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Hijab and American Muslim Women: Creating the Space for Autonomous Selves*

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Among Muslims living in the United States, Islamic religious practices are negotiated and adapted to a new culture. A visible and controversial symbol of Muslims' differences from dominant American Christianity is the hijab *worn by many Muslim women. The decision to wear* hijab *occurs within a two-fold cultural context: (1) the assumption by many non-Muslims that* hijab *encapsulates Islam's inherent violation of women's "equal rights"; and (2) a widespread Muslim critique of American culture for its individualism, materialism, and lax sexual mores. Using data from interviews and observations with college-age, second-generation Muslim Americans, we explore the context, meanings, and consequences of wearing* hijab. *Second-generation Muslim women are negotiating social and religious identities in contrast both to non-Muslim Americans and to their immigrant families.* Hijab *has multiple meanings as a religious and social symbol; it provides a clear identity marker at a life-course transitional time, and it provides culturally legitimate space for young women who are formulating Muslim-American identities*

As increasing numbers of Muslims live in the United States, and as Islam becomes increasingly visible as a public religious presence in what is still a Christian-majority country, many Islamic religious practices are being adopted, adapted to, and abandoned by American Muslims. This is particularly true for first and second generation Muslims from traditionally Islamic societies such as

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Pakistan or Egypt. Some of these adaptations make Muslims more like the American majority in speech, dress, and cultural folkways. Other adaptations call attention to differences between Muslims and other Americans, particularly native-born Christians.

A visible and often controversial difference is the *hijab*, the headscarf that covers a woman's head, hair, neck, and ears—leaving only the face showing.[1] Many, but not all, Muslims consider wearing *hijab* theologically mandated. Many second-generation young women in the U.S. choose to wear *hijab*—often when they are in college and sometimes over their parents' objections. Drawing on the extant sociological literature, interviews, and ethnographic observations, we address the practice of wearing *hijab* by young Muslim-American women.[2] We consider the context in which it is worn, the meanings it has for young women, and the consequences they see it having for their lives.

RELIGIOUS PRACTICE AND IDENTITY IN AMERICA

Dimensions of the story we tell here are familiar to any student of immigration and religious pluralism in America. The British colonies that later emerged as the United States were overwhelmingly Protestant—in many cases non-litur-

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[1]There is no uniformly accepted set of terms for the clothing/covering we discuss here. Mernissi (1987) notes that the Qur'anic text in which *hijab* is used refers to a curtain used to separate the Prophet and his wife from some wedding guests in Medina, and thus the term refers to a boundary that segregates and protects. She is critical of the interpretations of the term *hijab* that have made it a veil worn by women alone. Roald (2001: 260) agrees that *hijab* is not a technically accurate rendering of "veil" from Qur'anic Arabic, but is critical of Mernissi's (1987; 2003/1985) and Ahmad's (1992) readings of the pertinent Qur'an and *hadith* passages for being selectively feminist. Roald also notes that *jilbab*, another word in the Qur'an, is a vague term that connotes a one-piece garment, which often includes the face covering, but not always. Roald (2001: 262-3) provides a variety of regional variations in the terms used to describe Muslim women's clothing. We will follow the conventions of current American scholarship—and the informants from our research—in using *hijab* to refer to the scarf that covers head, hair, neck, and ears, but leaves the face uncovered, *jilbab* to mean the one-piece full-length robe-like dress that does not necessarily cover the head, and *nikab* to refer to the face-covering. When the English word "veil" is used in general conversation or media, the reference could be to various clothing items and leaves unclear whether the face is covered. However, when the young women we interviewed referred to "covering," they almost invariably meant wearing the *hijab* headscarf, usually without the *nikab*.

[2]In this article we will use the terms "American Muslims" and "Muslim Americans" interchangeably. However, we note a difference in implications. The connotation of the former term is that "Muslim" is the main identity, and "American" is the qualifier adjective. We heard this term often from our respondents and found it in the "how to" literature on Islamic parenting and families (e.g., Hasan 2000); it indicates that those involved are working to create an American version of Islam. However, doing research within the U.S. involves studying people who are almost all "Americans," and thus the qualifying adjective (the hyphenated identity) is "Muslim," as it might be Italian-, Irish-, or Jewish-Americans.

gical, highly sectarian forms of Calvinism. Throughout American history, groups as varied as Baptists, Quakers, Mormons, Catholics, and Jews have at one time or another been religious "others." In general, those who encountered the greatest discrimination have been those with the most visibly different religious practices (Moore 1986). For example, Italian Catholics' street parades with religious icons, combined with the distinctive dress worn by those in religious orders, provided targets for anti-Catholic nativists (Orsi 1985; Bennett 1988). Similarly, Orthodox Jews' yarmulkes, payot, and strict Sabbath rules provided a visibility that made it easier for American anti-Semites to construct them as different, sinister, and non-assimilable.

