

2007

The Crescent and the Bible Belt: Islam in the U.S. Southeast

Naima Brown
University of North Florida

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/ojii_volumes

 Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Suggested Citation

Brown, Naima, "The Crescent and the Bible Belt: Islam in the U.S. Southeast" (2007). *All Volumes (2001-2008)*. 22.
http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/ojii_volumes/22

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Osprey Journal of Ideas and Inquiry at UNF Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in All Volumes (2001-2008) by an authorized administrator of UNF Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [Digital Projects](#).

© 2007 All Rights Reserved

The Crescent and the Bible Belt: Islam in the U.S. Southeast

Naima Brown

Currently a graduate student in Middle East
Studies at the University of Chicago

Faculty Sponsor: Ronald Lukens-Bull
Associate Professor of Sociology and
Anthropology

Introduction:

The Jacksonville Islamic Center is uncommon; its unique qualities are illustrative of the social and cultural issues that accompany a minority status in terms of both religion and nationality or ethnicity. Over the course of the past year (2005-2006), I have conducted ethnographic research within the Muslim community of Jacksonville. My research focuses primarily around the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida (ICNEF) which serves as both mosque and community center, yet my research extended into wider circles of the American Muslim experience, including a conference in Washington D.C. that dealt with issues surrounding Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism in the media hosted by CAIR (Council on American Islamic Relations). I have conducted formal interviews as well as participant observations while staying abreast of the current scholarship regarding Islam in America. It is my proposal that my data will demonstrate that the experience of Muslims in Jacksonville who attend the ICNEF is unique, both in context of the larger Muslim world and in contrast to other American Muslim communities. This is in larger measure due to Jacksonville's Muslim population being large enough to warrant a strong community center and a thriving mosque, but not sizeable enough where there are separate mosques for separate groups of people who might otherwise be divided along such variables as ethnicity, theological/sectarian differences, language, etc. Instead, there is a veritable cornucopia of diversity within the ICNEF, a

diversity worthy of examination. This research and subsequent article will present the ways in which this diversity presents itself, navigates through the larger needs and requirements of the community, and participates in interface with the larger, non-Muslim Jacksonville community.

Setting the Stage: A Brief History of Islam in America:

"If the Muslim community continues to grow at the present rate, by the year 2015 Islam will be the second largest religion in the United States." Yvonne Haddad, A Century of Islam in America, 1986

According to the available 2006 statistics, the Muslim population in the U.S. comprises only 2.2% of the world's Muslims (statistics provided by the United Nations, *Islam and the Muslim World, 2006, Husain*). It may seem a rather insubstantial number, but it translates roughly to 5 million people (*Oxford History of Islam, 1986;604*). The first notable migration of Muslims occurred between 1875 and 1912 from countries that are today known as Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon (Smith, 1999;51). It should be noted that many scholars agree that Muslims from Spain may have accompanied Columbus into the New World (ibid). Jane Smith cites three significant migration periods of Islam into the United States; the first being mentioned above. The second came with the fall of the Ottoman Empire that coincided with the end of World War One; the third migration, lasting through the 1930's, was restricted to the relatives of those Muslims already residing in the States (ibid;52). The Iranian revolution in 1979 caused a large amount of Iranian citizens to flee the Ayatollah Khomeini and relocate in the U.S. (Ibid). The Iranian emigre's brought with them the Shi'a sect of Islam (ibid;60). While the first Muslim immigrants came primarily from the Middle East, the majority of Muslims now emigrate from South Asia, Pakistan, India and Bangladesh (ibid). The countries mentioned above do not, by any

means, exhaust the list of places where American Muslims have come from. As my paper will illustrate further, the Jacksonville Islamic community reflects the great diversity of origins and ethnicities represented in the Islamic American population.

The first American cities where Muslim communities took root were primarily in the Midwest. There were also small settlements in California, New York, and Massachusetts, (ibid;60). As will be further explored, many of these early communities were divided along ethno/linguistic origins or similarities. Today, it is not uncommon in some of these larger metropolitan areas for mosques and communities to fall along such lines. "While many of the Islamic associations of the city are characterized by particular ethnic identities, *others are consciously attempting to use this very diversity to bring together immigrant and indigenous Muslims as well as Sunni and Shi'ites* (ibid; 57, emphasis added)." It is in the emphasized category where, I argue, the ICNEF belongs. The population of American converts must also be briefly examined. Islam is the fastest growing religion the world over, and its appeal has attracted many Americans. Smith distinguishes between Anglo American converts and African American converts, although I am not convinced of the merit of such an argument. Though many African American's converted under the tutelage of Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam, I have come across no supporting scholarship that Anglo American's are more inclined to subscribe to *mainstream* Islam while African Americans prefer the Nation of Islam. Certainly, my research at the ICNEF would run counter to such an argument. Smith does not neglect to mention, however, the growing number of Hispanic and Native American converts to Islam, highlighting the diversity within the American conversion experience (ibid;65-67). To be sure, there is no single form of Islam that is "the *true* Islam", at least not academically speaking. "Islam is not a monolithic entity," explains Karen Isaksen Leonard, "its beliefs and practices are not the same throughout the world. An early battle

over the Caliphate - the political leadership or the rapidly growing Muslim community - produced a lasting split between the Sunni (the majority) and the Shi'a Muslims. There are many other divisions within Islam (Leonard, *Muslims in the United States*, 2003;3)."

