider researcher does occur but infrequently and usually biased in a negative way against the community, since ethnic researchers, that is those born and raised in the US, are usually more acculturated, and thus, might feel hostile or indifferently towards their own community and its values and beliefs. Effectively, insider researchers can occupy two potential positions in reference to their community: first, where the researcher has assimilated so much into the dominant society that he sees his own community negatively, viewing himself as an outsider; second, in contrast, the researcher has ethnic pride and works toward elevating the status of his community. What bias may occur at the hands of the insider researcher does not necessarily imply categorically favorable analysis of the researcher's community. Aguilar proposes that outsider/insider researchers occupy and utilize both positions and perspectives in the hope to get a more accurate view of things that bring into clear focus a member's own point-of-view in the community. The present study attempts to occupy both positions. Most definitely, being an insider I bring many advantages, the most important of which is ease of access, since the fear inside the Muslim community of persecution through surveillance by law enforcement agencies, or of outright racist misrepresentation, may greatly hinder and limit an outsider's access. Given the current political climate, it would make carrying out research inside a Muslim community here in the US, even nearly a decade after 9/11, altogether impossible by an outsider.

Writing a metanarrative of his own research involving a high school on an Indian reservation, Peshkin (2000) discusses the challenges of interpreting data that goes beyond the binary of insider vs. outsider researcher: "Yet the researcher's orientation and the definition of the situation cannot help but have ramifications for the way people are treated or thought of (e.g., as 'subjects,' as 'deviants,' or as analogous to computers)" (p. 5). Peshkin challenges the researcher to examine his own subjectivity at every point of observations, data collection and interpretation in determining how one will affect the other. Similar to the thoughts and sensitivities I have grappled with during my own research, Peshkin shares two concerns of the school he researchers: "first, that my study should benefit the school, and, second, that I should be aware of their concern for cultural survival" (p. 6). For him, having this understanding from the outset must translate into data interpretation that most accurately and precisely portrays the reality as seen through the eyes of his subjects, for "interpretation is an act of imagination, where one perceives importance, order, and form and relates it to the arguments, story, narrative that one is constantly creating" (p. 9). In summary, the researcher's own imagination should not allow his interpretative and analytical brushstrokes to caricature the subject community; instead, the researcher should render as accurate a portrait as possible, being vigilant of the fine line between factual ground-level reality and his imagination.

Since this research attempts to locate the position of Islam and Muslims in the modern, colonial, capitalist world-system, a discussion of decolonial research methodology needs also mentioning. Speaking to this, Haraway (1991) systematically refutes the objective "Western gaze" pervasive in all western academic disciplines: "The [western] eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity -- honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy -- to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power" (188). Simply put, the idea of "objective

knowledge” mediates a scientific tradition in the service of hegemony. Such objective knowledge opposes and obviates any knowledge in the service of liberation, by widening the rift between the all-knowing subject carrying out his research, and the mute object of inquiry or research. According to Haraway, displacing objective, disembodied knowledge makes possible particular, or situated, forms of knowledge, which rather than being disembodied, becomes “embodied.” For her, this approach subverts the elitist, white male stranglehold on knowledge that draws its strength from claims of objective universalisms, emanating from nowhere and no “body.” This subversion allows for those underneath the “platforms of the powerful” to present the “subjugated” perspective (p. 191). In other words, situated knowledge allows the oppressed body to speak from a particular location (or a subjugated perspective). Researching and writing on Islam and Muslims in the US, my work doubtlessly represents an attempt at creating situated knowledge about a persecuted community in this modern world-system.

Blauner and Wellman (1973) posed a thesis similar to Peshkin and Haraway nearly 40 years ago, by problematizing the research methods of “white” sociologists. Arguing the importance of overcoming the divide between the researcher (situated in the academy), and the subject (situated in the community), they call for decolonial academic research that serves the needs of the subject community. Being a person of Islamic faith, and having grown up in the US and attended primary and secondary public schools, as a researcher I hope to bring an insider’s understanding of the Muslim community that constitutes part of this research. As a Muslim living in post 9/11 America, I aim to understand the persecuted Muslim community. As a researcher, this affords me the role of not only as an outsider looking in, but as an insider who incessantly wrestles with issues of what it means to be a Muslim inside today’s America, and the role of Islamic education in preparing Muslim children to face American society at large. Certainly, the research, analysis, and outcome I seek to pursue will no doubt be determined largely by being situated as a Muslim male. While as a Muslim I’ve gained access to students, teachers, board members, and administrators with a degree of trust and frankness afforded to other Muslims in the community, and have observed things commonly found in a Muslim environment, my ability to fully grasp the challenges faced by Muslim female students, teachers, and administrators constituting an Islamic school has posed a limit in taking account of the situated perspectives of the female subjects in this study.

In order to understand how the Islamic school positions itself inside a Western capitalist nation-state by adopting the California public school curriculum, and the implications this carries for student identities as American Muslims, my research utilizes ethnographic methods in using the school as a case study. This data has been collected through observations and interviews with students of the Islamic and Qur’anic studies classes, their parents, teachers, school administrators, as well as board members of the school. The data was collected over the course of two trimesters (totaling about 10 weeks), where I observed and audio recorded the eighth grade Qur’anic studies and the Islamic studies classes that meet 3-4 days per week. The class observations provide analysis of the content and style of pedagogy. Additionally, I provide an analysis of the textbook used in the Islamic studies class. I have also recorded ten weeks worth of Friday prayer sermons, and attended a few community and school events held at the Islamic center, in order to better understand the ideological position of the Islamic school, and of the Muslim community. This should reveal how a particular interpretation of Islam serves to assimilate the Muslim community into American culture and capitalist institutions. The interview subjects consist of 5 school board members, 4 teachers, 10 students (eighth graders), 6 parents, and the school principal. My hope was to interview at least 8 parents, but several failed to follow

through on being actually interviewed. I recruited students for interviews by announcing the research project during observations of the classes, and by handing out consent forms and emailing them to their parents. I generally interviewed two students at a time, which made for a richer interview and conversation. Interviews with a few students, however, were carried out individually, since their schedule didn't allow for a group interview, and such interviews didn't elicit as rich a response from the subjects. Interviews with students lasted anywhere from a single 30-minute session, to multiple sessions totaling more than 90 minutes. Interviews with parents, teachers, administrators, and board members lasted between 45-90 minutes. In addition to interviewing the two Islamic Studies and the Qur'anic studies teachers, I also interviewed the eighth grade social studies teacher. One parent turned out to be a full-time teacher of the school, which made for a very detailed and long interview.

The observations and interview questions attempt to understand the school and the community's view of Islam, Islamic education, American society and institutions, capitalism, the challenges of being Muslim in America, issues of racism, class, and to what extent Islam informs these views. Students were asked about the type of after-school activities they participate in, what fears or excitement they feel about attending a non-Muslim public high school, and their opinions of the Islamic school, regarding its curriculum, philosophy and pedagogy, teachers, administrators, etc. Table 1 below outlines various sources of data collection that provided answers to the research questions with the richness and complexity underlying the aforementioned themes. Overall, the ethnographic data provides a snapshot of the Muslim community, its views, opinions, religious and political orientations over a short period of time. This data shows how the school has positioned itself with respect to the religious and cultural tensions it faces teaching, learning, and practicing Islam post 9/11.

**Table 1. Research Questions, Data Sources, and Analysis**

<b>Research Questions</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
1. Tensions between Islamic and Western models of education.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Islamic vs. Western models of education</li> <li>• Muslims and world-system analysis</li> <li>• Euro-American imperialist ambitions</li> <li>• American education, race, and class division</li> <li>• The war on terror, inferiorizing/racializing of Muslims and Arabs</li> </ul>	Examine Western education, expansion/colonialism, and capitalism. Look at the nexus of cultural domination, capitalism, racism, and American education. Opportunities for building Islamic education that challenges racism, capitalism, and cultural domination.
2. Are Islamic and Western education models viewed to have conflict or congruence?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• California Common Core State Standards</li> <li>• Islamic school's monthly newsletter (10 issues)</li> <li>• 10 Friday prayer/sermons</li> <li>• Interviews with 3 teachers, 3-10 parents, principal, 4-6</li> </ul>	The newsletter will provide insight into how the school positions itself as an Islamic school. Friday sermons, interviews will give insight on how the Islamic center and the community position

	board members, president of the Islamic center	themselves religiously and politically. Understand their views and perceptions of American culture, society, institutions/capitalism, Western education, California public school standards, and Islam and Islamic education.
3. How the school's philosophy, curriculum, pedagogy challenge and assimilate students into American society?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Classroom observations and audio recordings of Islamic and Qur'anic studies classes</li> <li>• Interviews with 10 students</li> <li>• Islamic Studies textbook</li> <li>• School's website and its stated goals, philosophy, etc.</li> </ul>	Analyze the way Islam and Qur'an are being taught/learned. Examine the Islamic themes being emphasized in the curriculum. Look at the way American society, culture, institutions are discussed vis-à-vis Islam and Muslims. Student's views on Islam and American society. Discuss student identity implications.

As Muslim communities continue to grow inside Western countries, and Islam takes root outside its historical lands, the challenge of interpreting, teaching and learning Islam inside its new location today requires appropriate attention of the Muslim communities. Since 9/11, this challenge remains fraught with many complications, as the Muslim community struggles to fend off the hostility they and their religion face in today's America. In this struggle, many desperate attempts take place in understanding the role of Islamic education. None of the many voices emanating from inside the US calling for an "Islamic reform," mention, or let alone challenge, the relationship between Muslims and the capitalist world-system. The fact that this world-system promotes racial and class hierarchies, inferiorizing not only Islam and Muslims but also other communities of color, often does not factor into any debates on Islam and Islamic education. Any attempt to link today's world-system with the inequities present in the pre-Islamic Meccan society, which the Prophet (PBUH) came to reform, remains surprisingly absent from these debates. By contrasting Western and Islamic epistemologies, and by understanding the position of Islam and Muslims in an increasingly hostile and militarized world-system that seeks to dominate, control, colonize and racialize Muslims and non-European communities, this study aims to propose an alternative epistemological approach to Islamic education that empowers the community to effectively confront the hegemonic, Euro-American, Judeo-Christian, colonial, capitalist world-system.

### **Chapter 3: Colonialism, Capitalism and Education**

Colonialism resulted from the inauguration and early expansion of the capitalist world-economy (that became a world-system) in Europe and Iberian America from 1450-1640 (Wallerstein, 1979, Chapter 8), and the struggle for power, trade routes, and new territories in search of wealth among northwestern European dynasties and city-states of 13<sup>th</sup> century Italy (Arrighi, 1994). European expropriation, colonization of non-European lands, and hegemony since the time of the Spanish Empire to the present, has brought Christianity, Western civilization, modernity, and democracy to an otherwise so-called ungodly, uncivilized, undeveloped, and undemocratic non-Western world (as seen through the prism of Western hegemony and imagination) (Mignolo, 2003). In short, the modern discourse of progress, development, and democracy has long historical roots to earlier colonial times and the making of the modern, colonial, capitalist world-system. Through an historical analysis, this chapter develops a framework for understanding the historical role of Western colonial education alongside the rise of European hegemony.

By examining the historical rise of Western education alongside the rise of colonialism and capitalism, undergirded by Western hegemony, this chapter locates the position Muslims occupy and have occupied inside the US, which as a leading capitalist agency and hegemon currently dominates the modern, colonial, capitalist, Euro-American, Judeo-Christian world-system that emerged in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Effectively, it traces the ascent of early colonial Spanish empire and the history of the earliest European-Christian expansion vis-à-vis non-Europeans, non-Christians, and Muslims. It also explores the development and promulgation of Renaissance-inspired European education, in the service of colonial expansion, which in the New World sought the proselytization of natives to European languages, culture, and Christianity. The literature and theories deployed in this chapter offer a connection between Western education and the rise of global capitalism in the context of world history and world systems, as evidenced in the works of Abu-Laughed (1991), Wallerstein (1979, 1995, 2001), Arrighi (1994), Frank (1970), Dussel (2000), and its structural, political and global implications resulting from colonialism, the Enlightenment, and post WWII in the works of Blauner (2001), Hall (1996), Mignolo (2003), Quijano (2000), and So (1990). The works of these scholars provide the *longue durée* of the last 500 years of political and economic history of colonialism, capitalism, dominated by Western hegemony and supremacy underpinning Western education.

#### **3.1 *The Capitalist World-System and Colonialism***

Through a study based on historical *longue durée* (Braudel, 1980), or the study and understanding of the present in light of its long history, this section examines the need and impetus for education by the present and bygone European powers, or world hegemon behind the making of the global capitalist economy as a world-system. The attempt here is to historicize and politicize “modern” education as being complicit with European empires. As Braudel states, “Past and present illuminate each other reciprocally. And in exclusively observing the narrow confines of the present, the attention will irresistibly be drawn toward whatever moves quickly, burns with a true or a false flame, or has just changed, or makes a noise, or is easy to see” (p. 37). He acknowledges that the validity of any work dealing with social theory/science can only stand the test of time if it draws upon the *longue durée* of history, as did Marx, for “Marx’s genius, the secret of his long sway, lies in the fact that he was the first to construct true social models on the basis of a historical *longue durée*” (p. 51). Braudel speaks to the dehistoricized

field of social sciences that attempts to understand and explain the social and political structures in the narrow confines of “current events” or “latest trends.” It is with an eye to ensuring the “long sway” in the understanding of Western colonial education as an institution rooted largely in the history of capitalism and colonialism that I attempt to discuss education in the context of the *longue durée* that stretches from the present back to the Italian city-states of 14<sup>th</sup> century, whose search for financial profits as the earliest examples of prototypical capitalist states gave rise to the Renaissance (Arrighi, 1994, Chapter 2). Here, the task requires us to identify and examine the rise of the capitalist world-economy as the starting point of our *longue durée*.

In understanding and responding to the social sciences’ view that poverty results from cultural and economic backwardness, Andre Gunder Frank dissects the widely-held notion of underdevelopment as a function of all societies’ cultures that are said to be underdeveloped. He presents historical evidence revealing “the development of underdevelopment,” which has existed not as an effect of cultural trait inherent in underdeveloped regions like Latin America, but because of the larger economic structures that constitute global capitalism as a world-system. Entire underdeveloped regions emerged from the metropolis-satellite structure, resulting nearly all from European conquest and colonialism, where the metropolis developed at the expense of the satellites. Satellites (or colonies) materialized because of their weak political relationship to the metropolis (or European states). The most feudal and underdeveloped regions today maintained close ties to the metropolis in the past. These satellites comprised of plantations and mining regions subordinated economically and politically to supply raw materials for the production of commodities in the metropolis. Satellites’ economic wellbeing, as suppliers and producers of raw materials using forced labor, depended on the markets the metropolis controlled. When the metropolis declined following the decline or losing of its markets to another emerging metropolis, satellites would bear the severe hardship and economic consequences. Frank’s argument challenges the traditional social sciences’ evolutionary ideas rooted in liberalism or Marxism that blame poverty on the people and their culture’s failure to evolve beyond their feudal and traditional past; instead, Frank (1970, p. 15) sees underdevelopment and poverty as the “global extension and unity of the capitalist system, its monopoly structure and uneven development throughout history”. This historical analysis of underdevelopment exposes the failure of the social sciences to acknowledge the history of colonialism driven by a capitalist order as the foremost manufacturer of poverty and underdevelopment, rather than some inherent cultural trait arguably present in the non-Western world’s penchant for poverty (Lewis, 1966), or the 3<sup>rd</sup> World’s “primordialist” tendencies and resistance to modernity and its institutions (Appadurai, 1996).

Wallerstein (1979, Chapter 8; 2001, Chapters 5, 7) refutes the entire social science perspective as being “developmentalist” that characterizes the Third World as feudal, lacking the stages of social and economic development on the evolutionary scale, because it hasn’t undergone “national development” or a “cultural change.” Wallerstein discredits a purely liberal (Adam Smith, Max Weber, etc.) or Marxian interpretation of evolutionary human history, which places societies along an evolutionary plane classifying them as feudal, capitalist or socialist. His analysis breaks from the 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectuals who locate the capitalist world-economy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century inaugurated by the industrial revolution. In order to look at the disparities between regions, Wallerstein (1979, Chapter 9) argues one must look at the social systems, or what he identifies as “world-systems”. The current world-system for Wallerstein constitutes the “capitalist world-economy” that emerged in 16<sup>th</sup> century northwest Europe, and grew into a world economic system. According to him, this transformation represented a unique occurrence,

or only one time in history when a redistributive world-system became a capitalist world-economy, which took place in Europe and Iberian America between 1450-1640: "If capitalism is a mode of production, production for profit in a market, then we ought, I should have thought, to look to whether or not such production was or was not occurring. It turns out that it was, and in a very substantial form" (Wallerstein, 1979, p. 16). For Wallerstein (1979, pt. I), profits result from extraction of surplus from what labor produces, or simply by paying labor less than the market value of what it produces. What began as extraction of surplus from labor in Europe, capitalist world-economy expanded with the extraction of surplus from workers around the globe under colonialism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, globalizing serfdom and slavery (mining of silver and gold, sugar and cotton plantations using enslaved labor in the New World).

Furthermore, from 16<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries, a large geographical area from northeast Poland going westwards and southwards throughout Europe, including the Western Hemisphere, a world-economy began to take shape and mature dependent on a single division of labor and a world market (Wallerstein, 1979, Chapter 5). This led to the emergence of three "structural positions" in the world-economy: core, periphery and semiperiphery, which had fully taken root by 1640. Wallerstein attributes this to the unifying of various groups in northwest Europe, where for the first time in world history, the state began working hand-in-hand with the bourgeoisie and the merchant class, something no world empire had done previously, resulting in strong state mechanisms, thus, creating a "core." When strong (political and military) states emerge in the core areas, resulting from the bourgeoisie/aristocratic alliance with commercial interests of merchants/businessmen, they relegate previous core states to the periphery through military might enforcing economic monopolies. Similarly, previous cores turn into peripheries as they experience political and economic decline. More specifically, the alliance between the merchant class and bourgeoisie used the nation-state as a political entity to not only extract surplus from labor domestically and globally, but also acquired non-market devices for short-term profits, such as military force. The nation-state had the military capability, shipping technology, and wanted to expand its European landmass (through colonialism) in order to ensure the steady level of income for its aristocracies (p. 17). The local capitalist classes, like cash-crop owners, or the nobility and merchants, became natural allies in Europe united under the nation-state, using it to not only remove non-market constraints but to also create constraints or monopolies on the new market of European capitalist world-economy. Poverty and underdevelopment, in this historical context, did not result from social or cultural backwardness of the "Third World," but from the expansion of a capitalist world-economy rooted in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe.

Arrighi (1994) points to the competition for trade routes and mobile capital among European states and dynasties, that culminated in territorialism fuelled by military and naval innovations, wars, conquest, and colonialism, behind the making of the capitalist world-economy as a world-system over some 6 centuries. It was only in Europe where "scattered" capitalism coalesced with state power to become "the powerful mix that propelled European states towards the territorial conquest of the world and the formation of an all-powerful and truly global capitalist world-economy" (Arrighi, 1994, p. 11). Using Marx's equation representing the cyclical logic of capital accumulation,  $MCM^7$ , Arrighi traces the similarities, and recurring patterns in the capitalist world-economy since its genesis in 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian city-states. These city-states by way of trade, banking, war-making, and state-making evolved over centuries into

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<sup>7</sup> MCM represents the cyclical logic of a capitalist agency, according to Karl Marx. This equation captures the money capital (M) is invested in commodities (C) in order to generate profit and yield more capital (M), which is then invested back in a continuous capitalist cycle of MCM.



powerful mini-states, and later into global empires, that competed with each other for trade routes in search of profitable commerce. This competition for trade and commerce resulted in the 100 years of war among the Italian city-states. The warring city-states always needing more money, turned to merchants, businessmen and bankers, who increasingly came to control the government, leading to a transformation “where networks of [capital] accumulation expanded to encompass the entire globe, they became increasingly autonomous from and dominant over networks of power” (Arrighi, 1994, p. 86). Falling increasingly under the power of “networks of accumulation,” European governments engaged in further war-making, if that became more profitable than trade, in the hostile annexation of each other’s territories to gain access to additional trade routes, revenues, and markets. But even war, like trade, would reach a limit, as smaller cities would be subsumed into bigger city-states (and vast empires) that created bigger wars, larger conflicts, resulting in mass social unrest giving way to agreements among European states to divide up the market, land/earth, trade routes, and to stay out of each other’s way (Arrighi, 1994, Chapter 2). This, then, set the character of the modern nation-states and the associated inter-state system, where “a situation has arisen in which in order to succeed in the pursuit of power governments must be leaders not just in processes of state-making and war-making but in processes of capital accumulation as well” (p. 86).

Consequently, the inter-state competition spread to various European dynasties seeking mobile capital to fund both state-making and war-making, which alongside trade and commerce gave birth to haute or high finance<sup>8</sup> by banking dynasties. High finance having its genesis in the Italian city-states, provided the necessary loans to various competing state dynasties. The English, Germans, French, Dutch, Spanish, and the Portuguese all struggled to dominate and rule over rest of Europe by having the most powerful state and military, with the help of capital borrowed from these merchant bankers and banking dynasties. The combined effects of the inter-state competition for mobile capital, and the switching of commercial interests and merchant traders from trade and production to high finance seeking higher profits in financial deals and speculation (e.g., loans to warring states), would create political and economic crises. Financial deals and speculation remove capital from investment in production, undermining industries and the productive capacity of the labor force, effecting massive recurring unemployment, economic collapse, social unrest, wars, and military conflict in order to exploit further markets and resources. According to Arrighi, this recurring “systemic chaos” is inherent in the capitalist world-economy and dates back to 14<sup>th</sup> century Italy, through World Wars I and II, and various wars the US has waged around the world post WWII, including the Cold War, and the War on Terror.

For Arrighi, the European inter-state system expansion and evolution took place through some six centuries of four systemic cycles of (capital) accumulation, where each cycle began and ended with the rise and fall, respectively, of the leading capitalist state behind the making of that cycle. These systemic cycles have their roots in the “big four” Italian city-states of Venice, Florence, Genoa, and Milan, where Venice grew into the “true prototype” of a capitalist state, embodying merchant capitalist oligarchy having strong state power, and using capitalist logic in calculating cost-benefit analysis for the profits involved in territorial expansion and acquisition (p. 37). The first systemic cycle of accumulation begins in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the Genoese capitalist financiers allied with the Christian zeal of Spain and Portugal in their territorial expansion (with the help of Christopher Columbus), who are vanquished and superseded in the

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<sup>8</sup> Arrighi (1994) describes *haute finance* as “a closely knit body of cosmopolitan financiers whose global networks” served the European dynasties and inter-state system and their budgetary needs (p. 54).

late 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Dutch forming the United Provinces through the Westphalia agreement, making Holland the first leading capitalist state and hegemon of Europe; its defeat comes in the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the hands of the British, who devastate the Dutch military for supporting American independence of 1776, which inaugurated the United States as a colonial-settler capitalist state in the making. Just as the Dutch used the United Provinces to establish peace through hegemony, so would the British use the Concert of Europe, destroying the United Provinces, to establish peace and hegemony not only in Europe but throughout the world. WWII, fomenting a systemic crisis in the capitalist world-system, would end Britain's status as the most powerful capitalist hegemon, making the US by default the leading capitalist agency and hegemon of the capitalist world-economy, which would follow a 500-year pattern of, again, being reorganized and restructured after a major war (or "systemic chaos") to bring about peace and hegemony in the modern inter-state system. This restructuring and reorganizing would take place with US government policy intervention, supplemented by the creation of IMF, the World Bank and the United Nations to govern and manage the expanding capitalist world-economy dependent on the inter-state system comprised of newly independent nation-states around the world (p. 68).

Arrighi (1994) applies the Gramscian notion of hegemony to the rise of the modern inter-state system and its hegemonic tendencies, where "[a] dominant state exercises a hegemonic function if it leads the system of states in a desired direction and, in so doing, is perceived as pursuing a general interest" (p. 29). Each hegemon, starting with the Dutch, used a group of organizations and state power to reorganize and expand the capitalist world-economy during its cycle of accumulation. Each successive cycle of accumulation expanded the capitalist world-economy as a world-system further, through a series of powerful hegemons with ever more political, economic, and military power greater than the previous hegemon that helped the West rule the world, bringing in its wake colonialism, the transatlantic slave trade, extraction of silver, gold from the New World, and expropriation of non-European lands, which by 1914 accounted for some 85% of the earth's surface (p. 53). With this sizable territory and non-Europeans at its disposal in the form of colonies (or satellites), European colonialism and hegemony driven by a capitalist world-economy, provided the Western world a position of economic, political, military, cultural, and racial dominance as conquerors that has extended into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, Western domination of the world did not simply occur by capitalist and territorialist expansion, but also through the Renaissance. The ensuing section examines the earliest impact of the Renaissance, which must be seen as not something born out of an inherently unique cultural, intellectual streak among the Italians, but as one of the earliest milestones achieved along the trajectory of the expanding capitalist world-economy.

### **3.2 *The Renaissance***

As Arrighi (1994, Ch. 2) has noted, the competition for trade and economic resources created political competition, giving way to 100 years of war (1337-1453) among various Italian city-states, along with the 100-years of Anglo-French war, attempting to absorb each other into increasingly bigger political-economic entities. To avoid constant conflict and gain legitimacy among competing political-economic players, and when trade and investment would no longer continue to be profitable because of the limitations of the trade and investment system, surplus capital found its way into investment and consumption of cultural luxuries of art and literature, which gave way to the High Renaissance in Florence and Venice.

However, the European Renaissance, said to be rooted in 15<sup>th</sup> century Italy, appears to go

further back to the 13<sup>th</sup> century in England, and to the Muslim lands. Being a philosopher, a scientist, and an educational reformer, the renowned Brit, Roger Bacon, seemed to epitomize the Renaissance man. During the years 1247-1257, when he took particular interest in the physical sciences, he called for the study of oriental languages in order to acquire knowledge from the Muslims in Spain and the Middle East, for he saw in them a “higher” civilization and hoped to gain knowledge that would reform European education (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 20). R. W. Southern (1962) describes the attitude of Europe towards the Middle East as based on myths and misinterpretations of Islam during A.D. 700 to 1100. The victorious First Crusade (in 1099) brought fictional tales about the Muslim world and Islam, such as Islam being a polytheist religion; that “Mahomet” was a “magician who had destroyed the Church in Africa and the East by magic and cunning, and had clinched his success by authorizing promiscuity” (Southern, 1962, p. 31). Southern characterizes this as “the history of Western imagination” (p. 28), to which I’ll return later. It is in the latter part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century when a greater knowledge and understanding of Islam supplants mythology after the translation of the Quran (funded by an Englishman) into Latin in the year 1143. “With this translation, the West had for the first time an instrument for the serious study of Islam” (p. 37). Similarly, during the later half of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, works of Greek philosophers, like Aristotle, were gradually acquired through the Muslims: “Europeans hoped that the peoples contacted in the Crusades would convert to Christianity and that Christian culture would be strengthened by the knowledge held by or transmitted through Islamic cultures” (Abu-Lughod, 1991, p. 21). Being greatly affected by the translation of Islamic texts and works, Roger Bacon requested the Pope to undertake the enormous task of developing an encyclopedia of the natural sciences, to end the Crusades, and to promulgate Christianity through understanding the languages and beliefs of the non-Christian world (pp. 22–23). From its very roots, the Renaissance planted seeds of European and Christian expansion, not only through religious conversion, but through the establishment of knowledge about the world as interpreted by Christian European men. Some 250 years after Roger Bacon’s request to the Pope, the accumulated European knowledge about the world results in the Renaissance-inspired expansion of the Spanish (financed by capitalist Italian merchant bankers) across the Atlantic. European appropriation of knowledge held by Muslims facilitates the expropriation of trade and sea routes largely controlled by the “Moors,” leading to Europe’s rise as an economic and political bulwark, establishing European hegemony.

Abu-Lughod (1991), in tracing European expansion in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, shows that the region or continent today called “Western Europe” was comprised of various city-states trading and competing with each other for the global trade routes, and later united under the banner of Christendom against the Muslims, who had controlled much of the trade around the Mediterranean until the 14<sup>th</sup> century. “The challenge from Islam was an important factor in hammering Western Europe and the idea of ‘the West’ into shape” (Hall, 1996, p. 197). The word “European” emerges for the first time as a result of the first crusader victory over the Islamic forces. Following the construction of the “West” and the “discovery of the New World,” the Christian European imagination began to see itself as one united people, region, and continent against the non-Christian world in Asia, Africa, and the Americas, in what became “The West and The Rest” thesis (Hall, 1996). Additionally, Abu-Lughod posits that the European rise to power towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century did not result from some unique technological or social inventions on the part of the West, as was later claimed by Enlightenment thinkers like Hegel and Marx (Dussel, 2000), but much of it had to do with the weakening and unraveling of the old world-system because of natural disasters like the Plague, creating a power

vacuum. It was simply that the trading in the East was in decline, and Europe found an opportunity to take advantage of the events. The Europeans seized upon a complex, sophisticated world-system previously nonexistent in other times, which had all the components of the modern system of advanced shipping and navigational technology, of production and marketing, of lending and capital accumulation, and laws and partnerships, which would later emerge as the European-dominated capitalist world-system (Abu-Lughod, 1991). Up until middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, most participants of the world system coexisted and no one single-handedly dominated it, for it included various centers of power scattered around the world engaged in trade, which no one region or empire controlled. Not until the European gradual take over of the system in the 15<sup>th</sup> century did the terms of trade change or, through military expansion and conquest, were forced heavily in favor of the European states' monopoly of the entire world system. All this contributed, along with the European Renaissance, to the rise of capitalism in Europe and the Spanish expansion across the Atlantic.

### **3.3 *The Renaissance, Colonialism, and Education***

The year 1492 saw the glory of the Renaissance and capitalism, combined with the zeal of religious and linguistic nationalism, explode around the Iberian Peninsula. The Genoese, looking for protection of profitable sea routes, unite with and finance the religious Christian zeal and territorialism of Isabella: "Like them they made war upon the infidel with a passionate religious enthusiasm; a Holy War, but a very profitable one [...] In them religious passion and the appetite for lucre were merged in a spirit of enterprise." (cited in Arrighi, 1994, p. 119). The year 1492 also marks the ousting of Islam and Arabs from Andalusia, the sailing of Columbus with the blessings of Queen Isabella, and the emergence of the idea by the Spanish intellectual, Elio Antonio de Nebrija, in the service of the Queen that Castilian would be the language of the Spanish empire and a means to spreading Christianity to the natives in the New World (Mignolo, 2003, Ch. 1). In the spirit of the Roman Empire, which was being resurrected during this time by the Spanish, Nebrija envisioned Latin alone as a must for having law, medicine, religion, and civilization. Both Hebrew and Latin came to be seen as languages based on an alphabetic writing system, where Latin represented the language of the Bible, which had been translated from Hebrew. Thus, all written European languages based on Latin characters came to exemplify civilized languages, for these languages carried the divine guidance of God.

Very early on, hegemony and colonialism, driven by expanding European capitalism, required that the "rest" must dispense with its superstitions and traditions by embracing Western values, so as to pave the way for the impending colonial, capitalist, Christian, Euro-centric world-system. Mignolo (2003) documents the impact of European notions of language, writing, literacy, and even European cartography upon the people of the New World, where the Spanish rendered all record keeping, writing, history, and knowledge belonging to the natives as the work of the devil. In order to chase away the "devil" from the ungodly savages of the New World, the Spanish often burnt and destroyed any recorded knowledge maintained by the natives (p. 71). This provides early evidence of not only religious and linguistic wars waged by Europeans against non-Western and non-Christian peoples, but also an epistemic war and cultural genocide that saw the knowledge and learning traditions of the "Other" as ungodly, satanic, and superstitious--a view similar, as mentioned earlier, to the one espoused by Europeans against Islam during the Crusades. European colonialism very early on established and developed this idea of spatial and temporal differences between the West (the modern First World), and the "rest" (the backward Third World).

More than eradication of previous belief systems, colonization implied, first, that whoever does not embrace the hegemonic values is marginalized and, second, that whoever is spatially marginal with respect to the values of the metropolitan centers is also behind in time. Integration by conversion meant, precisely, moving people from the savage margins to the civilized centers, and the idea of identifying the margin with the past began to emerge. (Mignolo, 2003, p. 247)

Thus, appeared the idea of *colonial difference* privileging the West (the First World) at the expense of the “rest” (the 3<sup>rd</sup> World). In this colonial context, after the discovery and annexation of the New World (or the Americas), the year 1535 saw the mandate requiring compulsory colonial education of the Mexica chiefs, local elites and their children. This mandate was repeated again in 1570, and in 1619 under different Spanish monarchies. To fulfill this schooling mission, along with many other Catholic colleges in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the University of Mexico was established in 1550. The purpose of these Catholic institutions of learning, among other things, focused on Christianizing and teaching Latin and Castilian to the elites of the natives in the New World—part of the larger attempt to promulgate “Christianity, decent morals, good government, and the Castilian language” (as cited in Mignolo, 2003, p. 53). Missionaries spread Western literacy by writing hundreds of grammar of Amerindian languages, as did the universities like University of Mexico and many other colleges established in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the Spaniards that taught Latin and Castilian. Christian doctrines were written in Latin, and the humanities were supposed to be taught in Castilian. These efforts sought to turn the New World into New Spain by the imposition of Western languages (Latin, Castilian) and literacy. The people doing the implementation of this policy in the New World like the friars, the Catholic colleges, and universities felt that the writing of the Amerindian languages and the studies of humanities would be a better tool in civilizing the natives. By portraying the natives as “inferior” in need of Spanish, Christian knowledge, which justified employing natives as slaves to mine and transfer at least 155,000 kilogram of gold and 16.9 million kilograms of silver from the New World (from 1531 to 1660) to Spain (Mignolo, 2000, p. 57). In the name of hegemony, extracting and transferring of wealth from the colonial world to Europeans, this epistemic violence committed by colonial and capitalist expansion inferiorized and racialized non-Europeans, non-Christians, and their knowledge, languages, culture, and history; the Christianizing and civilizing (or later a modernizing, democratizing) mission perpetrated by Western education, would recur as a historical pattern in subsequent capitalist European empires, including the British<sup>9</sup> and the US<sup>10</sup> stretching into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **3.4 Education, Development, and the Modern, Colonial, Capitalist, World-System**

Ruth Finnegan (1988) presents evidence arguing that, rather than actual alphabetic literacy, oral traditions and lack of writing/reading among societies and cultures around the world throughout history have been the norm. Before the advent of alphabetic writing around 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C., Greek works all existed in oral form. Lack of lettered literacy did not prevent

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<sup>9</sup> In order to promote the English language and education, the British in 1835 eliminated Persian as a major cultural and intellectual language in India to have a “high class of Indian” subordinates in the colonial government who spoke English (Spear, 1938, p. 82). Evangelical missionaries condemned Islam and indigenous education traditions as based on superstitions, and hoped that English education would pave the way for conversion to Christianity of Indians (p. 92).

<sup>10</sup> Using physical and psychological violence, leading to cultural genocide, Indian residential schools in the US and Canada up until the 1990’s legally allowed for the forceful recruitment of children of Native Americans to become English-speaking, Anglicized Christians in order to “*Kill the Indian, and Save the Man*” (Churchill, 2004).

societies from developing or having cognitive abilities, intelligence, rationality, as did the Greeks, given their oral traditions. Today's literacy campaigns, whether pushed by UNESCO<sup>11</sup> or USAID, have less to do with "eradicating poverty," developing cognitive abilities in the world's citizens, and more to do with colonial control, capitalist expansion, and Euro-American, Judeo-Christian hegemony through Western education models, as did the Spanish in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. One cannot but help question the true agenda of literacy and education campaigns around the world by the most powerful country, the US, when segregation and abject conditions have had such a long history in public schools located in impoverished regions across America, making literacy impossible to achieve (Gary, Frankenberg, Ee, & Kuscera, 2014; Jones, Newman, Isay, & Brooks, 1997; Kozol, 1991). As mentioned previously, Western colonial education as an institution of hegemony has played an undeniable role in empire building, colonizing, and subjugation. However, when discussing education as a tool of social development, many times scholars often ignore the historical role of education and Western empires (Willinsky, 1998). The developmentalist attempt (discussed below) to make a direct link between the absence of formal schooling (Western education models), and the failure of the nation-state to eradicate poverty, illiteracy, economic and social backwardness/underdevelopment, narrows and reduces such debates to the nation-state level of analysis, while ignoring a substantial historical, transnational analytical framework. Consequently, debates that frame modern education as a necessary ingredient in the formula for economic growth and social development, rarely look at the larger structures that reveal the hegemonic nature of modern Western education.

Alvin So (1990, pt. 1) provides a historical overview of the various models of (social and economic) development in place since post-WWII. One most popular and positivistic model of development came through the modernization school conceptualized by American social scientists. At the end of WWII, leading the reconstruction efforts across Europe, the United States and the Soviet Union emerged as powerful rivals, and newly liberated regions and countries in the Third World devastated by centuries of colonialism, sought a model of social/economic development that the US (and the USSR) offered to them. Having emerged as a new hegemonic Western power, US portrayed itself as a modern and "advanced" nation (similar to the previous British and Spanish empires), and the Third World as traditional and backward, who ought to look to the US for guidance. Moreover, the US would provide advisors and "experts" to help the Third World modernize and develop so as to "catch up" with the First World. Modernization studies mushroomed in American academies. US anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, the whole range of social scientists, constituted the modernization industry. With academic journals and camaraderie among social scientists, pushed along by the Social Science Research Council, and publications like the *Journal for Economic Development and Cultural Change*, provided academic legitimacy and endorsement to modernization. This developmentalist paradigm assumes modernization as an evolutionary apex, where all societies begin with the primitive stage and progress/develop to a modern stage, driven by social, cultural, political, economic and institutional reforms promulgated by the U.S. Modernization theory mirrors the early colonial Spanish attempt to move the "uncivilized" natives in the New World from the margins (geography linked to culture), to the center (Europe)

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted from UNESCO's site: "Literacy is at the heart of basic education for all, and essential for eradicating poverty, reducing child mortality, curbing population growth, achieving gender equality and ensuring sustainable development, peace and democracy. There are good reasons why literacy is at the core of Education for All (EFA)" (UNESCO, n.d.).

by spreading Christianity, and Castilian Spanish through Catholic schooling. Modernization theory, similarly, embodied American hegemony that saw the attempt to bring the Third World “traditional, backward” countries under the leading Euro-American, Judeo-Christian, capitalist state’s influence and control to serve its growing need for capital accumulation through political domination.

The developmentalist scheme undergirding modernization theory really seeks to benefit the First World through sales and transfer of equipment, technology, and institutions funded with loans provided by the World Bank. This developmentalist paradigm in both the Marxist and liberal (and neoliberal) camps, as an ideology represents a materialist, evolutionist, Eurocentric narrative of human history of social/economic development that stretches back from the Enlightenment and 19<sup>th</sup> century European thinkers to today’s social science models, which only see capitalist expansion as the only path to liberation from poverty and underdevelopment (Wallerstein, 1979, 2001): “To cope with this changing world, western scholars invented development, invented the Third World, invented modernization. . . . We do not live in a modernizing world but in a capitalist world. What makes this world tick is not the need for achievement but the need for profit” (Wallerstein, 1979, pp. 132, 133). It is within this developmentalist paradigm, arising from 5 centuries of colonialism and the cyclical history of capitalism as a world-system, given birth to and fortified by the leading capitalist Western hegemon of each cycle (Arrighi, 1994), that an understanding of modern Western education in the service of capitalism and “development” begins to emerge, which some have understood as providing a path to achieving “freedom” (Sen, 1999). Yet, the question remains as to how to achieve “freedom” in, and from, a centuries-old Eurocentric, colonial, capitalist world-system.