In recent years, *hijab* has become the most visible symbol of Muslim identity and issues in America. Bartkowski and Read (2003), Hoodfar (1993), Read and Bartkowski (2000), Schmidt (2004:105-10), and Shakeri (1998) have written insightfully on the "veil" and the meanings American Muslim women assign to it. Tellingly, books by Aswad and Bilge (1996), Bukhari et al. (2004), Haddad and Esposito (2000), Haddad (2002) and Roald (2001) all have photos of women in *hijab* on their covers, even though gender is only one aspect of the books' subject matter.

Scholars have analyzed the veil from many angles, including historical and theological. In this article, we are interested in exploring only the sociological dimensions of its practice and meaning. Unlike Read and Bartkowski (2000), who focus on the meanings given to *hijab* both by those who wear it and those who do not, our original intention in this research was not to investigate *hijab* or its meanings. Also unlike Bartkowski and Read (2003), we do not compare the meanings constructed by ordinary women with the interpretations by theorists and theologians of Islam. Rather, we began the research interested in the religious lives of college-age young adults, specifically their involvement with religious organizations and institutions. Late adolescence and early adulthood is often a transitional point in identity development, and in the U.S. these years are often spent in college. Our research was motivated by questions about how involvement with religious organizations affects this identity moment.

Hijab, its meanings, and the consequences of wearing it were themes raised consistently in our individual and focus group interviews–often by the interviewees themselves. This is clearly an issue of concern for young American-Muslim women, and it has important identity implications. It was only after noticing a pattern of women themselves (and some young men) raising the issue that we began to formulate the research questions for this article. At that point the second author conducted interviews specifically investigating *hijab*. The analysis here uses data from both the fieldwork and the interviews. We argue that *hijab* is a symbol that condenses a number of issues for young Muslims who are in the process of constructing the practical dimensions of an American Islam.

WOMEN AND TRADITIONAL RELIGION

One way to frame the question about *hijab* and college-age women in the U.S. is to place it within the recent literature about women and traditional forms of religious practice. Scholars such as Davidman (1991) and Griffith (1998) have investigated why some upwardly mobile, achievement-oriented, American-born women voluntarily join religions that protect a traditional gender order. The feminist critique of religious patriarchy that emerged in the 1960s and early 1970s has become well known in American culture, and as a general rule Americans prize individual autonomy and release from external obligations or coercion. Given that college-educated, often middle-class women are generally immersed in modernist social and cultural worlds, the attraction to traditionalist religion seems to need explaining. Neither a straight interest-based answer (Marxian or rational-choice), nor a cultural assimilationist argument provides a coherent answer.

One persuasive answer regarding women and traditional religion has come from the study of white and black evangelical Protestant women (e.g., Griffith 1998; Lawless 1983). These scholars argue, with some variation, that women find themselves in a man's world in most of our societal institutions. This is particularly true for working-class women who have more limited professional or mobility opportunities, but it applies to all women. One institution in this man's world where women can exercise some control and autonomy and can gain some recognition for their efforts is religion. Religious organizations become relatively free spaces for women. Men may control the top leadership positions, and there may be restrictions on women's participation. Nonetheless, women actually run many religious institutions in practice, and they thereby become spheres of female empowerment and solidarity (cf. Warner 1993:1045).

Our research with young Muslim women who are active in their religion, both those who wear *hijab* and some who do not, suggests that these women would find interest-based answers to be missing a crucial dimension. Also, they probably would not endorse in its entirety the empowerment answer. Indeed, they would–and sometimes did–object to even framing the question in terms of "modern" women and "traditional" religion. These women are the daughters of immigrants and practice a minority religion in a country that does not understand it. They live in a city (and most attend college) where social, religious, and ethnic diversity is widespread and obvious. And they are at a stage of life where self and group identities are often in the foreground of consciousness and social life (see Peek 2005). We argue that donning *hijab* is a practice that allows young women to create some cultural space for themselves—it is a part of a larger identity project by second-generation Muslim young people to negotiate their dual identities as Muslims and Americans and gives them the opportunity to be part of both worlds.

METHODS AND DATA

We draw upon data gathered among young adults in a midwestern metropolitan area in two related research projects. The initial project focused on college-aged young people and their orientations to and involvement with religious organizations. We studied young people connected to their religion and their religious communities, as well as religious organizations run by and for youth. As a result of this research strategy, we draw no conclusions or generalizations about young people's religiousness generally or about those who have left their religion behind. We assume that developing a religious identity is important to the young people with whom we are concerned, and we investigated its attendant meanings and practices.