It is important to address the fact that Muslim immigration was not always, nor is it now, greeted with unconditional warmth and welcome, and the information presented above is a woefully condensed presentation of the immigration experience of most Muslims. Muslim communities face a variety of challenges, both in terms of personal practice and agency, as well as politically, ethnically, linguistically, academically, etc. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad writes that "the suitability of Muslims for citizenship was questioned [in countries, such as the U.S., with a history of European style immigration policies] in a variety of ways and eventually somewhat resolved. *This has not necessarily lessened the prejudice against their presence* (Haddad, *Oxford History of Islam*, 1999;608)." As Haddad wrote this statement before September 11th, 2001, it is clear that the "prejudice against their presence" can only have increased exponentially, a topic that will be addressed further in this paper. In a section of Haddad's article, *Institutionalization: the Creation of Mosque Culture*, she explores the phenomenon that is the Mosque Culture of the West. It may seem obvious that in a predominantly Islamic country there would be no need to carve out a niche for Muslim experience, exchange, community, etc., it would be pervasive and therefore inconspicuous. In the U.S., as can be viewed through the ICNEF, the Mosque takes on new meaning, new responsibility, and often, modified or negotiated terms of community management than in a Muslim country. These institutional shifts were not without growing pains; "the majority of the immigrants are Sunnis," explains Haddad, "who believe there is no clergy in Islam; thus the creation and maintenance of Islamic institutions in the West is a new experience for the majority of the Muslim diaspora community (ibid;615)."

She goes on to explain that there is no ideal form that a Western Mosque might take, and that each community is addressing its particular and specific aims and goals. I will return to Haddad's views in the presentation of my research at the ICNEF, which I believe exhibits the qualities she describes. Furthermore, Haddad discusses the development of "Umbrella Organizations" as a unique aspect of the Muslim American experience. "Such organizations are the norm in the West, as governments and civic institutions expect to deal with a recognized national leadership, a religious hierarchy; simply put, *it is the Western way of organizing religion, and Muslims are pressed to reformulate themselves accordingly* (ibid;621)." I explored these concepts through my observation of CAIR and although it is not compulsory that members of the ICNEF also have membership in CAIR, it is through the ICNEF that I learned of CAIR, and there are many overlapping and articulating functions between the two organizations. Again, these organizations are not free from the scrutiny of those who associate them with militant or foreign "other" based organizations such as Al Qaeda. In truth, however, they are modeled much more in the image of a typical American advocacy group. I will return to all of these ideas in my subsequent analyses; my aim at this point is simply to place the ICNEF within a larger cultural context.

The Islamic Center of Northeast Florida:

"To be the lighthouse in the sea of life, facilitating the path to Islam in accordance with the Qu'ran and Sunnah (traditions of Prophet Mohammed PBUH) through religious, spiritual and moral guidance and social interaction." Mission Statement of the ICNEF, www.icnef.org

Founded in 1978, the ICNEF is technically a non-profit corporation whose services extend beyond a place of worship; indeed, there is a full time elementary school,

the Al Furqan Academy, with about sixty students. There is a Sunday school. There is a Muslim cemetery (not on the premises, the ICNEF owns a section of a municipal cemetery). Matrimonial services are available, as well as counseling and various other family oriented programs. Like many places of worship, there is a kitchen that provides meals for its own community gatherings, as well as for community outreach. There is a playground and a basketball court that are generally in use, and an overall palpable sense of business and goings-on at any given point in the day. Indeed, I often find myself confused at the correct way to refer to the building itself and I generally employ the term that seems to fit the moment at hand. If I am attending prayer or a religious event, I refer to the building as the *masjid*, or mosque. If I am attending an Arabic class or a public event such as *Sharing Ramadan*, I refer to the space as the ICNEF. If, however, I am visiting the school or meeting with the principal, I refer to it as Al Furqan. Nobody has ever corrected me when I have used one or another of these terms and I have never inquired as to which of these is the most appropriate; indeed, in terms of practice, it is *all* of these places, which, I argue, is exemplary of its unique American experience.

The building itself is a work in progress. Currently, it is a non-descript and unembellished white building set a few hundred feet away from the bust St. John's Bluff road which it shares with other houses of worship including a few Christian denomination, a Bahia Center, a Jehovah's Witness Kingdom Hall, and others. It is encircled by a modest chainlink fence and its sign is so small that it is easy to miss. Near the right corner of the building, there is a skeleton of what will one day be a minaret, yet beyond this, there is nothing *Islamic* about the exterior. The ICNEF has plans to renovate, (plans that can be viewed on their website), and the exposed innards of the future minaret are the only features that would inform a passerby that this place is indeed a Mosque. Through the large wooden front doors there is a long hallway; on the right

hand side there is an office and library, a large classroom that sometimes doubles as prayer space for women and children. On the left, there is a restroom, more offices, and a large kitchen. The hallway itself belies the multi functionality of the space; there are cubbies for the students and examples of their latest artwork and test scores, there are free Qu'rans and DVD's about Islam for visitors, there is a bulletin board with notices and fliers about upcoming events or information for the general Muslim community. The hallway leads into a large room where there is a stairway leading straight up to a spacious, lofted room that doubles as both classroom and prayer space for women and children. Back downstairs, below the loft, there is a bookstore stocked with Qu'ran's, calenders, Islamic clothing and more. Beyond this room is the main prayer hall, the *masjid*, this room is more visibly Islamic, but by no means ornate. There is carpeting with prayer rug shaped rectangles to help in the physical nature of prayer and spacing needed for the proper prostrations. There is a modest wooden podium from where the Imam speaks and where the call to prayer is made. Yet, in keeping with Islamic prohibitions against images of the Prophet or depictions of religious imagery, there is little else.

Most of the women, and some of the young girls, wear some form of head covering, but there is no standard, rather, there is a range of what is considered *modest*. One of my first experiences at the ICNEF was during prayer in a room with only women and children, and an elderly woman did not think that my head covering was sufficient. Gently and kindly, she came over to me and gave me a lovely piece of white embroidered cotton, which she wordlessly proceeded to pin around my head and neck. I was grateful for her thoughtful instruction, and have used her method ever since. The men, too, dress modestly, and there is a code of conduct between men and women that is common in places of worship. Men and women do pray separately, sometimes in the same room, sometimes not, and I will discuss this further on in this article. It is a peaceful place, but not

reproachfully quiet. It is a spiritual place, but not ascetically solemn. There are rules and codes of conduct, but they are instilled by example rather than by posting or policing. It is a mosque, but it is so much more.