Within the *longue durée* of historical Western capitalism, the role of education in the so-called “developing world” must be seen as a historical discourse emanating from the capitalist centers of power located in the “First World” that control economic and political structures at the global level, while dominating knowledge production that serves Euro-American hegemony empowered and financed by the colonial capitalist world-system, which has continued from the time of the Spanish to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the form of coloniality of power (A. Quijano, 2000). The historical role of Western education beginning with the Renaissance, and the role of “modernization” (or Westernization) through education in the service of capitalist expansion and colonialism, emerges as the catalyst for Western expansion. Western education and “development” have served as hegemonic tools of modernization and integration into the Judeo-Christian, Euro-American, capitalist world-system, as well as for civilizing the “ungodly savages” or indigenous folks in many European colonies of the past, and inside the US (Churchill, 2004); to fight the communist threat during the Cold War by indoctrinating school-aged Muslim children in Afghanistan<sup>12</sup> (Coulson, 2004, p. 17), and along with the events of September 11, 2001, to “win the hearts and minds” of Arabs and Muslims around the world through US-led free market, neoliberal reforms and programs aimed at the youth, promoting capitalism and American entrepreneurial values (Succarie, 2008). Since the 1980s, the ideology of neoliberalism (or corporate takeover of state ideology and institutions) in the US wedded to globalization has firmly consolidated itself as a dominant economic orthodoxy and class project

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<sup>12</sup> Content of one math textbook made available to schools in Afghanistan, through USAID with the help of University of Nebraska, Omaha, offered this math problem to young Muslim minds: “If a Russian is at a distance of 3,200 meters from a mujahid, and that mujahid aims at the Russian’s head, calculate how many seconds it will take for the bullet to strike the Russian in the forehead” (quoted in Coulson, 2004, p. 17).

(Harvey, 2005). American research universities have and continue to train foreign students as experts, where “the key figures in Chile’s and Mexico’s adaptation to neoliberalism were US-trained economists for example,” and who also serve in “international institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN” (Harvey, 2005, p. 54). American education and institutions continue to move towards serving a single, overarching logic of neoliberalism and fundamentalist capitalism (Giroux & Giroux, 2006).

### **3.5 *Racialized Colonial Subjects Inside Capitalist America***

The aftermath of the rise of the US as the third capitalist world-hegemon after WWII, requires a brief look at the impact of capitalism on racial formations and racism inside the US, and what this means for American Muslim communities. Understanding the struggle of non-European immigrant communities as internally colonized, racialized subjects can illuminate the position Muslims occupy inside the US. Omi and Winant (1994) attempt to capture the complex and historical debate on race and racism in 20<sup>th</sup> century America, and the way race mediates all aspects of political and social life in the US: “U.S. society is racially structured from top to bottom” (1994, p. 50), and that race plays a central role in both structuring and representing the social world (p. 55). Their overall argument characterizes the US as a “racial dictatorship” emerging from conquest and colonization through capitalist expansion, where the dominant culture, institutions, and policies represent the power and privilege of Americans of European descent, or of white Americans. This racial dictatorship resulted in the racialization of non-Europeans as inferior people expropriated either as slaves or rendered colonial subjects during the European “age of discovery,” and 500 years of colonial expansion beginning in 1492 with the sailing of Columbus. Inaugurating a social and world order where the master-slave relationship defined the European/non-European relationship, and the characteristic of “European whiteness” as a master race (politically, biologically, and culturally), established its perception and view of non-Europeans as slaves or colonial subjects biologically, culturally, politically, and intellectually inferior. However, the discourse of race and skin color results from the colonial relations between Europe and subordinate non-Europeans. Institutionally, the “coloniality of power” has found expression in the formation of structures of power and domination around the colonial binary of the West and the rest, enshrining racism and domination in the modern structures and institutions that benefit from and contribute to the Eurocentric, colonial, capitalist world-system (Quijano, 2000; Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992).

This coloniality of power inside the US through centuries of slavery, genocide of the native population, and influx of cheap labor from China, the Philippines, and Latin America has given rise to colonial racialized subjects, creating internal colonialism (B. Blauner, 2001, Chapter 5). Internal colonialism in the US refers to the internally colonized non-Europeans such as the Native Americans (majority of whom became victims of genocide), the descendants of African slaves, Asians, Chicanos, and Puerto Ricans who suddenly found themselves under the rule of a new colonial settler power in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the US expanded southwest through preemptive wars, wresting control of territories that once belonged to Mexico and Spain. These internally colonized communities experienced the same treatment that one found in the French or British colonies around the world. Specifically, the Chicanos experienced land occupation and confiscation by white settlers who exploited their land and labor to extract as much economic wealth as possible to become wealthy landowners and aristocrats of the new republic, the United States of America (Barrera, 1979, Ch. 3). Grosfoguel and Georas (2000) survey the treatment of Cubans, Puerto Ricans, and Dominicans inside the US post-WWII, and conclude how certain



immigrant groups inside the US have served as a means for either geopolitical interests, or economic benefit to American business in the form of cheap labor. Depending on how the US stands to benefit or what end the policy towards such an immigrant group will serve, it promotes, finances, and arms (such as anti-Castro Cuban exiles held up as model minorities), or racialize and inferiorize (by assigning social categories or stereotypical markers of “lazy, criminal, traditional” etc.) other communities of color to control and exploit their labor, such as the Puerto Ricans and Dominicans (Ramon Grosfoguel & Georas, 2000, p. 90). Non-European communities and groups who have been “incorporated” inside the US during its long colonial history and formation can best be identified as “colonial/racialized subjects,” and those migrating from countries or regions dominated by the US as “colonial immigrants,” since both the internally colonized and “racialized” and colonial immigrants share the same colonial treatment of American military conquest, occupation, and subjugation (p. 89).

The process of “racialization” has occurred through the long colonial history of conquest, exploitation, impoverishment, marginalization and subsequent criminalization of non-European communities, which continue to result in irreversible stereotypes of the marginalized group/s. Racialization can also occur through war and military operations. For instance, the Japanese-American community that enjoyed some privileges of white society in the early part of 20<sup>th</sup> century of land and business ownership, suddenly found itself racialized during WWII, facing internment (or concentration) camps because of the war with Japan. In these internment camps, the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation males (or Nisei) of draft age were required to sign the loyalty oath or the “Statement of United States Citizenship of Japanese Ancestry,” which was a questionnaire with two peculiar questions specifically asking if these men would take up arms to defend the US, and foreswear “allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor” (cited in Takaki, 2002, p. 27). The United States had gone to war with Germany and Italy also during WWII, but immigrants from these two countries did not face being racialized, unlike the Japanese Americans. Arab and Muslim communities have faced a similar fate inside the US post 9/11 with the War on Terror, which effectively racialized members of these communities as terrorists, oppressors of women, traditional, etc., effectively giving rise to institutionalized Islamophobia and the perception of Arab and Muslim Americans as a dangerous threat to America (W. Ali et al., 2011; Y. Ali, 2012). This has legitimized the existence of the internment camp for “enemy combatants” comprised entirely of Muslim men at the military-run Guantanamo Bay prison (in operation since 2002), as well as surveillance, and entrapment programs against the Arab and Muslim communities (Center for Constitutional Rights, 2014). In complete violation of the Geneva Convention and American civil liberties, Guantanamo Bay, Abu Ghraib in Iraq, and so-called “black sites” around the world have shown the impact and danger of being racialized as “terrorists,” effectively becoming nonhuman and vulnerable to being rendered, tortured, and killed even if completely innocent (ACLU, 2015; Giroux, 2014). Further adding to and justified by the post 9/11 Islamophobia, the United States has run a secret assassination program implemented more widely and ruthlessly under the Obama administration, carrying out extrajudicial killings of civilians across the Muslim world using aerial drones, while plans are underway to increase by 50% daily drone flights (and strikes) around the world by 2019 (Pilkington & MacAskill, 2015; The Intercept, 2015). Effectively, some 1.3 million people in countries of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan have been killed in a 10-year span of the ongoing “war on terror” (IPPNW, 2015, p. 15). Of course, this figure continues to rise every week, month, and year.

Furthermore, many decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the impact of racialization is nowhere more evident than in the killings of African and Native American males, who make up the highest percentage of those killed at the hands of the police across the US (Lendman, 2014; Swaine et al., 2016), or the racialization and criminalization of young African-American children in public schools (Cohen, 2015) that has given rise to the school-to-prison pipeline (ACLU, n.d.). The criminally racist mistreatment and racialization of African Americans, since their enslavement, has led to their criminalization and high incarceration rates in today's America (Coates, 2015). Immigrants trying to escape poverty from Latin America face white vigilante groups, such as the Minuteman Project, an armed white self-appointed militia that guards US-Mexican border against "illegal" immigration without any opposition from the government (Holthouse, 2005; McCarty, 2007). In this age of billionaires, mass incarceration, prison-to-school pipeline, the longest running war in US history in Afghanistan, and the rise of the Tea Party that's composed entirely of middle class white Americans seeking to undo achievements of the civil rights movement (Taibbi, 2010, Chapter 1), one sees the racism and marginalization inherent in the Eurocentric capitalist world-system, and those it racializes, dehumanizes, exploits, producing "a broad landscape of cruelty, precarity, and disposability" (Giroux, 2015).

Well before the American war of independence, Ben Franklin had advised the British crown to secure additional land and living space to accommodate the onslaught of settlers arriving from England by removing the native population from the land (cited in Arrighi, 1994, p. 60): "But as soon as the [American] Revolution had freed the settlers' hands, they set out to conquer as much of the North American continent as was profitable and to reorganize its space in a thoroughly capitalistic manner" (p. 60). Furthermore, after the civil war and abolition of slavery, "[t]he main military objective of the government became the wresting of the continent from the native Indian population, following Benjamin Franklin's longstanding prescription" (p. 291). This set the colonial, capitalist, and settler characteristic of the US very early on that paved the way for its rise as a capitalist superpower in the service of European settlers. Effectively, the emergence of the US as a hegemonic capitalist power has meant that racialization and racism, much like during colonialism since the time of the Spanish, will continue both inside the US and against the Third World through ongoing wars that have long characterized the rise and expansion of the Eurocentric capitalist world-economy for over five centuries. In parallel, Western education in colonizing and civilizing the "inferior" non-European world has grown and expanded alongside the rise, expansion, and formation of the modern, colonial, Euro-American capitalist world-system. In understanding the role of education within this *longue durée* of Western capitalism and colonialism, American education institutions become entangled not only with America's history and position as a capitalist settler-state, but also with the turbulent, hegemonic, racist history of Western colonialism, capitalism, and domination of the world. Accordingly, in the context of this *longue durée* of capitalism and colonialism, the ensuing chapter offers a discussion of American education, the Silicon Valley, and the research site and its ominous tensions with the surrounding space that serves American hegemony.

## Chapter 4: American Education, Silicon Valley, and the Islamic School

The cotton plantations and African slaves, whose wealthy owners became the founding fathers of a modern nation-state, make visible the “networks of [capital] accumulation” that came to dominate networks of political power in the US early on. This has been the inherent characteristic of Western capitalist empires and nation-states for the past five centuries. However, since the 1970’s in the US, these networks of capital have come to not only dominate but have also become increasingly independent of networks of power. This has given rise to the entire state, public, and private institutions that have moved towards neoliberalism, an ideology designed to prevent the collapse of American capitalism and its capitalist class by, among other things, undermining government’s regulatory authority of the economy (Harvey, 2005). This provides a window into why American education and institutions have aligned themselves with neoliberalism and fundamentalist capitalism (Giroux & Giroux, 2006). It further makes clear the point from Chapter 3 that the networks of capital have created a situation for the nation-states in which governments must engage not just in state-making and war-making, but also in capital accumulation to finance the other two functions. In sum, the entire modern inter-state system represents a capitalist world-system. This has created a political order whose tendencies skew state institutions towards promoting and preserving the capitalist state, which hinges on the constant competition for capital in the entire inter-state system. American education as a public institution, then, represents and articulates these materialist priorities and characteristics of not just a modern capitalist nation-state, but a colonial settler-capitalist, world hegemon constantly in political and economic competition with the rest of the world, backed by its uncontested financial and military power (Arrighi, 1994; Brzezinski, 1998; Harvey, 2005; Stiglitz, 2003).

Similarly, Arrighi (1994) outlines the capitalist history of a civilization and a powerful wealthy class of people obsessed with money and power, where money has taken over power by the fact that kings and rulers waged wars by mortgaging their countries and subjects to the priorities and logic of those with money. The moneyed or banking class ambitiously pursued more power in order to gain more capital by wresting control of trade routes, sources of commodities, and appropriation of territories, which paved the way for additional sources of income and power in a nearly cyclical logic systemic in the capitalist economy that expanded to become the modern capitalist world-system. Today’s nation-states through America’s postwar hegemonic rise and influence must function in this globalized system according to policies and rules set by the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN, which the US created and controls (in partnership with Wall Street) to this day. One must, then, examine the role of education in this system to see whether it serves and represents the logic and priorities of those seeking accumulation of capital and power, rather than the democratic aspirations of humanity. By looking briefly at education overall in the US and in California, this chapter problematizes the American model of education found in public schools, and its effects in terms of the historical connection between Western hegemony, capitalism, and colonialism, with implications for situating this study’s research site in the Silicon Valley. This means looking at how in the 20<sup>th</sup> century American education has evolved into increasingly serving capitalism, especially in light of the rise of the US as a world-hegemon after WWII replacing Great Britain.

Both Harvey (2005) and Stiglitz (2003) outline how American corporate interests particularly since the 1970’s have spread across the world through globalization that has continued to impose neoliberal/deregulatory reforms, seeking cheap labor, low-cost production, and a wider consumer base and markets for their products and commodities. Neoliberalism has

undermined the social and public good, moving the state institutions to increasingly form alliances with private businesses and industry, that has spread through philosophies informing economic policies, universities, schools, but also popular culture in promoting individualism (Harvey, 2005, Ch. 2). Moreover, based on *longue durée* history of the capitalist world-economy/system, the idea of systemic cycles (consisting of two phases) that explain the rise and fall of each capitalist hegemon serves to connect American education today with the second phase, or finance capitalism, which historically leads to destruction of the previous hegemon, and the emergence of a new one. The second phase of the American systemic cycle of accumulation, similar to previous capitalist empires, concerns itself exclusively with financial speculation designed to enrich the already wealthy elite at the expense of labor and the environment in the greater economic game of unbridled accumulation (that has marked the inherent crisis of capitalism for the past half millennium). This chapter attempts to situate the Islamic school in the Silicon Valley, which was founded to help the state in the business of war-making but has emerged also as a place for developing technologies for the purpose of capital accumulation and financial speculation. This provides the context for examining the Islamic school as the research site, modeled on California public schools and American education that have a long history of racism and segregation, aligned with the capitalist mission of the state historically, and neoliberalism more recently.

#### **4.1 American Education**

Spring (2011) provides a detailed history of American education, which from its infancy evolves as a specific and planned policy for enacting and institutionalizing cultural domination.<sup>13</sup> Grammar schools and “petty” schools in the 17<sup>th</sup> century American colonies served the purpose and mission of maintaining the Anglo-Protestant culture, language, religion, and class order vis-à-vis German and Irish immigrants, Native Americans and African slaves. This found expression in the common school movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century spearheaded by the famous Noah Webster, and Horace Mann. These elite Anglo-Americans saw in common schooling a powerful potential for assimilating Americans of all ethnicities and beliefs into a set of common values premised on the dominant Protestant Anglo-American culture and industrious capitalist work ethic. Common schooling hoped to be an effective remedy against social and economic conflict, for it would educate the poor and immigrants in industry and hard work as a way to achieve social harmony through economic prosperity and social mobility. This also inspired the charity school movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, which used the Lancasterian system based on a factory model for poor European immigrant children, and the public school movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, counter movements like the workingmen’s party thought of common schools and education as a way to challenge the larger economic and political structures, and as a deterrent against exploitation at the hands of businessmen and the Protestant elite. These early movements shaped the debate on the aims and goals of American public education for the majority white population; however, non-European communities and immigrants would face a protracted struggle with de facto cultural genocide articulated through educational segregation, exclusion, indoctrination, and institutionalized racism.

The colonial-settler nature of the new republic became evident in the way education served as an ideological weapon to achieve economic and political domination through cultural genocide over non-Europeans. Native American control over vast amounts of land posed a significant challenge, especially after American Independence. The expanding nature of

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<sup>13</sup> This section on American educational history mostly relies on chapters 2, 3, 5, 7, and 13 in Spring (2011).

settlements and the continuous arrival of additional settlers from Europe increased the demand for land. Wresting control of land from the indigenous communities became the order of the day. Among other founding members of the new republic, Thomas Jefferson pushed for using educational programs aimed at Native Americans to achieve precisely this. Jefferson believed “civilizing” the Native Americans through education into wanting what the white settlers had, such as the nuclear family, farms and farming, wealth and private property, and the value of the accumulation of wealth, would force them to trade land for money. What began as an attempt to expropriate land from the natives through schooling, gave way to Indian residential schools, which continued to commit cultural genocide into the 1990s in an attempt to “*Kill the Indian, Save the Man*” (Churchill, 2004). Jefferson’s “civilizing” educational programs came to embody American educational complicity in cultural genocide and domination of natives and non-Europeans subsumed into its territorial conquest and expansion driven by the capitalist ideology. This historical pattern of cultural genocide driven by the capitalist spirit has continued to repeat itself in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post 9/11 targeting Arab and Muslim countries (Succarie, 2008). Jefferson, like other Anglo-American presidents of the future, justified capitalist expansion and domination through education on progressive and humanitarian grounds: “I trust and believe we are acting for their greatest good” (cited in Spring, 2011, p. 124). As the struggle to expropriate Native American lands unfolded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the US occupation of Mexico’s territory leading to war in the 1840’s resulted in the acquisition and formation of the southwestern states of Arizona, Texas, Utah, and New Mexico, along with California. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with Mexico guaranteed US citizenship to Mexican nationals in the newly expropriated territories, who suddenly found themselves racialized inferiors, serving as cheap labor for US farmers: “Farmers wanted to keep Mexican laborers ignorant as a means of assuring a continued inexpensive source of labor” (p. 169). Fighting cultural domination, segregation, and exclusion, Mexican Americans responded by building schools to preserve the language and heritage of their own communities.

However, African Americans would face the longest period of violence, dehumanization, and school segregation. In the South, they faced industrialists who wanted to educate black children to work in the factories as menial labor, while the plantation owners wanted to deny them educational opportunities altogether, ensuring a supply of low-wage labor for their farms. These economic interests attempted to ensure the continued subservience of black communities to the majority white population through schooling and segregation. The infamous Dred Scott Decision of 1857, explicitly racialized blacks as of “inferior race,” and effectively institutionalized racism. The Plessey v. Ferguson decision of 1896 paved the way for school segregation of “separate but equal,” where schools serving black students received a tiny fraction of funding compared to those serving white students. Irons (2004) points to Jim Crow education as the single cause of what more than “25 million” African Americans in the US have suffered in the form of “higher rates of crime, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, low-wage jobs, unemployment, infant mortality, lowered life expectancy, and many other indices of social pathology” (p. 339). Despite the landmark Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954, making segregation illegal, and the black struggle for over a century opposing it, school segregation continues to exist (Gary et al., 2014; Irons, 2004).

Asian immigrants arrived during the California Gold Rush, and later began working as cheap labor mainly in the agricultural sector. Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino immigrants, seen as a threat to racial purity of white Americans and their way of life, justified their economic exploitation, and also faced racism and segregation. California Code of 1872

made education compulsory for whites only, excluding anyone not of hundred-percent European stock. In 1906, San Francisco created segregated schools for Asian communities, which the communities boycotted. As the US grew into a regional power, defeating the Spanish empire in the Caribbean and making Puerto Rico part of its territory, it further honed education as a weapon in absorbing the local population into its dominant Anglo-Protestant culture and capitalist institutions. Once the US attained its status as the leading capitalist world-hegemon after WWII, succeeding Great Britain, a sudden shift occurs in the federal government's interest in the American public school system to serve this hegemonic role.<sup>14</sup>

The Cold War and the Communist Scare pushed for the purging of anti-communist, or "anti-American," elements; however, the scientific race between the US and the USSR to dominate the world created this tension, on one hand, of creating a thriving educational system that not only offered some level of intellectual depth and freedom, but also the unleashing of scientific potential in a new generation that would, on the other hand, provide the military and ideological might to maintain America's emerging superpower role. Created in 1947, ETS (Educational Testing Services) accelerated the sorting tendencies of the education system, with its racist, eugenicist undercurrent that informed the IQ testing, evolving into the SAT exam. The SAT helped create an elite population of college-bound students, while those scoring low on the exam found themselves in the vocational track or military service. The inauguration of the National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1950 saw increased federal funding to colleges and public schools to produce the talented pool of future scientists needed to contain, if not defeat, the USSR. With the founding of the NSF, not only did American education form a close relationship with capitalism by offering highly trained science graduates to American industries, and a stratified labor force socialized to fit into the division of labor, but it also came to shift towards fulfilling America's role as a world military power. In the early 1950s, American education came under severe criticism as an institution for socializing and ranking students to play differential roles in the job market, with an eye to either vocational training, or post-secondary studies at a college or a university.

A historian, Arthur Bestor, sounded warning bells that US education lacked the intellectual and scientific rigor in the study of science, math, history, literature, and languages. He criticized the entire educational professional class for their anti-intellectual approach to education. Vice Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, who later came to be known as the "father of America's nuclear navy," also joined the chorus of criticism and reform of American education as being ill-prepared to select and train future scientists and engineers to meet America's defense needs against the Soviet Union. From 1940's to the 1950's, public schools had unsuccessfully lobbied for federal funding and legislation to deal with the postwar population boom requiring expansion of public schools and to cover teacher salaries. With the launching of the Soviet Sputnik satellite in 1957, the criticism of American education found a receptive audience in President Eisenhower, who supported the passage of the National Education Defense Act (NEDA) of 1958. NEDA released millions of dollars in federal funding to local public schools, requiring them to test, identify, and train future scientists and engineers, and provide science, math, and language training courses to help meet America's role as a superpower during the Cold War. With the rise of racial tensions in the 1960s, the civil rights movement, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the War on Poverty, corporations collaborating with the federal government intensified their involvement in public education to ease race and class tensions. The Carnegie Corporation and the federal government established educational TV programs such as

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<sup>14</sup> See Spring (2011) chapter 13.

Sesame Street, Electric Company, and 3-2-1 Contact to promote social harmony and science in children early on. This laid the groundwork for the nation to move intensely towards technological innovation to serve military power, forged through a close partnership with public education and private corporations. In the context of the Cold War, and later neoliberalism, the Silicon Valley came into existence to serve as a space of political-economic significance.

#### **4.2 *The Silicon Valley***

In situating the research site in Santa Clara County, one must look briefly at the larger space where it is embedded. This space represents the Silicon Valley that has its beginning in the Cold War. As detailed by O'Mara (2005), Silicon Valley's rise in Northern California led to the reshaping of pastoral land to facilitate America's emergence as a military and economic superpower shortly after WWII. Its strategic importance has required talented brainpower from the world over for constant technological innovation, making it a highly privileged place of money, social status, and political power that draws on the best minds from around the world pursuing the American dream (Blendstrup, 2007). The tremendous contribution that American universities made in the Valley's genesis and evolution also brings into further focus the marriage between American education (more specifically higher education), the American military and capitalist institutions, all together created what O'Mara calls the "Cold War science complex." This complex benefited greatly from increased federal funding toward scientific research that led to the region's suburban expansion and economic development. Scientific research spawned and attracted private companies that worked with universities like Stanford, which taught and promoted an entrepreneurial approach to development of technological innovation for both government and public consumption (O'Mara, 2005, p. 99). The partnership and competition brought in its wake not only "smart weaponry" for military use and the arms industry, but the personal computer, the Internet, and the digital revolution. As Figure 1 below illustrates, Silicon Valley has evolved into a sprawling powerhouse of technological research and development with direct help from the government and public and private American universities (Wonglimpiyarat, 2006). This shows the longstanding marriage between higher education and the US as a capitalist world-hegemon, further illustrating the modern capitalist state's tendencies towards state-making, war-making, and capital accumulation. Silicon Valley has transmuted pastoral land once belonging to indigenous peoples into a "thoroughly capitalist space" in the service of capital investment, corporate profits, and capital accumulation, as in the constant reinvestment, or breeding,<sup>15</sup> of money/capital, making it a capitalist agency par excellence. However, profits always come at a hidden cost of labor exploitation and environmental contamination the public must bear (Pellow & Park, 2002). Silicon Valley serves as an investment and strategic hub that provides both the financial expansion, and the technological innovation needed to maintain American economic strength and military domination, supporting America's role as the world's leading capitalist superpower. It provides opportunities for capital investment, and production of new technologies for the average buyer/user that contribute to America's world-hegemonic role: the ability to spy on and gather intelligence from any person around the world with a cell phone or an email address, including foreign heads of state, or to engage in a new theater of war called "cyber warfare" (Ball, 2014; Ball, Borger, & Greenwald, 2013; Borger, 2013; Glanz, Larson, & Lehren, 2014; MacAskill, Dance, Cage, Chen, & Popovich, 2013; MacAskill, Davies, Hopkins, Borger, & Ball, 2013).

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<sup>15</sup> An agency is capitalist simply because its money has "the 'power of breeding' (Marx's expression) systematically and persistently" (Arrighi, 1994, p. 8).

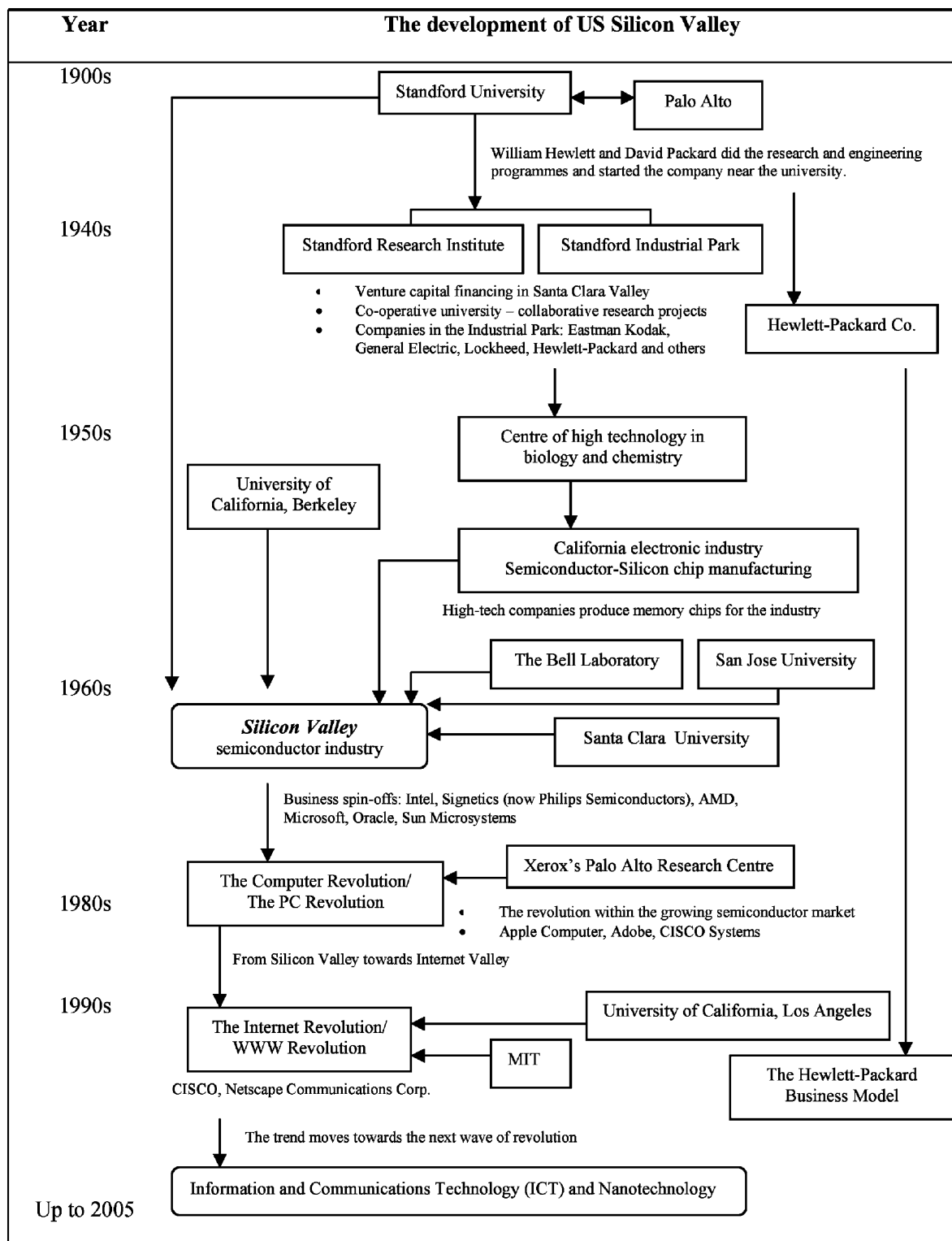


Figure 1. Silicon Valley and American Universities.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Reprinted from *Technovation*, 26(9), J. Wonglimpiyarat, "The Dynamic Economic Engine at Silicon Valley and Us Government Programmes in Financing Innovations," 1081-1089, with permission from Elsevier.



As Harvey (2005) has argued, information technology has been placed in the service of neoliberalism for the purpose of exploiting global markets and financial speculation:

It [neoliberalism] holds that the social good will be maximized by maximizing the reach and frequency of market transactions, and it seeks to bring all human action into the domain of the market. This requires technologies of information creation and capacities to accumulate, store, transfer, analyse, and use massive databases to guide decisions in the global marketplace. (p. 3)

Harvey's main argument centers on the origins and effects of neoliberalism, and the rise of what he calls the "neoliberal state," which has attempted to undercut democratic ideals and the common good through broad government reforms in the interest of money, allowing the networks of capital to fully take over networks of political power: "The freedoms it embodies reflect the interests of private property owners, businesses, multinational corporations, and financial capital" (p. 7). The ideas constituting neoliberalism came about as a result of fighting communist expansion during the Cold War that laid the foundation for corporate control of the state. In 1973, this precipitated the overthrow of Chilean government of President Allende by General Pinochet, backed by the CIA, US corporations, and Henry Kissinger, that led to the complete privatization and neoliberalization of Chilean economy and society. The US achieved similar reforms inside Iraq after the invasion of 2003, which "suggests that the grim reach of US imperial power might lie behind the rapid proliferation of neoliberal state forms throughout the world from the mid-1970s onwards" (p. 9). Harvey (2005, Chapter 3) further discusses how the neoliberal state works with military power, using the IMF, Wall Street/New York Investment banks, in which the state has handed over its institutions and power to serve corporate/banking interests in loans and financial deals. The world's surplus is extracted through capital lending by the "U.S. Treasury-Wall Street-IMF complex" to developing countries at high interest rates, resulting in what he calls "accumulation through dispossession." This "complex" in collaboration with wealthy elites of the world engages in constant accumulation of capital by impoverishing billions of people, and has transferred some \$4.6 trillion since 1980 from the Third World to the First (p. 162). Moreover, Harvey posits that "[i]nformation technology is the privileged technology of neoliberalism. It is far more useful for speculative activity and for maximizing the number of short-term market contracts than for improving production" (Harvey, 2005, p. 159). One could, then, argue that Silicon Valley since the end of the Cold War has evolved into a core expression or embodiment of a far-reaching and comprehensive ideology transforming itself from the "Cold War science complex" into what I term the neoliberal knowledge complex. This knowledge complex represents the privileged network created by corporate funding of educational reform, K-12 schools, universities, and the federal government in relations to the research site discussed below. Inscribed within the space that constitutes the aforementioned attributes of Silicon Valley, the Islamic school and the Islamic center as a research site represent a spiritual space where the teaching, learning, and practice of Islam occur.

### **4.3 The Research Site**

The Islamic school is located in a semi-industrial, corporate area of Santa Clara County comprising part of the Silicon Valley. Santa Clara County stands out as one of the highest earning counties in Northern California. As of 2014, median household income stood close to \$94,000, as opposed to \$61,000 for the state of California, and poverty level remained at just 8.5% in the county, or nearly half that of the state's (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Close to half

the population of the county possesses bachelor's degrees, and 37% of the population is foreign born, while about 51% speak a language other than English at home. Santa Clara County has a concentrated population of college-educated, middle-class immigrants who work largely in the technology sector. The research site consists of Muslim immigrants and their children, who established a mosque in the area that preceded the founding of the Islamic school. The massive two-story commercial-style building complex houses both the school and Islamic Center (or mosque). The school's mission and philosophy envision providing quality academic and Islamic education that focuses on building a Muslim identity based on the moral teachings of Islam. The school's website provides a section entitled "Expected School-wide Learning Results," also referred to as "graduation outcomes," which essentially capture the school's philosophy and mission. This list of graduation outcomes consists of four sections, and the first section is presented below:

- Islamic School students will develop love and reverence for Allah and Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) exemplified by:
- Displaying a solid Muslim identity that reflects pride in being a Muslim and a clear sense of mission
- Understanding the teachings of Islam through Qur'an and Sunna and their application in the daily life of an American Muslim
- Displaying character, values, and morals that are aligned with the teachings of Islam
- Being a positive role model and ambassador for Islam by striving for excellence and promoting good

The school divides its education into three categories: academic subjects, Islamic subjects, and enrichment programs (physical ed., art, computers). While the academic subjects consist of language arts, math, social studies, and science, the Islamic subjects consist of classes in Islamic studies (focusing on teaching Islamic beliefs, worship, Islamic history, and morals), Qur'anic recitation and memorization, and Arabic language learning. The school has based its "academic subjects" on California Common Core State Standards for science, language arts and math classes. The three categories (academic and Islamic subjects, and enrichment programs) make obvious that the school does not see the studying of Islam, the Qur'an and Arabic as "academic," which speaks to the separation between academic subjects and Islamic learning.

The Common Core State Standards have been a collaborative effort between corporate and government actors, embodying the neoliberal knowledge complex. Namely, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (of Microsoft Corp.) have funded and developed these standards, with the Foundation having poured some \$4 billion dollars over the last decade and a half in reforming K-12 education (Klein, 2015; Lipman, 2015a). Studies making a connection between schooling and the work place have long argued that socialization of students in public schools prepares them for the hierarchical ordering in the capitalist division of labor (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Here the marriage between Silicon Valley corporations, neoliberalism, and the government in the reforming of public K-12 education comes clearly into view, along with the American education model as embodied in the California Common Core State Standards representing the hegemonic tendencies of American capitalism: namely the aligning of "schools and classrooms with corporate manpower needs" and "economic competitiveness" (Lipman, 2015b, p. 58). If one looks at the Common Core State Standards as representing neoliberalism discourse embracing individual performance, competition, achievement, and responsibilities in a very measurable and material sense, then the "academic courses" offered by the Islamic school inherently forge a tension with the "Islamic subjects."

This makes obvious the epistemological, ontological, and teleological tensions that the two sets of courses, Islamic and academic, seem to conceal while appearing to coexist harmoniously. Chapter 1 presented and juxtaposed Islamic and Western epistemologies, and this chapter has presented the history and tendencies of American education as founded upon a historical nexus of settler colonialism, Anglo-American cultural domination (racial supremacy), racism, cultural genocide, capitalism, and neoliberalism. It remains to be seen just how the Islamic school achieves the “Expected School-wide Learning Results” dealing with Islam, given the diverging tendencies of Islamic education and the California public school model. The ethnographic data in the next chapters should illuminate the tensions and contradictions in the way the Islamic school as a site, and the Muslim immigrants as a community, negotiate and contest their presence inside neoliberal America.

## Chapter 5: Teaching Islam

The previous chapters posed the problem of colonial Western education in a broader context, beginning with the *longue durée* of capitalist history, and moved towards looking at the research site in the Silicon Valley. To that end, this chapter investigates the extent to which the Islamic school of this study, allied with the California Common Core State Standards for its academic subjects, mediates the neoliberal knowledge complex. This complex represents the nexus of Euro-American cultural domination (ontologically and epistemologically), racism, individualism, a market-driven work ethic, and the socialization of students into the capitalist economic system. Hence, the tensions and contradictions between the Islamic subjects/curriculum of the school and the academic subjects based on the State Standards should come into view. This will serve as a basis for examining further in Chapter 6 the epistemological and ontological impact resulting from the tensions between the academic and Islamic subjects, the Islamic mission and vision of the school, between expectations of the parents and the Islamic center's overall ideology, and the cumulative effect of these tensions on student learning and identity. The analysis of the ethnographic data in this chapter begins with an analysis of the school newsletter (10 monthly issues), and the weekly Friday sermons delivered at the Islamic center, so as to understand the larger context and ideological position of the school and the Muslim community. The ethnographical data cascades from the apex of the organizational hierarchy of the school, with an interview of the president of the Islamic center, followed by the board members of the school itself, the principal, the teachers, the parents, and finally the students. The analysis for each set of data ends with an interim conclusion for that section and link to the final conclusion of this chapter. Serving as a basis for examining the research site, the interviews triangulate with the Friday sermons and the school newsletters to provide an understanding of how the Islamic school negotiates and mediates Islamic and American values, and identities.

### 5.1 *The School Newsletter*

The monthly newsletters paint a picture of the school as an American school serving Muslim students and families. The school divides its subjects into academic and Islamic, and this bifurcation between the two, or the importance attached to the academic subjects, comes into full view upon examining the school's monthly newsletters. The amount of space in the newsletters devoted to the learning of academic subjects dominates all other topics and themes, with Islamic themes, or the learning of Islam, occurring infrequently in small sections. Advice, information, suggestions, events, and activities dealing with reading, science, and math dominate the newsletters' columns and pages. The first section of each newsletter usually begins with a message from the school principal addressing the parents about upcoming school events or changes, usually emphasizing the importance of encouraging their child to read, to take interest in science, and to develop overall good study habits. The newsletters average 10-12 pages in length, save for August's limited to four pages, with all 10 newsletters totaling some 80 pages. Spread over these 80 pages, topics/events dealing with Islam occur across 16 pages, confined to brief snippets, or small sections composed of fractions of a column. November's newsletter, exceptionally, devoted an entire page to Islam and discussed in some detail the implementation of the Living Islam program, and the contingent of eighth graders from a local private school, who during their visit learned about Islam, including a written reaction by one of the visiting students, and a parent's whose child participated in the visit, as having been a learning and

positive experience about Islam and Muslims. In contrast, entire 32 pages over some 9 months presented in two lengthy sections entitled *Helping Children Learn* and *Helping Students Learn*<sup>17</sup> offer advice to help parents mold their child into a disciplined, responsible, well organized, well mannered, polite, and respectful student, who values rules, fairness, and cooperation; they repeatedly emphasize reading, writing, science, and math skills. In one such section of February's newsletter, *Helping Your Children Learn*, Thomas Edison provides the value of hard work, while promoting an interest in science and innovation:

Thomas Edison once said, 'genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration.' He tried and failed many times before he invented the light bulb. Celebrate his birthday on February 11<sup>th</sup> by talking about the value of hard work and perseverance with your child.