We gathered data through several methods. First we draw on data gathered under the auspices of the Youth and Religion Project (YRP), co-directed by R. Stephen Warner and Rhys H. Williams. The YRP used individual and focus group interviews, site visits at religious organizations and institutions, and visits with families from a sample that included white, black, and Latino Christians, Muslims, and Hindus. For this article we draw on the YRP Muslim data, that includes one individual depth interview with a Muslim woman, one focus group interview with eight Muslim women, and numerous site visits to religious organizations for worship services, religious lectures, and classes that included both men and women. The site visits involved two types of religious organizations: (a) practices and programs centered in masjids; and (b) autonomous, young-adult run organizations, including a university-based Muslim Student Association (MSA) and other organizations that exist independently from sponsoring institutions and are run by college-aged young adults. These data were collected primarily from 1998-2001, although some follow-up visits and conversations occurred in late 2001 and early 2002.

The second data source is an interview-based project spun off from the YRP. The second author interviewed 40 Muslim women ages 18-25, three-fourths of whom attended college. These interviews, conducted in 2001-02, focused specifically on the meanings of and decision to wear or not wear *hijab*. Half of these women were *hijabis* (those who wear *hijab*) and many were recruited through MSA organizations (at more than one university in our metropolitan area).

Many of the women we encountered are from Indian or Pakistani families–or in the shorthand we often heard, they are ethnically "Indo-Pak." Others were ethnically Arab. Occasionally, we encountered Euro-American converts to Islam, but none of our individual interviewees was African American (one member of the focus group was black) or Asian. Some came from middle-class homes, often with one or more parents who are professionals and had been in this country for some time. Others came from lower-middle-class households, and had arrived in the U.S. more recently. Most of the young women we met and talked

to were from the city of our research site and lived in ethnically dense neighborhoods near other Muslims. However, some women, particularly in the MSAs at local universities, came from smaller towns or suburbs in the region and had lived mostly among non-Muslims; they generally had families who had assimilated fairly thoroughly. Many students at the universities in our research city still live at home and are at least somewhat involved in organized religious life with their parents and other family members—often in addition to involvement with the MSA or other youth-run organizations. Thus, different women faced different situations, and *hijab* is a response to different types of issues.

It is important to note the ethnographic position of the authors vis à vis the people with whom we talked and whom we observed. Neither of us is Muslim, and we made no attempt to hide that. We received permission from religious leaders to attend programs at masjids and autonomous organizations, and introduced ourselves as researchers at events or site visits. We both made a point of dressing relatively modestly and conventionally, in the middle-class garb that might be called "business casual." Many organized religious activities among Muslims are gender segregated. Many researchers, such as Roald (2004) and Schmidt (2004), have noted how difficult that can make getting information across gender lines. Women conducted the formal interviews and the focus groups from which the material in this article is drawn; however, the first author visited many organizational meetings and events, and often spoke with young women informally at those occasions. His status as researcher and professor was well known and may well have been legitimating. The second author's Indian ethnic identity and second-generation status may well have increased the trust respondents placed in her to report their stories carefully.

We are well aware of the extent to which many of the people we quote here were interested in representing Islam, and themselves, in a positive light. We accept that, in part because we are interested in how they construct what constitutes a "positive light" and what it means to them to be a "good Muslim." Undoubtedly a different research strategy or different researchers would have produced data somewhat different from the data we gathered, but we do note that many of the responses we chart here resonate with other research (such as Read and Bartkowski 2000 or Schmidt 2004).

We begin our analysis by discussing the cultural contexts in which these young people live. For second-generation people trying to be both American and Muslim, these contexts are significant. Young Muslims are in the general process of constructing an American Islam, and, in particular, of negotiating gender roles that are religiously appropriate and also respect their commitments to full public lives in the U.S. We then turn to analysis of the observations of the research sites and the voices of the Muslim women themselves.

THE CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Two cultural contexts are significant for understanding young Muslim Americans and *hijab:* American emphasis on "equal rights," and contemporary critiques of the moral status of American culture. We unpack each in turn.

Equality is a core American value, frequently expressed by the term, equal rights. The dominant American cultural interpretation of equal rights has two parts. First is that rights involve liberty from the control of external, especially institutional, authorities, and that these rights are the inalienable property of individuals. One is an individual, and is free, to the extent that one can make autonomous, individual decisions. Social obligations are legitimate only to the extent that they represent a contract between equal, consenting individuals (see Bromley and Busching 1988; Bellah et al. 1985; Williams 1995).

The second dimension of equal rights is the notion of treating all people the same. According to this interpretation of equal rights, responding to gender inequality means dismantling barriers to women in public life, organizational memberships, economic opportunity, and the like, especially through legal challenges. Many such challenges have been successful. Accompanying these changes in women's legal and institutional statuses has been a degree of cultural androgyny, such as women wearing pants and playing sports, as well as the relaxation (though not elimination) of sexual double standards. Given these two interpretative themes of what constitutes equal rights—individualism and equal treatment—many Americans view any outward manifestations of difference as inequality.

The notion that difference is an indicator of inequality is most publicly institutionalized in the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, which held that separate is inherently unequal. That framework shaped the public's understanding of the civil rights movement and the second wave of the women's movement. Thus, "gender neutrality" has emerged as the cultural frame to solve the problem of gender inequality; it has achieved legitimacy as the culturally appropriate way to relate to individuals—both socially and politically (see Williams and Williams 1995). Equal rights as gender neutrality rejects any institutionally authorized sanctioning of behavior that separates the sexes or that applies to men and women differently.

