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Social Justice and Community among Young Muslims in the United States

Haleema Welji

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This article explores how the concepts of dignity and conviviality impact the social justice work of young-adult Muslims in the United States. Here, conviviality demands confronting and coping with historical discrimination, exploitation, and abuse (Gilroy 2004) and is examined in relation to the ideology of the Muslim *ummah*, a united, global community of all Muslims. However, the Muslims this article focuses on see a tension between the ideology of the ummah and the practice, which results in inequity and a lack of dignity experienced by some Muslims. The author argues that attempts at building convivial relationships inadvertently lead Muslims to feel distance and isolation from Muslim spaces and community. Their social justice work provides them with the ability to look beyond the Muslim ummah and see dignity in a shared humanity. Combined with their intellectual and academic study of social justice, these Muslims are developing their own ethical frameworks grounded in Islam. Though challenging to enact, by continually confronting their privileges, biases, and blind spots, these Muslims are striving to live, behave, and build relationships that prioritize the dignity of all people, inside the Muslim community and beyond.

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Reclaiming a Diverse *Ummah*

Social Justice and Community among Young Muslims in the United States

Haleema Welji
University of California San Diego

Abstract: This article explores how the concepts of dignity and conviviality impact the social justice work of young-adult Muslims in the United States. Here, conviviality demands confronting and coping with historical discrimination, exploitation, and abuse (Gilroy 2004) and is examined in relation to the ideology of the Muslim *ummah,* a united, global community of all Muslims. However, the Muslims this article focuses on see a tension between the ideology of the ummah and the practice, which results in inequity and a lack of dignity experienced by some Muslims. The author argues that attempts at building convivial relationships inadvertently lead Muslims to feel distance and isolation from Muslim spaces and community. Their social justice work provides them with the ability to look beyond the Muslim ummah and see dignity in a shared humanity. Combined with their intellectual and academic study of social justice, these Muslims are developing their own ethical frameworks grounded in Islam. Though challenging to enact, by continually confronting their privileges, biases, and blind spots, these Muslims are striving to live, behave, and build relationships that prioritize the dignity of all people, inside the Muslim community and beyond.

Keywords: Islam; ethics; social justice; belonging; ummah; anti-blackness; conviviality

Résumé : Cet article explore l'impact des concepts de dignité et de convivialité sur le travail de justice sociale des jeunes adultes musulmans aux États-Unis. Ici, la convivialité exige d'affronter et de faire face à la discrimination, à l'exploitation et aux abus historiques (Gilroy 2004) ; elle est examinée en relation avec l'idéologie de l'*ummah* musulmane, une communauté mondiale unie de tous les Musulmans. Cependant, les Musulmans sur lesquels porte cet article constatent une tension entre l'idéologie de l'*ummah* et la pratique, qui se traduit par une inégalité et un manque de dignité vécus par certains

Musulmans. L’auteur affirme que les tentatives de création de relations conviviales conduisent involontairement les Musulmans à ressentir une distance et un isolement par rapport aux espaces et à la communauté des Musulmans. Leur travail en faveur de la justice sociale leur donne la capacité de regarder au-delà de l’*ummah* musulmane et de voir la dignité dans une humanité partagée. Parallèlement à leur étude intellectuelle et académique de la justice sociale, ces Musulmans développent leurs propres cadres éthiques fondés sur l’Islam. Bien qu’il s’agisse d’un défi à relever, en confrontant continuellement leurs privilèges, leurs préjugés et leurs angles morts, ces Musulmans s’efforcent de vivre, de se comporter socialement et d’établir des relations qui donnent la priorité à la dignité de tous, au sein de la communauté musulmane et au-delà.

Mots-clés : Islam ; éthique ; justice sociale ; appartenance ; ummah; anti-négritude ; convivialité

Introduction

In spite of facing various forms of Islamophobia, Farah,[1] a college[2] senior, researching food insecurity through a fruit and vegetable subscription program, has a lot of pride in being a Muslim-American. Her parents immigrated from Lebanon and raised Farah and her older brother in the southern United States. Even though she struggled with what she called the “immigrant child mindset” of making her parents proud while adjusting to life in a new country, Farah told me, “being Muslim in this country is so empowering. You get this community that strengthens you.” But then she hesitated. The hesitation was not because of Islamophobia, but because of the difficulties of acceptance, love, and support from within the Muslim community. Farah explained to me the contrast she felt between the ethics of Islam and the exclusion of marginalized segments of the Muslim community, especially LGBTQ+ Muslims, saying, “Islam is so embedded in this belief of respecting your neighbours and respecting everybody … [but] would anyone feel welcome if you were saying ‘no, you can’t do this’ or ‘your [LGBTQ+] identity isn’t right?’” Farah recognized that as an upper-class, Arab-American Muslim, she easily found acceptance in the Muslim *ummah,* the ideology of a united, global Muslim community that bridges across race, class, ethnicity, sect, and specifics of interpretation and practice (Asad 2003; Hodgson 1974). However, the contrast that Farah painted between the ideology of an inclusive ummah and the exclusion of marginalized Muslims demonstrates the ways in which some young Muslims are grappling

with inequitable treatment in Muslim-American communities and the United States more broadly.