Moreover, there exists little attempt at combining Islam into academic activities. For example, October's newsletter provides details about the Language Arts department requiring students, in the spirit of "Leonardo De Vinci and Ray Bradbury," to maintain a "creative notebook." It offers a range of topics for students to write about in their notebooks: "What is your favorite outdoor activity? If you could fly, where would you go? Paste a leaf in your notebook, and try to describe it. What do you like about school? Describe your bedtime routine. Who is your role model and why?" The absence of suggested topics dealing with Islam or being an American Muslim further reveal the rift between academic subjects and Islamic learning.

According to May's newsletter, which summarized all the extracurricular activities and events the school held for students during the school year, out of 31 such events only two dealt with Islam (a Hajj program, and Qur'an competition), and one Arabic Spelling Bee. It also offers a few suggestions for activities, advising parents to make sure their child keeps reading over the summer. Suggestions on keeping up with Arabic literacy or learning further about Islam during the summer do not exist. April's newsletter starts with the very first paragraph proudly informing the parents that 22 of the middle graders who competed in the Synopsis Science Fair Championship, nine students won the championship. Synopsis Science Fair and Championship take place every year in Santa Clara County, which "showcases students in the Santa Clara County of California who will become our future scientists, technology experts, engineers, and mathematicians."<sup>18</sup> According to August's newsletter, the principal explains the importance of enrichment activities that support the schools' ESLR's (Expected School-wide Learning Results). It offers MAD Science program as one enrichment activity that the school participates in. According to MAD's website, its programs "[a]re hands-on and focus on science and engineering practice," and "[a]re aligned to STEM objectives."<sup>19</sup>

February and May's newsletters contain an update from the Arabic department, which proudly discusses the school's involvement with the Startalk "Multi Media" Project:

If you walked into the school on January 18, you probably saw a few cameras and two videographers. They were part of the Startalk Multi Media project that [the school] was chosen to participate in. Startalk is a program funded by the National Security Language Initiative (NSLI).

It further highlights how the videographers recorded the Arabic class and posted the video on Startalk's website, providing the link. The Startalk<sup>20</sup> program, comprised of many educational

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<sup>17</sup> See <http://www.parent-institute.com/product/HB7E>

<sup>18</sup> See <https://science-fair.org/about-the-fair/>

<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.madscience.org/after-school-programs.aspx>

<sup>20</sup> See <https://startalk.umd.edu/public/about>

projects, hopes to train future teachers, students, and to develop curricula promoting foreign language learning among young Americans in order to serve America's national security interests. According to Startalk's website, the University of Maryland administers the program, contracted to it by the National Security Agency (NSA), but falls under the control of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), who launched it in 2006, with the NSA having executive oversight. A State Department Briefing from 2006 provides a detailed discussion on the ideological motivations and framework behind NSLI (Department Of State, 2006). Condoleezza Rice, during her term as National Security Advisor for President G. W. Bush, conceived of NSLI to serve America's national security needs but also to help America "[c]ompete -- compete in the world of ideas, compete in the world of commerce." NSLI contributes to America's hegemonic and imperial ambitions connected to its larger economic interests. Further revealing the schools ideological leanings, the Arabic classes, as detailed in November's newsletter, began using Arabic curriculum by the International Curricula Organization (ICO). ICO is an organization based out of Saudi Arabia's capital, Riyadh, serving hundreds of Islamic schools around the world, including N. America, Europe, and Australia, and endorsed (perhaps even funded) by the government of Saudi Arabia.<sup>21</sup> ICO describes its own values as developing educational material on Islam that contribute to "science, modernity, and development."<sup>22</sup>

Each newsletter ends with the following quote in the left column of the last page: "Our mission is to provide quality academic and Islamic education in a community that nurtures a strong Muslim identity, fosters brotherhood, and strengthens moral character." Yet, based on the content of an entire academic year's worth of newsletters, little advice exists as far as promoting the reading of the Qu'ran, the learning of Islam, Islamic history, arts, and literature at home or outside of school. No discussion exists on learning to deal with racism as young Muslims in an era of growing Islamophobia; instead, much advice, information, and school workshops offered to address bullying among students. Most school activities, such as field trips, that the newsletters take account of, favor the learning of California history and American culture through field trips, focusing on California heritage sites resulting from colonial settlements. One such field trip involved a visit to experience an 1890s school from the "Old West" where, among other colonial cultural norms, the "[b]oys learned to bow and girls learned to curtsy before speaking to the teacher," while learning the value of good hygiene and discipline found in such schools (February's newsletter). I attended a fundraising event for the school, where both the chairman of the school board, as well as the instructor from the Islamic Studies class spoke. The two emphasized how the school offers students a "great Islamic learning environment." The instructor particularly highlighted to his audience the grave situation Muslim youth face in the US, citing a Gallop Poll, which revealed immoral activity among the youth in America that would make their parents want to "pack their bags and go back to their countries." He also mentioned "Muslim identity" as being the key to Muslim education. He praised the students and performance of the school noting that it outdoes other schools in math and science, which is "the most important thing for me."

While the newsletters do present an image of a school making math, science, and reading skills a top priority, and somewhat ideologically aligned to American hegemony, the school embarked on a new Living Islam program to make Islam more "hands-on" by offering the enactment of the annual Hajj to students in November of 2010. Conceived of and organized by

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<sup>21</sup> See <http://www.iconetwork.com/about-ico/>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

the Arabic department, I observed this day of Hajj at the school where students participated in it. The teachers had created miniature sites of religious importance representing the cities of Mecca and Medina. Each grade level, starting with pre-K, guided by older students visited the various sites, which had signs written in English explaining the importance of the site for Muslims making the actual Hajj performed in the cities of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. Some of the students wore the *ihram* (a sheet-like attire wrapped over the body, worn by men making the Hajj), signifying modesty, purity, and erasure of any social/class distinctions. As an observer, I didn't have the written authorization to ask students about their experience after the event, but given the sincere expressions on students' faces, young and old alike, along with their excitement at making the Hajj, made it seem like a memorable event. The Hajj simulation marked the initiative known as the Character Development Program, part of the Living Islam series, implemented that school year, which seemed liked an attempt to have students experience Islam spiritually, compensating for a curriculum with apparent secular tendencies.

The monthly school newsletters show how the focus on science, math and reading, along with the Startalk Multimedia Project connected to the National Security Language Initiative, has turned the Islamic school into a public school receiving NEDA funding from the federal government, and must push students towards science and math, with lots of enrichment activities and field trips to that end. The school has not only wholeheartedly embraced the California Common Core State Standards, but has inadvertently also embraced the ideological framework of the US post-9/11 by participating in the Startalk program. The newsletters also reinforce ideas using language that asks parents to think and behave as American parents towards their children. Advice to parents center around making sure their child learns to read well, behaves well, has good study, listening, and organizational skills, with an enthusiastic emphasis on math and science. However, a balanced approach to combining academic and Islamic learning would not simply rely entirely on secular Western epistemology and dominant values for learning and making meaning of the world the students inhabit; rather, it would combine the two in a way that places Islam at the center, helping students translate and understand the impact of two epistemologies on their learning, identity, and how they see themselves as Muslims and as Americans. Learning based on the California Common Core State Standards, amplifying science and math, while assigning Islam a marginal role, does not allow students to think critically about their American and Muslim identities in a post 9/11 American. The configuration and aligning of the school's curriculum according to the State Standards has turned the school more into a science academy that aims to serve America's role as a capitalist world-hegemon, while assigning Islam a subordinate role to Western culture, history, and epistemology.

## **5.2 The Friday Khutba (Sermon)**

These observations consist of some 10 *khutbas* I attended between April 2010 and January 2011. This represents a time, some seven years after the 2003 invasion of Iraq and nearly 10 years after 9/11, that marked the beginning of even greater upheavals to follow in the Muslim world. In the fall of 2010, Wikileaks released thousands of American Embassy cables that highlighted the secret cooperation of certain Arab and Muslim countries under the sway of the US and its war on terror, as well as American hegemony in action in other places like Haiti (Pieterse, 2012). Again, in January 2011, Wikileaks released documents known as the Palestine Papers, showing how the Palestine Authority (PA), to the detriment of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, had fallen squarely in line with US and Israel's demands and plans (Black, 2011; Freedland, 2011). There was also the presidential order signed by Barak Obama allowing

the assassination of American citizens overseas, which mainly targeted Muslim Americans (Priest, 2010). Pieterse (2012) points to some evidence that leaked cables made public to the world contributed to the movement that would come to be known as the “Arab Spring,” or uprisings touched off by a vegetable seller in Tunisia setting himself on fire on December 17, 2010. This led quite swiftly to the overthrow of governments of Tunisia and Egypt under the rule of same governments for 20 to 30 years, respectively. Undoubtedly, these events sent shockwaves throughout the world, along with the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the Western overthrow of Muammar Qaddafi of Libya in 2011, and the subsequent push by the West to overthrow the government of Bashar Al Asad of Syria. The blowback effect of these Western interventions has given rise to the spread of an extremist anti-Western movement known as ISIS and their followers, largely concentrated in Muslim countries of Iraq, Syria, and Libya, where the US has sought regime change to serve its own ideological and hegemonic ambitions. By examining the themes of the *khutbas*, this section looks at the extent to which these portentous world events shaped the discussion of Islam inside this large Muslim community, whether in the form of criticism of American foreign policies, or a reassessment in the understanding of Islam, seeking spiritual or collective empowerment to cope with the spiraling political crisis facing the Muslim community since 9/11.

The *khutbas* mostly offer traditional spiritual advice, highlighting the importance of the life of the Prophet, and the teachings of Islam. These *khutbas* range in topics such as protecting the family through the practice of Islam, serving the community, building brotherhood, helping children in the US connect science to Islam, and the importance of praying, or making *du'a*,<sup>23</sup> to ensure worldly/material success. Most of the observed *khutbas* do not discuss the political situation facing Muslims in the US, or the major news events affecting Muslims such as Wikileaks’ documents exposing US war crimes in Iraq, or the events unfolding in the Middle East that led to the Arab Spring. For instance, preceding the *khutba* on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 2010, an American soldier named Bradley Manning and Julian Assange of Wikileaks had made headlines just a week before, leaking videos that showed the killing of civilians inside Iraq in 2007 at the hands of American forces, as well as a 2009 US bombing of a village (Garani) in Afghanistan that killed 100 civilians, mostly children (Zetter & Poulsen, 2010). The speaker, American born and raised, who delivered the *khutba* that day lectured his audience of the qualities found in professional sports involving discipline and following rules that can also be found in Islam. Another speaker who delivered the *khutba* on December 3, 2010, limited the discussion on ways Muslims can be “proactive” in the community by building brotherhood and helping Muslim youth inside the US; ironically, just earlier that week Wikileaks had released documents (the Embassy cables) revealing collusion between Muslim governments and the US. As far as discussing political events affecting Muslims, only two of these *khutbas* tried explicitly link the teachings of Islam to larger political events.

One such *khutba* (5/21/10) highlighted the *shari'a* or Islamic law with respect to war crimes and the binding nature of legal contracts in Islam, and the speaker concluded that writing to one’s elected officials in Congress or the Senate would prove most effective for the Muslim

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<sup>23</sup> Here the distinction needs noting between the two contextual meanings of the word “prayer.” *Du'a*, or supplication synonymously known as praying to God, entails the worshipper placing two hands together, inner sides touching each other, palms open and pointing towards the heavens, and the actual act of prayer, or the Islamic form of worship (or *ibada*) the Qu’ran refers to as *salat*, which comprises of the obligatory five daily prayers performed by Muslims as one of five fundamental pillars of Islam. Among English-speaking Muslims, “prayer” refers to both acts, and context makes distinct the two meanings.



community in their fight against persecution inside America. The speaker, a Jewish-American convert to Islam of Russian ancestry (he disclosed this during his sermon), detailed how the *shari'a* does not promote violence. "According to *shari'a*, Islamic law, you cannot kill soldiers, if they are not on the battle field. If they're in their barracks, if they're in a restaurant, you cannot kill them." Citing several Muslim scholars, the speaker adamantly condemned the killing of women and children in Afghanistan and Pakistan by American bombings as "collateral damage," saying "Islamic law does not allow collateral damage." He also condemned the attack in 2000 on USS Cole in Aden, Yemen ("Suicide attack kills American sailors," 2000), as illegal, because the Yemeni government had made a contract with the US military: "Muslim governments are allowed to make treaties with non-Muslims. These alliances happened all the time, and Muslims have to obey them." This led him to conclude that violence against any government is illegal.

Not acting violently towards one's government, not rebelling against one's government, it's not just a legal tenet in Islam. It's actually a theological tenet...this is actually a theological belief. It's part of being a Sunni Muslim.

The speaker's emphasis that both Western governments and Muslims abide by the *shari'a* delivered the message that Muslims in America not engage in any militant or "extremist" behavior saying, "those of you who became citizens of this country, you swore an oath to respect the laws of this land." Somewhat adding to the fear of persecution among the audience, he delivered the following emphatic words:

There are people in this country [says with great emphasis] who do not want Muslims here, and they will not stop until everybody, every Muslim is either in prison, or is afraid of their lives and leaves the country. There are some people in this country who want that. Have no doubt about it. We need to be wary and watchful.

He ended the *khutba* by citing various Sunni scholars of *hadith*,<sup>24</sup> whose views forbid Muslims to rebel and rise up against their rulers, and that the only way for Muslims to protect and exercise their rights in America is to "write to your congressman." However, the uprisings during the Arab Spring in many Arab countries certainly did not heed any of the Sunni religious opinions, which the speaker expressed by advising against the overthrow of their rulers, exposing a great difference of opinion on what he categorically wanted the audience to accept as fact. The speaker said nothing to highlight the varying opinions on the referenced body of *hadith* within the Sunni Islamic tradition. Such silence points to an interpretation of Islam intended to suppress political agitation, fearing "radicalization" in the community.

Another *khutba* (1/28/2011) that addressed issues of political significance focused entirely on the events in Egypt and Tunisia that launched the Arab Spring. The speaker, American-born and raised, discussed the place social justice and social change occupy in Islam, quoting a *hadith* of the Prophet: "And one who is not concerned about the affairs of the Muslims is not from amongst them." Arguing how Muslims need to be concerned about the suffering of others regardless of their "skin color, or ethnic color, or nationality, or the language they speak, or how rich they are, or how poor they are," the speaker detailed the importance of social justice, and in that context began discussing the events of the Arab Spring:

You are well aware of what happened in Tunisia in a month, or the past few weeks. There is [sic] a lot of demonstrations repeated. There's an uprising. And what's going on today in Egypt? If you don't know, the demonstrations have taken up [sic] in the streets. And these people [are] not necessarily just demanding that this tyrant leaves, and someone

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<sup>24</sup> The word and the body of *hadith*, discussed in Chapter 6, refers to the collected sayings of the Prophet.

else gets installed. They want something that's part of our core-faith, and that is social justice.

The speaker in great length impressed upon his congregation the duty Muslims must fulfill to speak up for social justice also "in our own backyard," and justice not only for humans but for animals as well. He further impressed upon the audience importance of change, or "*al taghir al afdal*, change for the better," and the obligation requiring Muslims in "speaking the truth in front of a tyrant or an oppressive regime." After making a passionate plea for Muslims to pursue social justice and change, he exhorted the community to support social justice by donating generously to finance and fund the construction of an Islamic architectural façade for the center's building, costing some \$500,000.

The Friday *khutbas*, mostly delivered by individuals who seemed to have had some level of formal training in the study of Sunni Islam, deliver largely a spiritual message for their attendees. The observed *khutbas* lack any sort of message or a proposal that would enable the community to take advantage of the freedoms in this country affording some level of meaningful political engagement and organizing. None of the *khutbas* encouraged the audience to study the Qur'an, the life of the Prophet in order to deal with their persecution, or how to confront racism and discrimination targeting Muslims in a collective and organized manner. The speakers' opinions and views of Islam, as well as their reaction to the larger world events affecting Muslims, seemed to point the community towards either confusion and complacency, or contribution of money to the Islamic center itself. Effectively, I discussed the topics of *khutbas* in some length with the president of the Islamic center during my interview with him.

### **5.3 The President and the School Board**

The interview with the president of the Islamic center, similar to other interviews, touched upon themes of understanding Islam, Muslims in America, racism, and the American political and economic institutions. Questions with all interviewee's took account of their background, if their child attended the Islamic school, and the interviewee's involvement in the community. Most interviews shared similar themes and questions to a large extent, and the analysis of the interviews in this chapter, except interviews with the teachers and principal, have been aggregated into larger themes. The president of the Islamic center migrated to the US to attend college, studying engineering in undergraduate and graduate schools, and joined Muslim student organizations while in college. He eventually arrived in the Silicon Valley to work in the technology sector as an engineer. I posed a set of questions related to the extent to which the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet offered insight on today's American society. In response, he mostly alluded to the Prophet's life and his last sermon, which according to the president covered topics such as "how to treat women, how money should be divided in the world, how to treat the environment, and how to treat, like you know, slavery." He explained further how the idea of slavery applied even today:

And, you know, slavery is not only things like slavery, you know, they used to have slaves in the past; it's in all forms of shapes of life. I mean you could be at work and have your old boss enslaving you by just simply treating you badly, and just ordering you left and right.

His response showed some experience having lived and worked inside America where workers sometimes face exploitation and abuse at the hands of their superiors. Commenting on the relevance of the Qur'an, the president limited his discussion to the charitable aspect of helping the poor in Islam through the paying of *zakat*: "if all Muslims, imagine, give 2.5% yearly charity,

of course, those who are able to, I don't think you'll find any poor people in the world." I pressed on with other questions, asking him about the American economic and political system. His response showed a limited understanding of American history, or institutions, and that America has worked economically well for the most part, except "like the bubble in 2000, the bubble that was even worse in 2008, and how the system collapsed." He commented vaguely on the political system as having worked for some people and not for others: "you know, every [one] who came to the country, and how things, how people opposed them, and how the system opposed them; the way the blacks were treated, and so on." I began posing more direct questions in order to focus on the specific aspects of the economic system, asking about his understanding of capitalism and if it was at odds with the teachings of Islam:

My understanding of capitalism is, is basically, you know, like, the way the system runs, basically. I mean, when you think capitalism, everything is running, and people view things just, basically, by a lot of times you have money, you can do things. You know, and approach of capitalism is basically you have the rich, you can say pockets of people running the affairs of the country, and these are, it could be, like, founding men in some major corporations that, you know, runs the system, and they have the, the ultimate control basically over, you know, others they have in their sight."

He did express somewhat accurately, albeit nervously, one aspect of capitalism as embodying the marriage between money and power that "runs the system." However, as far as capitalism and Islam were concerned, he tried to compare the Islamic *shura* system with democracy and concluded, "so I think it would be very, very slight difference between the two, between capitalism and the way, the, the Islamic system runs." It remained unclear what he meant exactly by "Islamic system." He likened the Islamic *shura* system to democracy, and felt that only negligible differences between Islam and capitalism existed, which implicitly resolved any contradictions between the two.

Finally, the interview turned to the Friday *khutbas*. According to the president, a *khutba* committee determines the topics. Anyone in the community can submit topics to the committee by e-mail, or through an online request form s/he would like a future Friday *khutba* to address. And perhaps this represented the overall ideological tendencies of the community as to why the *khutbas* did not address certain topics. When asked why most Friday *khutba* topics didn't cover political problems affecting Muslims here and overseas, the president replied that their status as a religious organization precluded this: "The reason we don't, because we are a religious non-profit organization, and there are other orgs [sic] that can address those issues, like CAIR, who specialize in that field. When it comes to politics, it's an area we do not cover. Because of the 503 status, we follow the law of the land." The fact that certain American churches sharing the same non-profit status as the Islamic center had made racist political statements against Islam in 2010 seemed to contradict this (Park, 2010). After a series of questions covering the Gaza siege, the Israeli assault of the Mavi Marmara, the boat bound for Gaza to break the siege in the summer of 2010 (Macintyre, 2010), resulting in 11 civilian deaths, as well as racism, racial and social injustice in America, which had also targeted Islam and Muslims, the president insisted that such topics could not be covered because of the center's non-profit status, and other Muslim political organizations were charged with discussing such topics in the Muslim community. The president's comments seemed to show further how the Islamic center, and possibly the community, preferred to stay clear of politically charged issues.

#### 5.4 *The School Board*

The interviews with the board members touched on themes including the extent to which the board has ongoing direct contact with the needs of the teachers and students; changes in mission or philosophy of the school being considered; student readiness to deal with racism post-9/11; the sectarian Shi'a/Sunni division and learning about Shi'a Islam; Islamic culture, Sufism, and Islamic poetry in the curriculum; the relevance of the Qur'an and the Prophet's life (*sunna*) inside America; and the understanding of capitalism and democracy with respect to Islam. I interviewed five board members out of a total number of seven that comprise the school board. All the interviewed male board members, except for one female pharmacologist, work in the Silicon Valley in the area of finance or engineering. All have at least one child attending the Islamic school, and took interest in serving on the board to contribute to the school's success. Most interviews lasted less than an hour, but the interview with the board chair lasted nearly 90 minutes.

Since interest in their child's education served as the primary motivation for their presence on the board, I began the interview asking them about the extent of the board's involvement in understanding the needs of the school and students. None had any direct, regular contact with the students or the teachers as board members. Instead, the board learns about the needs of the school through the principal during its biweekly meetings. The school itself holds monthly meetings with the parents, and the board learns about parental feedback through the principal. The board does hold two open sessions every school year where teachers and parents give feedback in an "open forum," according to the board chair. Most board members stated that they, however, did have informal contact with other parents and teachers through parent-teacher meetings, and during community gatherings held at the Islamic center. As one board member stated, because "it's a tightly-knit community," board members, parents, teachers often run into each other where discussions about the school and students inevitably take place. However, other than their own child or children attending the school, the board has no direct contact with the students. The board chair provided the most thorough answer when asked how the board learns about the needs of the school, the teachers, and the students. He explained that at the end of each school year, a survey is carried out soliciting feedback from parents, teachers, and staff about the school. The main source of information that determines the needs and direction of the school is the WASC action plan: "It's been our common framework and blueprint that we work against to move the school forward." The WASC accreditation process identifies needs of all stakeholders (parents, teachers, staff), and at the time of this research, WASC had made two recommendations that the board made a priority: increase teacher salaries by a third to match those in the Santa Clara county public schools, and expand the size of the school to accommodate some 100 waited-listed students. This led to the question of school's source of funding.

The school holds two fundraisers each year, raising anywhere from \$75K to over \$100K per fundraiser. The school had raised some \$110,000 for capital improvements in the past year. The second fundraiser takes place during Ramadan, and serves to provide financial aid for those unable to afford the annual school fees (about 15% of the students). The school receives consistent funding at its fundraisers from longstanding donors interested in offering Islamic education, especially founding members of the school, along with parents whose children graduated from the school, and the teachers themselves. As the chair noted, "we get a lot of donations from teachers and the staff...amazing [that] they're already getting paid in a suboptimal way." These questions began revealing one clear contradiction: the families funding and sending their children to the Islamic school do so because of their interest in Islamic

education. Yet, WASC accreditation sets an entirely different set of priorities and goals that don't have anything to do with the teaching, content, curriculum, or learning of Islam. Given the distressing environment for Muslims in the US post-9/11, the ensuing questions sought to understand what and how the school had planned on teaching Islam, and to prepare students as Muslim Americans beyond the Islamic school.

These questions asked board members about the mission and vision of the school, student needs, and racism. The questions attempted to gauge an understanding of the reaction to the impending post-9/11 crisis accelerated by the Arab "Spring," and the regime change to come in some of the countries at the hands of the American government. These questions sought to grasp some insight on how this specific Islamic school planned on responding to the crisis. The board members varied in their input about what exactly the school's mission and vision ought to be. Replies ranged from making students contributing members of American society; ensuring students learn to be "good persons;" expand the school to high school level; more focus on learning Qur'an and Arabic; better and expanded school facilities, making the school affordable to more families, while providing "excellent secular education and Islamic environment;" and tracking success of the Islamic and Qur'anic studies classes. The board chair observed that, although, standardized testing tracked students "on the normal subjects, you know, English, math, and science," no such testing existed for the Islamic curriculum: "So we'd like to find areas to quantify and track just that." Classifying the California Common Core State Standard courses as "normal" further highlighted the tension and disconnect between Islam and secular academic subjects, while finding a way to "track and quantify" Islamic learning, spiritual development, and readiness to face American society as its contributing members, seems to further make Islamic education a captive of the American public school model. Given the emphasis on "measurable achievement," I asked the board members how the school prepared students to cope with a post-9/11 America. The answers all shared a common theme, which sought to make sure students didn't engage in discrimination, prejudice, bullying, and practiced tolerance towards people of other faiths. The visits to Christian, Catholic, and Jewish schools, as well as receiving students from these schools, according to the board members, showcased how the students learned to "project a good image," and "integration with overall society." One board member cited the successful entry of all graduates from the school to four-year colleges and UC schools as an example of student success in surviving and thriving in the US post 9/11. Another member felt that a separate course should be offered focusing just on American history, so "they'll know what the American values are," helping students deal effectively with American society.

The next question directly asked how the school prepared students to deal with racism, not as perpetrators but as potential victims, and if the school curriculum provided this. Some board members felt the school prepared the students to deal with racism and discrimination, as Islamic teachings and American history offered them some insight on the topic. One cited the example of his two children who had already graduated from the school, saying "I think they cope very well with their [new] surroundings." While all expressed learning about racism should be part of the curriculum, no one really knew how or if students actually learned to deal with racism. The response from the chair consisted of dealing with racism in a "proactive" manner. This involved ensuring students worked hard, and through achieving success, affect the perception of people around them. He emphasized individual responsibility as the key to proactively countering racism through material success and achievement. The discussion transitioned to themes of Islam the school should or wants to emphasize to help students in the

current political climate. Generally, the board felt that Islamic history and Prophet's life should serve as a basis for "character development," and this was something being done as part of the Living Islam program that the Islamic studies class implemented, aiming to help students "live" Islam in their daily lives and actions. Moreover, instill in students the values of humility, honesty, striving for excellence; to live "harmoniously and coexist in a pluralistic society," as exemplified by the Prophet's life; and feel proud to be a Muslim through a strong understanding of the religion and its rules.

Given that the school and community make much effort in maintaining interfaith dialogue and interaction with communities of other faiths, the interviews turned towards how the school and the Islamic center work with religious differences, embracing theological diversity within the Muslim community itself. Questions asking the board's feelings about the Shi'a-Sunni divide and teaching Shi'a Islam in the school elicited a general response: the community and the school are predominantly Sunni, but Shi'a teachings could be offered. One board member expressed a general tendency, saying, "our overall Islamic curriculum should be Sunni. Our students should know that there are differences, and people have differences in how they practice;" that students can learn about Shi'a/Sunni differences as part of comparative religion, offered in the social studies class. Another felt he'd like to see the school perhaps cover and teach the historical origins of the two traditions, and teach "nuances or differences from different Shi'a traditions." More focus on Sunni Islam, because majority of students are Sunni, I was told. One respondent felt the students too young to worry about sectarian differences: "I don't want kids at this age to look at their peers and say he's a Sunni, he's a Shi'a." As long as one has taken the "*shahada*,"<sup>25</sup> you pray five times a day, you fast, you read the Qur'an," differences don't matter, and that the Islamic studies syllabus is between the two traditions. I reminded the interviewee that the textbook for the Islamic studies course only covers Islam from the Sunni tradition and is not "neutral." He continued to emphasize that differences ought to remain invisible, for the reason alone that 90% of the students belong to Sunni families. I shared with all of them that the community's efforts at interfaith dialogue outdid any effort at intra-faith dialogue; that given the persecution of the Muslim community, it needed to overcome differences within the community in order to deal effectively with its persecution. Only the chair, when later discussing the relevance of the Qur'an and life of the Prophet for Muslims in America, gave a detailed response. He explained how sectarian differences existed among also the Christian communities, and exist predominantly among Muslim immigrants and not the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation in the community. He opined further how overcoming the sectarian divide will take time, over many generations, for the Muslims to "lose cultural baggage" and see themselves as only Muslims, not belonging to any specific culture or Islamic tradition. His long, detailed response exhuded an underlying assumption: while diversity among faiths had to be respected, only assimilation into American society can help the diverse Muslim communities overcome their cultural and sectarian divide. This somewhat made the view towards offering Islamic culture as part of the Islamic curriculum predictable.

The interviews moved towards exploring teaching not only Islam but also Islamic culture (Sufism, poetry), and insights the Qur'an and Prophet's life offer Muslims living in the US. The idea of teaching Islamic culture, as represented by Islamic mysticism and poetry, elicited a tepid response of interest. None had either considered teaching the cultural aspect of Islam, or with the exception of one member, felt that it could be accommodated in the curriculum. The reasons cited pointed to lack of time that already afforded limited exposure to the religious teachings of

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<sup>25</sup> *Shahada* refers to bearing witness that there's but one God and Muhammad is His Messenger.

Islam, and students lacking the maturity to learn about these topics. The extent of the interest consisted of just one member saying “I wouldn’t mind” if the children learned about poetry and Sufism, while the rest left it up to the parents to request the school to teach these topics, or teach it at home themselves. Perhaps an introduction to mysticism and poetry through the existing curriculum, as another member put it. In melding cultural and theological Islam, my questions moved to, then, exploring what relevance and meaning the Quran and the life of the Prophet (or the *sunna*) held for Muslims in America. Every reply touched on how these two sources of Islam (Qur’an and the *sunna*) “teach us to be tolerant,” and how to live “harmoniously” in a multi-faith society, or “how to behave” as minorities in America. Muslims existed as minorities during the Prophet’s times, “so it’s a 100 percent match,” according to one board member.

The final questions asked about their understanding of capitalism, and the American political system with respect to Islam. The questions about what capitalism is and how it may contradict teachings of Islam created a noticeable variation in the response among the three immigrant members, versus the two second-generation members. The immigrant members characterized capitalism as a “system for the rich...mostly for exploiting the poor;” a system that allowed people to make as much money as possible regardless of how it affects others; its defining characteristic as the “free-market economy” had problems with Islam in the use of *riba* (interest) in making loans. All three pointed out some contradiction between capitalism and Islam that deserved some attention. However, the people who run the system must take the blame, and not capitalism. Of the two second-generation board members, one abstained from any comment and admitted, “I don’t know anything,” while the other member, the chair, claimed certain aspects of capitalism “aligned with Islamic principles.” He propounded at length how capitalism represents the idea of “free market enterprise” that operates without any barriers. However, capitalism in America didn’t allow for monopolies, did not allow people to be overcharged and cheated, unlike in a “pure capitalist society.” That Islam and the *shari’a* called for a similar balance found in American capitalism: “the way the country operates socio-politically and economically is a lot closer to, aligned to Islamic principles than many think.” All board members felt that students should study and understand both capitalism and American democracy, and the extent to which these are consistent or at odds with Islam. This moved the conversations to understanding the views and opinions the board members held about the American political system. Everyone saw the American political system as the best in the world. Immigrant members of the board compared it to the system of their home countries, and felt things politically were a lot better for people in general in the US. In spite of the way Mosques across the country had been subjected to surveillance (Markon, 2010), the presidential order by President Obama making it legal to assassinate (Muslim) Americans overseas, or the widely known torture of mostly innocent Muslim prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, everyone felt that the judicial system and the Constitution still continued to fully serve the citizens of the country. No one felt that Muslim Americans suffered politically, racially enough to warrant a critique of the political system. Responses included such statements as “I don’t think we’re really deprived of those rights; it’s the envy of the world; very democratic internally to its own people.” The strongest words of support came from the chair himself: “I think overall the political and economic system is by far one of the most, you know, Islamic-friendly, you know, philosophically aligned with kind of Islamic principals that exist...overall, I think, very happy and pleased with the system.”

The interviews with the president of the center, and with the school board provide some understanding of views of Islam and America that shape ideas of being a Muslim in the US. In

spite of the persecution Muslims face, positive attitudes towards America “as the land of opportunity” serve to undermine any feelings of resentment. There exists an organizational distance in the learning needs of the students facing possible racism in public schools and beyond, where the school board’s vision of the school largely focuses on academic achievement. The board wanting to “quantify and track” the Islamic curriculum, similar to standardized testing of the academic subjects, further makes obvious the efforts to align Islamic education with the public school model based on state standards in order to achieve “academic excellence.” Even though founding members of the school and other consistent donors, who continue to financially invest in the school, would like to see a robust understanding and teaching of Islam, the board thinks of the school as a private science academy where Muslim students receive an education designed for professional achievement. Seeing student achievement and success as a bulwark against racism, discrimination, and persecution inside post 9/11 America, further paints a picture of an Islamic school as a place where Muslim immigrant families bring their children to learn Islam in order “to project a good image” and “integration with overall society.” The school embraces the hegemonic public curriculum that serves America’s role as the leading capitalist state through the promotion of academic excellence and achievement, and makes Islam a willing partner in achieving this goal. The complete absence of intra-faith outreach efforts, and priority on interfaith dialogue further show the community’s desire for acceptance and assimilation. None on the school board see the offering of Shi’a teachings in a predominantly Sunni school as one possible way to have students engage in intra-faith dialogue, providing future Muslim generations in America the possibility to overcome the sectarian divide within the Muslim community. Instead, the board chair hopes assimilation as Americans will erase the sectarian divide and diversity among Muslims. Efforts to reach out to other faith groups, emphasis on science and math, WASC accreditation, standardized testing, Common Core State Standards, the learning of American culture and history, the teaching of Islam with great emphasis on making students tolerant of others, to live “harmoniously” with the society and its members, and “secular education with an Islamic environment,” all point to an attempt towards assimilation into an American identity mediated and sanctioned through the practice and understanding of a particular interpretation of Islam.

### **5.5 *The School Principal and Teachers***

The principal, an immigrant from N. Africa, dresses according to the modest Islamic dress code, like all female staff, with her hair and neck covered in a scarf, or a hijab. She speaks in a polite and humble manner. We begin the conversation about her professional background and the composition of the staff of the school. She holds a bachelor’s degree in computer science, and later acquired a teaching credential to teach math, going on to a master’s in education. She began working as a teacher for the Islamic school in 1994, mainly because her three children, one after another, had entered since kindergarten, graduating later to go to high school. A number of years thereafter, she took on the position of vice principal in 1998, and nine years later became the principal. She explains that the gender composition of students is fairly even, but women comprise majority of teachers and staff, with only 3 male teachers. I pose several questions, and ask her about the advantages and disadvantages of using the California public school model and curriculum for the Islamic school. The main advantage lies in either admitting students who had previously attended a California public school, or because a student’s family had to leave the Islamic school to attend a California public school in another county. Using the California public model ensures a smooth transition for students, entering or



leaving the school, without falling behind in the course work and testing requirements. Speaking highly of the public school standards, she says, “California is known to have one of the best standards in the country...so we are following a good set of standards.” The interview moved towards exploring how the school helps students face racism.

Replying to the question as to how the school prepares students to face American society in an age of ubiquitous Islamophobia, she offers a number of ways the school undertook this challenge. Most teachers at the “school grew up in America,” and are familiar with American education; all the teachers want to work with Muslim students, and help students understand this society. “We are making sure we are in connection with the society around us,” which the school achieves by using books on Islam specifically written for American students, and the textbooks used for the secular curriculum come from the public schools. “We don’t want to be isolating our students. So this is something very deliberate we’re doing.” When asked how the school prepared students to deal with racism, she points out that Muslims living in the Bay Area needn’t worry about facing racism and discrimination, because it “is [a] pretty diverse, educated community.” I inquire if learning to deal with racism and discrimination ought to be part of the curriculum; she feels ambivalent and says, “I am not sure, not at this time.” It didn’t seem like a “big problem” to her at the moment, and students didn’t have to be prepared, but that might change, she says. Instead, the school focuses on making sure students have confidence about themselves, about who they are, their religion and identity as more of a priority: “I don’t know that discrimination, specifically, they’ll be a target of.”

At this point during the interview, I discuss at length with her how it appears, based on my observations, the school wants to instill in the students a strong sense of nationhood, of being an American, a requirement somehow for every Muslim in America to aspire to. This elicits a long response from the principal. She points to how a “majority of our families are immigrant” who instill in their children a cultural sense of belonging to another country, because they feel, “I am from, you know, overseas, and I am a visitor here.” This somehow created a conflict for the school: “So we are trying, on the other hand, to make them feel you are American, too.” Emphasizing the importance of feeling American, she quotes the Qur’an where the prophets address the people as saying “oh my people,” explaining that prophets came to guide their own people, not foreigners. Similarly, if Muslim children hope to contribute, “they need to feel these are my people, and I need to do good in my community, my society, my country.” She further expresses how past generations didn’t focus on making students feel part of American society, implying that the school must help them “understand the balance” where they can have “allegiance” to Islam and America. For her, this “balance” would ensure students feel part of the Muslim world and America, and one didn’t preclude the other. Concluding this point, she alludes to my previous question on the advantages of using the California public school model; that it keeps students from becoming “isolated” as American Muslims by “reading the, the literature that other kids are reading; students are learning about, you know, the holidays, and all these things.” So, the public school model and curriculum not only ensured “a good set of standards,” but also cultural knowledge necessary for feeling/becoming American.

We begin discussing learning Islam. Students learn to read and memorize verses of the Qur’an in Arabic in 1<sup>st</sup> grade, and teachers help them understand the general meaning of the text. She speaks of the challenge of teaching religious text meant for adults, “because the Qur’an is revealed to adults and not children, and the topics are not for children.” Up until 6<sup>th</sup> grade, teachers and the books focus on simple themes of the Qur’an, such as “love of Allah, of the Prophet, kindness, morals.” I ask what themes of the Qur’an and Prophet’s life do students in

upper grades learn? Past 6<sup>th</sup> grade, students learn about the Prophet's life, serving the community, and having compassion for all of humanity; the importance of having connection with Allah, to be God-conscious; compassion for the purpose of being understanding, and an open mind towards differences and diversity among people. Responding to what important issues the Qur'an and Prophet's life offer Muslims in America today, she continues shaping the discussion around tolerance and diversity as being the centerpiece of Islam. Qur'an and the Prophet teach us about diversity of culture and dealing with people of other faiths; this is important, she says, "because we are a minority among people of other faiths." Since tolerance and diversity occupy a central place in the community's and school's philosophy, I inquire about the way this diversity embraces the differences found in Shi'a and Sunni schools of thought inside the Muslim community, and what programs the school offers to facilitate this intra-faith dialogue. The school caters to the dominant body of Sunni students, though "a lot of Shi'a students" attend the school. The school encourages students to pray the way their families pray. Teachers respect the differences among students as far as levels of practice, and *madhab* (school of thought) in order to create an environment of acceptance. "We want everyone to feel comfortable, but it's clear what we teach, you know," concludes the principal, underscoring that Sunni Islam serves as the basis for the school. We briefly touch on the issue of teaching Islamic poetry and Sufism. The principal repeats the board's position that students haven't reached the age where they can understand and appreciate learning Sufism or Islamic literature.