Given this assumption, it is not difficult to see that *hijab,* in and of itself, can be considered a manifestation of inequality–women wear it, but men do not. In addition, the American media are full of stories about women's oppression in Islam, such as the prohibition on women's driving in Saudi Arabia and the Taliban's vicious treatment of women in Afghanistan. Operating from this perspective, many Americans do not understand why second-generation Muslim American women wear *hijab.* It seems to many Americans to be an open admis-

sion of second-class status (this is not only a U.S. problem, see Shakeri's 1998 analysis of Canada).[3]

The second context in which second-generation Muslim women operate is the widespread debate and critique of American culture now current in media and politics. This includes critiques of American culture's materialism, individualism, and sexual openness. The critique is not limited to Muslims, but is common among both Muslim religious leaders and laity. During our fieldwork and interviews, we heard many criticisms of American society and culture, from its reliance on credit cards and personal debt, to its elevation of work and career achievement above family.[4] Respondents often combined the defense of Islam's views on gender with a discussion of the problems of modernity, the threat of carnality to moral purity, and a rehearsal of the social problems in the United States that are allegedly caused by moral breakdown. In this frame, the idea of equal rights as promoting individualism is seen as one source of society's problems.

However, when the issue is gender and *hijab*, the heart of the Islamic critique of contemporary American society seems to be a basic distrust of human nature and its ability to resist sexual impulses. For example, we attended a summer camp run for youth at a local masjid. According to one of the male speakers, himself in his mid-20s, making a presentation at the camp to high school age males: "whenever a man and a woman are alone in a room together, there is always a third figure present, shatan [Satan]."[5] Field notes from the same camp session on relations between men and women, but from a different speaker, reveal:

> You know what this means: you see some girl wearing little more than a handkerchief for a dress, and the guy in us (we're all guys) says 'wow!' That's natural. We're human. But after that one look, we look away, because Allah has something better for us, paradise, not hell.

Fear of untrammeled sexuality appeared in a number of different settings. Many of these concerns focused on the threat to women from men's inability to control their sexual desires (cf. Read and Bartkowski 2000). However, in a number of talks we heard, the attention centered on the threat women pose to the moral

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[3]The recent controversies in France regarding the veil have some similarities to U.S. issues, but important differences. One common theme is the tension between Muslim immigrants and the host country's national identity, and another is the tension between a universalist conception of equality versus external symbols of particularlistic group membership. However, France formally defines its public square as secular, and thus the contention was more about religion, per se, than about inequality as such.

[4]See, for example, Beshir and Beshir (2001), an advice book for Muslim parents published by an Islamic publishing house. They list such things as "individuality," "physical indulgence," and "fulfilling desires" as aspects of American culture that clash with Islamic values and pose a challenge to raising Muslim teenagers.

[5]Mernissi (2003:42) quotes a very similar saying and attributes it to Abu Issa al-Tarmidi, a contributor to the *hadith*.

purity of men.[6] In either formulation, American society's sexualized culture appears as a significant problem for Muslims and a threat to society's well being.

Thus, college-aged American Muslims have access to two distinct streams of cultural messages–equal rights vs. cultural decadence–that in many ways paint opposite portraits of what are the normatively appropriate relationships between men and women.[7] As Ajrouch (2004) documents, this produces a contested space for ethnic, religious, and gender identity development. Ajrouch's respondents felt particularly caught between what they called the "boater" culture of their immigrant parents, and "white" culture of the United States. Religious understandings, Ajrouch shows, play an important mediating role in how gender is configured (even though only one member of her focus group participants wore *hijab*). Contested cultural space is not a new dilemma for immigrant populations or members of minority religions. But Islam's increasingly public and controversial place in American life, and the importance attached to *hijab* in understandings of Islam in the West, make this particularly acute.

CULTURAL WORK AND THE RELIGIOUS RESPONSE

American Muslims, especially young people born in the U.S., are aware of the conventional American assumptions about women's inequality in Islam (e.g., Hasan 2000). Further, college-age young people are in a period in the life course where issues of dating, romance, love, and sex are salient for people of all cultural and religious backgrounds. The distance between the practices and values of first-generation immigrants (our respondents' parents' generation) regarding sex and marriage and the so-called mainstream American culture of sex and romantic love is too wide to be ignored.

As a result, young Muslims in America are constantly engaged in the cultural work of trying to figure out appropriate gender practices for their situation. In our research, we heard formal presentations on Islamic dating and marriage prac-

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[6]Mernissi investigates theories and approaches to sexuality in Islam, often contrasting them to those in Christianity. She holds (2003:30, 32-3, 41-5) that Islam's explicit theory of female sexuality considers it to be passive, and thus women must be sheltered from men's active sexual aggression. However, she also discerns an implicit theory that has an active conception of female sexuality, from which men must often be protected, lest social disorder result. Mernissi notes that both theoretical conceptions have resulted in the same practical solution—the veiling and subordination of women. Many of our respondents reject the idea that *hijab* represents subordination, but we heard many comments that showed a severe distrust or even fear of sexual desires.