I began my ethnographic research of the ICNEF in the fall of 2005. Then, as now, the spiritual leader of the community was Imam Zaid Malik. Malik, originally from Pakistan, has been in Jacksonville for six years. Highly educated, he holds a masters degree in both Arabic and Islamic Studies from Pakistan, as well as a degree in Sharia law and Islamic history. He also holds a seat on the faculty of Sharia in Saudi Arabia. He speaks fluent English, as well as Arabic, Urdu and Punjabi. Malik's duties range from leading prayers five times a day, giving a Friday sermon, performing marriages and divorces, counseling, funerals, prison ministry, interfaith activities, and speaking on local television programs. I asked the Imam about the unique nature of the ICNEF. He replied that indeed, it is unique, and added that in bigger cities the mosques are separated by nationalities whereas at the ICNEF there is a "beautiful diversity". When I asked how the ICNEF compared with Muslim communities and mosques in Pakistan, he answered that in Pakistan, a mosque is just a mosque, used for prayer only, without the variety of uses as in the ICNEF. "A party in the mosque [in Pakistan]?" he laughed as if to say, *not a chance*. Malik also remarked that the ICNEF, with its myriad of functions and purposes, represents more accurately the Prophet's mosque; in Malik's interpretation, a community center as well as a place of worship is more akin to what the Prophet was offering his companions. Malik is not unaware that there are other factors involved and clearly stated that because of the Jacksonville Muslim community's minority status, it is more important to create a strong community without regards to ethnicity - "when you are in the majority, it doesn't matter as much," he explained, it is not as if there are no community centers in Pakistan, of course, they are simply separate of the mosques. There are two primary spheres that I

participated in during my research at the ICNEF: an Arabic course taught by Imam Malik, and a women's *halaka*, or study circle. For this article, I will focus primarily on my experiences at the *halaka*, and how it demonstrates some of the distinct characteristics of the ICNEF.

Haddad asserts that "Mosques in America have taken on certain non-traditional functions that are normal for Christian churches, (Haddad, 1986:7)." She goes on to explain that the adaptation of Islam to America has changed the role of the Mosque through many of the characteristics that the ICNEF has adopted: conducting weddings and funerals, Sunday morning religious education classes, fundraisers, bake sales, bazaars, community dinners and cultural events (ICNEF hosts a *Sharing Ramadan* community dinner and lecture) (ibid). She also addresses the changing role of the Imam within the American context. Haddad described the same duties that Imam Malik listed above as uniquely American, "maintain Mosques, provide counseling, services similar to those offered by Christian clergy, and act as Islamic spokesperson to communities in which Islam is little known and even less understood (ibid)." Indeed, Malik is often on public access television engaging in interfaith dialogue and public education. I asked the Imam what the goals of events such as *Sharing Ramadan* are, he responded that it is to "remove ignorance about Islam, to show the true picture and teachings. It works very well, that's what the people I meet with who give me feedback say." It seems reasonable to assume that there is no *Sharing Ramadan* in Pakistan. I also asked Malik if his community asks him different questions or requires different counsel than in Pakistan. He responded that, more often, people ask about mortgage or financial issues, or about the suitability of certain American foods and whether they are *halal*, pure, or *haram*, forbidden.

Circles within Circles: The Women's Study Circle and other Observations and Encounters:

"Do my political visions ever run up against the responsibility that I incur for the destruction of life forms so that 'unenlightened' women may be taught to live more freely? Do I even fully understand and comprehend the forms of life that I want so passionately to remake?" Saba Mahmood, Politics of Piety, 2005

"No one gets what being a Muslim woman is...the degree of respect...as a mother in Islam, is, amazing." Sister "S" during an interview at the ICNEF.

The excerpt above from Mahmood's text outlines the parameters I attempted to place on my analyses of the women I encountered at the ICNEF. Oppressed, veiled women are iconic of Islam for many Westerners. I wanted to avoid, as much as possible, the hermeneutic hurdles that accompany the assumption that one is engaged with an oppressed or otherwise encumbered person. I wanted to explore agency, to be sure, but as Mahmood points out, without an intimate understanding of *what* I am encountering, how can I speculate about freedom and oppression? Secondly, I assert that without placing a certain mental rubric in place, I could not have received the comment made by Sister "S" above openly and without bias, I could, rather, attempt to perceive the "emic" experience that she described. As I recount the comments and opinions of the women I interviewed, it is my goal to elucidate the complexities of gender negotiation in any culture and that many of the Western views of women in particular simply stall or impede cultural awareness and sharing rather than promote understanding and common ground. In relation to my core argument, I also maintain that the women I encountered at the ICNEF are an expression of the American Islamic voice and experience; examining gender is a doorway

into examining identity which, in turn, is a doorway into an examination of American Islam. I aim to be clear at this point that I am not proposing that Muslim women are never oppressed. Simply, I am attempting to expand the question from the rather elementary dichotomy that seeks an absolute answer - *either Muslim women are oppressed or they are not* - to a more inclusive examination that seeks, rather, to broaden our definitions and develop a deeper grasp of what is so emblematic of the "other."