Our conversation turns more intense as we discuss the separation in the Islamic and secular curriculum of the school, and how the school handles topics of greed and selfishness with respect to Islam. I observe that the school's curriculum either offers courses that entirely deal with Islam, or with secular subjects, and if the school planned to unify all courses under an Islamic theme. The principal admits, indeed, the two need not be mutually exclusive, and the school would like to "integrate Islam" with the secular courses. She gives an example, saying that when 7<sup>th</sup> grade classes discuss evolution, a parent will volunteer and give a talk from an Islamic perspective. However, she doesn't believe in "totally integrating" the curriculum, but only when "appropriate." She further praises the California school model, saying how it prevents the school from becoming "an island," for "that was never our aim with our school; that our students become isolated. They have to learn who Shakespeare is. They have to learn, you know, Darwin, because they live in this society." She emphasizes that her position represents the school's philosophy since its founding, and that "this is more important than just giving them Islamic literature, and Islamic background." I begin asking how, with respect to the teachings of Islam and the Qur'an, the school addresses issues of greed, materialism, and selfishness so prevalent in this society. She emphasizes the values of "compassion, service" where the school encourages students to participate in activities to help local nonprofits, by "raising money for the less fortunate, serving your community." The representative of an organization next door met and spoke to the students about their work, and students launched a clothes drive, as part of their many service learning projects, to contribute to the organization's work. She concurs and says, "materialism in this society is very strong. We can teach these things to our kids, but they are part of this society." I highlight the capitalist and Eurocentric undercurrents of the California public school model. This leads to a lengthy discussion on education in America, driven by standardized testing, the competition to win admission into a highly rated university or college, and how the combined effect programs students to think of education mainly in terms of material success, money, and individual achievement. Reflecting on what she said earlier, I tell the principal while the school doesn't see itself as an island cut off from rest of American society, it

does serve as a spiritual space, an island of sorts, offering virtues of patience and compassion, surrounded by a sea of individualism, selfishness, greed, and money à la Silicon Valley. Thus, I ask how the school intervenes in the California school model to provide different motivations for learning, rather than test scores and upward social mobility? The principal responds that the school takes a break to perform their daily prayers with the adjoining Islamic center, as well as the larger Friday afternoon prayer; the school values instilling in students a strong spiritual connection with God, to “being a good person,” and the school goes above and beyond to make this happen, she says:

One-third, imagine, one-third of their day is about Islamic studies, which is a lot. Sometimes I feel we ask too much of the students. One-third is about this, to make it [Islam] strong part of their identity. That, you know, this is my moral compass. You know, Islam is my compass.

She further points to students learning Islam so that it serves as a guide, “where it helps students make decisions in choices: “I make choices where I take care of people who are in need, and after that if I want to go buy that fancy thing, and I can afford it, then yeah, Allah subahana watallah allows us.”

Lastly, I ask about her understanding and opinion about capitalism, American democracy, and what students learn about the political and economic systems. She appreciates the political system, as it teaches much about dialogue and differences among people. However, the Islamic heritage serves as a “check system” for her in accepting or rejecting things in the political and economic systems. Even though “democracy is the will of the people, basically,” and mirrors somewhat the Islamic *shura* system, which really provides the final criteria for right and wrong, since “certain things Allah subahana watallah decided for us for a reason,” she says. She views capitalism similarly, describing it as having advantages and disadvantages, where it, “allows, you know, creativity, and, and competition, but at the same time could be, could forget people who are in [a] difficult situation.” Again, she emphasizes how Islam serves as a “guide” to whether it permits certain things in capitalism, while forbidding others. She gives a brief response to how and what students learn about capitalism and democracy. Student learning about the economic and political system consists of students practicing democracy through active participation in the school’s student council. The student council regularly proposes and provides feedback to the school. The school solicits feedback from staff and parents, “so, [we] practice democracy from this point of view.”

The principal provides many arguments for using the California public school model and textbooks for the Islamic school. The main reason behind this “very deliberate” approach stems from ensuring student inclusion in American society through acculturation, which also represents the school’s philosophy. Racism and discrimination, in her mind, does not pose a problem for students or the school. Instead of targeting the California public school curriculum for modification to serve the needs of Muslim students at an Islamic school, the school attempts to “integrate Islam” with the secular curriculum so as to facilitate student transition away from their parents’ culture and heritage into American society as Americans. Teachings of Islam and the Prophet provide material mainly for teaching “tolerance” and respect for “diversity” in America. Teaching Shakespeare and Darwin, as the principal said earlier, ensure the school does not turn into “an island,” which in her own words is “more important” than learning Sufism, or literature from the Islamic world. For her, students taking a break to make the afternoon prayers in the adjoining Islamic center serves as a sufficient intervention into the California school model as far as bridging the gap between academic and Islamic curriculum. The respect for diversity mainly

concerns itself with non-Muslim Americans, which warrants the existing configuration of the school curriculum, yet diversity found in the teachings of Islam and the Muslim community that may serve to overcome the Shi'a/Sunni rift, for instance, holds low priority. The school fails to conceive of the Qur'an, the Prophet's life, or Islamic mysticism as a way to instill in young Muslims a sense of community responsibility, helping them develop their potential role as leaders of a persecuted community, which they must represent and defend. This form of intervention, for example, in the public school model contrasts sharply with using Islam only to ensure students mature into law-abiding, tolerant American citizens.

### *5.51 The School Teachers*

Questions posed to teachers touched on themes dealing with pedagogy, curriculum, racism, American democracy, and capitalism. The interviews with the social studies, language arts, and Islamic studies teachers shared these topics and themes. The interview with the Qur'anic studies teacher, however, overlapped slightly with the interview of the Islamic studies teacher. Unlike the analysis of the interviews with the school board members presented in an earlier section that aggregated the interviews by themes, I present the content of the interviews with the school teachers here as individual conversations. The longest interview occurred with the social studies and Islamic studies teachers, lasting about 1.5 hours each. The fact that both teachers grew up in the US, as opposed to the teachers of the Qur'anic studies and language arts classes, who migrated to the US as adults, the former had more to say on issues of racism, education, and Islam in America, than the latter. All teachers shared a bit about their professional background, and how it brought them to teach at the Islamic school. I describe the interviews here more as conversations and discussions, since interview questions often served as a vehicle for establishing a substantial dialogue with the teachers.

### *5.52 Social Studies Teacher*

Before working at the Islamic school, the social studies teacher taught at a private art college for two years. After embracing Islam, she taught in a public elementary school for five years but decided to work with kids in an "Islamic environment." Our conversation first turned to her experience working at an Islamic school in contrast with the public elementary school; how she felt working in an environment that represented a diverse immigrant community; her experience with the level of inclusiveness she experienced as an American convert to Islam; and the feelings of immigrant teachers living in a post 9/11 America. She says that the students at the Islamic school remind her of American kids attending an elementary public school, "in terms of what they like to do, and how they talk, and how they play together." However, the Islamic school students take their studies seriously with the parents "dedicated [more] to their education than I found in public school." Preferring to work in an Islamic school, she explains how it gives her the opportunity to, "make constant comparisons between American history and Muslim history, and talk about having this whole foundation of shared beliefs." This allows her to "relate" to students as Americans and as Muslims. Furthermore, the shared identities make it possible and easy to highlight similarities in Islam and the ideals of the Founding Fathers of the country: "so, I can say things, like, they put this into the Declaration of Independence – that's a concept in Islam also," and "how the framers of the constitution had some similar moral values to the teachings of the Prophet (pbuh)." Sharing her experience working with Muslims from other parts of the world, she highlights the diversity of views and openness in the school. "Our school has a culture of mutual respect, and a culture of understanding," and people seem to

discuss openly their differing opinions on Islam and the *sunna*, she explains further. Overall, the teachers and staff feel comfortable as Muslims living in California, and believe they and their children have many “opportunities” and “advantages.” Parents want to protect their children from “things that maybe wrong with America,” but they accept the advantages with the disadvantages. Muslim staff and teachers at the school have shared their dismay at suicide bombings carried out by Muslims overseas, as not representing Islam, and “saddened by it, both for the victims, and also for the image of Islam that its portraying.” Since embracing Islam and wearing the headscarf, she has had encounters with non-Muslims Americans curious about her national origin and ethnic background. Such encounters have made her sympathetic towards Muslim immigrants who tolerate probing questions by Americans in greater frequency. “I think it’s frustrating to constantly have to justify yourself.” Effectively, she fears that students graduating and going on to public high schools will face similar problems. “I know a couple of kids who’ve been called names in public high schools.” She laughs and says, however, “it makes teaching about civil rights really easy in social studies.”

We begin examining her approach to teaching social studies, linking it to themes of relevance to Muslims and Islam. A long discussion develops. In her class, she emphasizes the history of “colonization, dehumanization” with respect to the Native Americans, “and look at how the current rhetoric is also dehumanizing Muslims.” She connects the history of racism and occupation in America with the occupation of Palestine, but she also highlights the presence of Muslims in America during the time of slavery by showing a film about the life of a captured slave named Abder Rahman Ibrahim Sori, a Muslim prince from West Africa. She uses these discussions on race and racism to counter the lack of understanding of African Americans and Latinos, which she believes serve to also help Muslim students understand the effects of Islamophobia on them. She observes that most students hail from families whose parents migrated here in the past two decades. Effectively, immigrant parents have little to no understanding of race relations and racism towards communities of color, accepting the racial and class biases found in American culture. Having little contact with non-Muslim communities of color, students unwittingly often engage in stereotyping these groups. Sharing an example, she tells me how, “as a negative comment, one boy said to another, ‘you cut your hair like a Mexican.’” She confronts students upon hearing such comments with, “you know, if you said that in certain circles, it would really be insulting.” When students engage in stereotyping or generalizations about other groups, she connects it to dehumanization of people, and especially of Muslims post 9/11, making students self-conscious about their own prejudices and stereotypes. “Usually when I hear something like that, I would say, would you want someone saying that about Muslims?” She explains how both the Islamic studies and language arts teachers make an effort to expose students to people of other faiths, and ethnicities. Nonetheless, as a result of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, students feel resentment against people of the Jewish faith, which the school counters by having students visit Jewish schools. Such visits offer opportunities for students to bridge the political divide, she says of one such visit: “Then, we shared lunch, and all the boys went off to play basketball. Girls were hanging out and talking.” She hopes such visits continue, since they help overcome the fear and anger some students feel.

In this context, she discusses her attempts to highlight the plight of Native and African Americans with respect to the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. How these founding principles of the nation excluded non-whites, and women, who all struggled to have the founding principles of “all men are created equal,” apply to them. She emphasizes and impresses upon her students the need to appreciate and use the Constitution to protect the rights of

Muslims, and she draws numerous parallels in her class between the Civil Rights movement, and the situation Muslims face as another persecuted minority inside America today. Students don't seem that concerned about racism, but when she discusses Declaration of Independence, students will raise issues about how Muslims, "guilty by association," end up at Guantanamo Bay prison. The students find it difficult to "believe that America could be responsible for those kinds of things... a country that's supposed to be based on these natural rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" she says in reference to Guantanamo. Such discussions make her appreciate how young students "have a clear sense of justice; you know, justice, they get." At the start of the school year, she began requiring students to keep a journal, and she offers them challenging questions to write about: "How have you seen people change the country using the Constitution? List 20 things that you love about America. List 20 things you'd like to change about America?" She says this assignment enables students to not just think about "negative stuff," but also to "be excited about being American." She shares some examples of student responses. Students wrote about the Native American experience during early American colonial history, and they noted how "these people were discriminated against and we don't want that to happen to us...so I think there might be some underlying fear there." Students have also written about American history and the Declaration of Independence with respect to knowing their rights. Commenting on the themes of student journals, she observes, "I am not sure how different it is from regular middle school kids, you know." I ask her what other fear her students have expressed. Students seem to worry more about just being accepted in high school, but "some of the girls are nervous about wearing hijab," she says.

I ask her how Islam could help students understand their rights in a non-Muslim country, and empower them also, like other persecuted groups, to have the rights and privileges of the American Constitution apply to them, and struggle against constitutional exclusion expressed in such legislation as the Patriot Act. She admits to not having considered using Islam in this way, and says, "that's a fantastic question!" She has often discussed the situation facing Muslims post 9/11 with her students, and how everyone agrees that it pales in comparison to what the Native Americans and African slaves experienced: "You know, compared to what the Native Americans went through, wholesale genocide, you know, and enslavement of a whole population brought here and ordered to be slaves. So, it's not that bad." She believes service learning offers students one such opportunity to serve the community, since that constitutes a major part of being Muslim; she cites one program headed by a Muslim organization working with prisoners that her students have been learning about as part of service learning:

For the sake of Allah, you're supposed to be doing community service anyway, so you're showing that Muslims are positive contributing members of society, so that could be one angle. If we had more time to look at the Civil Rights movement, and maybe make a comparison to what the *sahaba* (Prophet's companions) went through, that would be a nice comparison.

She asks me to repeat the question, and upon further reflection, she says students should "emotionally attach" themselves to the Prophet as a role model: "We have our example, history's most amazing sociable activist, the Prophet, *salallahu alei wa salam* (peace be upon him). You know, I mean, he was a guy who nobody believes [sic] him. He's trying to completely overhaul the culture, and you know just a couple of people believe him. What an amazing example!"

Our conversation digs further into examining what students learn about capitalism with respect to Islam. She talks of the curriculum in the coming trimester when students will learn about cultural and intellectual colonization, and the implications and damaging impact of

exporting American culture to other countries. Students will also look at manufacturing of pencils, erasers, sweaters employing cheap labor. They will trace a product's origin, and follow it through its many processes until it reaches the market: "I'll start by showing them that film, *History of Stuff*, which is basically showing how mainly America demands cheap products, and how that affects people around the world, and the environment." She explains she's had students knit a sweater to get a feel of time and labor involved in knitting just one sweater. "If it's something hand-knitted in India, imagine that you have to knit these sweaters constantly," a point she highlights in order to make students aware of the impact of mass production on people and the environment. "I was trying to get them to understand a lot of these products, priced really cheaply, are not representing the labor, and people are not getting paid their fair wage." Though she discussed capitalist production and labor exploitation in responding to my question, Islam did not appear in talking about these topics.

We turn to the textbook used in her social studies class, and what if any option she had in choosing it. She picked the publisher that offered the social studies textbooks for both 7<sup>th</sup> and eighth grade classes, since "I thought continuity is good," she explains. However, she "feels the need for a lot of supplementation," because the textbook doesn't present sufficient information about the "Native American experience, nothing about Muslims in America whatsoever," she says, and "there's a little blurb about civil rights." She herself reads up on early American history, and speaks enthusiastically of what she's learned. "Recently I've been discovering how Islam was part of the debates in writing the Constitution, the Constitutional Convention, which is fascinating." The framers of the constitution thought of the Prophet, "as one of the most important thinkers in time, and that we should consider his perspective in developing the constitution," she tells me jubilantly. She also says Washington felt positively towards "Mohammadans" as workers, quoting him, "and if Mohammadans are good workers, you should hire them." She declares this points to the presence of Muslims during that time period, aside from the 4 million African Muslims out of 12 million Africans kidnapped and brought to America as slaves. Presenting this history of Muslims helps the students take interest in early American history. It also helps students "make the link to African American communities," showing "that there's a link between our histories." She believes this will help young Muslims overcome the ethnic divide within the community, and also overcome any stereotyping of African Americans among children of immigrant families. She talks further about the need for balance and different perspectives missing from the textbook. She shares an example of this imbalance with respect to Abraham Lincoln: "I think he was a good person... on one hand he had the Emancipation Proclamation, but there's no mention of his assassination of Native American chiefs whatsoever." She feels school textbooks need to discuss American history fully and from different perspectives, and students as "our future lawyers and politicians, and lobbyists," need to learn history from different perspectives. "The most important thing for me is to get across that there's always another perspective." Through these multi-perspectives, she hopes to enable students to think critically about American history.

Our conversation shifts to the school's philosophy and mission, social justice, Islam, and capitalism. I ask her what changes she'd like to see in the school's philosophy and the curriculum itself. This year the school launched a service-learning project that came out of the discussion between the teachers and the school board. Service learning aims to help students contribute to American society. She brings up the example of how the American people contributed to social reforms, and part of the class curriculum covers the post-Industrial Revolution social reforms, and "what people did then to help make [American] society a better

place, and help workers to get paid well, and what people are doing now.” She says, “your connection to Allah,” and how “being an American is about” community service: “community service is a really important aspect of American culture that I really appreciate.” We begin discussing how she integrates the teachings of Islam and the Prophet into some of these topics of equality, justice, and oppression. She thinks Friday *khutbas* often serve as a good topic of discussion during class, especially when *khutbas* cover themes dealing with overcoming differences in the community, or to help and feed the poor. Students also listen to invited speakers from Muslim organizations working to serve the community. One such organization run by Muslims works with the prison population, and a speaker came to talk about the work this organization does. She feels that such organizations and Muslims running them provide positive alternative role models for students, but still feels the school places “big emphasis on science and engineering.” Still, by exposing students to themes of social justice, she thinks, “that some people will come out, I hope, as artists or community activists.” We continue our discussion on capitalism. She teaches her students that, “as Muslims we should not be comfortable with any kind of discrimination or injustice.” Using documentary films, she highlights exploitation of labor, such as sweatshops in Honduras that manufacture clothing for colleges and universities bearing their logos. She speaks of the film on this topic about an American college student, the daughter of a well-known Bay Area political activist, who exposed the industry and organized students around this issue, pressuring her university to boycott these manufacturers. “I want them to see as Muslims, and as inhabitants of one of the richest countries in the world, you should be informed, and you should understand what you are consuming.”

As we reach the end of the interview, we revisit in greater detail the school’s overall mission and how the school board can better serve the needs of students and the community. She feels the school needs to be more a community school, rather than a college prep academy. Service learning projects provide a lot of benefit for the students and the community, by increasing “self-esteem...it increases communication, critical thinking, and I would really love to see, this would be my vision for the school,” she says.

So you’re accepting everyone from the community, you’re giving them what they need, and you’re contributing to the community in other ways. Because that’s great for the students, that’s great for the PR of the school, and that’s great for the PR of Islam. She further explains how people of other faiths, Christians and Jewish groups, have done “wonderful things for people all over the world.” She thinks Muslims ought to also contribute in a similar way, and if the school functioned as a community school, the students could also make such contributions in their adult lives. I ask her about the role the school board can play in giving the teachers and staff the freedom to make such changes possible. Since school board members have no background in teaching or education, “because they’re elected but on the basis of their participation in the community,” she says it would serve the school well for them to receive training on understanding the dynamics of running a school. “Being more informed would be really helpful, I think, about how a private school is run, and about the history of the school.” She exercises great freedom in choosing the curriculum for the social studies classes. However, she shares in detail the pressure the students and teachers face in achieving high test scores. “Somehow many of the teachers get the message that their test scores better be high, and maybe the pressure is coming from the parents, maybe it’s indirectly coming from the administration, but they feel pressured.” Parents seem anxious to have their child learn reading in kindergarten, she says, and shares a few examples of this pressure on the students. “I talked to a kid this morning in kindergarten, who doesn’t go to the park. I was giving him a test, because he had



been out sick for a couple of days, so the prompt was, ‘draw a picture of something you could with your friends at the park.’ And he said, ‘what do you mean’? And I said, so do you go to the park? And he said, ‘no.’” She expresses her frustration at the inability of parents to understand their child’s need beyond academic success. She says, “I talked to another kindergartner the other day...and, I said, what’s your favorite thing to do, and he said play some kind of [video] games, shooting games.” We conclude our long conversation with her thoughts on how parents seem only concerned with “straight A’s,” without any concern for their child’s social life, personality, and emotional needs.

The social studies instructor’s pedagogy at many levels aims to use Islam to help her students connect with the history of America, from colonial times to the post-Industrial period. She impresses upon the students injustices and oppression in America’s colonial history, the struggle of people of color to have the ideals of the country enshrined in the constitution apply to them, but also how the modern nation engages in unfair economic practices through capitalism and consumerism that exploits labor abroad. She brings in service learning, showcasing Muslims as activists who improve the image of Islam as role models for her students. She presents the Prophet as a “social activist” role model for the students as future activists who will take up the fight against racism and persecution of their own community. Nonetheless, a good part of her pedagogy attempts to transition students away from their own ethnic history and heritage into American history, culture, and society using epistemology that’s partly rooted in the class textbook, and her own supplementation of that history as an American. Seeing Immigrant parents as bringing their own prejudices and accepting the race relations inside the US serves as an impetus to have students learn the early history of Muslims as African slaves, and the black struggle to fight racism and discrimination. Linking of these histories through shared identity of a Muslim, while helps students establish solidarity with those having faced racism and persecution in America, it’s unintended effect weakens the influence of their parents’ culture and history that’s intertwined with Islam. With her encounters with students, she makes the second-generation students aware of the subtle racism found in their own language carried over from mainstream American culture, but doesn’t seem to make students aware of the class divide in American society, such as between upper middle class Silicon Valley Muslim families and people from other low-income communities in the area. She goes to great lengths to illustrate how the suffering of Native Americans and African slaves, “wholesale genocide” of the former and “enslavement” of the latter, makes what Muslims have suffered since 9/11 as “not that bad.” These second generation young Muslims inside America, having ethnic and cultural ties across the world through their parents, of course, would benefit greatly from understanding that the racist and genocidal treatment of the natives at the hands of the American government and policies still exists today in the form of slaughter of millions of people across the Muslim world since the war on terror began. The absence of this approach creates the usual tendencies of an inward-looking public school curriculum focused on all things American, rather than making connections and solidarity with people colonized inside America and around the world. Students could benefit not only from this transnational approach to understanding colonialism, racism, and genocide, but also grasp how their racialization as Muslims has occurred at the precise moment the US started its war on terror. This would lay bare the common historical thread in American history that ties all colonized and racialized communities together that America has waged war against since its genesis as a colonial capitalist nation-state. Not doing so only creates tension between immigrant Muslim parents and their American-born children, as well as tension

between an inward-looking American-centric public school curriculum and Islamic education, which should teach solidarity with all the people across the world.

### 5.53 *Language Arts Teacher*

A German immigrant trained as a physician who embraced Islam while working in the Middle East, she decided to teach at an Islamic school after moving to the Bay Area with her husband. At the time of the interview, she had taught language arts at the Islamic school for 6 years. Explaining her reasons for teaching at the school as, “I love kids. I love literature, reading and writing.” We briefly discussed her experience working in a school composed of teachers and staff from different ethnic, linguistic backgrounds, and if she felt excluded as an immigrant convert of Islam. She notes that teachers at the Islamic school predominantly emigrated from overseas, and teachers from similar cultural or ethnic backgrounds tend to maintain closer friendships with each other: “And the Arabs, probably, their closest friends are Arabs, too. And, my closest friend, for example is the social studies teacher.” Both her and the social studies teacher are Muslim converts of European ethnicity. However, she posits that school staff and teachers mix with each other quite comfortably and don’t exhibit any bias for people they like or dislike based on cultural or linguistic differences.

We discuss improvements she’d like to see in the language arts curriculum. She feels positively about the curriculum overall, but would like to see the class based more on literature and inquiry, connecting it to the school’s overall curriculum, rather than structured towards testing. Perhaps move away from letter grades, to an assessment that’s a narrative on what students should improve upon: “I don’t believe in grades, like letter grades, but I would prefer it would [sic] be more authentic assessment methods.” Narratives would enable students to know their weaknesses and strengths, and areas of improvement, making “it more open-ended and connect it to other subject areas,” she says. As far as the textbook for the class, she thinks it offers interesting literature, and profound stories that facilitate much discussion during class. I share my review of the textbook with her, which I had a chance to look at earlier. Though the stories in the textbook represent a diversity of ethnic and gender voices, none exist representing Muslims or Arabs in the US. I ask her how she deals with the fact that the textbook fails to provide any literary space to voices of Muslims in America and overseas. “I never thought about that. I just accepted the fact that, you know, we are covering the California content, standard curriculum, and we are just doing what is used in the public schools,” she says. However, “in our discussions we bring the Muslim element.” She acknowledges that the Muslim world has “amazing writers,” but had never considered including literary works by Muslim and Arab writers.

We dissect the class textbook further, and I ask her if she tends to not teach certain stories. Stories having to do with dating, girlfriend/boyfriend relations, or stories with photos showing female bodies, she usually will exclude: “So, whenever it’s really inappropriate Islamically, I don’t. I just skip.” I ask her if she had considered using stories or poetry from the Muslim world translated from Arabic or Persian to English. “I think we should still have literature that’s representative of the culture and the world we live here,” she replies. Reading literary works from the Muslim world “would be interesting, but it would take a lot of time, and that’s why I am not doing it, because we just don’t have the time,” she argues. Furthermore, class assessments and tests only involve stories from the class textbook, and bringing in new stories would create problems as far as testing and class activities. We converse at length, and I point out, given the demographic shift in the US especially in California, school textbooks will more

than likely move towards offering a diversity of voices and experiences not just from inside the country, but from around the globe. I also explain how the academic and Islamic subjects tend to be completely disconnected from each other, and bringing in Islamic literature could help the language arts classes overcome this disconnect, as well as bring in perspectives from around the world that represent the communities the students belong to. She concurs and speaks of the bias present in the textbook:

Yeah, it's true. It's [textbook] pretty biased for sure. I mean, they're very biased with the many, many texts, like Anne Frank, and many texts about how the Jewish people were treated, what they had to go through, their suffering, which I think is very important to talk about. They mention the Japanese internment camps; they should make a connection to the modern world, like, maybe historically, especially what happens now in Palestine, to look at that.

This leads our conversation to discussing the mission and philosophy of the school, taking into account her own class and needs of the students post-9/11.

She believes the school should move away from the “conservative approach to education, like students sitting, teachers teaching, standardized tests... focusing on having to follow rules.” This structured schooling restricts the potential of students as learners, who should “feel they are explorers, and scholars; they have to figure out things.” She would like to eliminate standardized testing, honor rolls, achievement and “Muslim character” awards, and recognizing individual students by placing them on lists. She'd much rather prefer cooperative team learning, service learning projects “connected to real life issues” that make use of what students learn in all their classes. She encourages group work, allowing students to make choices, making learning as hands-on as possible, she further explains. Echoing the social studies teacher, she'd like the school to use the Waldorf model that focuses “on the whole person,” bringing out each student's own strengths and qualities that they can use in a team with other students. She laughs saying, “I would completely get rid of homework, starting in the youngest [students],” allowing students to have a life outside of schoolwork connected to what they learn at school, so “they don't have to sit at home and just do their homework for hours.”

I ask her if and how she connects themes and characters in stories to capitalism, democracy, and the teachings of Islam. “We read a story about Latino migrant farmworkers, and Cesar Chavez's story, and watched a movie, and we talked about that,” she explains. Echoing the message of a particular verse from the Qur'an, she shows her students through such stories the importance of taking action in changing one's “own condition,”<sup>26</sup> for those in charge will not automatically “look after people with less power.” Only when people unite around a particular goal, will they “have the opportunity to change something.” She's had students work on projects exploring and measuring strategies to work towards changing things around them, “and what they would choose to do if they wanted to do something.” While discussing this, she mentions in passing that the Intel Corp. had set up a critical thinking project for schools, which helped students work on this activity. This possibly shows how as a teacher she has appropriated the critical thinking skills for political and social activism, which a technology giant such as Intel has

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<sup>26</sup> See the italicized sentence in the following quote: “For each (such person) there are (angels) in succession, before and behind him: They guard him by command of Allah. *Allah does not change a people's lot unless they change what is in their hearts.* But when (once) Allah willeth a people's punishment, there can be no turning it back, nor will they find, besides Him, any to protect (Al Quran, 13:11, Trans. Yusuf Ali).” Another translation of the italicized sentence says, “[i]ndeed, Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves (Trans. Saheeh International).”

most likely set up to help students succeed in science and math. In having her students look at stories of marginalization and empowerment, we discuss that such stories and the teachings of Islam may help students understand the marginalization of their own Muslim community. “We definitely talk about that a lot, the characters in the story and how we would deal with the problem like that as Muslims,” she replies. When students made use of the critical thinking tools, she once made a list of things the farmworkers had done, “like, boycotts, strikes, hunger strikes, flyers, posters, demonstrations, writing paper articles, things like that, but I added, for example, making *du’a* on the list.” She asked the students to rank the most important things on the list, and most students placed making *du’a* on top, because “you have to make *du’a* to Allah first, because no matter what you do, if Allah doesn’t help you, then nothing will help,” she tells her students. She challenges her students to think about what they would do as Muslims in that situation, or what actions the Prophet himself would take. In this context, I ask if she discusses with her class imprisonment of Muslim youth or their possible entrapment; she responds saying, “I don’t consciously include political or contemporary issues, no. It’s not like I say, oh, this is an issue in our present-day life as Muslims in United States, I should incorporate that, no.” As we reach the end of the interview, we turn to the topic of racism her students could face as Muslims, in high school and beyond, when covering stories in her class that deal with racism. “Whenever there’s a connection, we talk about this. We talk about what is it like as a Muslim, how do people react, what do we do when they react? We talk about experiences that people had,” she tells me. During these discussions students have not yet reported to her any incidence of racism. She does have discussions, when the topic comes up, about how high school will be different. Students have visited and hosted students from other private Jewish, and German schools in the area so as to ready them for a non-Muslim high school where they’ll experience a diverse student body. Such gatherings give her the opportunity to discuss with students how they must present themselves as model Muslims, asking students, “how you are going to be their impression about Muslims, so what are you going to do to make that good, and to make it beneficial for you and the other people?”

The language arts teacher brings in some teachings of Islam, and she does address inequalities and struggles borne out of racism and capitalism. The effort at dealing with racism appears to focus more on making sure students present themselves as “acceptable” Muslims. This requires students align their behavior with the teachings of Islam in such a way so as to ensure their smooth transition from an Islamic school to a public high school. Similar to the social studies teacher, she tries to resist the tendencies of the Common Core curriculum, and the emotional demands homework and standardized testing place on the students. Her solution to move students away from the public school model consists of offering service learning projects to her students, while she expresses preference for the Waldorf schools as a model for the Islamic school. The use of public school curriculum greatly limits teachings of Islam, life of the Prophet, or what it means to be Muslim in America since the war on terror began. Moreover, the curriculum excludes any literature representing the experience of Muslims inside America, or any literature from the Muslim world, which would seem like an essential ingredient at an Islamic school. This further delineates a line between academic courses and the Islamic curriculum created by the need to cover all the stories in the class textbook. Limited time and standardized tests don’t allow for literature from the Muslim world. Effectively, Islam receives limited discussion, circumscribed within and presented as a spiritual doctrine of ideas that regulates personal behavior, and not as a system of thought representing an entire culture and civilization that gave birth to Islamic education and learning.

#### 5.54 Qur'anic Studies Teacher

The Qur'anic studies class teaches interpretation (*tafsir*), and recitation (*tajwid*) of the Qur'an with two different teachers. I interviewed just the teacher who teaches the *tafsir* class, as the one who teaches *tajwid* speaks little English. The Qur'anic studies teacher always speaks with enthusiasm and a positive tone in and out of class. She emigrated from Palestine in the mid-1990s, and had been teaching at the school for 5 years at the time of the interview. Her training in Islam consists of both Qur'anic interpretation (*tafsir*) and recitation (*tajwid*). Sharing her experience as an immigrant Arab teacher working with teachers and staff of other ethnicities, she says, "it's really a good community here." All the staff work together, and attend social events organized for them outside the school, which "really, really helps all the staff to come together, like each other, meet outside of the school." We begin discussing how much independence she's had in organizing the curriculum for the class. She had participated in the Qur'an Action Plan Committee, composed of the school principal and two other teachers. The main goals of the program, as determined by the committee, sought to provide students with understanding parts of the Qur'an they memorize through *tafsir*, and the rules of recitation. The *tajwid* and *tafsir* programs had just started that year only for eighth graders, adding to the school's curriculum of memorization of four parts of the Qur'an (which comprises of 30 parts). Replying to my question about what changes she'd like to see in the course to make Qur'anic learning richer, she says since this year *tafsir* and *tajwid* have been added to memorization, three periods a week does not seem sufficient. "If we had more than 3 periods a week, that would help a lot if we can introduce other things." She would like to have the class everyday, 5 periods per week, but students already have too many classes to take. She also shares that coordinating with the Islamic studies class could improve her class, "so we don't teach the same concept[s]."

We discuss if she teaches *tafsir* or interpretation of the Qur'an based on a certain *madhab*, or school of thought, and what themes of the Qur'an she focuses on. She does not cover different opinions around any particular verse or chapter of the Qur'an. "I teach in general, and my way of teaching is I want students to leave the school with something that will help them with their life." Because the class gets taught just 3 times a week, it's not possible to discuss details about different possible interpretations. When interpreting certain Qur'anic verses having many and wide interpretations, she generally tells her students, who may hail from Shi'a families, "they have to go back to their parents and follow what their parents do." The *tafsir* does not cover "all the meaning of the words in the Qur'an, but the subjects of the *ayat* (Qur'anic verses)." The class curriculum for the year will only consist of two chapters of the Qur'an: *surat al-Waqi'a* (The Inevitable) and *surat al-Hadid* (The Iron). She emphasizes various themes from these two chapters of the Qur'an. From *surat al-Hadid*, she covers having humble hearts,<sup>27</sup> how to focus on prayers, description of what a believer is with respect to the Day of Judgment, this world and the afterlife. She hopes to reinforce in students the behavior they should adapt in this life with the afterlife in mind. "Just to let the students think about *duniya* (worldly life) in a different way, not just to think of it as fun, fun. We need to look at *duniya* to change our

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<sup>27</sup> Humbled hearts in *surat al-Hadid*: "Has not the Time arrived for the Believers that their hearts in all humility should engage in the remembrance of Allah and of the Truth which has been revealed (to them), and that they should not become like those to whom was given Revelation aforetime, but long ages passed over them and their hearts grew hard? For many among them are rebellious transgressors" (Quran 57:16, Trans. Yusuf Ali).

behavior. How can it work to my *akhira* (afterlife)?” She highlights verses that talk about Christianity and Judaism, where both “Jesus the Son of Mary,” as referenced in the Qur’an, and Prophets Noah and Abraham are mentioned.<sup>28</sup> Referencing these verses of *al-Hadid*, she talks in length about how her eighth grade students will attend high school with non-Muslims. The knowledge about other religions will serve them well in having discussions about Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, and being able to say that the three religions once shared the same message in their original form. “They have the same message, but these books these days, they changed it from its original, and that’s why you see a lot of differences between Christianity, and Judaism, all of that.” She stresses the importance that Islam can be recognized as being equal to Christianity and Judaism by learning about these religions from this chapter (*al-Hadid*) in the Qur’an: “A lot of people think about Islam in a different way, but when they present it about [sic] other religions, it’s the same thing, and all the [three] religions they have the same message.”

I ask her a series of additional questions about Qur’anic themes of relevance to Muslims in America she’d like to discuss with her class, and how she connects greed, selfishness, racism and persecution of Muslims to the Qur’an and Islam. She would like to teach more history about the shared prophets of the Abrahamic faiths found in the Qur’an, such as Prophet *Isa* (Jesus), so as to “train” the students to talk about all the prophets with Christians and Jews from the perspective of the Qur’an. This knowledge about the other Abrahamic faiths, combined with “teach[ing] and insist on the manners of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) . . . how to say *salam*, how to smile,” would prepare students to represent Islam in the best way possible to larger American society, helping them dialogue with other religions, and perhaps bring people to Islam through engaging in *dawa’* (promulgating of Islam). She tells her students, “I see you as stars of *dawa’* outside -- gonna present your religion, gonna present your identity out there.” Regarding selfishness and greed, she also thinks the manners of the Prophet provide students with the best way to deal with everything around them, reminding her students often. “Everything is going fast, it’s very selfish out there.” She speaks of an event in Prophet’s life when a neighbor, who hated him, would always throw garbage at his door: “. . . and Prophet Muhammad when he (the neighbor) didn’t do it one time, he went to visit [her to make sure the neighbor was ok].” She believes using Prophet’s exemplary manners and behavior towards non-Muslims can also serve students in dealing with racism and persecution Muslims face in America; that having the right Islamic manners modeled on the Prophet’s life can help change people’s racist feelings towards Muslims. “What we always focus at [sic] is present Muslims, all of them, in a good way, to present, like I said, their manners, because sometimes with their manners what they are doing, they change other people’s ideas about that [Islam].”

We discuss some final comments and questions about improvements she’d like to see in the Islamic curriculum of the school, if the curriculum presently helps students develop a Muslim identity, and what changes she’d like to see in the curriculum and school’s philosophy regarding the teaching of Islam. As far as teaching *tafsir*, she wishes “we had started this program from the first to eighth grade.” Students had been memorizing the Qur’an only until 5<sup>th</sup> grade, but once the *tafsir* and *tajwid* programs began, Qur’anic studies expanded to the upper grades, 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup>, reducing memorization of verses by half. We discuss if the Islamic curriculum of the school helps students develop a Muslim identity. The Islamic studies committee of the school has recently started monthly themes where students engage in activities along those themes, she says in a positive tone. Themes range from being a leader, to the idea of *tawhid* (oneness of God), and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid verses 26 and 27.

help students develop a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Muslim today. Expressing her satisfaction with its philosophy and curriculum, she paints a picture of the school (including the school board) as actively working to improve its Islamic and overall curriculum. “Actually, the school is doing very well, always meeting with the committees, meeting with the teachers here, see what they need; for this program (Qur’anic *tafsir*) we will meet every month to see how it’s going.”

Although the Qur’an as a book of divine revelations overwhelms any reader with its complexity and depth, touching on nearly every theme from the cosmos down to the trees, and everything visible and invisible, the teacher here has simplified the themes to suit the age of the audience. Similarly, the school has decided to limit the content by focusing on shorter chapters of the Qur’an that deal more with the afterlife, an understanding of other Abrahamic religions, imparting on students an interfaith, ecumenical approach to accepting people of other faiths. It’s somewhat difficult to determine whether the decisions taken by the school committee to select shorter chapters determined the themes, or vice versa. Certainly, many chapters and verses of the Qur’an that speak to the political, social, and community aspects of being a “believer” would seem in order at an Islamic school preparing students to face the “outside” world, and would seem entirely suitable for students belonging to a community facing persecution and discrimination. Themes of the Qur’an selected for the class, similar to the themes of Friday *khutbas*, show to some extent the tendency to limit topics of Islam that touch on issues of political and social significance facing Muslims, and instead, turning the attention to topics dealing with personal behavior (Prophet’s good manners, getting along, patience, and tolerance) that safeguard against discrimination and racism. Of course, a class designed initially and for a long time to exclusively provide first through fifth graders with only one purpose – select memorization of the Qur’an – will take time to refine and further develop topics it will cover, imparting through the science of *tafsir* a deeper understanding of Qur’anic text to its students. This may explain the simple first-year approach of the *tafsir* curriculum in offering students sophisticated themes relevant to their lives in America.

### 5.55 *Islamic Studies Teacher*

One of the few male teachers at the school, the Islamic studies teacher grew up in the Bay Area. A second-generation Muslim of Indian descent, he returned to India, shortly after finishing middle school in San Jose, to study Islam and the Qur’an for a total of 8 years at an Islamic seminary there. Upon completion of his Islamic studies, he returned to the Bay Area and began working as an imam (leader/priest) of a local mosque. He obtained his teacher certification, and at the time of this interview had been working at the school for 7 years. Our long conversation begins with the role he has played in determining the organization and pedagogy of his class, and ways he can enrich the learning of Islam. “There’s a lot of autonomy. I can pretty much do whatever I want,” he says, and speaks in length to the challenge of finding good textbooks on Islam published in the US. When he began teaching, the class readings had comprised of copies of articles from different sources, and students didn’t have a textbook. As part of the WASC accreditation process, he decided to update and use the current curriculum and textbook, “based on what was available at that time,” he says. However, even the current textbook needs replacing at some point, as “the kids are making fun of the textbooks.”