[7]Read and Bartkowski (2000) and Bartkowski and Read (2003) provide thorough analyses of the debates about *hijab* itself within Islamic elite circles. We focus on the broader, everyday cultural debate between American conceptions of freedom and equality and Muslim notions of proper social values.

tices and informal discussions on appropriate ways to behave toward men and women. We attended workshops on Muslim parenting and read literature on what is permissible and forbidden for men and women to do. One major theme of these various settings and media was a denial that women's inequality was intrinsic to Islam. In almost every discussion of Islam, gender, or family that we heard in the course of this research, Muslim speakers (both male and female) went out of their way to claim "in Islam, women have equal rights," or "men and women are different, but that does not mean unequal." Some of these claims may have been for the authors' benefit—non-Muslims openly engaged in research. But we take as significant how often our respondents went out of their way—often completely unprompted—to make this point.

Several of our respondents clarified to us that equality as sameness was not how Islam views gender, but rather, that Islam emphasizes "equity." Equity was then interpreted in terms of complementarity of needs, functions, and contributions (cf. Bartkowski and Read 2003). This formulation includes a degree of essentialism that is often connected to biology, sexual drives, and the basic distrust of human nature and its ability to resist sexual impulses that we noted above.

Other respondents provided us with rationales for their understanding of women's equity in that they claimed women actually had an advantaged position, in some respects, as compared to men. For example, one respondent noted to us that in Islam, women are allowed to keep their own money, whereas the money men earn is the family's money and must support the household. In addition, a male elder from a masjid explained that, unlike in the west, women in Islam had never been considered "chattel" property (his term) and thus their issues were not the same as Western women's. Whether that claim is true is less relevant to our case than the way it demonstrates that Muslims in America are acutely aware of the clash between their practices and many Americans' notions of equal rights. We also note that these are not Victorian separate spheres arguments, because nothing in them necessarily mandates that women should remain only in the private domain of home and family. These claims were often articulated to us by women who are themselves creating very public, career-oriented lives.

Another example of the cultural work being done by American Muslims comes from a long evening's discussion of Islamic marriage practices, presented as one class in a series of talks geared for young people and held at a masjid (also in attendance were a significant number of people who looked more like parents than singles). The lecturer, an out-of-town sheikh who was an invited speaker, discussed courtship and marriage practices using the language of "rights" and "choice," repeatedly emphasizing that women as well as men are allowed to choose their partners. He questioned the wisdom of arranged marriages, claiming that without a chosen relationship, built on love, respect, and observance of Islam, a marriage could not be happy (note that "happiness" as a criterion for a good marriage was important). Arranged marriages, he claimed, were part of

Arab and Pakistani culture, not Islamically prescribed. We found it significant the extent to which the sheikh put Islamic practices in the U.S. within the language of choice and rights. Below is a passage, quoted from the first author's field notes, where the sheikh was discussing how men and women could begin to evaluate potential marriage partners:

> A man can look at his prospective wife. This is unavoidable in the U.S. Since one will be "living with the choice for the rest of life" it is important that one look at one's spouse first. And, this should/can be done without her parents' permission. One can look at a young woman on the streets or in public. Indeed, one should look before one gets serious—it is important to protect the other's feelings, so that one does not reject them in a face-to-face meeting (say at the family house, etc.; that kind of rejection can be very painful to the young woman and her family).

Most of the lecture was from a male perspective—the sheikh often stumbling a bit to keep women's concerns in mind—but the framing was choice, rights, and equality .

Finally, at several points Muslims emphasized to us, and we observed, that there are definite rules of modesty for men as well—concern about moral purity and sexual control are not directed solely at women. In some discussions at the MSA at a local university we heard claims by young women that men, as well as women, should wear *jilbab* (a full length, long-sleeved robe)—thus rejecting the Western custom of pants. This was, in effect, a protest against a modesty double standard, as well as against dominant American norms of attire. Similar claims are evident in Hasan's (2000) book and among Ajrouch's (2004) respondents.

Young men themselves often emphasize the importance of their own modesty. At one work-service day attended by the first author, groups of young Muslims (males and females working in separate groups) were painting, collecting litter, and planting grass and flowers in an impoverished neighborhood. Quoting from field notes from that day:

> Near the end [of the post-prayer lecture] was an admonition to the women working to keep their *hijabs* buttoned completely and to the men to have their shirts tucked in as they worked. He [the Imam] said, "men, we don't need to see your backs!" I did notice that while many of the...[male] volunteers had on t-shirts, they were generally t-shirts whose sleeves hung all the way to the elbow. None had on shorts or sleeveless tee/tank tops.