When I first began attending the *halaka* meetings it was, quite honestly, because I was effortlessly welcomed. The women were all aware of my position as researcher, and were no less inclined to allow me to study with them, ask questions about the teachings, and chat about kids and school. The format of the meetings were straightforward; beginning with a prayer and blessing, and proceeding into readings from either the Qu'ran or the hadith, followed by a discussion or question and answer period. Often, these meetings were interrupted by children, cell phones calls, or other needs. There is no designated leader, but there are natural ones, and a few women seem to take the lead in terms of reading and guiding discussions. Not all of the participants are from Arabic speaking countries and a few are local Jacksonville converts, and so those women who speak and read in Arabic often take the reins. Before or after the official *halaka*, conversation topics range from casual inquiries into the well being of family and children, to the pressing and often controversial issues facing the Muslim community. On one occasion, shortly after the 2005 riots of Muslim youth in France, a sister brought with her a copy of an interview of Tariq Ramadan, a renowned scholar of Islam (one whose book I cite in this article), and proceeded to read the entire interview aloud to the rest of the group. Much of the interview spoke to the need of Muslims in Europe and the US to engage as citizens of their countries, and not to retreat into their religion. The sister read Ramadan's quote, "Muslims living in the West should not be defined by their religion,

but members of the society in which they live." This is a contested concept, even within the sample of those whom I interviewed, for many held that it is their Muslim identity that comes first, that they are *Muslim Americans* rather than *American Muslims*. In the spirit of the comfortable environment of the *halaka*, I chose to conduct a group interview of three women, (one from Somalia, one from Pakistan, and one from Florida who is a recent convert), to further discuss these issues and more. The following is a summary of their views and they will be referred to here as Sister "1", Sister "2" and Sister "3":

I wanted to know if the women felt that the Jacksonville Islamic community was unique or uncommon, so I asked them about the different forms of practice or lifestyles that they observe at the ICNEF.

Sister 1, Pakistan: *The various cultural aspects are very integrated, people pray the same, modesty is still important. In Pakistan, there is only one phenotype; here you step into being with Muslim people from all over the world. It is the University of Islam.*

Sister 2, Somalia: *In Somalia, it is 95% Muslim. The US is so different. I don't know where food comes from here; in Somalia all food is halal.*

Sister 3, Florida: *Everyone seems comfortable here.*

I wanted to probe deeper into what exactly defines the women's experience of their American Islamic community. In discussing the kinds of questions that non-Muslims address to them, questions that they would likely not be asked in Muslim countries, which may aid in further elucidating their particular experience.

Sister 1: *They ask about the hijab or my head scarf. They ask me if I know that Jesus loves me. I am asked less questions since 9/11, people are more wary. They watch the news, CNN, and they think they know you. Before,*

people asked questions...now, they are just sure that you are oppressed, they don't bother to ask, they want to know what color my hair is.

Sister 2: *There is a man at my job who always wants to talk to me about Jesus.*

Note: at this point, the other two women wanted to make sure that Sister 2 knew that this was harassment and illegal and that she should report it to her boss.

Sister 1: *I had a woman follow me in Tampa who kept asking me why don't I believe, why don't I believe [in Jesus]. Generally, still, in America it is acceptable to be different.*

I asked the sisters how they respond to such questions and comments, also, I asked them what they perceive to be the greatest challenges facing their community:

Sister 3: *I tell them God loves you more [than Jesus]. Most people are not supportive [of her conversion], if I answer fully, people are receptive. If I told them I was a lesbian that would be more accepted.*

Sister 1: *I just try to answer their questions. The community needs to project Islam to counter the image portrayed by the media, that we are not extremists, we need to build a better understanding.*

I began to understand that the women felt that the Muslim community in Jacksonville is diverse and unique; all three women said that they felt the diversity enhanced their own experience, but, at the same time, it is not without its challenges. Yet, the ideas expressed by the women at the *halaka* were not unequivocally shared by other women I interviewed. Indeed, there are certain contested views. I interviewed a woman who is from Jacksonville and had been a Muslim all her life, Sister "H"'s opinion about the diversity at the ICNEF was more apprehensive.

Sister H: *There are some Arabic women with chin tattoos, the Qu'ran strictly forbids that. That bothers me a little. Maybe they are Afghani. Some of the older women wear sari's, that's forbidden. But, the women will sometimes police each other, and tell each other to cover up. Sometimes, though, if I like the different style, I'll borrow from it. Some of the women can make me feel underdressed - like I am not as religious as they are.*

What is clear is that the dynamic cultural and ethnic diversity of the ICNEF affects the experience of its members differently. I asked the same questions of the men that I interviewed, including the Imam. One young man from France who is currently an exchange student at a University offered his views about the ICNEF, I will refer to him as Brother "F".

Brother F: *Compared to France, it is so much better! In France we pray in little sub-basements. There is no MSA [Muslim Student's Association], the Muslim community here is more connected - it is a wonderful mosque [the ICNEF], more like an umma [global Muslim community]. France does have more halal markets, I cannot really eat on campus here. I am surprised by the gender inclusion here - the presence of women and children. In France, genders are more separate. The ICNEF is very American - how sometimes at prayer announcements will be made about other stuff. There is more diversity here than in France. This is the first time I have prayed with Egyptians, Ethiopians, Pakistanis, Bosnians...Minarets are illegal in France, they are disguised. The U.S. campus is very religious, a much different perspective than in France.*

I asked Brother F how he responds to the comment that Islam is oppressive to women, and what his experiences regarding women and Islam were.

Brother F: *It is not true that Islam is oppressive to women. The hijab is the choice of women, my sister chose the hijab at 25*

years old, and my parents were against it, they were worried for her. I think girls are nicer looking in hijab, more mysterious. But it is not my place to make these decisions.