As far as enriching the curriculum, he would prefer a “project-based” learning of Islam; have students work on a project around a certain chapter of the textbook, such as the chapter on the annual *hajj*, asking students to, “write a book on *hajj*, and this could be a 15-page book, or

you have to write a report,” he says. He admits, though, limited student time and school hours pose a challenge in doing such projects. Again, he expresses the need to change the class textbook, but “not necessarily the content, I think the content is fine,” and the textbook still offers “a good mix ... [of] theology and this society we have to live in.” As long as students can relate to the content of the textbook, “[to] the examples, I think, that’s the most important thing.” Since Islam and the *hadith* date back some 1400 years, making the teachings of Islam relevant poses a challenge, and that’s what the right teacher does, he tells me: “Of course, the person teaching the book generally makes a big difference.” Making the teachings and ideas relevant provides the students an Islamic foundation that will serve them throughout their lives, “using the moral guidelines that they need to abide by at all times ... as they grow up and start being citizens of a society, getting married, that they are actually, you know, they know their foundation.” Further admitting the shortcomings of the class textbook, he’d like to see a curriculum that’s more challenging, since “the current curriculum, you know, still feels like a story book ... I’d just like to see [it] a little more challenging, something that requires a little more work from them.” He shares a brief story with me about a student who wasn’t doing well in his class, and the student’s parent told him, “oh, I am not worried about the Islamic studies; we’ve read stories of the Prophet since they were little children.” He shares his reaction, saying, “Islamic studies is not just stories of the prophets, you know. Islamic studies is about your diet; Islamic studies is about your, you know, your environment. It’s Earth Day. It’s part of the Islamic studies.” Having observed his eighth grade class, we briefly begin discussing how he details the entire science of *hadith*, such as looking at the chain of transmission, which determines where a *hadith* gets placed in the range of categories from ‘weak’ to ‘strong’ or authentic. He responds proudly that a seventh or an eighth grader can evaluate a certain *hadith* in this way, or explain the significance of a certain place in Mecca and Medina during the Hajj, which says much about his project-oriented curriculum and pedagogy of Islamic studies. “For even many adults, if you tell them *mustadafa*, yeah, I know it’s a place in Hajj, but I don’t know what to do, whereas a seventh or eighth grader will be able to tell you what they do in *mustadafa*.” As we finish this part of our conversation, he emphasizes the role of activities and projects around each chapter of the textbook, where they add “more relevance to the contemporary period ... again, it just enhances their knowledge,” he says.

We begin discussing a series of questions regarding the Sunni school of thought (or *madhab*) he uses to teach the class, to interpret verses of the Qur’an, and what school of thought, if any, the class textbook promotes. He tells me that the Hanafi and the Shafi schools of thought dominate the curriculum, but as far as teaching from the book, he does not veer much from its content, and “don’t try to interpret it,” explaining a suggestion a former school principal shared with him. Given the diversity of students, there maybe different interpretations about Islam, but generally he says, “I’ll try to maintain, you know, that which is in the book.” He feels that the textbook generally takes into account all schools of thought, without imposing a particular one. I point out the book represents only the Sunni schools of thought, and he responds, “[b]ut at the same time, you will not find anything in the textbook that demotes Shi’a, or anti-Shi’a, yeah, yeah.” He’ll give differing opinions only when a certain Qur’anic verse needs explaining: “then, I will do my research, and give them every possible explanation.” Also, when his students ask him about his own opinion, “and only then would I share my opinion,” he says. Even though his background and training is in the Hanafi school of thought (common among Sunni Muslims from South Asia), he reassures me that he does not impose his opinion on his students, and will usually say, “[t]hese are all, you know, valid opinions, to, to you know, explain a certain version



of the Qur'an." I ask if he sees any disadvantage in not teaching Islam from a particular school of thought, or taking a multi-school perspective to teaching and learning Islam. He thinks that all schools of thought share in common topics around consumption of alcohol, death, prayer, Hajj, *zakat* (charitable spending), and that "[i]n this multi-cultural society they should learn from a multi-*madhab* [school] approach." His class sometimes will also have Shi'a students, and when students have to memorize a certain *du'a*, he'll usually tell those students to memorize "those *du'as* that you memorize in your house." Of more importance, in his opinion, is what students learn at home about Islam, rather than what's taught in the classroom: "... it's not about what you teach the children half of the time, it's about what they learn at home."

We further discuss what themes of the Qur'an and *hadith* the textbook emphasizes, what additional themes he would like to see in it, and if he has encountered anything he disliked. The book covers the chapter *al-Haqq* from the Qur'an, the Day of Judgment, "Hajj is a big thing, the battles, and then, dealing with your elders." Touching briefly on community service and learning outside the classroom, he propounds the need for students to engage in community service, because "we're a community that's so introverted, everything is about us." That students need to, "get out of school, get out of the classroom, be exposed." However, the "logistics" of undertaking this remain a challenge for him. Continuing on with the question of additional themes, he expresses reluctance in sharing his thoughts. "You know, I can't say that, of course. I can't base [it on] my opinion." He says the curriculum more or less covers, "all things I have in mind," but "I really enjoy the last theme we have on *haya* – modesty, shame, respectful interaction with the opposite gender." The theme also touches on topics of alcohol and drugs, which he feels "directly relates" to the students, "as they move into high school, so that's the part I really, really like." I ask him if the themes he'd like to teach deal with students' lives and challenges they face. He resoundingly concurs with the assumptions behind this question, but defends the existing themes of the Islamic curriculum, saying "because things like the Day of Judgment, ah, death, these are important things. I mean these are real-life things. If we're not gonna [sic] teach them, who will?" He wishes students could attend a funeral as a fieldtrip, in order to remind them of the ultimate direction of their lives, implying that such activities would serve to ensure their proper practice of Islam. As far as disliking anything in the textbook itself, he expresses much satisfaction with it, and only finds the typos and spelling errors annoying. The creators of the textbook have done "a good job," he says, of presenting balanced opinions and interpretations, unlike other books used in the past that had "pro-wahhabi, pro-salafi" tendencies. He attributes this balance to the fact that the authors of the textbook "have been around in this country for a number of years and have done their PhD's here."

Our conversation moves to discussing the important issues the Qur'an and the life of the Prophet address that relate to Muslims in today's America. The great themes of the Qur'an, he feels, address peace, justice, "even if it's against your own brother the Qur'an says," and service, which he highlights by quoting the Qur'an: "You've been created to serve mankind." The stories of various prophets in the Qur'an is where "we find our strengths and encouragement," encouraging people to be good. He says the encouragement of worship in the Qur'an "makes you a better person, God-conscious, you know, being good, accountability." Accountability helps Muslims resist temptations to do wrong, and this contributes to one's spirituality, which "makes a better people, and a better people make a better community." The Qur'an has a lot to offer to America and the West, he says, in addressing economic, racial and social injustices, and feels "[i]t has a lot to offer the West." Turning to the life of the Prophet, he offers a much longer response, touching on the Prophet as an example for dealing with "friends and foes," as a just

leader, who “was always conscious of God,” and “always reminded people around him of the hereafter.” That he commanded respect by his companions, but at the same time very practical and “not just some machine that shouted out rules.” He remarks at length how these days people don’t respect authority (implicitly in the US), and that the penal code in Islam doesn’t allow people to commit wrongful acts and get away with it, because “oh, you’re my friend, or you know, you’re from the richest 10% in the country . . . if we can hire the best lawyers, we can lie and still getaway, you know, that doesn’t exist.” I point out that American society offers a different system of laws, which mostly focuses on protecting the rights of producers and consumers, facilitating and mediating their economic relationship. A constant battle plays out, like a dialectic, whether the laws will serve the interest of the producers or the consumers, with little focus on other aspects of human existence. Without acknowledging this point, he interjects saying, “Islam does not allow the ultra rich or the elite; there’s no such thing. It doesn’t exist.” I ask him, how then the Islamic school decides what to teach, since it cannot teach the entire system of thought Islam offers to Muslim students in America. He refers to his earlier comment about giving students an Islamic foundation that allows them to continue their study of Islam further. As an example of this, he points to the topic covered in the textbook about the Day of Judgment, which he says is “studied in the book pretty thoroughly.” This topic shows them how to study other topics of interest in Islam, and to “make sure that you don’t just accept one interpretation, one opinion, or just sort of go over it . . . they go to the right people to study the right method, yet are able to be, you know, citizens of society.” He believes other themes can be brought into the discussion, which all depends on the teacher, and feels satisfied with the Islamic studies curriculum overall.

Our discussion turns to what extent the Qur’an offers students ways to deal with selfishness, materialism, and greed present in the US, and if Islamic studies can provide students awareness about racism and their persecution in the US. “The Qur’an pretty much speaks against all of these things, greed, selfishness,” he explains, adding that the Qur’an “overemphasizes . . . again and again the need to serve others, the need to give, the need to give charity.” He recites and translates a verse from the Qur’an to highlight this, “that they give preference to others despite the fact they are in poverty.” He does discuss with his students materialism in American society, “because a lot of my students are very materialistic.” He finds materialism more prevalent among students from affluent families, but his students who’ve traveled to impoverished parts of the world “value and understand this [problem] more than others.” He helps his students navigate past materialism by emphasizing the value of being around “right type of people, right friends, the right society, right company,” but also through achieving an Islamic foundation he spoke of earlier. He briefly talks about his other friends who grew up in the US “caught up in the American Dream,” which he calls an actual “nightmare” because of the things his friends went through in their lives. The only friend that managed to survive the nightmare “had a solid foundation” in their understanding of Islam, he says reassuringly. Speaking to how Islamic studies can help students confront racism and persecution in the US, he unequivocally says Islam teaches “not only, and how to deal with it, [but] how to eradicate it, to be kind to your foes, to be respectful, agree to disagree. The Prophet was kind to his enemies.” He says fighting itself is not the best way, but “the best form of religious warfare is to speak against an evil oppressor.” That Islam teaches one to distinguish between right and wrong, which “guide[s] you to make that change in a positive manner. Positive change, societal change.”

The conversation moves to, then, discussing how Islamic teachings can serve to help students get more involved in defending their rights as Muslims, and ways the school could

integrate this. The instructor initially responds with an emphatic “yes,” saying the Qur’an and the Prophet’s life together provide ways in “defending your rights, yet, in a non-violent way, you know.” Additionally, he underscores the fact that the Qur’an cannot be understood “without the teachings of the Prophet.” Giving a defensive response to how the school can integrate this, he says “these are eighth grade students, so what more do you expect of them?” Without giving specific examples, he explains how students have gone on to high school without encountering many problems, and if they did, their “foundation” in Islam served them well, and the students “have been able to defend themselves and their rights as Muslims in America.” He feels the curriculum and his pedagogy address the discrimination and violence facing Muslims since 9/11, as he always confronts through classroom discussions any recent incident affecting Muslims in America. “You know, defending rights. Does Islamic studies teach that? Yeah, of course. Integration from the school, I think, the school is doing quiet a bit.” He points to the school’s outreach efforts in working with other schools and religious communities as an example of how the school sufficiently integrates programs that prepare students to deal with discrimination and persecution Muslims face. For him, the way the community can deal with dehumanization and demonization is through the fundamental teachings of Islam. He points to the Prophet’s life, and how he faced these very same things through “patience and perseverance; standing up for your rights; the Prophet stood up for his rights for us to stand up to our rights. To not hurt your foes or your enemies.” He says the only time the Prophet fought or engaged in a war was to defend himself, “but his intent was not to hurt anyone; his intent was to defend himself.” I ask him how exactly the school could integrate this legacy of the Prophet enabling the students to stand up for their rights. He proposes some sort of collaboration “through a joint Islamic studies-language arts program, you know. Challenging coverage, going to rallies. I don’t know how many parents would want their children to be going to rallies, you know. Covering some portion of the news everyday, analyzing it, you know. That would be ideal.” His final response to this set of questions shows that, even though this disconnect between academic and Islamic curriculum exists, bridging this rift would benefit the students, for example, by connecting the themes of Islam with the language arts curriculum, or in the words of the instructor, a “joint Islamic studies-language arts program.”

We begin discussing his understanding of democracy and capitalism, and if students should learn about capitalism and Western society, as well as racism and false imprisonment (e.g., Guantanamo Bay), in the context of Islam and Islamic studies. He admits to not really having studied either democracy or capitalism much beyond what the words mean. Giving a brief reply on his understanding of democracy, he characterizes it as “[p]eople’s voice, for the people, by the people. Everyone has a say, which is not the case now.” Attempting to explain capitalism, he says “if you were to ask me the history, you know, where it comes from and what people are doing to actually implement capitalism in this country, probably not much.” He sums up capitalism as “a corrupt group of people out there and they wanna [sic] make sure they’re running the show.” That capitalism comes down to the rights of the average person being undermined, and “Muslims are required to defend everyone . . . we’re not just for ourselves, we are for mankind.” He also points to the contradiction in how Muslims stand for defending everyone but “the worst, you know, countries on the face of this earth so happen to be called Muslim countries.” However, he feels “we Muslims in America” can break from what goes on in “our [home] countries” in speaking out against corrupt forces in the US. As far as students learning about capitalism and Western society in his Islamic studies class, he says “yes, definitely, but not in eighth grade.” These “are just little children,” and perhaps high school or

college would be a better place. He thinks students should learn about confronting racism, false imprisonment and Islam saying, “[y]eah, why not. I mean, why not; give me a good argument, why not.” We begin discussing how he already presents some critique of capitalism to his students when covering themes of greed and selfishness vis-à-vis Islam. Referring to the writings of W. E. Dubois and double consciousness, for example, as well as learning about capitalism, I explain how such themes could provide his students the critical ability to make sense of their own subjectivities as Muslims growing up in today’s America. He begins embracing the idea that the curriculum does need some reconsideration in order to serve the interests of Muslim students:

You know, I think there’s a great challenge ahead of us, and there’s a way we need to figure it out. It also adds to the fact that our curriculums [sic], in that case, do need to be revisited, and there needs to be things added to these curriculums. And we need intellectuals that make our curriculum, and not just imams.

Posing some final questions as we conclude the interview, I ask him about his teaching style, pedagogy, and assessing students. Lastly, we end the interview on a brief discussion about the school’s philosophy, mission, and its overall emphasis on academic achievement. He begins his class with what he reads on “the news in the morning,” which he claims benefits the students and “a lot of it is just impromptu,” as far as what outside topics he’ll bring into his class. He doesn’t adhere strictly to the class textbook so as to make sure “they are not oblivious to what’s going on around [them].” He feels at such a critical age his students do need to know things, “in order to strengthen their identity...to be comfortable as Muslims.” He feels the students need to know and understand what’s going on around them. “I mean, these are not little babies any more. They do understand.” His class lectures and discussions sometimes will not cover Islam directly. Instead, students will read the class textbook quietly themselves and do the exercises in an accompanying workbook for part of the class hour. “I have them do the exercises in the workbook to reinforce their Muslim identity.” He requires his students to memorize some of the *hadiths* (sayings of the Prophet), helping them develop a habit “as they get older, if they’re delivering lectures or *khutbas*.” Students learn to quote the Arabic along with the English, so as to preserve their knowledge of the Arabic language. We discuss how he assesses his students. “You know Islamic studies, a lot of it they practice, you know, the things they are able to remember and implement, their moral uprightness.” How students behave and act based on what they learn in the Islamic studies class serves as a way to assess his students: “You know, you make me a promise, you got to fulfill that promise. I am gonna [sic] make you a promise, I’ll fulfill that promise. You’ve learned something and I expect you to implement it.” Homework assignments, in-class participation, and the final exam make up the grade for the course. “That’s why most kids in my class get an ‘A.’” He doesn’t see the success of his students as coming from the textbook, or quizzes and exams. He feels success translates into students not being afraid of their religion, but “to be able to defend their faith. Yeah, yeah to be able to go back to their faith leaders, to be able to talk with them.”

As we move to the last part of our conversation, I share with him how the school’s orientation seems to weigh heavily in favor of academic achievement, specifically math and science. That the underlying assumption of this orientation hinges on excelling in the technical sciences, math, and physics so as to facilitate upward mobility, economic and material success in a capitalist society. He points to the school’s mission saying, “which is why part of their mission statement is ‘well-rounded Muslims’ you know ... conscious of their Islamic identity, and that’s what matters to me.” The “moral, religious consciousness,” acquired through religious learning will serve students well in “whatever path they choose to pick in this capitalistic society,” he

observes. Since a range of interests exists among parents and students in whether taking learning Islam seriously, or excelling in the academic courses, he believes the “moral identity” students develop through their “Islamic foundation” will guide them to making conscientious decisions in their lives in always choosing “the lesser of two evils.” He does admit that eighth graders can learn more about Islam, and the school could provide the curriculum to achieve this; however, expanding the study of Islam further would require an Islamic high school, further bolstering student Muslim identity to effectively counter the impact of greed and selfishness. As far as changing the mission and philosophy of the school, “I don’t think there’s any part I’d like to modify, per se,” he says confidently. Without being specific, he would like to see improvement in the school, but defends the school saying that among other Islamic schools, “this is probably one of the better Muslim schools that actually has a mission statement, that actually follows it and implements things.” He tells me how a teacher recently returned from an ISNA<sup>29</sup> (Islamic Society of North America) educational forum feeling more than satisfied that the school had already implemented a lot of things discussed at the forum. “So, I am pretty proud of the school at where I teach at, and I think we’re doing a pretty good job.”

The Islamic studies instructor somewhat ambiguously articulates the direction the school and the Islamic curriculum should take in a post 9/11, war-on-terror environment. His pedagogy consists of anecdotes about news and current events affecting Muslims, which he feels students must learn as harsh realities of the world they live in. This provides students opportunities to discuss political and economic issues that touch their lives. However, he lectures little on Islam or from the class textbook, which the students themselves quietly read during class and answer questions in a workbook. As an Islamic studies class in an Islamic school, it does not offer an intense study of the Qur’an as divine revelations. He favors *hadiths*, or the collected sayings of the Prophet, as a source of learning Islam, instead of the Qur’an itself. He teaches the methodology for studying *hadith* in great detail, yet no methodology exists in either studying the Qur’an. He makes explicit his view that *hadith* and the Sunna serve as a sine qua non prerequisite to studying and understanding the Qur’an. However, one could argue that the study of the Prophet’s life, or Sunna, cannot preclude an understanding of the divine revelations in the Qur’an, which determined the course of the Prophet’s life and actions. A second-generation American Muslim who has spent considerable time both overseas studying Islam in India and growing up in the US, the instructor seems fully aware of the challenges Muslims face in the US, yet he cannot offer a critical enough look at either America as an empire, or the Islamic school’s areas of deficit. While the challenge remains, as he said, of balancing the teaching of Islam between parents who bring a “fear of Islam and Masjids” from their home countries as being too strict and austere, to parents who feel Islam as an essential part of their child’s upbringing. The conflict between academic excellence on the one hand, and the need for more Islamic curriculum that serves their child’s spiritual and social needs on the other, reveals the internal pressure the school faces in balancing academic and Islamic courses that results from its location inside the Silicon Valley. This location doubtlessly influences the school’s tilt towards math and science, both locally and nationally embedded in a capitalist world-hegemon.

The “image of Islam” pressure also exists to make sure students don’t behave in a racist manner, to exercise tolerance living in a multi-cultural society, and to learn about the country’s history, its political system, and somewhat indirectly the workings and effects of a capitalist system, vis-à-vis exploitation of labor, individualism, greed, and materialism. He says students

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<sup>29</sup> ISNA is a national Muslim (Sunni) organization known for its annual Islamic conference held each fall in Chicago.

should learn about capitalism “but not in eighth grade,” or they “are just little children,” yet as far as teaching students about current events and political challenges facing Muslims, he takes the view that “these are not little babies any more.” Another place of contradiction relates to his response on how the school apparently favors excelling in math and science, saying, “what matters to me” is the “Islamic identity,” which contrasts with his reply at a fundraiser, where standing on the podium he touted the success of students in achieving high test scores in science and math as “the most important thing for me.” These contradictions reveal some confusion in what exactly an Islamic school should help young Muslims achieve, and what role it must play in shaping and preparing their consciousness to take on discrimination and racism in high school and beyond in a society known for racializing all minorities. Finally, his response to the disconnect between academic and Islamic curriculum, and how bridging this rift would benefit the students, shows that the school grapples with this disconnect; that connecting the themes of Islam with the language arts curriculum, or in the words of the instructor, a “joint Islamic studies-language arts program,” or a balanced mix of Islamic and academic learning, may help students to participate in political activism inspired by the life of the Prophet. This could potentially make the themes of Islamic and academic curricula more meaningful to Muslim students living in a post 9/11 world, offering pedagogy oriented to connecting spiritual knowledge to political empowerment. Nonetheless, the Islamic studies instructor remains adamant about the school not really lacking in any area, saying, “I am pretty proud of the school,” and feels that giving students an “Islamic foundation” oriented to regulating moral behavior as the right approach to Islamic education; that giving students an Islamic foundation, both as far as practicing it and studying it, and through service learning, somehow gives students the ability to avoid greed, selfishness, and the effects of life in America as a racialized minority. For the instructor, the only way to deal with persecution is through “fundamental teachings of Islam” and Prophet’s life of “patience and perseverance,” which makes obvious the complacent tendency of the community toward its own persecution since the war on terror began.

### **5.6     *The Parents***

This section provides an overview of interviews with parents of eighth grade students whose classes I observed. These interviews explore themes similar to interviews presented in preceding sections. They also provide further insight on parental expectations, community demographics, ethnic background, and views about America, Islam, and Muslims within the community and families the Islamic school serves. Hoping to secure interviews with at least eight parents, only six parents agreed to participate. All, except one, had migrated to the US approximately in the 1990’s, and among the six, one father and five mothers constituted the interviewees. The American parent (a white convert to Islam), who teaches at the school full-time in lower elementary grades, provided a much lengthier interview, critically looking at certain aspects of the school, the immigrant Muslim community, and the California public school model. I refer to her in this section as the American parent. All the immigrant parents had a science, math, engineering, or business background, possessing a bachelor’s or a master’s degree. The American parent came from a journalism background, married to an engineer who migrated to the US, but eventually accepted a full-time position as an elementary school teacher at the Islamic school after her children enrolled. One other parent also worked frequently as a substitute teacher at the school. All six hailed from different ethnic backgrounds: Turkey, Kuwait (of Palestinian descent), Bangladesh, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, and the US. This small sample most likely represents the diversity of the school itself, as well as the Muslim community and the

Silicon Valley. Families having more than one child had all their children attend the Islamic school starting usually between kindergarten to third grade. All parents enrolled their child to “learn Islamic values in an Islamic environment,” offering a “protected environment,” and knowledge of the Arabic language. One parent felt the public schools didn’t offer anything on Islam, where students learned more about Christian and Jewish holidays and culture than anything about Islam. Most agreed the Islamic school prepared their child to deal with American society, providing Islamic values to the children, and by reaching out to other communities. Especially since 9/11, the school had initiated periodic visits to the Japanese community, churches, and synagogues, teaching students how to live as Muslims in a pluralistic society with tolerance and respect. The American parent felt the school can do more to make sure students don’t “stay in their little cultural groups,” which prevents their full participation and adaptation to American society.

Parents overwhelmingly expressed interest in their child attending an affordable Islamic high school that offered strong academics, and all expressed some concern about missing out on further Islamic education if their child attended a public high school; most worried about the peer pressure their child will face in high school, but felt their child’s “Islamic foundation,” “Muslim character,” and “being well-rounded” will help him or her successfully deal with challenges of attending a public high school. One parent already had another older daughter attending a public high school, and expressed satisfaction with her success there. Most parents didn’t express any concern that their child may face racism in high school, since California and Santa Clara offered a “diversity” of people and communities. One parent spoke of finding a public high school that already had some Muslim students attending to make it easier for the daughter to make friends. In anticipating racism and discrimination in their children’s adult lives, all parents agreed that the school should make learning about racism part of the curriculum. While a few parents focused on how students should learn not to engage in racism themselves, others felt it essential to learn how to counter racism, discrimination, and the effects on students, which some felt a strong Muslim “character development” would help counter. The American parent voiced strong condemnation of how some students “resisted” learning about Declaration of Independence, the State of the Union address, the Constitution, and the Diary of Anne Frank.

All parents would like their child to contribute towards making the US a better place for Muslims; some went further, saying “not just Muslims” but for everyone. The part the school could play to that end would consist of an Islamic school that is academically distinguished, facilitating academic success and a “strong Muslim identity.” It should offer students an “understanding [of] American political system, one’s rights, how to assert those rights correctly, effectively.” Encourage students to pursue careers in “journalism, civics, politics, government, and public health,” preparing them as “leaders in the proper way to lead the government.” It should help students learn to cope with their daily lives with other people outside the community, and how to speak out, correcting perceptions about Muslims, and “defend Islam.” Every parent categorically expressed learning about democracy and capitalism as essential knowledge for living in the US. It would help students to participate in politics, to “make a difference,” to “have a voice,” to deal with this society and “engage in discussions” about democracy and capitalism. One parent felt this would help students understand how Islamic finance and capitalist system “can coexist.” It would also help them use the stock market, by understanding “halal and haram investments.” Their understanding of democracy seemed clearer than of capitalism. For many, democracy simply represents the ability to vote and choose the leaders they want in office, or as one parent stated, “by the people, for the people.” That it gives people a “voice” in the election

of their political leaders by majority vote. Another parent characterized democracy as where “everybody is equal.” Characterization of capitalism ranged from “exploiting the poor” for money, to everyone taking responsibility for their “own financial wellbeing;” earning by working hard, “that nobody is paving your way for you,” and where there’s “no financial help” from the government. The American parent severely criticized the immigrant families for their “baggage” where they don’t appreciate how, unlike in their native countries, hard work pays off in America; that it’s not about who you know that determines success or failure, but your own hard work: “FDR said, pull yourselves up by the bootstraps.”

Discussing activities outside of school, most parents encourage and allow their children to play sports. One parent spoke of encouraging their child to attend political rallies, and election campaigns, accompanying his uncle who often teaches workshops on Islam at local churches and high schools. None of the parents allowed their child to celebrate holidays such as Christmas, Halloween, and in some cases Valentine’s Day. However, some parents allowed activities that do “not collide with Islamic teachings.” One parent greatly appreciated the “charitable” aspect of America, and wants her daughter to participate in poverty alleviation efforts. Nearly all parents, except one, allowed their children to use the Internet, and Facebook with the requirement that family members (elders) became part of their social network. Some parents even required having their child’s Facebook password. Parents generally permitted watching of American television shows and movies appropriate for their child’s age. Only one parent encouraged her child to join the local Brownie troops for “social and leadership skills.” As far as Islamic activities outside of school, half of the parents seemed to involve their child in activities such as memorizing the Qur’an, the family together reciting the Qur’an, praying on a daily basis together, attend lectures on Islam, and keep up with reading current news affecting Muslims in American Muslim magazines. Some parents felt their child studied Islam at school, and having much schoolwork on Islam didn’t allow for Islamic activities outside of the school. A few parents encourage learning Islam within their family’s cultural heritage, namely Turkish and Arabic, and seem to maintain their ethnic cultural environment at home. Generally, parents try to supplement Islam learned at school with teaching the child about Islam at home through relevant discussions and books. Parents frequently attend events about Islam at the Islamic center with their child, and hope to extend what their children learn at school in order to make it a “part of their life.” One parent teaches her children about Shi’a Islam at home, since the school curriculum only covers Sunni Islam.

Parents would like to see the school emphasize certain areas of Islam. They should know the “rules and regulations of Islam,” so as to help them live in the US; Qur’anic curriculum needs improvement, “so the Qur’an becomes their life.” Too much emphasis on academics and “good scores,” but students need to learn how to behave with “Islamic character, manners” so as to “portray yourself” the right way to larger American society, aware of its etiquettes, do’s and don’ts. Students need to know the reasons “we pray” or make *salat*, and how to behave with “non-Muslims” in a positive way. Students should learn about moral character, so “they can be good representatives of our religion.” Provide more history on the teachings and life of Imam Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law (deeply revered as the first spiritual leader or imam of the Shi’a school of thought). All parents responded positively when asked if their child should learn both Sunni and Shi’a Islam. Parents felt that both should be taught “in a positive way,” and Muslims “have to live with their differences,” since “we’re all Muslims folded under the same belief in Allah.” Only one parent felt that Shi’a Islam should only be taught at home, not at the Islamic school since it’s a Sunni school. Most parents looked positively upon the teaching of



Islamic poetry and Sufism. These could be offered “if there was demand,” and if a majority of parents wanted it, while not really a “top priority” for others. A few parents thought Sufism shouldn’t be taught, or taught only to the extent “why to stay away from it.” Others felt that Islamic poetry and Sufism represented Islamic “literature and heritage,” and offered “another way of looking at the depth of understanding Islam.” That Sufism offers “good teachings of tolerance, and is part of Islam.” One parent (full-time teacher) expressed concern about using “California Core Standards” and the focus on high test scores that greatly limit the school’s ability to integrate these topics, affording a spiritually enriching curriculum.

When asked what important topics their child should learn from the Qur’an and the Prophet’s life, nearly all parents focused on the Prophet’s life as the “best example of the Qur’an,” with little mention of specific topics from the Qur’an. Living as a minority with non-Muslims, exhibiting patience and tolerance, became the overriding response. The Prophet’s life provided a model for showing tolerance towards non-Muslims, and the example of the woman who would often leave rubbish at his front door<sup>30</sup> out of spite for his teachings and Islam, echoed repeatedly among the parents as an example of compassion and tolerance. The Prophet taught people everything from the mundane to the divine, parents explained: how to get involved in “political life,” how to “wash [or maintain good hygiene], eat, and pray.” Prophet’s kindness and “positive way of handling things” endeared him to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, making him an exemplary human being in all respects. His life, his companions, their struggles and wars offered a source of spiritual edification for the students in patience, good character, and Muslim identity. A few parents highlighted specific topics of the Qur’an they’d like for their child to learn, which included the “beauty of creation” to help students connect with nature in a compassionate, caring way; the do’s and don’ts for the Muslims to follow and implement in their lives; one parent highlighted how the Qur’an asks Muslims to “think of those who are less fortunate than them.” Most parents felt the school covered these topics from the Qur’an and the Prophet’s life, but one explained how the school needs to “go in more depth about the philosophical issues” of the Qur’an and Islam to help students make it “a way of life.” Another parent saw the need for the school to offer teachings of Imam Ali, especially for students who follow Shi’a Islam.

Ultimately, parents provided feedback about what improvements and changes they’d like to see in the school. Even though most felt the school overall performed well and excelled in certain areas, further improvements needed making. The school should offer a greater understanding and study of American history and culture, enabling students to “effectively” deal with American society. The American parent would like to see “less emphasis on deadlines, evaluations, and measurable things,” and more focus on “kindness, being welcoming;” a greater diversity of teachers and students, more male teachers, teachers with social science background, and students from other ethnic and class backgrounds, beyond the existing Arab and the South Asian mix of students from middle class and wealthy families; and make the school a community school by offering funding to attract teachers and students of diverse backgrounds. She sees problems with the school operating on a California “public school model in an Islamic setting” and feels the community should develop its own model, which what this study attempts to do. Other parents touched on how the school needs to ensure “students must have a voice to get what they want,” for learning to “speak up” will help them deal with larger society. The school should

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<sup>30</sup> The very popular story goes that the Prophet became concerned for the woman when she failed to visit her daily mischief upon his door. After discovering where she lived, he paid the woman a visit only to find her seriously ill. The magnanimous gesture of compassion and greatness moved the woman so deeply she embraced Islam.

offer more qualified teachers with less reliance on substitute teachers, especially the Arabic language program, since the current ones aren't "qualified to be teachers." More extra-curricular activities needed for students to develop public speaking and leadership skills. The Qur'anic studies curriculum "needs to be enhanced." Lastly, the Islamic curriculum should focus less on memorization and more on "overall study of the meaning of the Qur'an."

Interviews with the parents show the varied range of expectations from the school, its Islamic curriculum, and from their children growing up and living in America. The parents themselves represent a diversity of nationalities and ethnicities in the Muslim community. A number of parents encourage the learning of Islam within the family's own cultural heritage, such as Turkish, Arabic, et al., and consciously try to maintain their native cultural environment at home. Overall, the general tendencies among the parents show strong interest in their child's preparation to succeed socially, spiritually, and academically as an exemplary Muslim who'll one day contribute to the betterment of American society for everyone; who'll take up the struggle to correct the misperceptions about Islam, and thereby contribute to countering racism and persecution of Muslims by playing a leadership role. Even though parents' own understanding of capitalism seems limited, but in order to have influence inside the country on public opinion, policies about Islam and Muslims, an understanding of democracy, capitalism, American history and culture, according to the parents, should play a critical role. As the American parent emphasized, students learning how Islamic finance and capitalism can coexist, and where they learn to work "within the system," will boost their influence and presence inside the US for the benefit of Muslims and Islam. However, parents would like the Islamic curriculum to develop and improve further, especially teaching the Qur'an in a substantial manner, preferring those topics from the Sunna and the Qur'an that deal with compassion, kindness, and tolerance, or the qualities the Prophet embodied. Parents feel the school places too much emphasis on test scores, but not enough on behavior and character determined by Islamic teachings, and how to "portray" oneself as a Muslim to other Americans. For all parents, Prophet's life provides the best example of the Qur'an, as well as giving students an understanding of how to deal with non-Muslims with patience and tolerance so as to minimize friction with people in America, and to live in harmony with others who may or may not like Islam and Muslims. Parents want the school to offer extracurricular activities that help students develop public speaking and leadership skills. They'd also like to see improvements in the Arabic program and Qur'anic studies where the curriculum focuses less on memorization, taking more of a philosophical approach to studying the Qur'an, where students grasp its "overall" meaning that shapes their lives, identity, and outlook. For one parent, the school must also teach about the life of Imam Ali in order to serve the needs of a number of Shi'a students there. All parents responded positively to their child learning both Shi'a and Sunni Islam. Most parents think the school should offer Sufism and Islamic poetry, since these exemplify Islamic culture and heritage, and could facilitate a deeper grasp of Islam. Generally, immigrant parents' subconsciously express anxieties over their children being too influenced by the dominant white, Judeo-Christian culture, since none allow their children to practice Christmas, Halloween, or Valentine's Day, and do not want them to attend a public high school. The apprehension with attending a public high school has less to do with facing racism and discrimination, but more with the child facing peer pressure, engaging in behavior Islam forbids, such as drinking, taking drugs, and dating. Parents overwhelmingly prefer an Islamic high school so as to continue their child's Islamic education. Parental preferences and concerns show the extent to which they strongly favor an Islamic school that tilts heavily towards learning of Islam as a rich cultural,

literary heritage, and identity, alongside a liberal secular curriculum that prepares students to critically deal with the world they will inhabit as adults. These preferences contrast sharply with the Islamic school that does not teach the cultural aspects of Islam, and favors science and math as the primary goal of achievement and success.

### **5.7 *The Students***

Though they were all asked the same questions, interviews with students varied in length and content. This section provides an overview of the conversations (mostly carried out in pairs) with the students. Student interviews hoped to clarify the extent to which the students study, learn, and practice Islam, and the level of their knowledge and interest in studying Islam beyond what they learn at school; what sort of pressures and challenges they face as young Muslims in post 9/11 America; their knowledge of American economic and political institutions, especially with respect to the free market ideology. Overall, similar to other interviews in this study, these interviews also try to understand how the racialized Muslim community negotiates the many obstacles it faces, of racism and discrimination, as being seen as the “other,” and attempts to, both, overcome these obstacles, and help students achieve success inside the leading capitalist state through the learning of a particular interpretation and understanding of Islam.

Interview responses varied greatly, either as a “yes” or “no” to some of the questions, or as a lengthy, engaging conversation. It all depended upon the personality of the student. The more sociable a student, the more s/he took keen interest in the questions and having a conversation. These responses offer rich information, since the interaction with the students, and their voices provide insight not just about the school, the classes, and student likes/dislike, but also how these eighth grade students’ lives and identities had been shaped by attending an Islamic school located inside the Silicon Valley. Six girls and four boys made up the student interviewees, representing nationalities as diverse as Turkish, Lebanese, Jordanian, Bangladeshi, Indian (Tamil and Urdu speakers), as well as American and Pakistani. Only one had migrated with his parents as a young toddler to the US, but the rest were born in the US. Nearly all students started the school as either kindergartners or in the third grade. All students expressed positive feelings about having attended the Islamic school. Reasons for feeling satisfied and happy largely centered on having close friends, “a good environment,” learning about prayers, “my religion,” Islam, Arabic, and the Qur’an; the teachers, feeling “like a family,” no “peer pressure” or “dating boys,” and “it’s pretty friendly,” exemplified most thoughts about having attended the Islamic school. Furthermore, student feelings about not having attended a public school contrasted sharply with those of going to an Islamic school. Reacting to how their experience would differ if they had attended a public school, overwhelmingly students reported they “would not be as knowledgeable about Islam,” and have friends that they can “relate” to, as well as being able to perform their daily prayers during school hours. Only one student felt he would’ve made more friends at a public school, since he’d find more people who’d speak his family language, Tamil.

Though some felt slightly curious about how their experience would’ve differed at a public school, only two students expressed the possible need to attend eighth grade at a public school in order “to prepare” for public high school. Expressing no interest in attending a Muslim high school, students felt incredibly excited, but nervous, for experiencing life outside the Islamic school. The nervousness arose from the thought of attending a public high school after spending some 9 years in a private Islamic school, where they had established enduring friendships, and felt uncertain about being accepted as “equals” in a public high school. In spite

of the anxieties, life in high school would offer opportunities to socialize with non-Muslims, to showcase Muslims and Islam in “public” so as to offer a “different understanding” than found in the “media.” Getting to know people outside of the community, experience “both environments,” or the “outside world” in order to prepare for college, and meet people of other religious and ethnic backgrounds, served as the rationale for wanting to attend a public high school. Capturing the sentiment of her classmates for lack of interest in attending an Islamic high school, one student summed up the reasons by saying, “you can’t be trapped in an Islamic high school, middle school, elementary school for our [sic] whole, entire life.”

We discussed what activities students participate in after school, and at home not related to their schoolwork, so as to understand their interest in Islam and the American culture. Most students took part in clubs at the school in their prior years, such as the chess, cooking, knitting, and speech clubs. None belonged to any club in the eighth grade. At home most students spent limited time on the computer to check email, watch videos, read blogs, and only 4 students reported having a Facebook account, which the parents monitored closely, adding themselves and other family members as part of the student’s social network. Often, parents didn’t permit their child to have Facebook until reaching high school. Girls reported taking more interest in reading novels and books at home, while boys frequently reported playing sports and video games with their friends. Students reported that parents monitor the TV shows, movies, and online activity of their child closely. All students attended some sort of a Friday evening activity either at the Islamic center or in the community, such as a *halaqa* (an Islamic study circle). A few students attend female-only *halaqa* with their mothers on Friday evenings also. Only two students, both females, intensely pursue studying Islam outside of the school curriculum; one takes additional classes on Qur’an every Saturday aimed at reading and memorization; another listens to Qur’anic recitation during the week, reciting and memorizing it, and every Friday attends a *halaqa* where she learns *tajwid* (recitation), *hadith*, and Arabic. For others, involvement in learning Islam at home appears limited to family discussions, reading the Qur’an daily, and prayers. Those students who intensely studied Islam at home, also showed a greater knowledge of the Qur’an through memorization of sizable parts (or *juz*).<sup>31</sup> One female had memorized 28-30 parts of the Qur’an, and half of *Surat al-Baqra*, the longest chapter in the Qur’an. Others reported having memorized on average 10 shorter *suras* (chapters) of the Qur’an usually found in the last, or thirtieth, part. Students normally memorized the thirtieth part during their earlier elementary grades (3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup>), and about two *suras* per school year after 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Effectively, a majority of these students had forgotten the last part of the Qur’an, save for some of the shorter chapters recited during the five daily prayers; only a few students who actively reviewed and recited regularly during the week remembered what they had memorized in earlier grades.