Male modesty in appearance was a point made a number of times in the functions we attended. Indeed, several observations in the first author's field notes from various site visits note that the author was dressed slightly "immodestly"—khakis and short sleeve, open-collared shirts—as compared to the Muslim men in the draping *shalwar kameez* clothing of South Asia or others in Western dress, but with their long-sleeve shirts buttoned all the way to the wrists and the neck.

RELIGION AND CULTURE

All of these examples point to ways in which Muslim Americans deal with the tension between dominant American constructions of equal rights, gender, and the status of women. The second generation is clearly working to find a "negotiated order" (Maines and Charlton 1985) in gender matters. They often have concerns about American culture but they cannot accept the traditional restrictions that many associate with Arab or Pakistani culture. They need to figure out how to be co-workers with professionals of the opposite sex and to find marriage partners without the arranged customs their parents may have used.

We found one particular discursive claim used by many American Muslims, both male and female, to deal with the cultural and potential logical tensions they face. Warner et al. (2001) call this Islam's "Teflon construction." That is, things that are objectionable, or that are seen as restraining, unfair, or unwise, are deemed to be aspects of "culture" and can be jettisoned without damaging the purity of Islamic truth. Bad things slide off the "true Islam" as if it were coated with Teflon. Further, many respondents said that Islam should be purged of cultural pollutions; for example, some interviewees told us that Islam in America is "liberated" (one used that term) from the problems of Middle Eastern and other traditional cultures. Thus, the necessary reality of Islam in America—that it must adapt to a much different cultural environment from which it emerged—is turned into a virtue.

We heard many speakers make a distinction between religion and culture in this regard—for example, the sheikh giving the lecture on marriage and dating described above. We first became aware of it, however, in interviews with young women. We quote here from an individual interview, in which the respondent gives a clear account of how religion and culture can and should be distinguished. We note that though the interviewer occasioned this particular response by presenting the religion-culture distinction to the respondent, this line of questioning was itself prompted by the use of the religion vs. culture logic in a prior focus group interview:

> I: [H]ow do you distinguish between something that's religious and something that's cultural?
> R: [W] hat I try to do is look for very sound evidence when it comes to anything that anybody says to me that doesn't make too much sense. Or a lot of times we go back to the life of the Prophet–peace be upon Him–and all the companions of the Prophet and the women at that time and how they lived their lives. [If] something is explicitly stated through the Hadith or [if I] see in the Qur'an that it's wrong, then we leave it. And if it's not explicitly said, then you consider it a gray area of where it's controversial or you need to do further research. But I would never say, "Yes, this is a sin" if I've never found any sound evidence. [I]t may be something that people are ashamed of because of their own cultural background, which is natural.
> I: So gray areas might be considered cultural?

R: I guess the more you understand your religion ... once you get older, you begin to do research yourself. ... There's so many things that can fall into that category when you begin to question where this is coming from. Some things are for example the way you get married, like arranged marriages compared to non-arranged marriages ... [or] the way that the women dress. If you go to Africa, women don't wear what I'm wearing. No, they wear African clothing. And if they go to Turkey, they wear Turkish clothing. In the West, they go to some Limited Express at the mall and they get a skirt and a shirt. But the whole point is that everything is covered but the face and the hands. And everything is loose and covering all shape and form. So, in a case like this, you can see how there are so many different cultural influences in the way that people apply Islam. But again, it still complies with Islamic teaching.

HIJAB AND AMERICAN MUSLIM WOMEN

This quotation leads us specifically to *hijab*, a cultural and religious symbol that we believe epitomizes the negotiation second-generation American Muslims do regarding their identities. Many of the women we talked to made a conscious decision to wear *hijab*; for some of our respondents this decision was not made until they were in college (see similar evidence in Schmidt 2004:101, 105-10). The decision was presented to us as having a number of dimensions, although it invariably involved a sense of religious obligation. A keyword in many of the explanations was "modesty." Revealing too much of the body endangers the moral status of both men and women. *Hijab* helps protect women from men and men from women. These discussions of modesty often occurred in all male settings, or when men spoke to gatherings of men and women at a meeting or at *Jummah* (midday Friday) prayer.

Interestingly, in many of the notes gathered by the second author and other female research assistants, the discussions of *hijab* among young women themselves were often less about modesty and moral purity than about other interpersonal issues. Perhaps the modesty angle is so obvious to young women it need not be mentioned in all-female discussions, but our field notes and experiences did not report the types of fire and brimstone speeches and warnings of moral danger among young women that we witnessed regularly among young men. Rather, many discussions among young women were more about visibility, social ostracism, and public reputation.. One young woman told the second author, "If I don't wear the *hijab* the Muslim girls [at the MSA] will not acknowledge me." Another said, "I don't like [her college's] MSA because all the girls want you to wear the *hijab* or else they are rude to you," indicating the peer pressure and social expectations involved. Other dimensions of identity also intersect with religion for these second-generation youth in their cultural identity work. The first author's field notes from various MSA functions, such as potluck meals (not prayer services), indicate that a significant minority of the young women were uncovered—often seven or eight among the 30-odd women there. When asked

about this, one Arab informant replied that the ones without the *hijab* were definitely "Indo-Pak," as "no Arab girl would be uncovered."