The last part of Brother F's comment, regarding whose place it is to advocate hijab or other issues regarding women's roles, intrigued me. Perhaps a closer look at authority and who has the right to address these issues would further illuminate the expressly American Islamic female experience. I asked my participants about who will address a woman who is not dressing modestly enough, or not representing the Muslim concept of a pious woman. Unanimously, the women said that they police each other, it was a source of laughter to imagine men telling them how to dress or behave. The Imam, I was informed, will sometimes address issues of modesty in his sermons, but his message is addressed to both men and women. The men I asked all agreed that it was not their place. Is this unusual? Is this a fundamentally American perspective. Certainly it is not the Iranian or Afghani perspective. Another participant, a highly educated man from India and a University professor had some poignant critiques of gender issues in Islam, he will be referred to as Brother "I".

Brother I: *It is easy for me to say that Islam is not oppressive to women - I am not a woman and that is a question best answered by women. Islam's texts show that Islam was progressive, revolutionary for women. Even today, Islam balances between the needs of individuals and the needs of communities. When Europe was still debating whether women had a soul, Islam was offering women new rights. But, some people misinterpret texts. Men have abused power. They confuse their freedom with the right to abuse women. The problem of women's rights are not exclusive to Islam.*

Ultimately, I got the feeling that the question or debate surrounding women in Islam within the American context was not

the primary issue for the men and women I interviewed. In fact, they seemed to expect that I, an American non-Muslim woman, *would* ask about gender, and I was accommodated and indulged. However, when I asked about other issues facing the Muslim Community gender issues were not among them. The president of the local MSA is a woman. The principal of the Al Furqan academy is a woman. There are women on the board of directors for the ICNEF. When I discuss CAIR, it will be noted that women play a significant role within that particular, and distantly American, organization. None of the participants I interviewed agreed that Islam is oppressive to women. In fact, the fair question is often raised as to what exactly oppression is, and is American culture perhaps more oppressive to women than the religion of Islam? That is a question best left for a separate article, but I offer it to the reader as a point of entry into new perspectives. Finally, as I mentioned at the onset, it is not the goal of this article to propose tautologies, *Islam is either oppressive to women or it is not*. It is germane for the intentions of my research to limit my observations and considerations to the American Islamic distinction, which I have not, by any means, exhausted. For instance, I have not studied enclosed or isolated Muslim immigrant groups living in larger urban settings where assimilation and participation with American culture is easily avoided or at least truncated - perhaps the experience of women from such a context would be drastically different than the women at the ICNEF. At this point, I intend to introduce another circle within the circle, the Council of American Islamic Relations, CAIR.

CAIR:

“CAIR’s vision is to be a leading advocate for justice and mutual understanding. CAIR’s mission is to enhance understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.”

CAIR's mission and vision statements, www.cair-net.org

CAIR, established in 1994, based in Washington D.C., is one of, if not the, primary advocacy groups for American Muslims. Leonard explains their conception as a part of a series of Muslim advocacy groups emerging in the 1990's beginning with the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC). "In northern California, a year later," Leonard writes, "the American Muslim Alliance (AMA) was established by a political scientist of Pakistani origin. On the East coast the American Muslim Council (AMC) was established in 1990 in Washington D.C., under Arab leadership, and in 1994 it was also Arab leaders who founded the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) in Washington D.C. (Leonard, 2003;18).

In 2005, CAIR hosted a weekend seminar entitled *Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism*. Its premise was that, for American Muslims, both Islamophobia (the fear of Islam) and Anti-Americanism are important issues, as American Muslims straddle both identities. The conference consisted of six sessions whose topics ranged from *Anti-Americanism and U.S. foreign policy*, *Misconceptions about Christians and Muslims in Public Discourse*, to *Impact of Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism in Civil Rights and Policymaking*. Panelists included many Muslim scholars and political activists, Christian leaders, representatives from the ACLU, Amnesty International, and the State Department, to diplomats and ambassadors from Muslim countries. While the details of the discussions and presentations were riveting and, in my estimation, crucial and timely, it is the existence of CAIR and the promotion of a conference such as this one that is applicable to my larger argument: CAIR and its goals are exemplary of a distinctly American Islamic expression, moreover, CAIR is well aware of this aspect of their impact and works to promote the values, rights and principles of the best of American culture as important to the identity

of American Muslims. Many of the participants who I interviewed are members of CAIR, and as I mentioned, I learned about CAIR through a poster on a bulletin board at the ICNEF. As I am interested in circles of identity and identity crafting in the Muslim American community, I felt that an examination of some of the other organizations, outside of the ICNEF, that people are involved in may shed light on some of these issues. There are a few other organizations that some of my participants mentioned: the MSA (Muslim Students Association), CERWIS (committee for enhancement of the role of women in society), ISNA (Islamic Society of North America), as well as many other non-religious groups.

The CAIR conference that I attended highlighted the diversity of the American Islamic community. There were many ethnicities represented, as well as a large amount of women both as panelists, mediators, and audience members. Although many different topics and ideas were explored, the overarching theme of the conference was to clearly define the role of the American Muslim, and to, as mentioned before, feel comfortable and empowered to embrace American citizenship and identity along with Muslim identity. Dr. Omar Ahmad spoke on the opening night of the conference. During the course of his presentation, he made the statement that "America defines progressive as the furthest away from Islam one can get." He, and many other speakers, did not consider the Muslim community without fault or accountability in remedying the current situation. The situation, as Ahmad defines it, is that student visa's from Muslim countries are being denied, there is little outsourcing in the Muslim world, there are few American Muslim diplomats, and more. He points out that September 11th, 2001 has put American Muslims in a precarious position and that their civil liberties are at risk. He also called on the American government to change its policies towards Palestine (this, of course, was said before the 2006 election of *Hamas*, and it would be

interesting to know if Ahmad's opinion has changed), stop exporting American pop-cultures, and to promote dialogue. He wonders why non-Muslim American's are not speaking out on behalf of Muslim civil liberties and issues of discrimination. Ahmad then goes on to set the tone for the remainder of the conference, which is that American Muslims must utilize their status as American citizens and embrace the freedoms and rights included therein, and that they must not retreat into closed communities. Outreach, Outreach, Outreach - this was the clarion call by the panelists to the audience.