The interviews turned to asking students about their Qur’anic and Islamic studies classes. All the students enthusiastically expressed how much they like and enjoy their Islamic studies instructor and his teaching style. Students described him as “funny, creative, really good teacher” and the class itself as “it’s too much fun” and “learning is so interesting.” Generally, the instructor brings in many anecdotes, stories, and news, which he shares always at the beginning of class. I asked the students how their teacher doesn’t really prepare lectures out of the class textbook. Students thought this style made the class fun, saying “I love how he has a story with everything,” because the instructor connects the anecdotes and latest news with Islam and Muslims. According to one student, this “helps everybody remember” what they learned about

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<sup>31</sup> The Qur’an consists of 30 parts; each part (or *juz* in Arabic) containing a number of chapters or *suras*, which are further divided into ayat(s) or verse(s).

Islam, for the Islamic studies class covers a great deal of early history of Islam and the Prophet, and his stories relate Islam to students' lives in the US. Hence, students like his pedagogy that "combines world issues" with the stories about the Prophet and early Islam. Questions regarding the Qur'anic studies class elicit differing perspectives and opinions, however. Some students like the way "they teach us *tajwid*," and also the meaning of what they're memorizing. Students liked that, first time in the school's history that year, the Qur'anic studies classes started offering interpretation of the Qur'an through *tafsir*, or hermeneutics, explained in English. This created some frustration, for students dislike the way the Qur'anic studies class alternates each week between the instructor (whom they call *sheikh*) where they memorize the Qur'an and learn proper recitation or *tajwid*, and the other week where they learn *tafsir* from another teacher (whom they call *khala/auntie*). The cause of frustration resulted from how the two sessions didn't stay in sync, and often the *tajwid* class went at a much faster pace than the *tafsir*. The *tafsir* sessions progressed too slowly often with the instructor spending weeks and months on repeatedly explaining the same verse of the Qur'an. However, students felt Qur'anic *tafsir* made memorization of the Qur'an much easier. Students expressed preference for memorizing more chapters of the Qur'an in one school year; as mentioned earlier, since reaching middle grades, memorization and overall learning of the Qur'an had considerably slowed down, according to the students. In general, students liked the *tafsir* class taking the time to teach the meaning of each verse of the chapter in the Qur'an. Students appreciated grasping a deeper meaning of a verse or chapter through their *tafsir* instructor. Learning about the importance of prayer explained through *tafsir*, helps them appreciate the daily prayers. For example, some students spoke of the Qur'anic verses that compare human hearts to "fertile soil," and "how hearts harden over time as [sic] they don't pray," but praying keeps the hearts like fertile soil, which their *tafsir* instructor explained. One student admitted, "yeah, she has changed a lot of students' opinion about prayer," effectively.

I asked the students if the Qur'an and Islamic studies classes offer open discussion about Islam in the US, or the US with respect to Islam. Students mostly felt Islamic studies class does provide open discussions about Islam and the US. They cited how the instructor brings in a lot of news into his teachings that affect Islam and Muslims in the US, especially news stories that stereotype Muslims. The instructor will often challenge his students to think how some stories could have a different narrative if the news involved "another religion," or group other than Muslims. One student felt such discussions, "opened our eyes to how much hatred there is towards Muslims." The class has covered such events as the Fort Hood<sup>32</sup> shooting, and how that sent "a negative message about Islam." The class responded by sending a poster to the families of the victims, expressing sympathy, saying "sorry for their loss." Students reported that they have weekly workshops on different topics, and one workshop discussed Islamophobia and "how to deal with that, instead of just walking away." The Islamic studies instructor had also discussed the event where a pasture named Terry Jones in 2010 preached the burning of the Qur'an to mark the ten-year anniversary of 9/11. He shared with his students the experience traveling overseas and often dealing with airport authorities, as a Muslim routinely subjected to suspicion and additional searches. He encouraged the students to educate people about Islam as "a peaceful religion."

I also inquired about their knowledge of capitalism and democracy, and to what extent their classes explored how they can participate in a democracy. Most students did not know what capitalism itself constituted, or what it meant for Muslims to live in a capitalist society. A few

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<sup>32</sup> A Muslim US army psychiatrist on November 6, 2009 carried out a shooting at the Ft. Hood army base in Texas.

vaguely recalled having studied it in 7<sup>th</sup> grade in their social studies class, but most were unsure of what it meant exactly. Capitalism meant “something about governments, and the way they govern and money.” Capitalism essentially means “America is a free country,” and it gives people the opportunities to pursue what they want to be. Another somewhat accurately thought of capitalism as “derived from mercantilism, where somebody takes something but pays less for it, but charges more for it” and where the “business [world] decides on how much somebody is paid,” and not governments. Most students admitted discussing democracy in their social studies class mainly vis-à-vis the constitution, where democracy means having “a say in the government.” None had any idea of how to participate in a democracy, but a student likes “to watch news and understand some issues that are happening.” A student spoke of having written a paper for the social studies class on what they’d like to change in the country. Only one student said Islamic studies class discussed democracy as a fair way to elect political leaders; however, the instructor explained democracy as problematic for Muslims, since in Islam leaders do not get elected based on popular feelings, but based on “descendants” or “royal blood.” Overall, classes present democracy focusing on how Muslims should learn the Constitution and understand what are their rights, so as to understand and benefit from democracy, but not really covering in detail how to participate in it.

The interviews transitioned into the topic of racism and discrimination facing Muslims in the US and how to deal with it. Nearly all students reported discussing racism in the Islamic studies class, but no one mentioned the social studies class, and only one student reported language arts class covering it. Discussions on racism facing Muslims appear to often focus on the racial “profiling” of Muslims mainly at airports, and Muslims often labeled as terrorists. A student, referring to the Islamic studies instructor, said, “like, he always mentions high school” when discussing racism, and how to react to others when they tell you “to do something against your religion.” The attitude on dealing with racism, most students felt one, has to do with changing people’s perspective about Islam and Muslims, or just to ignore them, or “be more open minded about it.” If someone says something racist about Muslims, “like, not make a big fuss over it and stuff.” One should simply explain to racist individuals what Islam really is, or “tell them the facts” about Islam and Muslims so as to rid them of their hatred. We turned to the topic of discrimination, and to what extent they understood it and would recognize it. For most students, discrimination occurs when a person gets treated differently based on his/her appearance, such as when a white person receives “better treatment” than a black person, or someone treated differently based on the color of their skin, or “their appearance,” attire, etc. For instance, a Muslim woman wearing a scarf, or a Muslim family, targeted at the airport for a “random search” not because of a security threat, but for their Muslim appearance and religion, which would constitute discrimination. When people are “bad” towards someone because of the way they look, because of skin color or dress, basically constitutes discrimination. If “you are nicer to a white person than [to] a black person, you are discriminating.” If you’ve been looked upon and treated differently, and people give you looks that say, “get out of here.” During one conversation with a student, I asked if she ever feels angry or depressed upon learning how much anger and hatred here is for Muslims in the US. She responds explaining how “you are supposed to be patient in Islam” and explain to Americans the difference between “good Muslims and bad Muslims.” She tells of two non-Muslim friends who have said to her, “wow, you are really a nice person,” while another assured her, saying “I am gonna tell everybody not all Muslims are bad.” Another expressed how she will not behave apologetically, and not care about what “people think” of Muslims. If people treat her in a mean way, she’ll be patient, and still behave nicely to

people in keeping with the teachings of Islam: “I would just turn to Allah, and maybe, like, make *du’a* and it’ll stop.” She further recommends “just ignoring” the person. One student admitted, “personally, I’ve gone through that, so I think that would be easy to recognize.” I ask him about his experience, and he explains that whenever his family travels overseas, airport authorities in the US make them go through extra “checks” or screenings. He attributes this to family members wearing hijab and having a beard where appearance serves as a sole basis for the entire family to get searched. Another student described discrimination as when a person is made a fugitive simply based on the person’s religious or racial background, and to “segregate the person” from others. Two female students reported never having been searched or treated suspiciously at the airport, even while wearing a hijab. The two also defined discrimination as what a person wears, or one’s skin color. Another student described discrimination as “singling” out a person purely based on appearance.

Students generally had little to say whether the school teaches them about their relationship with American society and racism facing Muslims. According to some students, the school holds a workshop for students every week with different themes, and one workshop discussed Islamophobia and racism. Students learned the best way to deal with racism involved presenting themselves as good examples of Islam and Muslims, as in “show them, like, we are not violent.” People should know “Islam is a really peaceful religion.” Relationship with American society can be a positive one “as long as the people aren’t racist.” Even the relationship with bad people can change if they understand “the truth about Muslims.” As far as racism facing Muslims as an American, one should have good relations with other Americans, and “you shouldn’t define everything in America, like, *haram* (forbidden in Islam), or whatever.” Muslims should make their voices heard by voting, and be aware of what the American government is doing. I talked to the students about what discussions they have at home about racism and America. Based on student replies, parents seemed to encourage their child to volunteer, and “maintain a good relationship” with people in America, to “stand up” for one’s rights whenever faced with discrimination, and be neighborly. Provide help or assistance to the elderly in public places when one sees them struggling to do something. One should not “hang out” with people “who have something against you.” Try to explain to people who speak in a negative way about Islam that they have a “wrong perception” about Islam, and always practice patience with such people without resorting to meanness or violence, and “not lower yourself to their level.” While conversing with a pair of students (girls), we began discussing if they also feel anger towards people who make Islam and Muslims target of their racist behavior and speech. Both thought the best way to react “is not to show your anger,” and “try to kill them with kindness,” said the one who tries to help elderly Americans so that people understand the kindness Muslims bring. I asked them both if a black person consistently went out of their way to be nice to an extremely racist white person, will the white person stop their racist treatment of black people? Both responded saying in the long run, acts of kindness will have some or “a little effect on them.” The student attitudes towards racism and racist people clearly showed the influence of the Prophet’s own life dealing patiently and kindly with his foes, and how they themselves should behave as a minority in the US.

Connecting the issues of discrimination and racism to Islam, I asked the students what the Qur’an and the Prophet’s life teach Muslims living in America. The Qur’an tells Muslims to “treat other religions with respect” and be nice to them even if they are not nice to you. It teaches about the many Prophets of the past, and Allah teaches “us to have perseverance and stay strong to our faith.” We have to “obey Islamic rules, even though we’re in a completely different

environment.” The Qur’an talks about how people “forget your [sic] *iman* [faith] and *ibada* [worship],” for in America the distractions with “information and amusements” can lead to forgetting of Islam. If you’ve been given a lot of wealth, then you must be “generous with other people.” The Quran teaches “how to be human, how to act [humanely]” and “that’s why we fast, to feel for the poor.” People in America and Muslims are “here trying to get more rich” while other people “can barely eat each day.” Muslims should “just get what [we] need, and not what we want.” People should not use violence “when faced with discrimination and racism.” Even though women don’t wear “*hijab*” today, the Qur’an “tells Muslims to still, like, to keep wearing *hijab*.” The Prophet’s life teaches Muslims how he never wavered, patiently bearing “abuse and torture,” never asking Allah to punish the people who abused him, “the hardship and the patience he, like, showed.” Known as “*al amin* (the honest one),” people “trusted him” and we should also “trust people” in America. In the face of abuse, he showed Muslims how “to stay patient and pray to Allah (swt), and maybe it will get better,” and eventually people will realize “Muslims aren’t so bad.” Prophet’s life shows Muslims how to better “our belief in Islam,” and “improve our daily actions.” The Prophet “was a role model . . . and he is still now [for us].” Based on stories about the Prophet, one should “be, hmm, honest and trustworthy.” The Prophet a “modest” and “humble” man “used to sleep on a mat on the floor,” and always gave “*zakat*” or charity whenever he had the opportunity.

As we reached the end of the interview, I asked the students about their opinion of the school, their classes, teachers and staff. I also asked what it meant to be a Muslim in America. The answers slightly varied between boys and girls. For the girls, being a Muslim is obvious “if you wear *hijab*,” and one has to “behave and do good things,” or people will “start stereotyping” Muslims. Islam teaches “me how to behave properly” and being a girl means one has to be “modest” and not “attract attention to yourself.” You have to do “extra work” since girls “they gotta cover up,” which creates risks of profiling at the airport with “the security checks and all,” but “that’s normal.” Effectively, it makes it easier for “guys to blend in with other guys.” Boys spoke briefly about how “I like the way I am living as a Muslim,” and as a boy one can “be a strong Muslim member of our society,” but would like to learn “about being a Muslim in public.” These questions made it somewhat clear that girls feel greater pressure and make a greater effort in representing Islam and Muslims in a likeable way to the general public, simply because of their greater visibility that comes with wearing the headscarf, than the boys at the school.

Interviews with the ten students further confirm the ethnic diversity of the school, and their bilingual home environment offering diverse languages as Tamil, Arabic, Turkish, Urdu, and Bengali, where they also experience the cultural knowledge and heritage of their parents. Students grow up in an Islamic school surrounded by Muslims and Islam, which de facto serves as a spiritual space shaping their identity inside America as Muslims, while shielding them from the “Americanizing” influence of public schools. However, since the secular public school curriculum predominates over the Islamic curriculum, the balance favors Americanization more so than Islam. The insularity of attending a private Islamic school, conversely, creates both fascination and anxieties about attending a public high school for the students, where they will have greater freedom and a diverse population of non-Muslims to socialize with. However, students will no longer have the familiarity of the people and space they occupied for some nine years in an Islamic school. Student input about the school and the courses provide insight on the Islamic subjects vs. the academic subjects. For instance, though students like their instructor’s entertaining pedagogical style, the Islamic studies class lacks the rigorous learning of Islam, for



the instructor spends much time on issues and events inside America that frequently affect Muslims, rather than lecturing substantially on Islam and the topics found in the class textbook. Additionally, student dissatisfaction with the Qur'anic studies class shows that the Islamic curriculum does not hold the same importance as the secular curriculum. The fact that the Qur'anic *tafsir*/interpretation had been offered the first time in the Islamic school's three decades of existence, and even then for a few times a week, testifies to this disparity. Moreover, students don't demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of American society or ways to deal with racism and discrimination, other than just to behave nicely and patiently like a "good Muslim." This mirrors the community's and the school's inability to comprehend the level of racism and discrimination students will face in the future, as they transition into a society that continues to reel from the effects of the war on terror.

The lives of students outside of the Islamic school, as far as practicing and supplementing knowledge of Islam, appear to differ between boys and girls. Boys reportedly spend more time on the computer playing, video games, Facebook, checking email, and sports, which some of the girls also engage in; however, girls spend slightly more time reading, writing, and learning Islam, regularly attending *halaqas*. One female student had memorized 3 parts of the Qur'an, while boys report remembering slightly fewer number of *suras* they had memorized than the girls. This points to the school's Qur'anic studies program needing a transformation, for students feel learning of the Qur'an has slowed down considerably since 5<sup>th</sup> grade. Students greatly enjoy their Islamic studies class and teacher, who does not teach Islam in an intense but in an entertaining way. In the Islamic curriculum, only the Islamic studies instructor discusses latest news and events affecting Muslims, such as racial profiling, Islamophobia, as well as crimes involving Muslims. He encourages students to fight racism and distortion of Islam by educating people about Islam as a peaceful religion. Racism and discrimination facing Muslims receive little discussion time in language arts, and the social studies courses. Other classes discuss democracy as far as comprehending the Constitution for the purpose of protecting ones rights, without covering in detail how to participate in a democracy, other than to vote, and make posters or write letters of condolences to families of victims killed by a Muslim in the US. Only the Islamic studies instructor offers frequent discussions about high school with respect to discrimination and racism, telling the students to guard against people who might influence them to do things Islam opposes. Discussions on these topics usually deal with racial profiling at airports, or Muslims labeled as terrorists. Students' response to racism and discrimination comprises of changing people's perspective of Islam, or to merely just ignore the person's racist behavior, and be "more open minded about it."

Students recognize discrimination in the context of when Muslims are targeted as far as profiling and searches, but also when a person experiences ill treatment or segregation simply based on his/her appearance or skin color. Students have learned to use patience and not become angry or hateful towards Americans who treat Muslims in a racist way. Only one student expressed never feeling apologetic for her religion or caring what people think about Muslims. Students believe praying to Allah, or behaving nicely with racist people, as effective means of defending against racism. School offers weekly workshops where sometimes Islamophobia has been discussed, teaching students to change people's perception that Islam seeks peace, thereby conveying a different image about Muslims. Some students believed in this approach, since they had made non-Muslim friends who began seeing Muslims not as terrorists, but as kind people. Changing people's perception about Islam and Muslims the school sees as an effective way to deal with racism. Confronting discrimination and racism in America with respect to the Qur'an

and the Prophet, students think practicing Islam faithfully would help them in this area. Like the Prophet, Muslims should be generous and behave humanely, and bear hardship and abuse with patience, always being trustworthy and honest. Girls think they should dress modestly even though people in the US don't, and feel a greater burden of representing Islam to non-Muslims. Taking kindly towards racist people and discrimination shows the effects of teaching students about the Prophet, who behaved kindly and patiently towards people who harassed and insulted him, which serves as a model for how the students ought to behave in the US, or as one student said, "to kill them with kindness."

## **5.8 Conclusion**

The analysis of the monthly school newsletters shows the extent to which the school has shaped itself into an American science academy. The newsletters also substantiate the concerted attempts the school makes to socialize parents and their children into an American curriculum and education. It offers advice and outlines the areas requiring parental intervention to ensure their child's success in the secular curriculum, or academic subjects, dealing with science and math. The newsletters fail to mention, or bring to attention, similar strategies on how their child can also excel and succeed in the study of Islam. Moreover, the school has embraced the government's attempt to use Islam and Muslims to further the state's national security needs, such as the Startalk Multimedia project, part of the National Security Language Initiative, which it showcases as an achievement by publicizing its partnership with the US government. The Friday *khutbas*, rich in Islamic content and advice, don't quite connect the teachings of Islam to the community's need for survival and empowerment inside a country that often views them with suspicion and hostility. The interviews with the president of the Islamic center, and the school board reveal the view that Muslims face really no harm or danger post 9/11 to their civil and constitutional rights. In fact, the attributes used to describe America range from "the land of opportunity," to "it's the envy of the world," and capitalism represents the right "balance" found in Islam. The board fails to offer a critical look at American society, or any mention of the war on terror and its impacts on Muslims in the US. It does not view with urgency building unity within the community, such as overcoming the Shi'a/Sunni divide, but enthusiastically engages in inter-faith dialogue in the hope of acceptance by the larger American society. The board feels proud of the school's academic subjects, and embraces the public school model to ensure academic achievement in the California curriculum. Such perspectives perhaps explain the priorities and goals of the Islamic school. Islamic education merely provides the ability to showcase the image of Muslims as that of hard working, honest, successful professionals living harmoniously inside diverse America. Islam, in effect, serves as a partner in the promotion of science and math, and in the achievement of professional and material success. Going largely against what the school founders originally intended for the Islamic school, the board's vision hopes to offer "secular education with an Islamic environment," with plans to transforming it to a profit-making private school. Consequently, it fails to play the role of a community school that shapes and graduates future leaders, who'll one day represent and defend Muslims in a fundamentally racist society. The interview with the principal uncovers similar tendencies of the school. She speaks of deliberately using the public school model to serve the school's philosophy of well-rounded Muslims. For this reason, as someone who migrated as an adult to the US, teaching Shakespeare and Darwin play a far more critical role than teaching Sufism, Islamic literature, and poetry. The notion that Islam, the teachings of the Qur'an, and Prophet's life could help young Muslims develop into leaders serving a persecuted community remains absent.

Paradoxically, Islam becomes subsumed into the secular curriculum, serving to transition students away from their parents' culture and ethnic identity into American society. Effectively, Islam emerges as an amputee shorn of its literary, cultural heritage, and epistemology.

The teachers exhibit similar tendencies through their pedagogy. The social studies teacher offers her students a rich and critical study of American history. However, she teaches students about the genocide of the natives, and enslavement of Africans as far worse events than what Muslims have faced in America since 9/11. This makes obvious the epistemological orientation of an inward-looking public school curriculum, which makes America the point of reference for interpreting all that happens in the world. This undermines the ability of students to make larger, transnational connections between the racist, capitalist, colonial history of genocide and enslavement inside America with its wars overseas as another form of colonial expansion. The language arts teacher speaks passionately of her desire to change the traditional style of teaching and learning, subverting the public school model, so students think of learning as an exploratory group activity, and not the prevalent approach to individual achievement and recognition. She also discusses the labor movement in the US, and attempts to bring in basic themes of the Qur'an to show her students the value of exercising human action, prayer, and patience in dealing with adversity and oppression at the hands of those with power. The class offers American literature representing experiences of women and minorities, but does not include writings by American Muslims. Literature from the Muslim world, or Islamic poetry, simply does not exist in a literature class serving Muslims, for the curriculum aimed at standardized testing takes up all class time. Turning to the religious curriculum, the Qur'anic studies *tafsir* class offers limited themes of the Qur'an that focus mainly on prayer and good manners of the Prophet, teaching patience and kindness in the face of hardship. This class also repeats the same mantra of good, well-behaved Muslims with "soft hearts" living harmoniously in American society, for Islam and Sunna somehow only teach kindness and humility in the face of persecution. Finally, turning to the Islamic studies class, the instructor's lectures predominantly consist of current events Muslims should take note of. It offers no systematic methodology for studying the Qur'an, a book of divine revelations central to learning Islam and the life of the Prophet. Neither does the class dig deeper into the meaning of the Qur'an, its relationship to the Muslim world, nor into American society and its economic system, where the curriculum attempts to connect Islam and America in a meaningful, purposeful, and empowering manner for students. The instructor cannot decide if the school should excel as a science academy, or as an Islamic school offering a vigorous curriculum in the study of Islam. Nonetheless, he acknowledges the wide rift separating academic and Islamic subjects in the school, and suggests offering a joint course combining the curricula from the two subject areas, such as Islamic studies and language arts, to offer a new course to the students. However, as far as teaching Islam in his class, he similarly emphasizes themes of patience and perseverance as sufficient ideals to help students counter racism. His primary focus on ensuring students have an "Islamic foundation" that regulates their moral behavior based on the life of the Prophet, further reveals the complacency of the school and the community towards racism and discrimination it faces.

The views of the parents, in comparison, contrast sharply with others in the community and the school. Having emigrated from around the world, parents value not only their child learning Islam, but also want to preserve the family's cultural and linguistic heritage. They'd like to see their child succeed academically and excel in their knowledge and practice of Islam. They hope Muslim children will have a better understanding of democracy, American history, and capitalism, so Muslims can one day contribute to making the country and the world a better place

for everyone, while changing the negative perception of Islam and Muslims. Noting the low quality of teachers in the Arabic program, parents also feel the school ought to place less emphasis on testing and improve upon the Islamic curriculum. For their children, parents desire a better understanding of the Qur'an that takes a philosophical approach to understanding its overall meaning. They feel the study of Sufism, Islamic poetry, and teachings of both Shi'a and Sunni Islam will help their children experience and appreciate Islam as a civilization, culture, and a way of life that shapes their identities in the US. Parents intimate that their child's Muslim identity, guided by rich teachings of Islam, will offer protection against the influences of the dominant white culture in the US. Since they do not allow their children to celebrate Christmas, Halloween, and Valentine's Day, they express concern that attending a public high school will expose Muslim children to the prevailing American culture and social pressures all teenagers face of drinking, drugs, and dating.

However, the interviews with the students provide a glimpse of how the school's mission to integrate them into American society as good, well-behaved Muslims has taken shape. Unsurprisingly, all students believe in patience and kindness as effective responses to those who target them with racism and discrimination. None of the students expressed any interest in attending a Muslim high school, and obversely expressed sheer excitement at attending a public high school. Only one student (out of ten) interviewed reported the desire and ability to use his family's language at home and at the school, if he could find someone else to converse with. The remaining students experience their parents' language only at home, hearing their parents speak the language, but rarely conversing with them in it. Students express a greater level of comfort speaking English, taking interest in Facebook, sports, video games, American TV, movies, and mainstream culture, but only a few make the effort to advance Islamic learning outside of school. Having observed their personalities during the interviews, and in the classrooms, they indeed come across as kids in any other American public school, a fact echoed also by the social studies teacher who characterized the students in the same manner. Their American identity that dominates the cultural, ethnic identity of their parents, in spite of having attended an Islamic school since kindergarten, and growing up in a mostly non-English speaking home, or in a bilingual environment, corroborates not only the power of American culture, but also the role the Islamic school has played in its promotion through the school's philosophy and the public school curriculum. One of the parents, an American who teaches in the elementary grades at the school, made the observation during the interview, rather disappointingly, that some students resist learning the Declaration of Independence, the State of the Union address, the Constitution, and the Diary of Anne Frank. This demonstrates some resistance by the students to the dominant culture and the hegemonic public school curriculum, and it further highlights the epistemological and ontological tensions, and tendencies of the school. Enlisting the help of a particular understanding of Islam, the Islamic school acculturates the students with its curriculum mediated by its philosophy, principal, teachers, board members, and most of all, by the California Common Core State Standards. This further weakens the bonds between students and their parents' culture and heritage, clearing the way for student integration into American society as well-behaved minorities.

## Chapter 6: Learning Islam

The previous chapter explored the ramifications of combining Islamic education and the California public school model. It examined the tensions and contradictions in an Islamic school that bifurcates classes into the California public school curriculum and Islamic subjects, the effects of this bifurcation on teaching and learning, and the acculturation of students into the dominant culture as American minorities. Adding to the findings of the previous chapter, this chapter assesses the impact of these tensions on the pedagogy and content of the two eighth grade classes, Islamic and Qur'anic studies. It explores the ontological and epistemological effects of the Islamic curriculum, or the approach to learning Qur'an and Islam, on student identities. My first attempt to visit and observe these classes occurred during the spring trimester of 2010, but having suffered a serious bout of flu, I missed more than a month's worth of observations. Returning again in the fall of 2010, my observation of the two classes occurred over 10 weeks, just two weeks shy of the fall trimester. I also had to re-interview students from the new cohort, as those from the spring had graduated that summer. The method of recording class observations consisted of notes/comments, and audio recordings. I would usually place myself in the back corner of the classroom, seated in a chair intended for middle graders, making myself as invisible as possible.

Since the two classes teach Qur'an and Islam using the Prophet's sayings and actions (or Sunna) compiled in various books called *hadith*, the proceeding sections of this chapter, first, provide a brief overview and history behind *hadith*, along with a discussion on Qur'anic *tafsir* (exegesis). Next, the chapter offers an analysis of the Qur'anic studies class observations, examining its pedagogy and content, moving onward to a similar analysis of observations of the Islamic studies class. Additionally, the textbook of the Islamic studies class gets reviewed through a comparative analysis, for the emphasis on *hadith* in understanding the themes of the Quran uncovers the textbook's epistemological approach to teaching Islam, and what this means for student learning and identities. The chapter ends with a discussion of the Islamic curriculum's methodology, ideology, and implications for student identities. Unless otherwise noted, Yusuf Ali's English translation of the Qur'an has been used throughout the chapter when referring to verses of the Qur'an.

### 6.1 *Islam, the Prophetic Tradition (hadith), and the Qur'an*

In Islam's history, the emergence and the recording of *hadith* and Sunna have played an essential role in the formation of traditional or "orthodox" Sunni Islam (Azami, 1992; Nasr, 1987; Rahman, 1979, Chapter 3). The word *hadith* has many meanings and occurs throughout the Qur'an (where the word often signifies a story or event), but in reference to the life of the Prophet, *hadith* refers to his sayings and exemplary conduct (defined as Sunna), observed, memorized, and transmitted by his companions to subsequent generations of Muslims orally and in writing. The Prophet, his life, actions, words, and worship exemplify someone "human yet completely immersed in the sacred," making "every facet of human life" sacred for those who follow the Sunna (Nasr, 1987, p. 97). The Prophet's earthly actions and behavior emerged from a metaphysical state – mind, body, and soul, thoroughly embodying the divine message of the Qur'an – making his life a blessed model for all to follow. Therefore, the study and understanding of *hadith* has played a major role in traditional Islam. Collected by Muslim scholars some 150 years after the Prophet's death as a record of his tradition, or a "store room for the *sunna*" (Azami, 1992, p. 32), in Sunni Islam this prophetic tradition has been compiled into

mainly eight works of *hadith*, each collected, examined, and recorded by an individual scholar of *hadith*. Of the eight, six carry significant authority and recognition throughout the Muslim world.<sup>33</sup> As Nasr (1987) points out, these compilations represent some six thousand “authentic” *hadith* sifted through three-hundred thousand *hadith*, which led to the development of the sophisticated science of *hadith* (Azami, 1992). This science provided a sound method for ordering and classifying of *hadith* by the number of transmitters, the reputation of the person/s transmitting, and the chain of transmission that goes directly back to the Prophet through his coeval companions (*salaf*), and their successive generation of students who learned the *hadith* from their teachers, and passed it on to the next generation of students. Over the course of many centuries, the collected works of *hadith* became the repository of the Sunna.

The initial sheer large scale of *hadith* (300,000) points to their proliferation after the Prophet’s death, and when the effort to compile them began in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century *hijri*, many felt they had a *hadith* they wanted to share with the compiler of their time. Azami (1992, p. 26) notes that some of the people close to the Prophet claimed to possess a large number of *hadith*. One Anas ibn Malik, who served the Prophet for a decade, had some 2,630 *hadith*, which a number of people obtained and wrote down. One of the Prophet’s wives, A’isha, claimed to have 2,210 *hadith*, which three people had in written form. There are many others who claimed to have between a few hundred to a thousand *hadith* of the Prophet. However, according to Azami (1992), the Prophet himself and his early companions forbade the recording of *hadith*, since the understanding of the Qur’an and its preservation needed all the community’s attention (p. 29). As far as learning Islam, this small fact may indicate that the study and understanding of the Qur’an takes precedence over the large and varied body of *hadith*. Rahman (1979, p. 60) also lays out some of the early debates on the collection of *hadith* to record the Sunna of the Prophet, for in the early history of Islam the Sunna and *hadith* represented two separate sources on the life of the Prophet. The companions of the Prophet during Islam’s genesis and their successors learned the practice either from the Prophet himself, or from his companions, creating the consensus (or *ijma*) on the prophetic tradition (Sunna). Before the collection and compilation of *hadith*, most scholars, jurists, and lawyers accepted as reliable these learned practices or Sunna, and rejected the attempt in the second century of Islam to collect *hadith* on the account that narration from any individual (or solitary narration) cannot replace the “lived” Sunna of the Prophet. Thus, the collection and publication of *hadith* encountered some opposition early on, but over the course of seven centuries of collection, organization, and codification, *hadith* contributed largely to the development of laws (*shari’a*), legal rulings, as well as interpretation and commentaries of the Qur’an, thereby establishing a “traditional” understanding of Sunni Islam.

The rich body of *hadith*, both in Sunni and Shi’a Islam, has played an instrumental role in the establishment of traditional Islam. The influential role of *hadith* in interpreting and understanding the Qur’an has remained prevalent for more than 12 centuries, for the reason that the Prophet’s Sunna and teachings found in the compiled *hadith* serve as the primary method for undertaking hermeneutics/exegesis (*tafsir*) of the Qur’an, as well as offering a historical record of events during the Prophet’s life and Qur’anic revelations. This approach to understanding the Qur’an has come under criticism by some scholars who hope to interpret the Qur’an in a way that makes its teachings relevant to the intellectual challenges Muslims face in the modern world,

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<sup>33</sup> Nasr (1987) reports the six *Sahih* (correct/genuine) as *hadith* of *Jami’ al-sahih* of al-Bukhari, *Sahih* of Askari al-Din Muslim, the *Sunan* of al-Sijistani, the *Jami’* of al-Tirmidhi, the *Sunan* of al-Nasa’i, and the *Sunan* of ibn Majah. Nasr also provides a similar list of Shi’a *hadith* compilations assembled about a century later in similar manner as the Sunni body of *hadith*.

calling for an *ijtihad*<sup>34</sup> (innovative reasoning by way of intellectual exertion) that produces a new understanding of Islam in light of the current challenges facing the *umma* (global Muslim community). One such attempt at *ijtihad* relates to the exegesis of the Qur'an undertaken in some twenty volumes by Tabataba'i (Medoff, 2007), an Islamic philosopher and scholar who hailed from a family that for five centuries has produced Islamic scholars in Iran (Algar, 2006). Medoff (2007) provides an overview of Tabataba'i's monumental and groundbreaking twenty-volume work entitled *al-Mizān fī Tafsīr al-Qur'ān* (the balance in exegesis/*tafsir* of the Qur'an), and examines the "hermeneutical *ijtihad*" Tabataba'i has developed. Tabataba'i's *ijtihad* of Qur'anic *tafsir* utilizes logic, Islamic philosophy (or the rational sciences), and a theoretical understanding of Islamic metaphysics. In assigning *hadith* a secondary role in interpreting the Qur'an, instead of the traditional primary place *hadith* has long enjoyed, Tabataba'i relies on the Qur'an itself in interpreting the Qur'an, or "tafsir of the Qur'an by the Qur'an" (Medoff, 2007, p. 20). This approach ensures the Qur'an speaks for itself, and the interpreter's voice does not eclipse the meaning of its verses. In other words, Tabataba'i warns against explanation of a verse based on the interpreter's own personal bias, ideas, and opinions, which he calls *tafsir bi-l-ra'y*, or eisegesis. His chosen approach to *tafsir* involves reflection (*taddabur*<sup>35</sup>), which the Qur'an declares at least in four different *suras*,<sup>36</sup> exhorting Muslims to reflect, ponder, and consider what Allah has revealed in the Qur'an: "Then do they not *reflect* upon the Qur'an? If it had been from other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction."<sup>37</sup> This approach enables an "ordinary person" to discover the meaning of verses in the Qur'an, where pondering and reflection of each verse "in relation to its context and place" within the overall message of the Qur'an lends it to "speak for itself" (Medoff, 2007, p. 24). The "balance" in Tabataba'i's *tafsir* results from his severe critique of not only those "overawed by western civilization" (cited on p. 26), for they reject all *hadith*, distorting the meaning of the Qur'an to meet the dictates of "modern science and empiricism," but also the traditionalist, Sunni and Shi'a, scholars who cage the ability of the Qur'an to speak for itself by interpreting it strictly in light of the large body of *hadith*. This paradigmatic shift through a "balanced" approach and *ijtihad* illuminates the Divine Message of the Qur'an further, unhindered by any "preconceived views" that, otherwise, traditionalists and modernists have managed to impose on and undermine a meaningful understanding of the Qur'an and Islam.

Tabataba'i simply asks the reader/interpreter of the Qur'an to look at the meaning of the verse, and research its meaning in the Qur'an to see "what does the Qur'an say? . . . [and] forgets every pre-conceived theory and goes where the Qur'an leads him" (cited on p. 30). Examining the works of a few other traditionalist Sunni<sup>38</sup> and Shi'a scholars who have insisted on using the tradition of *hadith* to interpret the Qur'an, Medoff concludes that Tabataba'i's scholarly *ijtihad* renews the approach to exegesis/*tafsir* of the Qur'an "without dwelling on any theological, philosophical, mystical, philological or grammatical point," relying entirely on the Qur'an to

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<sup>34</sup> The Arabic word *ijtihad* originates from the word *jihad*, or struggle, which gives *ijtihad* its meaning as an intellectual struggle in reaching a new, fresh perspective on existing ideas and beliefs to address contemporary issues facing Muslims. In modern social science and humanities parlance, *ijtihad* simply refers to achieving a paradigm shift in methodology and understanding of Islam made possible by an *intellectual* struggle.

<sup>35</sup> The word *taddabur* means to reflect, ponder, and consider, implying a level of intellectual, rational effort.

<sup>36</sup> Qur'an (4:82, 23:68, 38:29, 47:24)

<sup>37</sup> Qur'an (4:82, trans. Saheeh International)

<sup>38</sup> The prominent Sunni exegete, Ibn Taymiyyah (d.728/1328), and his student, also a prominent exegete, Ibn Kathir (d.774/1373), relied on the tradition of the Prophet's Companions (*salaf*) and *hadith* for commenting on and interpreting Qur'anic text.

speak for itself (p. 36). Tabataba'i further argues, responding to the criticism and restriction traditional exegete (*muffasir*) place on interpreting the Qur'an, that while *tafsir* based on the exegete's opinion the Prophet forbids, this prohibition does not apply to one engaged in *ijtihad* in interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an (p. 38). Furthermore, the traditional exegetical approach throughout the history of Islam, beholden to a deep understanding of grammar and *hadith* for interpreting the Qur'an, has implied that the Qur'an lacks the perfection, completeness of divine guidance mentioned in the Qur'an itself, where "the Qur'an was practically abandoned" (cited on p. 56). Giving primacy to the human intellect and reason, for that's what the Qur'an aims to enlist in imparting its message to the reader, Tabataba'i says, "Allah, the Immaculate, did not invalidate the probative force (*hujjah*) of intellect in His Book. How could He when its probative force depended upon [the] intellect" (cited on p. 68). Since this *ijtihad* aims to render the Qur'an as a book of divine revelations that requires rigorous intellectual reflection, which the Qur'an itself challenges the believer to do, it lays the groundwork for a younger generation of Muslims living in the West to interpret the divine message with respect to the challenges they face post-9/11. Tabataba'i's effort towards this goal mirrors those of his Sunni cohorts who also seek to engage in *ijtihad* for the same reason.

Seeking a renewal of Sunni Islam, Rahman (1979, Chapter 3) also outlines an *ijtihad* similar to Tabataba'i's that's not beholden to the traditional approach or "orthodoxy" that refuses to depart from a *hadith*-centric understanding and *tafsir* of the Qur'an and Islam. This resistance to *ijtihad* stems from the fear of losing "stability" in Islamic belief and practice the traditional approach offers. Yet, he also criticizes the modernist attempt to reconcile Islam with the modern world by rejecting *hadith* entirely as representing the Prophetic tradition or Sunna. Since understanding the historical context of the Qur'an greatly depends on the rich corpus of *hadith*, Rahman seeks a balanced *ijtihad* through a reexamination of the historical development of *hadith*, and the role it has played in shaping Sunni understanding of the prophetic tradition and the interpretation of the Qur'an. With respect to the analysis of Qur'anic and Islamic studies class observations below, the foregoing discussion on *hadith*, *tafsir*, and *ijtihad*, then, should serve to examine the traditional Sunni, "orthodox" tendencies of the Islamic school, its Islamic curriculum embedded in a public school model, and what if any attempts at *ijtihad* occur in teaching Islam. Effectively, this should make visible epistemological and ontological implications for students, who must negotiate their identities as Muslims, as Americans, and as minorities inside a modern secular capitalist democracy and its dominant Euro-American, Judeo-Christian culture.