Increasing importance needs to be placed on navigating Farah's concerns about conviviality—of accepting and appreciating the difference within her religious community. While the term conviviality suggests a focus on positive, diverse interactions, I draw on the literature that embeds conviviality in the need to address the challenges of power dynamics head-on to build toward equity. I use Paul Gilroy's (2004, xi) definition of conviviality from *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* which entails the active recognition and grappling with contemporary challenges of multicultural ideals in Britain amidst racism as well as an unjust colonial past. Other social scientists have used conviviality, such as Deniz Duru (2016, 158), who adds that it "involves both cohesion and tension," and Brad Erickson (2011, 115), who writes that "integration, accommodation, discrimination, and polarization may take place simultaneously" in conviviality. However, most of the literature attributes these examples of conflict to inter-group conflicts, rather than intra-group polarization. The concept of ummah relies on the Islamic ethics of acceptance of all people, and serves as an important example of community-centric ideologies of conviviality.

I use my fieldwork with young Muslim-Americans who are active in social justice issues to explore concepts of community, belonging, and conviviality. I concentrate on the challenges of Muslims in Generation Z who are members of immigrant families. This population is particularly attentive to inequity as an ongoing challenge to conviviality. Although conviviality is central to relations both inside and outside of the Muslim community, I focus on intra-Muslim conviviality. The United States Muslim ummah reflects the ethnic, racial, sectarian, and socio-cultural diversity of global Muslims (see Afzal 2014; Mir 2014). However, ideologies of a united ummah hide intra-Muslim tensions such as the marginalization of Black Muslims (Beydoun 2015; Jackson 2005). With growing scholarly and community awareness of these hierarchical dynamics, this project explores how a segment of the Muslim population grapples with continued inequity within the ummah. Specifically, how are young social-justice-minded Muslims in the US building ethical frameworks centred on the dignity of all people and what impacts do these practices have on their connections to the Muslim-American community? How do their efforts shape their ability to create convivial relationships?

For social-justice-minded Muslims, the ideological concept of one ummah is not a reality because of all the ways it fails as an instantiation of equality across Muslims. As a response to inequalities, I argue that these Generation Z, second-generation immigrant Muslims bring together their ideas of social justice both from Islamic values and the historical American context, to define an ethical framework built from seeing dignity in every human life. As a consequence of their activism, these Muslims often lose Muslim community. Specifically, I argue that:

(1) Identifying and articulating examples of inequitable relationships in the Muslim communities they grew up in, many of these young Muslims are deliberately retreating from Muslim spaces, relationships, and community;

(2) While grounded in the ethics of Islam, their distance from the Muslim community, along with intellectual exploration, allows them to build ethical frameworks motivated by the ideals of the equal dignity of all people; and

(3) Having developed confidence in their values, these young Muslims are attempting to build diverse community along the values of equal dignity in all people, even though this requires continual work.

I begin with an introduction to my methodology, then go on to provide some background on the concept of the ummah and the role of social justice in the Muslim-American community. In the rest of the article I use the concept of conviviality to outline the aspirations of my interlocutors in terms of intra-Muslim belonging.

Methodology: Exploring Young Adult US Muslims

This article is based on ethnographic work with social-justice-minded, Muslim-American college students or recent graduates. These young adults are part of efforts to advocate for and enact justice and equity in both Muslim and non-Muslim spaces. Growing up almost exclusively in a post 9/11 world, they have faced subtle and overt signs of what they call "Islamophobia."[3] However, for many, realizing that being Muslim was a stigmatized identity helped them embrace their Muslim identity as they fought against such stereotypes. The continual negative depiction of Islam by their neighbors, government officials, legal/criminal policymakers, and others, structures their relationship with their religion (Zine 2006). Islamophobia also largely influences their religious

communities and spaces, and contributes to intra-Muslim racisms, as some immigrant Muslim communities attempt to appeal to and assimilate with white Americans at the expense of Black Muslims (Jackson 2005; Khabeer 2016). For these young Muslims, growing up in the US influenced their exposure, involvement, and education on social justice movements in the US context, including recognition of the role that Black Muslims played in civil rights (Chan-Malik 2018).