Another speaker echoed this sentiment, Mr. Ahmed Younis from MPAC, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, when he said that Muslims need to exert the energy to feel ownership in and of American, not to change it, but to create a place within th pluralism that is distinctly American Muslim. He elaborated that the job of Muslims is to remove the phobia from both Islamophobia and Americanphobia, Muslims need to represent America. I want to be very careful at this point not to reduce the content of the CAIR conference, which was three days of a multitude of views and opinions, to these few points of two speakers. However, what is applicable to my research is how CAIR is an example of a new paradigm, an emergent and contemporary Muslim experience. Would CAIR exist in any other environment, or are the conditions perfect at this point to provide context for its existence? This may seem like an unanswerable or esoteric question, but it is in the canvassing of the question where I propose the dialectic process, and indeed the Anthropological process, of understanding culture processes begins. I maintain that CAIR is a part of the Muslim American experience in three ways.

First, its mission and the issues it advocates are distinctly American Muslim issues, and further, they propose an engagement with these issues, and activist mentality, that is very American in flavor. CAIR does not propose that its members

abandon Islamic doctrine or teaching, but that they synthesize it with mainstream American politics to protect, enhance, and expand the American Muslim's position in the U.S.

Second, watchdog organizations, civil liberties organizations, advocacy groups; these are a part of the American methodology of citizen engagement with government and with each other, and it is generally not the privileged or majority class that require them.

Third, it is an emergent and currently unfolding phenomena that is sometimes called post 9/11 America; and Muslim Americans are reorganizing and redefining their role. CAIR has been pivotal in calling for Muslim's to engage and promote the ideals and the core principles of Islam, without relinquishing pride, religious freedom, civil rights, ethnic identities, etc., all of which are the legacy of American concepts of democracy.

The ideas presented above do not go unchallenged. Additionally, I do not know how many of the members of the ICNEF are members of CAIR, and of those who are not, I do not know their reasons. There exists an organization called anti-CAIR that challenges CAIR on virtually all fronts. I have written a separate article, CAIR v. anti-CAIR, that explores their conflict. To reiterate, however, I am not at this point concerned with CAIR as it stands on its own; rather, I am concerned with CAIR as an example of the many circles of identity within the Muslim American undertaking. Indeed, the term *circles of identity* was offered to me by a man who holds a rather prominent position in CAIR, whom I interviewed almost a year after the conference. I asked him to define his personal hierarchy of identity, how he constructs the levels of his roles. He felt that my question was too linear and that it would require a simplified answer. Rather, he told me, he views it as a question of circles of identities, or at least, parallel hierarchies. He said he identifies as a Muslim, as American, as part of his ethnic group, which, he points

out, is unique to America, “it is the immigrant struggle which this country either hinders or facilitates,” he said. I asked other participants the same question:

Sister H: *For my own sanity, I am a Muslim first, a Woman second, and American third.*

Brother F: *In France, the government wants to create a French Islam. This is a big problem. I am a Muslim first and French second, I don't really think of myself as French. Other French don't think of me as French. Identifying as a Moroccan is more difficult, neither country claims ownership. Its like “avoir le cus entre deux chaise” [to have your ass between two chairs]. I am definitely not American, its too late to become American.*

Circles and Circles...Local Media and Photo-Ethnography:

Examining and understanding the role of organizations such as CAIR help to explain the difficulties of crafting identity for American Muslims, as well as to observe some of the variation therein. There are many examples of how American Muslims have accessed, or been portrayed in, the local Jacksonville public forum to either facilitate awareness or illuminate the lack thereof. I wish to cite two of the times where local print media helped to give voice to local Muslims, and what the implications are, as well as how it supports my argument.

Both the *Florida Times Union* and the *folioweekly* printed stories about local Muslim's, and both seemed aware that their stories were unconventional, or somehow undermined the commonly held opinion of their average reader. The *Times Union* article was entitled, “Muslim's Respond to Bombings: That is not Islam”. The title itself, referring to the 2005 London bus bombings, is transparently American. Americans, and many other non-Muslim countries, are in need of such clarifications or explainers about what is and what is not *true* Islam (which I am not implying even

exists). Let me be clear, I am certainly not insinuating that there is such a stark division; that is, the anthropological point of view to which I am bound bars me from offering legitimacy to one form of practice above another. However, I maintain that these types of articles addressing these types of issues are aimed at the American non-Muslim public and that this is emergent and deserves our scholarly attention. The subheading of the article reads, “Jacksonville faithful are among those considering the London attacks,” further on, the author writes that one of the motivations for the statements against the attacks was to “prevent retaliation against American Muslims and preempt the recurring criticism that American Muslims don't condemn terrorism loudly enough (ibid).” The audience is clear, as is the intention; while most Jacksonville Muslims likely do privately condemn the London attacks, their public condemnation is embedded within the current climate of the non-Muslim's post 9/11 fears. The sub-heading seems to be assuaging or reassuring its readers, *don't worry, the Muslims in Jacksonville think the bombings were wrong*. The quotation above freely admits that the participants are engaged in a cultural exchange with non-Muslims, and moreover, they are trying to anticipate any possible backlash.