### 6.3 *Learning Qur'an*

The eighth grade Qur'anic studies class meets 3 times a week, offering memorization and interpretation (*tafsir*) of the Qur'an, which two separate instructors teach. Generally, during some meetings the class will split in half, where one half will learn memorization with the other instructor in a separate classroom for half the period, and then switch with the other half in the *tafsir* class. The class sometimes also alternates each week between the two teachers, teaching *tafsir* or memorization. The instructor of the memorization class, a male immigrant whose native language is Arabic, generally does not communicate in English much, and the students refer to him as "shaikh" (a learned wise person or scholar). The *tafsir* class instructor, also an immigrant and a native speaker of Arabic, uses English to explain the meaning of the Arabic verses of the Qur'an. Her students refer to her as *khala* (auntie in Arabic), a word students use to address female staff at the school. Although my observations focus on the *tafsir* class, I sat in on the



memorization class a few times to observe the organization, pedagogy, and pace of the class. Usually, the instructor will play verses of the Qur'an from a recording, or recite them out loud himself, with students reciting loudly, following the recitation. During memorization, the instructor will call on individual students, and have them recite certain verses from memory. The memorization component of the class offers the traditional pedagogy for students to memorize Qur'anic text through repetition of listening and repeatedly reciting verses of the Qur'an. However, my observations of the Qur'anic class mainly focuses on the *tafsir* component, as far as what meanings the instructor offers the class through her style of interpretation. Although the *tafsir* class also covers and reviews rules of *tajwid*, which students learned in previous grades, my analysis solely looks at the themes and meanings of the Qur'an the instructor highlights, derives, and connects with student lives. The observations analysis below offers an account of one complete class meeting, and then moves to highlighting topics and issues covered during the trimester. The format (month/day/year) has been used to refer to a specific class meeting/observation.

The Qur'anic *tafsir* class sometimes meets in two different rooms, with different seating arrangements. Students either sit in rows of desk facing the blackboard, or in clusters facing each other. The class follows a certain rhythm. The instructor starts the class with the Islamic greeting of "Salam Aleikum," and begins discussing the meaning of Qur'anic verses covered during the previous session. She'll ask students to read or recite the verse in Arabic and provide the English meaning of each word in the verse. Reciting the verse in Arabic, she raises her voice above those of the students, the cheerful and encouraging tone of her voice constantly quizzing the class for meaning of the Arabic words she just recited. As if engaged in a competition, students respond excitedly and shout out varying shades of meaning of the Arabic words their teacher just recited, assembling the meaning of a verse a word at a time. The instructor continuously gives feedback with the tone and pitch of her voice, praising a student or class with "*mumtaz*" (wonderful), or "*tabarak Allah 'aleik*" (good job). Students display great interest in arriving upon the meaning of the verse with their teacher's help, as if the meaning of the entire verse suddenly unfolded in their minds. After reciting a new verse in the *sura* (a chapter of the Qur'an) with many repetitions, and its meaning fully explained and understood, the instructor asks her rambunctious students to read the verse silently for a few minutes to reflect on its meaning. Following the silent reading, the teacher tells students to pair up and explain each half of the verse to their partner. The class fills with voices of students explaining the verse to each other, with some students yelling out questions to the instructor over the loud chatter that fills the classroom, seeking explanation of a word. Not everyone always pays attention, of course, and often the boys in the class find themselves chided (in a gentle, motherly fashion) by their instructor for talking and distracting others. During any portion of a lecture, or when a student reads aloud a verse, she'll review the rules of *tajwid* (recitation). Especially if students have a pending test involving recitation, a substantial part of the class hour gets devoted to reviewing these rules.

### 6.32 Class Observation (10/7/2010)

The hallways echo with Arabic recitation of the Qur'an coming from another classroom, where students memorize aloud Arabic verses through repeated recitation. The instructor, speaking in her usual ebullient voice and Arabic accent, starts the class and asks a student volunteer to come up and explain rules of *tajwid* (recitation). A boy volunteers and begins reciting names of letters and vowels in Arabic one by one. She briefly asks the class how each one letter or vowel applies to rules of recitation. As students loudly give answers, the teacher

interjects frequently to add to the explanation of the terms, naming each one in Arabic. She smiles and thanks the student volunteer, referring to him jokingly as *ustad* (teacher): “*Inshallah, jazak Allah khair, ustad* (May Allah reward you with goodness, teacher).” The instructor asks the class to turn to *surat al-Hadid* (The Iron) in their Qur’ans, saying “let’s review the *tafsir*.” She asks the students, “who does [or] makes *tasbih* (praise) all the time for Allah ‘azzawjal (the mighty)?” Students take guesses. She begins going over the first verse of *al-Hadid*. She recites the first word of the verse “*sabbaha*”<sup>39</sup> as a cue, and students read out loud the entire verse in Arabic. Saying “again,” she reads aloud slowly, enunciating clearly the Arabic words of the verse, one after another, as students follow along. She asks students for the “main idea” and meaning of the verse, repeating the question, who makes *tasbih* (praise), referencing the first word in the verse *sabbaha*. A student responds, “everything.” She says, “exactly, everything in heavens and earth, and [what] Allah *azzawjal* created makes *tasbih* to Allah *azzawjal*; everything, the birds and plants.” She continues to repeat, “all living and non-living things” praise Allah.

The instructor momentarily changes the direction of her lesson, and asks if anyone can find the 99 names of Allah in the first eight verses of *al-Hadid*. “From aya one to eight, what are some of the 99 names?” Students mull over, and one female student answers, with the teacher repeating the answer out loud to the class: “*al-aziz* (the mighty), *al-hakim* (the wise), which are in aya number?” Students respond, “one!” Another girl calls out two more names she found: “*al-awwal* (the first), *al-akhir* (the last),” with the teacher echoing the student, explaining the meaning of the two names of Allah, respectively, “no one before Him, and no one after Him.” Another female student points out “*al-dahir* (the manifest), *al-batin* (the intrinsic or hidden).” A girl raises her hand to name the one she found, and the instructor points at her and nods, “*al-qadir* (the determiner).” She asks, “in how many days did Allah *azzawjal* create *assamawat wa al ard* (heavens and the earth)?” The instructor calls on a girl, who answers correctly, “*sitat ayyam* (six days).” The entire class reads out loud verses 3 and 4, with the instructor correcting the Arabic pronunciation, reminding her class of the *tajwid* rules during recitation.

Explaining to the class how verses 4 and 5 share the same meaning, the instructor links verses 4 and 3, “because all of them, Allah *azzawjal* [is] talking about the same subject.” She asks students about verse 5, “Allah *azzawjal*, he reminds us of what?” Pointing out that verse 5 and 2 share same meaning, where “He owns everything,” she explains that Allah gives an example of His power in verse 5 and 6, and poses the question: “What is the example about?” One student begins explaining: “He turns night into day.” The instructor acknowledges that as the correct answer, and recites the verse in Arabic, explaining the link between the two verses further. Allah owns everything, and he created everything. She reminds students of *surat al-Qasas* (The Stories) in the Qur’an that discusses how only Allah can control the coming of each hour, night, and day. Even though scientists just explain the revolving of the earth in the solar system responsible for this, every morning one has to thank Allah for changing night into day: “It’s a blessing from Allah *azzawjal*, because if he decides to have all our life [sic], day time or night time, no one else can bring the day, ah, or night. Right?”

Moving to verse 7, she recites each word, and explains in English that the verse’s seek belief in Allah and His messenger, and to give charity, such as “*zaka*, [to] help needy people, right?” Students are asked to refer to verses 2 and 5, where Allah describes Himself as the owner and creator of the heavens and the earth, so that “one gets the message that He owns everything.” She says it’s not easy to spend money for others, so one is reminded to spend money. “Spending

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<sup>39</sup> *Sabbah* (to praise) is the verbal form of the noun *tasbih*.

money is not easy for people. Oh, I have twenty thousand dollars, and I have to give five thousand away.” Emphasizing that spending often poses a challenge for people, she says Allah reminds us, “He owns everything, even the money that you have, the car you have, the house you have, Allah *azzawjal*, he owns these things.” She tells students because Allah “made us *khalifa*<sup>40</sup> (representative)” on earth, one needs to obey Allah’s commands, such as charitably spending money. After asking students “what does *ajar* (reward) mean,” she explains reasons for spending money, since Allah owns everything, the person shall receive a reward for that charitable act. She concludes that humans don’t own anything, and Allah gives them everything, so spending out of what Allah has given earns such people a reward. She moves to explaining verse 8 about people “who did not apply Allah’s orders” of spending money as mentioned in verse 7. She asks “who wants to read number 8?” A girl starts reciting the requested verse, and the teacher reminds her to keep in mind the rules of *tajwid*. The teacher begins translating each word of the verse, and asks the class to recite the verse again together. She proceeds with the *tafsir* referring to a previous verse, where Allah reminds the reader that he owns the heavens and the earth, asking believers to spend money. Allah created everything so humans can live comfortably on earth. “Did He leave us like this to live by ourselves,” she questions the class. “He sent who?” A girl responds, “prophets.” She refers to the Prophet as the messenger who “delivered the message to us. Allah *azzawjal* He sent Prophet Muhammad, and he is human, like us. He didn’t send an angel to teach us...to make the message clear to us.” She does not finish explaining the entirety of verse 8, and asks students to look at verse 9. She calls on one student to read the verse, who reads it slowly, pausing frequently. “Again, I want someone else to read it, and I want to see if you have any of the *tajwid* [rules] that we learned,” she asks another student to read it again.

As a student recites, she corrects her pronunciation, explaining the meaning of a word in the verse. She quickly quizzes the class about the *ahkam* (rules) of *tajwid* in reciting the verse in Arabic. “What did you hear, what did you see from *ahkam tajwid* that we took?” A student tries to answer, but does so incorrectly. Another student raises his hand, and she points to him asking, “did you see an *ahkam*?” He provides her with the right answers. The instructor spends the next 10 minutes reviewing the rules/*ahkam* of *tajwid*. She asks another girl to read verse 9 again, who recites it faithfully according to the rules of *tajwid*. The instructor begins covering the meaning of the verse, outlining each word at a time, quizzing students’ knowledge of Arabic vocabulary found in the verse. She offers some *tafsir* on the verse: “He sent Prophet Muhammad, *salallahu alei wa sallam* [peace be upon him], to help us, to live the right way on this earth.” She asks the students, “did He send Muhammad by himself? No. He sent with him the Qur’an [the students loudly echo the answer with her]. . . . And why [did] Allah *azzawjal* sent [sic] the Qur’an with Prophet Muhammad?” She recites parts of the verse in Arabic that answers this question, and begins discussing the concepts of darkness and light mentioned in the verse. Explaining that one cannot do anything in the dark without turning “on the lights,” she underscores how according to the verse the Qur’an brought people out of darkness into light, “so you can see.” The work of Prophet Muhammad “showed people the right path, the straight path to?” The students respond loudly, enunciating the answer, “to *janna* (paradise)!” She smiles, and points out that “is *al-noor*,” or the light the verse alludes to as the “right path.” As the class ends, she shares a final thought on the verse, and connects the “straight path” to how the Prophet’s companions stopped drinking date wine once they received guidance from the Prophet.

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<sup>40</sup> The word *mustakhlifin* in verse 7 has been translated in other translations as heirs, successors, or inheritors of wealth or the earth. The word *khalifa* means vicegerent or representative, and shares the same Arabic root with *mustakhlifin*.

### 6.32 Analysis and Overview

In the class meeting presented above, the instructor covers the *tafsir* (interpretation with commentary) on *surat al-Hadid* from verses 1-9, which she repeats over the next two weeks. Following a rhythmic pattern, she explains each verse, with direct student participation, always stopping to ask students what the Arabic words mean. Her discussion leads the class in covering the topic of everything praising (living/non-living) Allah, and some of the 99 names or attributes of Allah found in the first 8 verses of *al-Hadid*. Students find Allah's attributes, such as the Mighty, the Wise, the First, the Last, the Manifest, the Hidden, the Determiner. She drives home the point that Allah has power over everything, creating, owning everything. Allah makes the passing of time possible so that nighttime and daytime occur, which no human being can prevent or control. She connects this fact with another *sura* in the Qur'an as proof, and moves deeper into *al-Hadid*, covering topics of charity and fear of Allah. The instructor creates a context with her interpretation for understanding who Allah is, that He controls the world and not any human being, agency, or institution. The role of human beings in all this, she explains, is that of a representative (*khalifa*) of Allah on earth, when in fact the word *mustakhlifin* here by many translations means those who inherit or become heirs of wealth left behind by their families, and thus, offer some of it as charity to the needy. She further lectures that Muslims must obey Allah, and behave generously by giving charity even when one has little money, for all things belong to Allah including one's wealth. However, leading her students into a profound discussion about Allah, the relationship between the Creator and humans as His representatives, the Qur'an and the Prophet as "guiding light," she ends the class without connecting it to the lives of students inhabiting a society known for excessive materialism and greed. Instead, she connects it to the Prophet's companions who stopped drinking wine as a result of his message. Without providing a historical background of the *sura*, she does not point out that the verses she covered about charity address the wealthy in Mecca, namely the established powerful Quraish tribe, and what responsibility in Islam the rich and powerful bear towards the poor. Neither does she explain how charity serves to overcome disparities between the rich and the poor, for example, in the US.

Overall, her interpretation and commentary points to a sense of individual morality, as in the companions of the Prophet who stopped drinking wine, and not a larger message of social justice, responsibility, and charity practiced by those who will "enter paradise." This limited interpretation continues throughout the trimester into verse 17 of *al-Hadid*. The discussion of the Day of Judgment (10/21/10) continues with respect to the *mu'minin* or faithful in verse 12, and believers who'll enter paradise, which she cross-references with verse 15 in *sura Muhammad* that also provides rich a description of paradise as a place of rivers of wine, milk, and honey. Her focus deals with "how does it affect my behavior, my way of life?" (11/1/10), showing the emphasis on individual, personal spiritual responsibility that's elaborated on further in the coming class meetings. Her commentary remains silent on what does it mean to be *mu'minin* growing up in American society, dealing with varying social pressures of selfishness, greed, materialism, and other ill influences and programming teenagers face through TV shows, Internet, movies, and video games. Or the impending big changes they'll face entering a public high school, potentially encountering racism in an age of Islamophobia. When discussing the "action items" (11/4/10) for students to implement in order to become *mu'minin* or to do during 10 days of the month of Hajj (11/8/10), to increase their *'ibada* (worship), she limits it to good manners and prayer: "[L]ike, if you don't start [sic] with Salam, how about you start with Salam?"

If you don't read Qur'an everyday, start at 5am to read everyday." She encourages her students to fast on the day of 'arafa (one of the 10 days of Hajj). The discussion lingers on becoming faithful believers or *mu'minin* only through the rituals of worship, such as prayers and fasting. All of the meetings in December, the instructor discussed the topic of humility or *al-Khushu'a* in *surat al-Hadid*, and commented on how to achieve this humility in one's heart through the five daily prayers. She elaborates further that *al-khushu'a* represents a certain spiritual level and "not every *mu'min* reach[es] that level," calling it "a high level" (12/13/10). Her insight and advice consist of praying in a quiet room to achieve this spiritual state of the heart, and the high importance attached to ritual prayers, for that's the first thing Allah "will look at when I am dying." She resumes (12/14/10) the discussion on *al-khushu'a* (humility), and details how one loses *al-khushu'a* when one forgets to pray, to read the Qur'an, as that "really affects my heart," and the opposite of *al-khushu'a* begins to happen. The instructor compares this hardening of hearts to verse 14 of *surat al-Mutaffifin*,<sup>41</sup> that refers to how engaging in dishonesty and fraud leave a "stain" on the heart, like a stained "white shirt" which becomes hard to clean after many stains. Something as simple as saying "salam" contributes to one's *ibada*, she advises, and again recites the Prophet's *hadith*: "The best among you start[s] with salam." The last meeting of the term (12/23/10) and the instructor compares sports with achieving *al-khushu'a* in one's heart through effort, time, and practice. "You have to practice, right, to be a good basketball player, or soccer player, right? She spends considerable time lecturing that young Muslims spend just two minutes to make their daily prayers (or *salat*), which seems miniscule compared to their other activities. She tells of a companion of the Prophet who became Muslim upon hearing the recitation of verse 16. Without feeling awkward about this particular story, she tells students, "he is about to go make *zinnah*,"<sup>42</sup> but the effect of this verse on his heart stopped him from engaging in extramarital sex.

The instructor brings in examples of something as mundane as playing sports, but this spiritual message of becoming *mu'minin*, achieving humility of the heart, needs to connect to their lives in a far more complex manner, beyond the traditional moral restrictions of avoiding alcohol and sex. Students need to connect how their spirituality will help them deal with their challenges in life, but also other actions they should take, beyond prayer, that will contribute to their spiritual salvation. These actions can translate into their hard work towards learning all aspects of Islam, achieving academic success, and their struggle against discrimination and persecution they and their own community will encounter. Moreover, the *ijtihad* (discussed earlier) with respect to the work of Tabataba'i in the interpretation and commentary of the Qur'an needs to happen precisely for this reason. Giving students a sense of the overpowering and determining force of Allah, where no one has any control over the passing of night and day, needs to also be supplemented with the privileged position that human beings enjoy in this entire creation. The role of mankind in this vast creation of Allah, as *khalifa* (representative), cannot just be reduced to worship and charity alone. Students should understand how Islam can influence and guide their action in dealing with the challenges of earthly life. The lives of young students require making meaning of the Qur'an in such a way that it lights their way not just to paradise in the afterlife, but also to making the right decisions, and choosing the right paths in their worldly lives. In many places, the Qur'an describes upholding truth, justice, and defending the oppressed also as part of faith and worship (*ibada*), and interrelating these themes can serve the "earthly" life of young Muslims to motivate them towards these noble goals in a

<sup>41</sup> Quran (83:14): "By no means! but on their hearts is the stain of the (ill) which they do!"

<sup>42</sup> This word refers to illicit sexual intercourse.

tremendously important way that benefits them and their communities spiritually, materially, politically, and socially.

#### **6.4 Learning Islam**

The Islamic studies class normally meets 4 days a week, sometimes fewer, and may not meet up to a week or more if the instructor travels for conferences, community and religious events, such as visiting Mecca every year for the Hajj with a group of Muslims from local communities. His classroom is arranged in a different way than other rooms in the school. Students sit in clusters of two to four, with individual desks facing each other. Girls and boys sit in their respective clusters, and there are slightly more girls in this eighth grade class than boys. Born in England, the twenty-something instructor grew up in the San Jose area of Northern California. He wears something similar to a cassock that covers him to his ankles. He also wears a lengthy traditional beard, less the mustache, which often represents the beard style of Sunni Muslims from South Asia. His appearance, surprisingly, does not represent his American personality, identity, and style of speaking, where he'll often times switch to using slang or Ebonics when emphasizing a point to his younger audience, who most likely often hear these expressions in the context of hip-hop beyond the school environment. The instructor of the Islamic studies class, unlike the Qur'anic studies class that centers its discussions and lectures on purely spiritual topics of the chapters/*suras* of the Qur'an, lectures little from the course textbook, or on Islam directly. Rather, he uses a passage from the textbook as a point of departure for all his colorful lectures filled with anecdotes, personal stories, latest news, and humor that the students apparently enjoy greatly.

He has a disarming way of getting students to listen, to follow his instructions without coming across as overbearing, or authoritative. In fact, his teaching style seems similar to a conversation between two good friends, where one friend (the instructor) excels in telling captivating stories, and the other (the class) enjoys nothing more than listening to them. Whenever sharing a story, the instructor always enunciates and narrates with a modulating tone, speaking slowly, sometimes theatrically, placing emphasis on words to make the story sound dramatic: "He shot his *own* child! Can *you* believe this?" My notes based on the actual observations and audio recordings of the class meetings consist of some 17,000 words, about less than half that of the Qur'anic studies class, for the instructor usually lectures for the entire class hour. Surprisingly, students stay far more alert, paying attention to every anecdote and joke the instructor shares with the class, than these very same students do in the Qur'anic studies class, which revolves around constant student participation. This probably results from the instructor's light-hearted approach and interesting stories intended to keep students informed about issues affecting Muslims around the country and around the world. Similar to the observations for the Qur'anic studies class presented above, this section also deliberates on the full content of one class observation, followed by an analysis of it and of the remaining class meetings.

##### **6.41 Class Observation (10/6/10)**

The class starts with the instructor asking students to turn to Chapter 4 (Unit A) in the textbook. Although the chapter in the book is entitled, *Ayyoub, The Prophet of Patience and Thankfulness*, the Islamic studies instructor spent the class hour lecturing on and discussing a small subtopic. This subtopic, listed in lavender on the bottom of page A27, reminds the reader in three short sentences, with the heading, "What should a Muslim do when another Muslim becomes sick?" It offers three brief points on the obligation of Muslims to visit another who has

fallen ill, to offer help, and to make supplications. The instructor takes issue with the heading of this section, saying “I disagree with that. How do you think we should correct that?” He suggests changing it to, “what should a Muslim do when another *person* becomes sick? It doesn’t have to be a Muslim.” He discusses the three items in this section, and expands on each one.

Underscoring the need that Muslims should visit the sick regardless of their religion, he begins talking about the etiquette in paying someone sick a visit. “In Islam to go visit a sick person is a requirement.” He tells class about how and when to visit and asks the class, “what do you think you should be conscious of when you go and visit another person who is sick?” The classroom buzzes with answers. “Don’t stay for long. Make your du’a and get out. Let them know you’re coming.” The instructor confirms these answers, adding, “don’t get all offended” if people say it’s not a good time to visit.

He jokingly imitates someone “offended” for having their offer to visit rejected: “I was gonna go visit them, and they said ‘no’ to me.” One should not get offended if anyone refuses the visit, since people usually refuse for a lot of different reasons that have nothing to do with the visitor, he explains. Again, underscoring that one should not show up unannounced, he continues to humor the class with impressions of people paying someone a visit: “Knock, knock. Oh, Salam Aleikum, how are you? We’re here to see you. What’s for dinner?” Students giggle. He outlines two types of visits. One is the Islamic visit where one informs the sick beforehand of one’s visit; find out a good time to visit; keep the visit short. He tells class, “if your visit has gone over 5 minutes, you’re doing something very wrong,” and recommends no more than 3 minutes, unless one is visiting a family member or friend. Alluding to his own son’s stay in the hospital, he prefers people visit the hospital, rather than visiting his family at home. Hailing from an Indian family himself, he lightheartedly pokes fun at Indian families who visit the sick at someone’s home with expectations to “make tea for them . . . and sometimes these people just sit, and sit, and sit.”

Clarifying that Islam provides guidelines for visiting the ill, citing a book of a “Shaikh Abdel Fatih Abdel’s on visiting the ill,” which the class will read at the end of the school year, the instructor underlines the importance of making “your visit very, very short.” He shares with students his own experience as a clergy visiting the ill in hospitals, whereby he keeps his visits brief, whether it’s someone terminally ill or recovering from surgery. Focusing on one such visit, he talks in length of one young Muslim he visited in the hospital, “who had just had brain surgery.” He tells his students how the otherwise “fine young man” spent three days in surgery, who suddenly felt ill one day, and after visiting the doctor next day, learned he had developed brain cancer. After surgery, “he had, like, a tube coming out of his head, right here (he draws a picture of it on the board), and then a little bottle where they were collecting, like, his blood.” The class silently listens, captivated by the story and the picture the instructor has drawn. He brings the story to a close. “The point I am trying to make, you gotta remember this, because a lot of our parents make this mistake” of staying too long to visit someone ill. He compares “our parents,” who eagerly go to visit the ill but “they sit for too long,” to “our generation . . .” pausing for a minute as he scans the room to fill in his unfinished thought, “we don’t really go,” students and teacher admit simultaneously, while another student utters, “sad.” That “our generation” sends an email, and “we don’t bother any more,” but there has to be a “middle ground” as far as visiting the sick, for “that’s part of your humanity, part of you being Muslim.”

He exhorts his students to visit the sick regardless of their religious affiliation, since that’s how American Muslims ought to behave: “I want you guys to grow up growing into America as Americans.” Even if “one hates Muslims, puts their garbage bag in your front door

every morning type of a neighbor,” deserves a visit when they fall sick. In a blunt and humorous manner, he advises his students that if anyone says visiting an ill non-Muslim is *haram* (forbidden), “what do you do to them?” Some students reply, “you slap him in the face.” The teacher repeats the same words, “you slap him in the face, thank you very much,” demonstrating that he has suggested this exact response previously. He takes this position because the Prophet visited non-Muslims who had fallen ill. “He taught us this by example. If anyone tells me that he didn’t, I’ll take him and punch all of his teeth out,” he says jokingly. The class listens with awe. “It’s ok, in fact, it’s encouraged for you to go and visit non-Muslims,” he informs them further.

Shifting to the third point in the textbook about visiting the sick, he tells students what one should do during such visits. “What are you supposed to say to them?” Students respond with, “say *du’a*.” He echoes their answer and says it doesn’t matter if they are Muslim or not, and to make “*du’a* for *shif’a* (cure and recovery) . . . ya Allah, give Michael health.” Recapping, he highlights the two points of “time management” and visiting at an appropriate time. A student raises her hand and asks if during *du’a* “you can ask for their guidance [to Islam]?” The instructor responds with, “why not?” He tells a short story of a Muslim who emailed him regarding an ill colleague, and wanted to find out how to convert the person to Islam, which the instructor disapproves of doing. “You’re telling me you’re gonna go to the hospital, while this person is sick, and in pain, and in difficulty, and tell him to change their [religion]? First, you need to introduce your faith.” He concludes the topic of “our parents” vs. “our generation,” where the former, “on one extreme, go all the time, *mashallah*, but they sit for too long. We, our generation, my generation, we don’t go at all.”

Covering the types of “*du’as*” or supplications to say when visiting the sick, he asks students what they are, and writes two *du’as* on the board in Arabic. He tells another story of a friend’s mom he had given one of the supplications to recite for her sick friend, which can also be used as a “cleanser from bad deeds, right?” The woman recited the supplication while visiting the sick friend, who asked about what she had just recited. When the sick friend learned that the supplication worked “as a cleanser of sins,” she became “frustrated” and wondered what she had done “that God had to punish me so badly” with a serious illness. The instructor explains that illness does not result from sin, but making supplication for one’s sins can provide spiritual benefit. The instructor writes the supplications on the board, and the students begin copying them. A student asks, “do we have to memorize these?” The instructor answers in a humorously sarcastic tone. “I wonder why you’re writing them? Yes!”

The instructor translated these two supplications from Arabic: 1) I ask Allah the magnificent, lord of the mighty throne to cure him. 2) Oh Allah, we ask you for beneficial knowledge, plenty wealth, and cure for all diseases. He tells the class: “The second one you should recite every morning.” While students write the *du’as*, he tells one student to yawn with the left hand covering the mouth. “It is Sunna to use your left hand, and it’s the back of your left hand,” because of germs. He recites a hadith saying “if you don’t cover your mouth, guess what? *Shaitan*/Satan pees inside your [mouth] on two occasions: one of them is when you yawn and don’t cover your mouth, and when you don’t wake up for *fajr* prayer.” A girl responds, saying at *fajr* “that’s in your ear,” and the instructor agrees. After making lighthearted and humorous conversations with students, he says to also memorize the *du’a* on page A28 in the textbook with slight modification. All three *du’as* with translation must be memorized by Monday, and he tells them to write this assignment in their calendars. Students pull out their thick calendars/planners to record the assignment. He tells the class everyone has to spend “next 10 minutes



memorizing.” The class fills with the sound of students reciting and memorizing the Arabic supplications until the bell rings.

#### 6.42 *Analysis and Overview*

Taking the small subtopic in the textbook as the point of departure, the instructor spends the entire class lecture and discussion, presented above (10/6/10), on visiting the sick. He makes it overwhelmingly clear to students that Muslims should visit anyone who has fallen ill regardless of the person’s faith. Emphasizing the etiquettes of making such visits, where one should always notify the person beforehand and not stay for too long, he berates immigrant Indian (or immigrant) families for doing just the opposite. Following the rules of American etiquette and social protocol, he presents himself as an archetype for the right way to visit the ill. Making a great effort to distance the students away from their parents’ way of visiting the ill, while underscoring the irrelevance of the ill person’s faith, even in this context he expresses the school’s overall mission and ideology. “I want you guys to grow up growing into America as Americans.” This aversion, and possible underlying hostility, to the immigrant Muslim mindset sees further expression in telling his students, albeit jokingly, “I’ll take him and punch all of his teeth out,” if anyone denies that the Prophet didn’t visit non-Muslims when they became ill. The American etiquette, social protocol, and the Sunna for visiting the sick serve as a basis for pulling students away from their parents’ heritage, values, culture, and norms. He refers, again, to the Prophet’s Sunna by reciting a *hadith* when a student yawned without covering his mouth, which shows the extent to which his pedagogy tends to center around *hadith*.

The remaining class lectures largely deal with a collage of stories and events surrounding Muslims, but topics focusing just on learning Islam from the textbook receive little class time. Students usually do the textbook readings themselves, sometimes as homework or in class, and write answers to the study questions that the instructor checks during class. The instructor provides commentary or *tafsir* about the Qur’an often based on his own opinions and *hadith*. For example, his insistence that the soul will not leave through the “collarbone,” as the verse in the Qur’an<sup>43</sup> details, but through the toe based on a *hadith* (11/3/10). As far as topics dealing strictly from the textbook, the Islamic studies instructor lectures and discusses stories of Ayyoub, Zakariya, Maryam, and Yahya that dot the lectures in bits and pieces throughout the trimester. The only class meeting devoted entirely to teaching of Islam didn’t happen until the end of the trimester (12/14/10), focusing on the patience of Zakariya, the importance of prayer, and that one shouldn’t just ask for “things” but also ask for guidance, good health, good grades, and what really matters in life is kindness towards one’s parents. These stories basically highlight the power of patience, accepting what Allah has willed, and the positive effect of supplication and worship in seeking Allah’s help in overcoming or asking for things that may seem impossible: Maryam always having food in her room, out of season fruits, like mangoes; Zakariya praying for a son in his old age and gets blessed with his son Yahya. Being patient, charitable, observing the five daily prayers, and asking Allah for anything. Politeness, obedience, and respect always to one’s parents, similar to Yahya. Dealing with patience when struck by illness, calamity, death, or loss of any sort keep recurring, and according to the textbook and the instructor, the Prophet’s own life offers an example of patiently dealing with suffering, and to not complain, wail, or mourn over loss in an extravagant display of emotions (10/19/10).

The month of Hajj occurred during the trimester, and the making of Hajj saw lots of projects and activities for students. The instructor offered a detailed discussion of sites after he

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<sup>43</sup> Qur’an (75:26): “Yea, when (the soul) reaches to the collar-bone (in its exit).”

returned from Hajj (12/6/10). In other lectures, the Day of Judgment and Resurrection loom large, as well as how to avoid hell and earn paradise, mainly through varying levels of belief in *tawhid* (Oneness of God), which will serve as everyone's salvation regardless of their faith. However, the instructor makes a point that it's not so much only one's faith that will count on the Day of Judgment, but those who lived lavishly while millions around them languished in abject poverty and destitution, such as the millions of poor crammed into Bombay slums vs. the Hindu billionaires living in their own high-rises nearby (11/2/10). However, he does not draw attention to the disparity right there in the Silicon Valley, or in Saudi Arabia when sharing a long story about giving away his skullcap to a poor man in Mecca (11/3/2010). The only meeting (12/7/10) that dealt entirely with political issues affecting Muslims resulted from the discussion on projects students will work on as part of the Character Development program launched that school year. Giving examples where one project may require students to do a study on the entrapment of a Somali teenager in Oregon, accused of attempting to detonate a fake car bomb<sup>44</sup> in November of that year, he begins talking in length about the FBI. Referring to the FBI agents as "jerks," he tells the class of "an FBI agent that I actually work with, like, I kind of know him." Additionally, he talks in detail about the Park51 Mosque, Gaza Flotilla,<sup>45</sup> and the tendency of the media to always distort any news about Muslims, such as the coverage of the Park51 Mosque in New York City, as the "Ground zero Mosque" to divert attention away from the Gaza Flotilla. He does not talk about Malcolm X when the class topic looks at all the prophets mentioned in the Qur'an, and the discussion moves to "prophets in America," briefly examining the history of the Nation of Islam and Elijah Muhammad, followed by a long discussion on Mormonism instead (12/8/10). As far as issues affecting Muslims overseas, he mentions in great detail the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, casting the entire issue in a moderate language of peace, partly assigning blame to the Palestinians for selling their land to early Jewish settlers, and that Muslims can learn a lot from Jews, but also to Israel for denying Palestinians basic human rights. There's also an interest in making students aware of the prison industry, which the instructor discussed in length (10/18/10), and a guest speaker who spoke at length about teaching Islam to prisoners during the entire class period (12/13/10). These two instances showcased the school's involvement in service-learning projects, for the students will help raise donations for Muslim prisoners.

The instructor discussed the month of Muharram extensively (12/16/10), particularly the 10<sup>th</sup> day ('*ashura*). Commenting on the massacre that took place on '*ashura* at Karbala involving the Prophet's grandson, Imam Hussein, along with his entire family, he noted it as a day all Muslims should fast, calling for Shi'a and Sunni unity. With respect to the death of Imam Hussein and Islam, he poignantly observed, "our entire tradition, our entire history is based on sacrifice." However, he did not provide any clear application of that sacrifice to the lives of young Muslims in his class, nor did he make it clear that Imam Hussein's "sacrifice" resulted from his struggle for justice and truth, confronting the rise of a tyrannical Muslim dynasty, which led to the Sunni/Shi'a division. Perhaps casting the "sacrifice" this way without its reasons resulted from not pleasing one side by offending the other, as he has a few Shi'a students in his class. However, making the reasons for Imam Hussein's sacrifice explicit would greatly benefit young Muslims facing racism and hostility in America, and give meaning and direction to the great struggle they'll face in many years to come.

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<sup>44</sup> The FBI agents had helped the suspect assemble, plan, and execute the fake bombing (Cook, 2010).

<sup>45</sup> Gaza Flotilla in May 2010 sailed from Turkey bound for the Gaza strip, under blockade by the Israel, bringing humanitarian supplies to the besieged Palestinians (Macintyre, 2010).

The Islamic studies instructor tends to focus little on the themes of Islam in the textbook. When those themes do come up during class lectures, the discussion usually leads to stories often unrelated to those themes. Islam appears in a shape and form where only patience, charity, and supplication seem like its most defining characteristics. Moreover, the interpretation of Islam the instructor presents serves to pull children away from their parents' heritage, as in the incorrect way "our (immigrant) parents" visit the sick, or the incorrect way they wail at funerals, and the fact they will not visit the sick who's not Muslim. The real motivation behind all these corrections of the immigrant way of doing things come down to the view he articulates forcefully: "I want you guys to grow up growing into America as Americans." The Islamic "foundation" the instructor spoke of during his interview (presented in the previous chapter) revolves around the themes of good moral behavior, as he once lectured class (12/28/2010) on not listening to music that condones forbidden acts (sexually promiscuous behavior). The spiritual piety, the moral purity, politeness, good manners, respect, and finding ways to seek forgiveness of Allah serve the purpose of getting what one wants in this life, and paradise in the afterlife. Though the instructor's anecdotes and personal stories attempt to connect Islam to the world, his lectures do not explicitly point out the need for and power of human action, guided by a deep sense of spirituality, which Malcolm X's life exemplified as an American Muslim. His long lecture focusing on the events of Karbala, highlighting the value of sacrifice, would go a long way if he made explicit the implications of that sacrifice. For example, serving one's community through one's learning, hard work, and career path. Sacrificing a career in high-paying professions (engineering, finance, business) by pursuing a career as a journalist, a writer, a scholar, or a philosopher who would contribute to securing a better future for Muslims in the US. Proudly narrating (11/3/2010) the biography to his students about the "genius" scientist and "simple" man who has worked for the same company in the Silicon Valley for 50 years, who shows up everyday during Ramadan to serve food to people in the Mosque, only perpetuates the school's image as a science academy, where Islamic teachings and virtue serve as a means to achieving the American Dream.

### **6.5 The Islamic Studies Textbook: Learning Islam**

The textbook, *Learning Islam* (Sadoun & Salem, 2007), consists of 6 units (A-F) with each unit containing a number of chapters based on the theme of the unit. The six major themes consist of the following quoted titles of each unit (in order):

Allah Controls the World [divine destiny]; Portraits of Faith [stories of Zakariya, Yahya, Maryam, Jesus]; Beautiful Worships [fasting and Hajj]; Islam Prevails Over Arabia [Prophet's battles, his death, family and companions]; The Sunna: the other divine revelation [hadith]; Leading a Pure Lifestyle [avoiding alcohol and forbidden meats].

However, the analyses below focus on Unit E, and the topic of Unit A, *al-Qadr*. Unit E (*The Sunna: the other divine revelation*) reveals the approach of the entire Islamic curriculum of the book and the school itself. The textbook authors lay out in detail their opinions about the relationship between *hadith* and the Sunna (or *sunnah*) with the Qur'an that together determine the understanding of Islam, serving as a basis for Qur'anic exegesis. The textbook discourages studying the Qur'an without understanding the Sunna and without the guidance of a learned scholar. Indeed, as pointed out in a lengthy translation and commentary of the Qur'an (Nasr, Dagli, Dakake, Lumbard, & Rustom, 2015), no person has a monopoly on understanding the divine revelations contained in the Qur'an, for it appeals to the layman as well as to the spiritually or intellectually cultivated: "Qur'anic language is at once concrete and sensuous, to be

understood by the simplest believers, and symbolic and metaphysical, to satisfy the needs of sages and saints” (p. 35).

The textbook describes the Prophet’s Sunna comprising of his words, actions, approval, and any attributes his companions reported, which came to be called *hadith*. The book says little about the fact that the Sunna, as discussed earlier in this chapter, existed in living practice among the Prophet’s companions, who learned it from the Prophet himself; that they taught and passed on his Sunna to others before it was compiled into books of *hadith* some two centuries after the Prophet’s death. The textbook makes this leap from quoting a Qur’anic verse that the Prophet “speaks only”<sup>46</sup> divine revelations, to how this verse proves “Hadeeth of the Prophet is part of Wahy, or divine guidance and revelation” (p. E4). The book conflates both the Quran and the Sunna as “*wahy*,” divine inspiration or revelation. The *Sunna* becomes as divine as the divine and miraculous Qur’an itself. However, continuing further in Chapter 1, it outlines the “roles of the Sunnah in Islam” as providing three functions or roles. First, the *Sunna* provides an understanding of “how to apply” Islam (p. E5), for the Qur’an does not detail the exact way to pray, fast, or perform Hajj. Secondly, “many phrases and concepts” needed clarification, which only the Prophet could provide. Thirdly, somewhat distancing itself from its earlier pronouncement, it admits the Sunna serves to supplement “additional details” not found in the Qur’an; even though the Qur’an serves as the “first source of knowledge,” learning the Qur’an without the *hadith* could “lead to misunderstanding Allah’s directions” (p. E6).

Chapter 1 of Unit A continues to provide verses<sup>47</sup> from the Qu’ran, proving the “mandatory” practice of listening to the Prophet through the compiled body of *hadith*. All these verses from the Qur’an speak of the Prophet as the best role model (33:21), to obey Allah and the Prophet as a mercy (3:132), obeying the Prophet is like obeying Allah (4:80), if one loves Allah, then follow the Prophet (3:31), and that “believers” should accept the Prophet’s judgment on all matters. Needless to say, even though the textbook makes a point of using *hadith* for understanding the Qur’an, here it does not provide the historical context of these verses to show that these verses addressed events and situations the Prophet encountered during his time. Without a doubt, this book accentuates the Sunni “orthodox” or traditional approach to learning Islam through the compiled works of *hadith*. Neither the Prophet nor the Qur’an encouraged or singled out *hadith* as a must for learning Islam, for all these developments happened a few centuries after the Prophet’s death. Further, as discussed earlier, Azami (1992) notes the Prophet himself forbade the recording of *hadith* in order to draw the community’s entire attention to learning, understanding, and preserving the Qur’an (Azami, 1992, p. 29). Ironically, in this chapter the textbook presents a *hadith* that one day people will “only follow the Qur’an” and not the *Sunna* (p. E8), and it fails to point out that the *hadith* in question points to the Prophet referring to his lived example to the companions, and not to the body of *hadith* that came centuries later. Of course, the Prophet advised, expounded, and clarified the Qur’an to his companions and the formative community of early Muslims, but to what extent the compiled *hadith* truly represent the words and ideas of the Prophet, remains a mystery, the development of science to separate false *hadith* from authenticated ones notwithstanding.