Several women mentioned the benefit of gaining more respect from men after starting to cover. One meaning of respect in this case may be discouraging unwelcome flirting or sexual attention. It is not hard to imagine that women who cover are much less likely to be hit on by non-Muslim, or even Muslim, men. Such overt signs of piety help remove ambiguity from new social settings. Others may well react to a covered women differently, and co-religionists who may be present can react to such visible piety to help divert people from temptation. Women in *hijab* instantly signal who they are and what group they identify with, making clear their religious and community connections. Schmidt (2004) reasons that young women who wear *hijab* are more likely to be granted religious and moral authority among peers, particularly among groups such as an MSA, and thus taken more seriously. Similarly, Ajrouch's (2004) respondents held higher behavioral expectations for covered women because of their easily visible claims to piety. We often heard women say they monitored their own behavior when wearing *hijab* because "you represent Islam" to others.

Emphasizing differences from non-Muslims is one key to understanding the identity functions of *hijab*. However, the young women we encountered were not all facing the same situations in college or vis à vis their families. Some came from families where their mothers did not cover; others came from families who worried about their daughters being alone among non-believers and exposed to big-city temptations. There are multi-directional pressures, and simultaneous negotiations involved, but despite varying logics, wearing *hijab* is a viable way of dealing with many of them. As with any social practice or embodied symbol, different people had different rationales for its use, and any given person often had more than one reason.

For many, wearing *hijab* and being involved in Islamically oriented organizations provide a way to escape parental authority and supervision, at least temporarily. These are very public young women, who drive around the city to various events, organize meetings of MSA and other religiously related groups, and plan for graduate school and careers. One local MSA itself recognizes this and offers workshops on things such as self-defense (showing the expectation that women would be without male escorts in many settings) and applying to medical school (one flyer noted explicitly "sisters are encouraged to attend").

A couple of the women provided an account of *hijab* that emphasized the way in which it provides some insulation from the restrictions that might otherwise accompany their status as unmarried women. Their families often had traditional gender ideas and regarded their young women protectively. And yet, the young women want to take advantage of what America can offer them, and still consider themselves good Muslims. Wearing *hijab*, an outward, public display of piety and religious identity, can finesse the constraints that conservative gender roles might impose upon them. One young woman who did not cover told the second

author, "if I wore the *hijab* I would be able to do so much more." *Hijab* is so symbolically loaded and so legitimate within the Islamic community—as is involvement in Islamic organizations and the women's attention to their own religious education—that the women are insulated (at least to some degree) from reactionary backlash from Muslim men or other women (such as their mothers) protecting a traditional gender order. In another example, one interviewee suggested that other women on her campus often wore *hijab* just to be able to "date" without repercussions (although we note that she did not mean "date" the way most native-born middle class Americans would define the term). Similarly, while many of our respondents could not imagine themselves marrying someone about whom their parents disapproved, they also did not anticipate an arranged marriage of the type so many of their parents had. *Hijab* carves out a cultural space for young Muslim women to live lives that their mothers could barely have imagined (see a similar theme in Cainkar 1996 and Read and Bartkowski 2000) and still to be publicly Muslim.

Alternatively, other young women are trying to achieve some distance from their assimilating, Westernized parents, or are from areas in which there are very few Muslims at all. They come from situations in which they and their families were reasonably well-integrated into non-Muslim communities. Often the women in their family of origin did not cover, except when in the mosque. In establishing their own identities, these women are often resisting assimilationist pressures from their families. Their arrival at college was their first experience with all-Muslim circles of friends. They began to wear *hijab* as an expression of a Muslim identity-in-formation (on their way to what Peek [2005] would call a "declared identity"),[8] as well as trying to fit in with a new crowd of friends. These women are creating identities that are distinct from their more Americanized families and that offer their own forms of autonomy. For example, one woman explained that going to college, meeting more Muslims, and continuing to learn more about her religion persuaded her to begin to cover: "It wasn't really taught to me. My mom doesn't wear it, my grandma doesn't wear it. No one wears it. But I found out—I researched, I talked to people—just one day it hit me and I decided to wear it."