The *folioweekly* article tackles an entirely different topic from a different perspective, but for the same audience. The article is entitled, “Unveiled: Dr. Sania Shuja puts a new face on Islam”. For whom is she putting on a new face? For other Muslims? I doubt it. For American non-Muslims with whom she must strive to present an accurate representation of her experience of Islam? I am convinced that this is the likely impetus. The author writes, “Shuja represents a face of Muslim womanhood that is not often seen, but is perhaps more common than acknowledged (ibid).” The article is peppered with photographs of Shuja in her white lab coat performing all manner of recognizably scientific acts; looking at sheets of data,

fiddling with test tubes, all *sans* headscarf. Juxtaposed with these images, is a cover photo that presents Shuja in her *hijab*. I am not criticizing the authors of either article, indeed, I am aware of the similarities between their articles and my own. They, like myself, are exploring the American Muslim experience. It is as if the non-Muslim is suspended between its fear of the “other” and its American impulse to understand and accept everybody. As I quoted Brother I as saying before, America either hinders or facilitates the immigrant experience. And although many of America’s Muslims are not immigrants, the same formula can be applied to any marginalized group. Shuja, in the *Folio* article, did speak to the diversity of the ICNEF, “At the Islamic Center,” she said, “like any place, there are people who are conservative and those who are progressive and there are women from so many countries. For the good, we said we should put our differences aside and pool our energy (ibid).” Shuja is herself the secretary of the ICNEF.

Ultimately, CAIR, the articles from the *Florida Times Union* and *folioweekly*, along with the outreach and interface that the ICNEF promotes, all point to the contemporary, post 9/11 context of the American landscape. All of these expressions are relevant because of the unique requirements of their specific community context; the Southern, predominantly Christian, post September 11th, mainly white, English speaking public...they are the audience, they are part of the context.

I want now to discuss an ethnographic method, photo-ethnography, that I had only introduced into this particular project rather late. I only offered the experience to one participant in hopes of closely viewing how the process works and fixing any problems so that I could employ this method in further research. The participant I chose, Brother F, who has been previously mentioned, is credited for all of the images reprinted in this article. The

method is rather simple - loan a digital camera to the participant, Brother F, along with some prompts or guidelines as to what the researcher, myself, is aiming for. I created a *photograph log* that included some prompts and ideas to keep in mind, along with a place to describe each photograph. Following are a few of the prompts I provided:

-Do I experience this location, object, group of people, sign or language in a distinctly Muslim way?

- Would I use these photographs as tools to describe my personal Islamic experience to someone who is unfamiliar with Islam?

- Is there something about this photograph that is particular to an American Islamic experience?

-Is this a photograph of something, someone or someplace that enhances and supports my Islamic lifestyle? Does it disrupt, challenge, or contend with my Islamic lifestyle?

Brother F, as mentioned previously, is an exchange student from France. I found his particular view quite instructive in that he had a keen awareness of *American Islam*, *French Islam*, as well as a sense of what *traditional*, or unmarked Islam, are, and how they compare and contrast with each other. Brother F took to the photo-ethnography eagerly, and produced some invaluable images, both for this project, and, according to him, for himself. I am providing a sampling of these images along with his descriptions as an appendix to this article. It is precisely this aspect of the photo-ethnography method that I appreciate; the reciprocal nature of the method, the elevation of an *informant* to an active *participant*. It is my opinion that Cultural Anthropology and ethnographic methodology are changing in this way. At this point, I wish to turn to the work of two

scholars of Islam, Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood, and attempt to place my research as an attempt to work within their emergent scholarship.

Asad and Mahmood...and Me?:

It is generally accepted that the majority of the scholarship pertaining to Islam in the 19th and the better part of the 20th century was cut from the Orientalist/Colonialist cloth. Rather, the methodology and theoretical frameworks enlisted were not suited to translate fairly or completely the Islamic worldview. Additionally, events such as 9/11 and the subsequent “war on terror” have served to underscore the lack of popular “western” understandings of the Muslim world. Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood are contributing to this discourse by examining such concepts as agency, gender, and power in their respective writings; Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion; Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, and Mahmood’s, *Politics of Piety; the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*. Although neither scholar is focusing directly on American Islam, I find both of their theoretical and epistemological frameworks to be vital to the anthropology of Islam.

Mahmood challenges the existing models for interpreting the figure of the veiled, religious, Muslim female body by exploring the limitations of previous scholarship and suggesting new modalities of inquiry. She challenges the secular-liberal definitions of freedom and agency, as well as the western model of feminism, highlighting the incapability of these models to probe certain questions. Questions such as, “How do we conceive of individual freedom in a context where the distinction between the subjects own desires and socially prescribed performances cannot be easily presumed, and where submission to certain forms of (external) authority is a condition for achieving the subjects potentiality (Mahmood, 31)?” When describing the women with whom she

conducted research, in Cairo, Egypt, as having a particular understanding of submission and subordination that rings foreign to the western mind, she asks, “how did the women of the Mosque movement [in Cairo] practically work upon themselves in order to become the desirous subjects of this authoritative discourse? What were the forms of reasoning and modes of persuasion they used to convince themselves and others of the truth of this discourse (Mahmood;113).” It should be noted just how current Mahmood’s text is, published in 2005, and that her ethnographic research began before the events that brought Islam into the foreground and continued well after. She has astutely observed that the image of the veiled Muslim woman has become emblematic of Islam itself in the popular western mind. Insofar as academics have supported reductionist arguments against the veil, this “emblem” has infiltrated Anthropology as well. Mahmood understands this phenomenon, but is nevertheless surprised by her audiences “lack of curiosity about what else the veil might perform in the world beyond its violation of women (ibid;195).” Before penetrating further into Mahmood’s ideas, I will no turn to Asad.

Asad is one of the preeminent scholars on the anthropology of religion. One of his chief contributions to the field is his *Genealogies of Religion*, published in 1993. Asad’s work has greatly influenced Mahmood, and he is often cited in her work. For my purposes, it is the first section of this text, “The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category,” that is most germane. The regnant theme of this chapter is the deconstruction of the heretofore accepted definition of religion put forth by Clifford Geertz (see appendix b.). Asad challenges, “my argument is that there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition itself is the historical product of discursive processes (Asad;29).” Consonant with Mahmood’s

aims, Asad is concerned with broadening the understanding of religion and the religious which, in its current form, is not adequately suited for the task of stepping out of the Western European framework. He asks, "Can we predict the 'distinctive' set of dispositions for a Christian worshiper in modern, industrial society? Alternatively, can we say of someone with a 'distinctive' set of dispositions that he is or is not a Christian (Asad;33)." Of course, the same question could be asked using the term "Muslim" in place of "Christian".