The remaining chapters of Unit E continue to discuss the sophisticated science and methodology of *hadith* that classified all the collected sayings of the Prophet and his companions’ into various grades of authenticity (Chapter 2). Chapter 3 erroneously reports,

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<sup>46</sup> Qur’an (53:3): “Nor does he say (aught) of (his own) Desire;” (53:4) “it is no less than inspiration sent down to him.”

<sup>47</sup> Quran (33:21, 3:132, 4:80, 3:31, 4:65).

“recording of Hadeeth started at the time of the Prophet” (p. E16), but also declares the Prophet discouraged “writing them at that time” (p. E17), and that the lived tradition of the Prophet survived through memorization (p. E19). It further elaborates on the different books of *hadith* that came to be compiled centuries later, and the purpose they served: Some compilations contributed to legal rulings, while others organized by topic, or by who narrated the *hadith*. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the four “major books” of *hadith*, detailing the biography of the compiler of each book, and Chapter 5 concludes Unit E by continuing the story of the compilers and what each one achieved and contributed to the collected body of *hadith*. Interestingly, even after clarifying that the Qur’an serves as the primary source of Islam, the textbook offers the reader complete silence on a methodology for studying and interpreting the Qur’an. The fact that an entire unit (out of six units) consists of the history and methodology of *hadith*, as well as biographies of the four “major” compilers of *hadith*, further shows the textbook’s strong *hadith*-centric approach to learning Islam. It offers nothing to the reader in a similar treatment of understanding and studying the Qur’an. What it does offer consist of four chapters of the Qur’an with scant historical context or methodology, without any mention of who translated the verses of those chapters. This inclination favoring *hadith* as “divine revelation,” then, obviously creates a certain epistemology that colors the discussion of the history, teachings of Islam, and the Qur’an. In order to examine this further, the forthcoming section offers a comparative analysis of Unit A in the textbook, *Allah Controls the World*.

#### 6.51 *Al-Qadar*

Unit A of the textbook covers some of the chapters that the Islamic studies instructor also lectured on (chapters 4-6 and 8) during my class observations. However, it’s chapters 1-2 of this first unit in the textbook that seemed to have established some general assumptions about Allah, life, and human existence with respect to Islam that this section critically vets. These two chapters discuss the sixth pillar of faith, *al-qadar*, which the book translates as “Divine fate or destiny” (p. A3). The textbook describes *al-qadar* as having 4 components: *al-ilm* (divine knowledge), *al-kitaba* (written destiny), *al-mash’eeah* (divine will), and *al-khalq* (creation). Divine knowledge (*al-ilm*) is explained as Allah having knowledge of the entire creation and what goes on in it. This knowledge of what goes on or will go on in the universe, or written destiny, has been recorded by Allah in a book (*al-kitaba*). In this fashion, divine knowledge and written destiny culminate in divine will (*al-mash’eeah*), according to which all of creation (*al-khalq*) functions or was brought into being. Woven out of the same thread, according to the textbook, all four components share this notion of fate or divine destiny. The textbook purports that belief in *al-qadar* will invoke Allah’s mercy, and help humans accept loss and tragedy in their personal lives; it will help Muslims be content and prevent them from being envious or jealous; it will teach humility and faith in God, rather than in magic and fortunetellers; and it will help Muslims be generous in giving to the poor (p. A9). Divine destiny, then, determines happiness, tragedy, poverty, and prosperity, according to the textbook. Rahman (1989), on the other hand, presents an epistemological view of *al-qadar* that places the Qur’an at the center, as a major theme of the Qur’an, and this results in a profoundly nuanced and distinctive understanding of *al-qadar*.

Rahman bases his definition of the word *qadar* in the way it appears in the Qur’an, “. . . it should be noted here that in Arabic the term for both power and measuring out is *qadar* and the Qur’an uses *qadar* in both senses” (p. 12). Elaborating further, he states that in pre-Islamic Arabia the plural of the word, *aqdar*, meant “fate,” or “a blind force that ‘measured out’ or

predetermined matters that were beyond man's control," such as birth, sustenance, and death. However, even in pre-Islamic Arabia the idea of fate, or *aqdar*, didn't apply to all aspects of human action. The Qur'an appropriated this term and changed the idea of blind fate into an "all-powerful, purposeful, and merciful God." Rahman also explains the Arabic word in the Qur'an, *amr* ("command"), which is closely associated with the "measuring" and these two notions the Qur'an uses to describe the way God has assigned certain measurement (or certain potential) to everything in creation, such as the sun, the earth, and the moon, and the entire planetary system moves with precise motion due to this "measurement" assigned by God. It is by God's command, or *amr*, that nature and creation obey the measuring assigned to them: "[...] the laws of nature express the Command of God" (p. 13). Since nature cannot disobey God's commands, and has submitted fully and absolutely to this measuring, the Qur'an considers all of nature and creation Muslim, for a Muslim is someone who has fully submitted to the commands of God. Rahman offers translation of verses from the Qur'an (3:83) to illustrate his point: "Do they, then, seek an obedience [or religion] other than that to God, while it is to Him that everyone [and everything] in the heavens and the earth submits?" More importantly, the significant difference in the way Rahman describes *qadar* is in the context of understanding God, for that is also the title of the first chapter in the textbook where the discussion on *qadar* initially appears. In other words, one must comprehend the idea of *qadar* as applying to God and all of creation, since the Qur'an presents this concept to convey the attributes, and the majestic glory of God, rather than what benefits it carries for humans who believe in it. Rahman's explanation of *al-qadar*, unlike the textbook, establishes a more clear relationship between God, nature and mankind, and how mankind is distinguished from rest of creation, as he further expands this explanation of *al-qadar*.

Rahman (1989, Chapter 4) elucidates the connection of *qadar* to nature and all of creation, the intent of which in the Qur'an is to convince the reader/listener of the infinite knowledge of God. That through measurement, or *qadar*, in the form of precise physical and natural laws that the earth floats, along with the rest of the planets in the solar system, in complete empty space without sinking; all of creation submits (without freewill) to the command of this measuring makes it Muslim; the only being in this infinite creation who possesses the choice to voluntarily submit to the commands of God, to be either Muslim or not, is mankind. What the Qur'an so convincingly points out to mankind is the miraculous existence of creation and nature, alongside the miraculous Qur'anic revelations, based on this measuring or *qadar*, as proof of God's power, knowledge, and existence. Furthermore, the miraculous creation of nature and the Qur'an for the purpose of serving mankind further illuminates the power and freewill measured out to mankind. It is through a weighty treatment of *qadar* that one might begin to appreciate the presence and infinite knowledge of God and man's position with respect to God and all of creation. The textbook not only misses this point entirely, but also conveys a jumbled and misunderstood notion of *qadar* that deeply speaks of a predetermined destiny of man who also, like the rest of creation, must mutely submit and obey God and His divine plan. From the point-of-view of students, the textbook fails to clearly explicate where divine will ends and where human agency begins. It fails to help students understand the existence of creation and nature vis-à-vis *qadar*, and more importantly, how that directly contrasts the submission of all of creation (hence, categorized as Muslim) to the Creator with the ability of mankind to choose whether or not it submits to God. Nowhere does the textbook convey to the reader that Allah has classified all of creation as Muslim for its complete submission to the divine will, but "measured" out (as in *qadar*) to humans the choice to accept or reject that submission. This view

of *qadar* gives students an ontologically critical view of what it means to be a Muslim, whom God has blessed with the ability to determine his/her own actions and fate.

As far as the topic of freewill and to what extent God entrusted it to man, Rahman (1980, Chapter 2) undertakes a lucid discussion using verses from the Qur'an. Namely, that Adam (the first human) possessed capacity for creative knowledge, which the angels and Satan (or *Iblis*) did not have. Allah commanded the angels in paradise to prostrate before Adam,<sup>48</sup> giving Adam a privileged position. Similarly, mankind with the divine knowledge from Allah exercises that privilege by choosing to either follow the divine commands, or ignore them, as did Adam.<sup>49</sup> Effectively, *Iblis* turned against mankind, and he's described in the Qur'an as anti-human, not anti-God. This creates the struggle between man and Satan. God is with mankind, given mankind makes the necessary effort, for humans possess the freewill to be God's vicegerent (*khalifa*) on earth. Rahman describes this role of humans as referring to the "primordial" nature (or *fitra*<sup>50</sup>) or purpose of humans. Freewill, then, becomes a willful struggle against the anti-human forces on earth. The very same struggle all the prophets faced against Satan, but Satan failed against those who struggled through their spiritually guided freewill. It is such men and women of virtue who maintain their "primordial nature [*fitra*] upon which God created man" (p. 18), for the primordial nature of all things created is to obey God's command, but only humans have the ability to change their primordial nature away from obeying the Creator. Subsequently, this conveys the message that Islam and divine revelations require some level of voluntary "submission" to the divine will, for otherwise humans have the infinite choice to live and act as they please. For example, the body of *hadith* didn't result from divine action, but human action involving early scholars who undertook an enormous task to collect hundreds of thousand narrations of the Prophet, his family, and companions. The early scholars applied their brilliant minds to develop the science and methodology of authenticating *hadith*. If the textbook made this point clear, then students would understand that their ability to study, reflect, and act accordingly will determine the course their lives take, rather than the direction already "written down" and predetermined.

The textbook's third chapter entitled, "Allah Gives and Deprives Wealth" in Unit A provides a discussion of wealth and poverty. It merely attributes the poverty and wealth as being from God, without mentioning the responsibility the wealthy bear towards the poor, and it does this by confusing the reader as to the meaning of the Arabic word '*rizq*.' *Rizq* may be understood as the things provided by God to sustain all living things on this earth. All the elements of nature, water, air, sunlight, and even divine guidance or the Qur'an fall into this category of *rizq*.

However, what man produces with his own hands and schemes, such as wealth and material goods, wars and oppression, may not necessarily be categorized as *rizq* but as worldly possessions and effects of human action. This distinction the textbook also fails to make clear:

People usually think that the source of their Rizq (sustenance) is their parents', bosses', or employers'. The fact of the matter is that Allah is the ultimate provider of Rizq to all of His creations. (p. A20)

The chapter continues and arbitrarily cites Qur'anic verses that have little relevance to the topic of *rizq* in the textbook's definition of the word (cited on pages A20-21):

There is no moving creature on earth but its sustenance depends on Allah: He knows the time and place of its definite abode and its temporary deposit: all is in a clear Record [Qur'an] (11:6).

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<sup>48</sup> See Qur'an (2:30-34).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., (2:35)

<sup>50</sup> The word *fitra* ranges in meaning from instinctive, to inherent, innate, and natural disposition.

It is Allah Who has created you; further, He has provided for your sustenance; then He will cause you to die; and again He will give you life (30:40).

The message of “divine destiny” continues, suggesting that as Muslims in America, you will encounter difficulties, but you ought to remain patient and attribute your plight to the divine will of Allah, for it is Allah that has determined your social and political status in society through the curtailment or enhancement of *rizq* in your life. In other words, do not blame America for any difficulties you might face as a minority, instead meekly submit yourselves to whatever difficulties you face as American Muslims. The book continues to expound in an illogical and incoherent fashion on this theme in the following text alongside Qur’anic verses:

A poor Muslim should spend as little as he or she can afford, while a wealthy person should spend more for the convenience of his family and himself. Allah says in Surat-ut-Talaaq. (p. A21)

Let the man of means spend according to His means; and the man whose resources are restricted, let him spend according to what Allah has given him. Allah puts no burden on any person beyond what He has given him. After a difficulty, Allah will soon grant relief (Qur’an, 65:7). (cited on p. A21)

The quoted text and the Qur’anic verse the book presents have little to do with understanding how “Allah Gives and Deprives Wealth.” This Qur’anic verse actually deals specifically with the topic of divorce, hence, the name of the chapter in the Qur’an, *surat al-Talaaq* (the Divorce). Verse 7 the textbook presents occurs logically from the 6 verses preceding verse 7, describing the details of divorce, and the required amount given to the woman as a financial settlement/compensation when a divorce occurs (explained in verse 7), hence, “let him spend according to what Allah has given him.” The message here is not to say that the rich live lavishly according to their means, while the poor must tolerate austerity according to theirs. Clearly, the textbook deliberately undertakes a modified epistemology of Islam in order to eliminate conflicts the understanding of Islam may pose to social and class disparities. Consequently, the textbook limits the understanding of social and political issues, and changes the ontological impact of the Qur’anic verses in the way it presents and interprets them. It defines and limits what it means to be a Muslim by presenting an Islam that’s both epistemologically and ontologically altered so as to minimize conflict with American society and institutions.

Throughout, one repeatedly finds the hardships along with some battles Prophet Muhammad and his followers undertook. In each instance, the textbook fails to explain in broader context why those early Muslims found it necessary to defend themselves against persecution at the hands of powerful Meccan tribes while disseminating the Qur’anic revelations? Why the struggle was waged, and how it relates to the idea of freewill that a Muslim must exercise in order to uphold the commands of justice, truth, and peace laid out in the Qur’an? Contrarily, the historical events of early Muslims and the Prophet in the textbook become a mere metaphor to instruct students in the virtues of patience and kindness in the face of suffering. The textbook makes little, if any, attempt to elaborate in a more comprehensive manner why the Meccan Arabs and powerful tribes felt their entire way of life threatened by the Prophet’s message and spirituality. It does not raise questions of social and political significance challenging students to critically connect Islam to contemporary social and political issues that reveal the economic inequalities and the underlying ideologies behind them. Instead, it ontologically presents an Islam that promotes a subjectivity of being docile (“kind and patient”) citizens and minorities of a modern nation-state. This may explain why the instructor, instinctively, does not spend much time lecturing from the book, since he constantly wants to



draw student attention to the more relevant events and stories affecting Muslims, seeking their interest and attention. Hence, a rift in the school curriculum takes place where Islam as a source of knowledge informs only one's spiritual life, and not the worldly issues of social and economic disparities, racism, and persecution.

### 6.52 *Social Justice*

Further on, Rahman (1989, Chapter 5) offers a discussion that the Qur'anic revelations came to pose an ideological threat to the oppressive and predatory Meccan social and political order, where both the economic and spiritual structures ensured the protection and perpetuation of those in power. According to Rahman, revelations and Prophet Muhammad's mission occurred in a particular social and political context. The oppressive conditions the wealthy tribes of Mecca had created for the orphans, the poor, and the women, desperately required reform. The Qur'an repeatedly warns and condemns the powerful Meccan tribes against their abuse of power and squandering of wealth on themselves. It condemns the exploitation and persecution of everyone under their domination, depriving the marginalized their rights. Among other things, the Qur'an forbade the cheating of the orphans out of their inheritance, female infanticide, collection of usury, divorcing women without just compensation, etc. These practices had grown out of the pre-existing social and political order Prophet Muhammad grew up in as a meek orphan himself. Devoting his entire adult life, he gradually opposed and reformed the social order with the help of the divine revelations. The Prophet's life, if anything, exemplifies the Qur'an as guiding human agency to the path to liberation from oppression inside oneself, and from the social order humans had created with their own freewill intended to serve their own narrow interest and desires. It is these interest and desires without divine guidance that created the Meccan social order, which the Prophet sought to change by offering Islam to the Meccans. In a sense, the book fails to illuminate that it is human freewill that creates injustice or oppression, and divine revelations serve to help lead humans out of the oppressive state of their own making. Conversely, the book promotes the myth that poverty, injustice, and oppression result from divine will as a test from Allah; that He grants wealth/poverty in the form of *rizq* to whomever Allah pleases. But even as a test, it's human agency coupled with divine guidance that enables mankind to prove to the Creator that it can overcome the oppressive state of existence by understanding and embracing divine guidance. This essentially captures the life of Prophet Muhammad and his Sunna.

The textbook stays clear of a discussion of history that looks at the oppressive, exploitative, and predatory system among the Meccan tribes. It doesn't draw this parallel between pre-Islamic Mecca, and today's society here in the US or the larger capitalist world-system where a global elite class exploits and oppresses the entire world (Elliott, 2017; Lipton & Creswell, 2016; Stewart, Heather, 2012). The textbook doesn't discuss this or make that connection with respect to *rizq*, or wealth and arrogance in Chapter 3 of Unit A. In undermining the paganism of the Meccan Arabs, Islam came to reform systematically the entire social, economic, and religious/spiritual order of Meccan society, which escapes the textbook's view entirely: "The Qur'an's goal of an ethical, egalitarian social order is announced with a severe denunciation of the economic disequilibrium and social inequalities prevalent in contemporary commercial Meccan society" (Rahman, 1989, p. 38). Islam came to enable social and spiritual reform that affected the social and political institutions of Arabia. The early Muslims and the Prophet sacrificed power and status to reform what was for the Qur'an an inhumane way of life among the Meccan Arabs. This culminates into an understanding that the fundamental role of

Muslims is to serve as reformers in any society when confronted by social inequalities resulting from the political and economic order of the day, whether locally or globally. Alluding to poverty and the arrogance of the wealthy, the American textbook on Islam says nothing about the duty of Muslims to challenge the practices of any social and political order that exploits people, that robs people of their livelihood, that abandons those who are dependent and needy, and where a complete social and racial hierarchy prevails, justified through a neoliberal system of thought and governance. In short, the textbook offers silence in pointing the finger at the capitalist world-system as today's version of the bygone Meccan society.

Lastly, the major fundamental difference between the textbook's discussion of *al-qadar* and Rahman becomes clear. The textbook relies heavily on the passages of various *hadith*, or uses *hadith* to explain the Qur'anic verses and to support the textbook's perspective on those verses. In contrast, Rahman relies solely on the Qur'anic verses, most of which he himself translated into English and explains without the aid of any *hadith*. He does this to show that the Qur'an, given that one undertakes a systematic study of it as a whole, communicates to the reader the actual message that made Islam a world religion, appealing to all of humanity. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Rahman's approach parallels Tabataba'i's, whose "hermeneutical *ijtihad*" of the Qur'an emerges from using the Qur'an itself (interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an). In contrast, the textbook's *hadith*-centric epistemology obfuscates the true essence and spirit of Islam that alters the ontological effect on their learning and conceptualizing of the Qur'an and the Sunna.

## 6.6 *Student Identity*

Wortham's (2006) research on student identity and learning in the classroom offers theoretical resources for understanding social identification, metapragmatic models, and sociohistorical views about a group or community. The social identities, in this case Muslim children of immigrant families, overlap with the subject matter, and that social identification and academic learning occur simultaneously and interconnect (Wortham, 2006, Chapter 1). Socially identifying people based on certain types of behavior and characteristics creates "a power relationship," and this power relationship emerged from European bureaucratic systems' need for social classification, which "changed how people thought about themselves and others," Wortham argues (p. 16). He concludes that acts of academic learning simultaneously create social identification, and acts of social identification simultaneously are acts of academic learning. More specifically, he theorizes that learning not only has a certain epistemology connected to it, but it also carries ontological consequences: ". . . because it involves changes in social being as well as changes in knowing. We are constantly and inevitably changing, even if in small ways, becoming different types of people as we learn new things" (p. 25). In essence, what one learns and how it is taught, determines what one becomes. This proves useful for understanding the pedagogy, the content of the lectures, and the epistemology of the curriculum in shaping both American and Muslim identities.

Furthermore, characteristics and behavior of certain people, then, become signs of identity, or "as indications that the individual belongs to a certain social type" (p. 30). These signs or characteristics of identities over time establish a metapragmatic model: "A metapragmatic model is a model of recognizable kinds of people (e.g., inappropriately resistant students) participating in a recognizable kind of interaction (e.g., refusing to participate in class)" (p. 32). A metapragmatic model, in the context of the Islamic school and Muslims, applies to the notion of being an American citizen, and the associated values of being patriotic, and respect for

the laws and institutions of his/her country, contrasted against Muslim students of immigrant parents resisting “Americanness” by displaying immigrant traits in behavior, opinions, and beliefs about Islam and America. Additionally, Worthams’ discussion of how perceptions about a certain people or community develop through a sociohistorical understanding of a group also applies here. The sociohistorical views of Islam and Muslims before and after 9/11 in America present a racist perception of the religion and the community as one that oppresses women, values and rewards violence, and promotes terrorism around the world—in short, Islamophobia. This leads to the understanding the many ways in which the Islamic school goes about attempting to conform its students to the metapragmatic model of being peaceful, law-abiding Americans, while simultaneously organizing itself in reaction to this sociohistorical view of Islam and Muslims having “extremist” tendencies. The school attempts to ensure that students don’t learn Islam to the extent where they cannot “fit in” as American minorities, and mediates a complacent religious identity in place of a cultural one. It teaches no cultural or literary facets of Islam, which would cover such things as art, poetry, music, mysticism, Sufism, or any part of the last 1400 years of Islamic history constituting these topics. The school willfully avoids these topics, because it aims to replace cultural Muslim identity with an American one. As far as the Islamic curriculum, the Islamic studies textbook fails to mention how Islam came to undermine a political and economic system that preyed on the weak and the dispossessed. Making such themes of the Qur’an invisible, effectively, precludes any critique of today’s world, where the school’s philosophy and mission translate into a curriculum of uncritical coexistence with, or embracing of, American society and institutions.

The identity of students belonging to immigrant families mediated through the Islamic curriculum, based on an American sociohistorical view of Islam and Muslims, serves the metapragmatic model of being good, tolerant Americans, as opposed to immigrants refusing American values and culture. The identity and subjectivity negotiated by the Islamic school in a dominant white society is largely self-made (Ong, 1996), because of the curriculum choices the school has made largely influenced by the sociohistorical view of its own community. These choices consist of limited teachings of the Qur’an and Islam, the epistemology of Islam the textbook deploys, the Common Core State Standards serving as a model of education, and the embracing of America’s post 9/11 ideological framework, such as the Arabic program’s cooperation with the Startalk program, part of the federal government’s National Security Language Initiative (discussed in Chapter 5). The school’s curriculum and orientation appear partially to be in reaction to the fear of student radicalization resulting from America’s war on terror that has seen invasions of a number of Muslim countries (Maira, 2005). This fact is supported by what topics are delineated in class lectures, and the comment by the Islamic studies instructor during his lecture that he works with an FBI agent, “or I kind of know him,” offering a glimpse of the post 9/11 partnership the Muslim community and the US government have embraced. Furthermore, the school prevents student learning of Islam (engaging in a form of suppression) that helps students become politically engaged with issues affecting them and Islam in the US, or with US policies globally (Abu El-Hajj, 2007). The curriculum draws its understanding and teachings of Islam largely from an epistemology of Islam that aids acculturation and assimilation into patriotic American identities. The ontological effect of this epistemology attempts to turn students into uncritical followers of an Islam that is leached of its history, political, and spiritual ethos, engendering Muslim-American identities perfectly at harmony with the political and economic order of the day. This points to the need for a model of

education that serves the needs of a persecuted community, which I discuss next in the conclusion of this research.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

*We're not in the middle of a war on terror. We're not facing an axis of evil. Instead, we are in the midst of an ideological conflict. But the bigger fight is with a hostile belief system that can't be reasoned.*

9/11 Commission

*We want education for our people that exposes the true nature of this decadent American society. We want education that teaches us our true history and role in the present-day society.*

The Black Panther Party

### 7.1 *Ethnographic Study*

Much analysis and interpretation of the ethnographic data of the research site has preceded this conclusion. Presenting the many voices, the experiences, the tendencies, the politics, and policies make the task of taking any sort of a final perspective or position a difficult one. Unlike quantitative research involving numbers, the many conversations and observations presented in this study of a social, cultural, spiritual complex consists of participants who cannot directly influence the analysis and conclusion of what they thought, said, or intended in this document. Therefore, as a researcher, one must at the outset make transparent the difficulties and limitations of writing a conclusion based on the ethnographic data collected, analyzed, and processed, for this activity itself transforms the data from its original form to something new through the interpretive tendencies, shortcomings, and understandings of the researcher. In that sense, this conclusion not only represents the tendencies and politics of the community, but to some extent of the researcher as well.

This dissertation has outlined the role of American and Islamic education in a *longue durée*, world-systems analytical framework. The case study component consisting of an Islamic school located in the Silicon Valley has afforded a detailed discussion on the need for a shift in envisioning Islamic education inside the US post 9/11. Basing itself on the California public school model and the California Common Core State Standards, the Islamic school through its philosophy, curriculum, and the teaching of a certain interpretation of the Qur'an, Sunna, and Islam has aligned itself with the neoliberal knowledge complex and ideology of the US post 9/11. The ethnographic data has made this insight possible by providing a look at the tensions and contradictions of Islamic schooling modeled on a public school. The school makes the learning of, and excelling in, science and math the main focus, which leads to the curtailing of Islamic learning. The school newsletters certainly make this clear, highlighting appropriate skills, habits, school events, and activities that ensure success in these subjects. The newsletters offer little advice to parents encouraging learning of Islam at home for their child. Moreover, the school has embraced a partnership with the federal government by participating in the Startalk program, part of National Security Language Initiative headed by the NSA, which the school newsletter boastfully advertises. The president of the Islamic center, the school board, and principal express little apprehension surrounding racism and discrimination facing Muslims, or students once they graduate to attend a public high school. The views of the board, such as post 9/11 America as "the land of opportunity," or "it's the envy of the world," and that capitalism represents the "balance" found in Islam, may speak to the ideology that undergirds the school's philosophy and mission. None of the administrators provided critical comments on the ongoing

war on terror, the cases of entrapment, and surveillance unleashed on the Muslim communities across the country by the FBI and local police departments. The board also holds the view that the civil and constitutional rights of Muslims as Americans remain mostly intact, contrary to what Muslims have experienced post 9/11. Such views may point to the fear and anxiety the community feels in sharing a candid response about its persecution to a researcher, for he may well be a government agent. Similarly, the partnership with the government through the Startalk program may also suggest a fear that “we” Muslims are not “with the terrorists,” but with the government in fighting terrorism. Perhaps the limited Islamic education and curriculum may in part also be a result of this fear, so as to ensure that young Muslims forswear any hostility or militancy towards the government and its policies.

However, whether it’s fear arising from the war on terror, or the obsession with achieving excellence in science and math, the school cannot articulate a vision as a community school: one that facilitates through its curriculum and pedagogy the nurturing of future American Muslim leaders who’ll represent a community facing racism and persecution. The school’s philosophy, curriculum, and orientation modeled on California public schools together, however, do the opposite. In showcasing itself as a science academy, or an “Islamic school with a secular curriculum,” it assimilates Muslim children away from their parents’ culture and heritage, perhaps so they don’t pose a threat as “outsiders” to the American way of life. As the school principal noted, the teaching of Shakespeare and Darwin play an important role in making sure Muslim children don’t feel alienated from American society. Effectively, this marginalizes Islamic history, literature, and Islam in the school’s curriculum in making sure students don’t mature into anything else but patriotic Americans fully immersed in Euro-American culture and identity.

Nonetheless, the school’s mission to assimilate students into American society does not go uncontested, and the ethnographic data provide insight, then, not only on the opposing tensions between the Islamic and American public school models of education, but also the varying and complex tensions among the school administrators, teachers, parents, and the students about what Islamic education should exactly involve. The teachers overall make best of attempts to have students think critically about American history vis-à-vis genocide and slavery, the farm workers movement, the experience of American minorities, and how to stand up to power and organize using their spirituality. As the social studies instructor commented, responding to the question of how to integrate Islam into the social studies curriculum, the Prophet can be presented as an archetype social activist to the students. The teachers’ efforts to make students conscientious about issues of social justice, notwithstanding, their American-centric pedagogy circumscribes these topics within the borders of the nation-state. Effectively, the US serves a reference point in making meaning out of the struggle for social justice, rather than a transnational one that better serves a multinational body of students in this age of globalization (Abu El-Hajj, 2010). Similarly, students also express some resistance to the American-centric tendency of the school, and to the dominant culture and curriculum. They resist learning about the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Diary of Anne Frank, which could be a sign that students may take greater interest in learning about their own Islamic history and culture. The parents seem to be far more in touch with the cultural, intellectual future needs of their children, since they’d like the school to offer a more robust Islam that includes Islamic history, literature, and the various schools of thought and traditions, such as Sufism. Parents justifiably point out that a culturally rich and diverse Islamic curriculum can better shield their children from the social pressures and effects of the dominant American culture.

Effectively, these tensions and contradictions must resolve into a new model of Islamic education.

## 7.2 *Opportunities and Challenges Ahead*

The world-systems analysis, and the *longue durée* of capitalism and Islam presented in this study necessitate the formulation of a new philosophy and model of Islamic education in relation to the grave political situation Muslims face in the aftermath of 9/11: the war on terror that witnessed the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. The military interventions and regime change have continued with Libya and Syria, bringing instability and chaos across that region, creating an insurmountable crisis of some 8 million Muslim refugees just in 2016 alone.<sup>51</sup> These military conflicts abroad point to the longstanding characteristic of the capitalist world-system, where the most powerful capitalist state must constantly engage in capital accumulation to maintain its dominance over other states by whatever means at its disposal. Certainly, Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, garnering hundreds of billion dollars worth of economic and military business deals from a country that rules over Islam's holiest cities of Mecca and Medina (Rucker & DeYoung, 2017; Shamseddine & Paul, 2017), and the trillion dollars worth of minerals in Afghanistan that American businesses prize, which may well make the American occupation of that country indefinite (Landler & Risen, 2017), all point to the attributes of war-making and capital accumulation that define America as the capitalist world-hegemon. Consequently, these military interventions overseas have resulted in the suspicion and persecution of Muslims domestically through surveillance and entrapment programs executed by the FBI, which continue to spread fear in the community, silencing any reaction to the country's foreign policies and ongoing military operations overseas. Since 9/11, Muslims have come to grasp the pervasive racist undercurrent in American society, but have still yet to understand the hegemonic role of America as a historically Euro-American, colonial-settler state. The historical colonial-settler element of America has resurfaced ferociously in the wake of 9/11 and the 2008 financial crisis with the rise of the Tea Party. Similarly, the 2016 election of a billionaire businessman, President Donald Trump, and the appointment of a corporate white conservative Secretary of Education (Mindock, 2017b; Walker, 2016) has seen a hyper-resurgence of the networks of capital accumulation taking over the state, and the increase in xenophobia towards all non-Euro-Americans, especially Muslims (Beckett, 2017; Buncombe, 2016), with the "Muslim ban" on foreign citizens entering the US from certain Muslim majority countries (Mindock, 2017a; Mindock & Sampathkumar, 2017). These national developments, if anything, make starkly clear the historical intersection of racial domination, American education, capitalism, and the US as a Euro-American, Judeo-Christian, capitalist colonial-settler state.

Furthermore, the military invasions and saber-rattling post 9/11 have revived America's hegemonic role post WWII, when the emergence of social sciences, modernization theory, and the government funding of public schools increased the tilt towards math, science, and technology in order to serve America's ever-growing economic and military might. Additionally, the history of American education as one of cultural domination, exclusion, and segregation has renewed the marriage between the federal government and American corporations in the development of standardized testing and the Common Core State Standards, creating a neoliberal knowledge complex. American education has further evolved and mutated as a hegemonic tool, achieving a global reach since 9/11, alongside US's role as a world-hegemon, to "compete in the

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<sup>51</sup> The top two refugee populations in the world (UNHCR, 2016) in 2016 alone came from Syria (5.5 million) and Afghanistan (2.5 million).

world of ideas, compete in the world of commerce” (in the words of Condoleezza Rice) by promoting individualism and free enterprise under the pretext of democratic reforms, targeting Arab and Muslim youth overseas through educational and cultural exchange programs as cures for extremism and terrorism.<sup>52</sup> What the US has achieved in Arab and Muslim countries post 9/11, imposing laws favoring multinational corporations, educational reform, seizing markets for American products, not to mention more oil and natural resources for its corporations, mirrors five-hundred years of European hegemony, which began with Spanish colonial interventions (mediated through the education of natives) for extraction of precious metals (gold and silver) and economic gain in the New World discussed in Chapter 3. This long history foregrounds the continuity in the colonial, capitalist, Judeo-Christian propensities of American education rooted in European hegemony.

Using a California (American) public school model for Islamic education in the US, then, naturally creates tensions and contradictions. This raises some questions for the Muslim community in the US. How should it prepare students culturally and Islamically to deal with challenges American Muslims face in the US? What should serve as a priority for Islamic education: spirituality for material gain, or spirituality for political and social empowerment? The latter would require an Islamic education model based on an interpretive *ijtihad* of the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet, or the Sunna (discussed in Chapter 6), that delineates an overarching theme to serve the social needs of young American Muslims today. Islamic education cannot merely serve the mainstream material priorities of upward mobility in American society, especially in this post 9/11 and post 2016 presidential elections era, when blatant racism and xenophobia have come to pose an existential threat to Muslims and other minorities in the US. Just as the launching of Sputnik in 1957 marked a drastic shift in American education towards science and technology, 9/11 should mark the rethinking and reorientation of Islamic education to effectively confront challenges Muslims continue to face. The new model of Islamic education has to empower the community, and must untangle itself from the logic and mindset of the dominant American culture and capitalist institutions. It must create its own epistemic space through a renewed understanding of Islam that derives a spiritual ethos of resistance to the social, cultural, and economic forces of the dominant culture and institutions that represent racial domination and capitalism. This means that a rich learning of Islam must occur alongside a rich learning of modern Western history, colonialism, capitalism, and racism, where the current social, political contexts serve as a way to make meaning of the struggle of the Prophet and the role the Qur’an, as a set of divine revelations and guidance, played in that struggle.

The emergent Islamic education model necessitates a renewed understanding of the *overall* life of the Prophet, as well as the *overall* teachings of the Qur’an as a foundation. This approach juxtaposes with learning Islam based on a few arbitrary *hadith* or chapters of the Qur’an that somehow speak to the learner as Islam, or the Message the Prophet delivered to his followers in its entirety. An overall understanding of the Qur’an and the Prophet, presented in its rich historical context, could forge a foundation of Islam for young Muslims to draw and build upon as they embark on their long journey to leadership roles as American Muslims. It may well prepare them for the protracted situation Muslims (and Americans) face, both as unwitting partners of empire and its targets. This requires an education model that teaches Islam in the

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<sup>52</sup> See Succarie (2008) for a detailed discussion on the neoliberal, neoconservative ideology embodied in “winning the hearts and minds” campaign unleashed after the invasion of Iraq under George W. Bush targeting Arab and Muslim countries.



context of the Prophet's life and Meccan society during his time, and connects it to the current situation. For instance, Ibrahim (Abraham) as a prophet mentioned in the Qur'an, what did his life teach Muslims? According to the Qur'an,<sup>53</sup> Prophet Ibrahim discovered monotheism that established the lineage of subsequent prophets of Abrahamic faith that runs through prophets Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. Prophet Ibrahim achieved something during his life that changed the course of human history. His achievement could serve as a model for young Muslims to follow, with the idea of engaging in an intellectual struggle that leads to a reorientation in their understanding of Islam and the world. Prophet Ibrahim himself engaged in an *ijtihad* (innovative reasoning by way of intellectual exertion) of sorts, about the religious beliefs and ideas of his forefathers, which led to a revolutionary grasp, a shift in his understanding of the cosmos and the Creator: the understanding of the relationship between the Creator and creation, and man as the intellectually and spiritually empowered servant of the Creator. The idea of *tawhid* discovered by Prophet Ibrahim became the spiritual adhesive of the Abrahamic tradition that the Qur'an and the Prophet came to renew and apply during his life in Mecca. So a similar renovation needs to take place using innovative intellectual exertion in taking a fifteen-hundred-year old prophetic and theological tradition based on the Qur'an that serves as the organizing principal of a new model of Islamic education. Theorizing on the prophets of Islam starting from Prophet Ibrahim, to Prophet Muhammad and his family would result in a new epistemology that becomes the overarching view and foundation of Islamic education.

Philosophically, taking Prophet Ibrahim's spiritual realization of *tawhid* as the point of departure, the new model of education sweeps through the prophets, modern history, and arrives into a post 9/11 world and America, producing a fresh perspective on Islam that informs the spirituality of persecuted Muslims today. For example, reflecting on the lives of prophets Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad makes evident the prominence of a common spiritual ethos of resistance, and it also provides some common traits across the three religions that each of the three prophets had no father or family. This lends itself to the crystallization of the spirituality of the oppressed, for it is the oppressed that the Creator seeks solidarity with, which expresses itself as a spirituality of resistance. The Qur'anic revelations first and foremost aim to free man from oppression inside himself, which then manifests in the larger world around him.<sup>54</sup> Conversely, oppression in the world comes to dominate one's soul and consciousness, and divine guidance but seeks to guide and liberate man's soul (Qur'an 10:108, 32:13, 39:41, 41:46). The Qur'an in a number of places speaks to this spiritual ethos of resistance, and the spirituality of the oppressed: Moses, separated from his family and orphaned at an early age, abandoned Pharaoh's imperial Egypt, sacrificing power and wealth, for he suddenly awakened to its oppression, withdrawing to seek spiritual knowledge; Jesus, also miraculously born without a father, refused to join those with power and their oppression, sacrificing his own life in fighting the Roman empire; and Prophet Muhammad, also an orphan, rose up against the tyranny of the powerful Meccan

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<sup>53</sup> The Qur'an (6:75-79) describes in detail when Prophet Ibrahim rationally reasoned and reflected upon the celestial bodies, witnessing the rising and setting of the stars, of the moon, and finally of the sun, declaring each one in succession as God, but realizing that some other single being, or One God, that the eyes cannot behold has created them and makes their recurring appearance/disappearance possible. This radical shift in beliefs towards monotheism or *tawhid* turned Ibrahim's father and the people against him, but it established Ibrahim as the first prophet of Abrahamic tradition of monotheism.

<sup>54</sup> As one commentary of the Qur'an recently published in the US notes: "Qur'anic sacred history is seen more as events within the human soul rather than as just historical events in the world" (Nasr et al., 2015, p. 37).

Quraish tribe, exerting all his will in fighting injustice and oppression on behalf of the marginalized members of Meccan society while living in poverty until death.

All three prophets' lives demonstrate a sacrifice and a spiritual ethos of resistance to power (similar to modern figures like Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X). Their spirituality demonstrates a spirituality of resistance for liberating the oppressed. This spirituality empowered them as servants of God, and not as rulers, kings, seeking power and status for themselves. Prophet Muhammad became a spiritually empowered servant (and not a monarchical caliph or sultan) through the divine revelations of the Qur'an, for the Creator seeks solidarity with the oppressed through divine guidance. This also reorients the idea of *tawhid* where humans submit their will to the One God by establishing solidarity with Him through the Divine Message, enacting resistance against persecution, oppression, and injustice. This renewed understanding of the Qur'an and the Sunna makes the spirituality of resistance and the spirituality of the oppressed possible, and provides an epistemology of Islam that creates a model of education founded upon prophetic spirituality. It reifies the spirituality of the oppressed, creating a spirituality of resistance (resistance in solidarity with God to dominant structures and institutions in the service of power) for students to put into practice. Such a model of Islamic education could help students embark on a path to social change that benefits them, their communities, and the rest of humanity.

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