Another young woman, whose friendship circles were all Muslim, related that she began to wear *hijab* in college, even over her parents' objections. She grew up in a mid-sized community in a state without a significant Muslim popu-

[8]In her study of the events of 9/11, Peek (2005) distinguishes between "chosen" and "declared" identities, the latter being an intensification of self-identity following a crisis. Our impression was that we saw fewer *hijabis* immediately post 9/11, but we do not believe this changes the fundamental dynamic we report here. It seems to us that, while not as traumatic as a public crisis such as 9/11, many young people's encounter with diversity and alternative social identities at college or in a metropolis, followed by finding a comfortable peer group, can result in something that approximates the sense of an emphatic declared identity.

lation, and her physician parents felt *hijab* to be unnecessary. Thus, *hijab* helps negotiate the generational difference with parents—establishing a distinct identity—as well as the difference with non-Muslim society. Many young American Muslims have experiences and knowledge that differ widely from that of their parents, whose social and cultural lessons are not very relevant to them. Many young people report that their parents—while culturally traditionalist—are lax or secularized in their religious practice. Consider this excerpt from a young woman:

> My parents, my family has always been Muslim by culture which I mean ... is not always very valid because I don't believe that ... that God considers you a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew based on your blood or ... something that you inherit. I believe ... you have to make a conscious decision. And so, at first, I think my parents were Muslim by culture ... [I]t wasn't until much later in life–my mother didn't begin covering until probably in her early 30s ... I started [at] 16, 17 years old. And this is something–this is a general thing in any Muslim family. So I think there's been like a, you know, a rise in awareness, Islamic awareness, in my own generation compared to my parents' generation.

Note her emphasis on individual choice and conscious decision as the essence of authentic religious commitment. Also, how she separates what is "religious"—and thus a true aspect of Islam—from what is "cultural" and to be examined, evaluated, and perhaps discarded. By her account, her mother began covering about the same time she did—but she presents this as a trend that is going from the second generation to their parents' generation, rather than vice versa. This young woman is becoming an American in her approach to chosen, voluntaristic religiosity, and still preserving a distinctly Muslim identity, visibly proclaimed with *hijab*.

In effect, these young women are using *hijab* as a cultural resource to give some substantive meaning to their contentions that difference does not necessarily mean inequality. In the process, they are creating practical dimensions of an American Islam. As Read and Bartkowski (2000) also show, these young women are active agents and are able, to some degree, to create their own lives. *Hijab* helps them do so, while also keeping them anchored in a traditional identity and avoiding potential anomie.

FASHION AS AN AUTONOMOUS DYNAMIC

We have presented the decision to wear *hijab* as one of identity development and the re-orientation of college-aged women from their families to their peer groups. However, we want to note that wearing *hijab* has a fashion dynamic that cannot be fully accounted for by religious motivations or social, ethnic, or class backgrounds. Lieberson (2000) charts what he calls the independent cycle of fashion as a social phenomenon in its own right. We call upon that now because,

in our view, it is also indisputable that along with its religious and social meanings, *hijab* is a fashion statement. Schmidt (20045 :105-10) refers to the *jilbab* and *hijab* as an "informal dress code" among the Muslims she met. In our experience, girls and young women talk about *hijab* with each other as if they were talking about their clothes from the mall. Further, the ways in which they wear *hijab*, for example, the different ways in which it is wrapped about the head and draped down over the shoulders, is subject to fashion, innovation, and trend. Young women experiment with different styles, teaching them to and learning them from their sisters and peers.

Further, as more and more young women wear *hijab*, others are now starting to wear the *jilbab*, the full-length robe. We have observed some women taking it a step further and wearing the *nikab* that covers their face. Part of this seems to be a dynamic where demonstrating one's piety may require ever-increasing steps in order to distinguish oneself from the many others who are beginning to adopt the symbol. Paradoxically, as is the case with the display of many symbols, this increasing demonstration of piety is simultaneously a dimension of fitting in with religiously identified peer groups even as it distinguishes identity and status. Thus, while this increasing covering is on one level about religion, it is also the case that religion is just the substantive content with which statements of personal identity and social distinction are being made. We have not pursued these last observations systematically, but they do make sense of some of the internal personal and social dynamics we have observed within Islamic schools, masjids, and student organizations.

CONCLUSION

May Seikaly (1998:182) notes that "while the veil carries a religious significance, it is a social symbol as well; women have come to use it to fulfill other needs." American society puts great emphasis on equality, independence, and the establishment of autonomous personal identity. We argue that the decision to wear *hijab* can work in just this way for many second-generation American Muslim women. They are creating cultural space for the development of autonomous selves through the use of this potent religious symbol. It emphasizes their Muslim identity and gives them some measure of autonomy, depending upon their personal circumstances, from: a) dominant American non-Muslim culture; b) their Westernized, assimilating parents; or c) their non-assimilating parents who hold expectations for them rooted in Arabic or Indo-Pakistani culture. Wearing *hijab* is, for them, a practical and useful response to living as young women in a nexus between two cultures and as members of a minority faith. They are able to carve out some autonomous cultural space with a public symbol that visibly repudiates the overly individualized culture of dominant American society and that gives them some room to feel at home and to prosper in both worlds.

In whatever situation these young women find themselves, they rely on the legitimacy of religion, and the Teflon construction of Islam as opposed to the polluting effects of culture, to provide them with opportunities to become simultaneously public women, young Americans, and good Muslims.

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