Fundamentally, Asad is suggesting that anthropologists adopt a model that is more concerned with the historicity of religion. Too often, Asad maintains, historical contexts and historical trajectories are not explored anthropologically. Asad offers his caution, "the anthropological student of particular religions should therefore begin from this point, in a sense unpacking the comprehensive concept which he or she translates as 'religion' into heterogenous elements according to its historical nature (Asad;54)."

Both Asad and Mahmood explore issues of modernity. If not all cultures strive for the same modernity, maintains Mahmood, then how can we assume that all cultures understand agency and oppression in the same way? Furthermore, is it the role of the anthropologist to assign value to a particular view, or is it simply to seek to understand it? Mahmood writes, "agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that *resist* norms, but also in the multiple ways in which one *inhabits* norms (Mahmood;15)." Asad adds that western modernity is thought to be pregnant with positive futures in a way that no other cultural condition is (Mahmood interview of Asad;4, see full citation in bibliography).

What I have just presented is an extremely condensed discussion of the two texts, and I wish to be clear that I have not presented the scope of the ideas each author presented nor have I summed up their conclusions and suggestions. What I have done, hopefully, is to present how I have, in

the beautiful dialectic of academia, been inspired and instructed by their work. Have I succeeded in employing their methods and avoiding the inadequate models they caution against? Have I resisted applying a definition of contemporary American modernity and rather, promoted the concept of *multiple modernities*? Have I sufficiently placed my subject matter into a historically specific time/space continuum so as not to produce tautologies and dysfunctional absolutes? Have I presented issues of gender and agency while allowing the subject to remain unfettered by western/orientalist concepts and conditions? Of course, my work here is not nearly as thorough as Asad or Mahmoods, nor I am on par with either academically or otherwise, and the title of this section is tongue and cheek. I do hope that I succeeded in some measure to employ their proposed revisions and reexaminations of the Islamic subject. It is in keeping with these ideas that I explored the photo-Ethnography; to place the researcher at a distance and put the power of academic discourse in the hands of the subject. I asked the Imam of the ICNEF how he defines modernity, his response is as follows, "Islam is the torchbearer of modernity. There has never been a clash with science [and Islam]. Science is the study of nature. Nature is Islam. Modern science establishes facts and concepts, this is compatible [with Islam]. There is a fine line between modernity and immorality. Is a bikini modern? No." I do not suggest the adoption of the Imam's definition in lieu of another, again, I propose a scholarly acceptance of multiple modernities, which, essentially, is unavoidable. Just as in physical or biological anthropology there is no such thing as a "primitive person" alive today, because all living humans are anatomically and biologically modern. And, as with linguistic anthropology, there is no such thing as a "primitive language" for much the same reason. Just so with cultural anthropology, it is simply not feasible to suggest that there exists a living culture that is more "modern" than another; all cultures

are negotiating with the knowledge of each other's existence, and that in itself brings us all up to speed with each other.

Conclusion and Ideas for Further Research:

My research of the Jacksonville Islamic community, as all good research should, has left me with more questions and ideas for further research than conclusions or answers. I would like to explore further issues of agency and power in the Jacksonville community as it relates to other Muslim communities. I am also interested in a deeper exploration of the American Muslim male; it seems that this subject is treated as unmarked or as a given - that the Muslim male defines the Muslim female and is not worthy of separate analyses. During the interviews I conducted, many topics were raised and discussed that were not included in this article. How Jacksonville is not meeting the needs of local Muslims, the American conversion experience, the political concerns of the members of the ICNEF and what sources they access for news and information while negotiating politically. Issues of child rearing and education. Issues of spiritual and religious guidance. I find all of these threads worthy of investigation, and encourage other students of anthropology to pick them up. Additionally, I found the preliminary experience of the photo-Ethnography to be extremely instructive, and plan to incorporate the method into further research.

The Jacksonville Islamic Community, CAIR and other circles of experience that I explored are all rich and vital points of entry into understanding the American Islamic perspective. Through the ICNEF, the *halaka*, the CAIR conference, the photo-Ethnography, and other aspects of the participant observation and interview processes, I offer one conclusion in a sea of unanswered questions and undetermined variables: The Jacksonville Islamic community, in its diversity ethnically and otherwise, is a unique community.

Furthermore, the American Islamic experience, *because* of its specific historicity, is unique in comparison to other Muslim communities in other countries. How the ICNEF and other communities will continue to negotiate with wider circles of American culture is by no means decided, and it may still be awhile before public discourse moves towards a deeper understanding of Islam separate from, or at least alongside of, discussions about terrorism and violence - I am hopeful that there are shifts occurring in the academic discourse, and that it is only a matter of time before it penetrates the public.

Bibliography and Works Cited:

Asad, Talal, Genealogies of Religion; Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam, John Hopkins University Press, Maryland, 1993.

Council on American Islamic Relations, official website, www.cair.com

Esposito, John L, The Oxford History of Islam, Oxford University Press, New York, 1999.

Esposito, John L., and Haddad, Yvonne Yazbeck, Muslims on the Americanization Path?, Oxford University Press, University of South Florida, 2000.

Husain, Mir Zohair, Islam and the Muslim World, McGraw Hill, Iowa, 2006.

Leonard, Karen Isaksen, Muslims in the United States, Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 2003.

Mahmood, Saba, Politics of Piety; the Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 2005.

Smith, Jane, Islam in America, Columbia University Press, New York, 1999.