The college population is especially interesting because it undergoes a period of novel religious exploration and heightened activism. Research on young adults shows that while religious practice is often reported to decline during college, religious affiliation and spiritual beliefs are more likely to remain consistent or increase (Koenig, McGue, and Iacono 2008; McNamara Barry et al. 2010). As a "moment of mobility and transition," colleges provide diverse spaces where students are actively shaping their identities (Amin 2002, 970). Individuals of this age group have been instrumental in activism, especially around climate change, gun violence, and racial injustice.

My ethnographic fieldwork began in 2015 when I conducted participant observation in academic and social residential summer programs for 18 to 26-year-old Muslims living in the US. As a Muslim-American myself and having started college under the umbrella of 9/11, I was curious how the current generation of college students was negotiating their religious and national identities. While I had tried to hide my religious identity during college and continue to grapple with formulating and articulating my own relationship to Islam, I found many Muslim-American college students I encountered in religious spaces, social spaces, and in my classrooms were more publicly embracing their religion. I began fieldwork at youth programs sponsored by national youth organizations of the Ismaili Muslim sect, offering programs to Ismailis across the United States. Ismailis are a sect of the Shi'ite branch. The programs concentrated on academic, social, and community service goals particularly rooted in the philosophy of an ideologically united Muslim ummah. While working with these programs, I was able to observe youth interactions, behaviours, activism, as well as build long-lasting relationships. In my role as a faculty member, I taught and led academic discussions on the history of Islam in America, participated in long discussions on growing Islamophobia, and facilitated visits to relevant Muslim-American historical sites. Through these camp activities, I grew more aware of the particular challenges and the mindset of this demographic group. From there, I broadened my sample to

observe and interview Muslims of different sects, philosophical traditions, and levels of religiosity.

This article draws primarily from interview-based methodology, supplemented by experiences and observations while interacting with over 200 young Muslims from a variety of backgrounds and experiences through camps and university spaces. Building on methodologies that focus on in-depth interviews with a few subjects (Crapanzano 1980; Dwyer 1982), this project relies on interviews as a means of concentrating on reflections on self and other that frame concepts of conviviality. The in-depth interview format offers a context for more substantive investigation on topics of faith and activism, and through which more complex concepts like dignity and conviviality are elaborated. Between October 2018 and March 2020, nine young adults granted semi-structured interviews ranging from two to five hours, broken up into multiple interviews. For interviewees in cities close to me or in cities I regularly visit, the interviews took place in person, at local coffee shops. The rest took place over Zoom. Out of the nine, I had observed five of them in social justice activism before the interview. As the sample I first met through camps may represent some self-selection to attend a religiously-motivated camp (although they still reflected a diverse range of relationships with faith), I also added participants from outside of those spaces. I met them through referrals by Muslim-Americans active in social justice and through public attention about their work.

For example, I met Chandni in 2015 during an international summer camp for high schoolers based in Nairobi, Kenya. After camp, she co-organized a fundraising project for a Kenyan orphanage. I met with her group during the planning stages, which allowed me to observe Chandni's role and the project's impact on her. While she was finishing her undergraduate degree, I conducted three interviews with Chandni at a local coffee shop (October 2018, August 2019, February 2020), each an hour and a half to two hours.

By contrast, I met Isra after hearing an interview with her on an education-themed podcast about her student activism against racial bias on her university campus. When I spoke with her, Isra had recently graduated and was working at her former university on diversity and equity issues. After conversing over email, Isra consented to a virtual interview in October 2019 and a follow-up in January 2020, each taking an hour and a half.

The interviews were structured around six themes: (1) issues of identity; (2) motivations for activism; (3) relationship with Islam; (4) family background

and religious upbringing; (5) Muslim community perception; and (6) definition of and engagement with the Muslim ummah. While the interviews do not replace participant observation and the lived experience of engaging in social justice work, the interviews allowed for targeted exploration of motivations for the work, as well as perceived responses to the work from their family, religious community, and school community.

I rely on how Scott Kugle (2014, 220) defines activism in his work with gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims, as "any self-conscious engagement with others in order to change the social order." The interviews are key to determining the relevance and significance of the central components that emerge from Kugle's approach: this included defining activism as (1) deliberate and self-conscious; (2) collaborative and interactive; and (3) attempting to change the social order to align with equity and justice. However, I step back from the label of social justice activist because many interviewees felt that they did not do enough to adopt the label and would need to "put more on the line" (Isra). However, these participants employed their interpretation of social justice principles to decide what to study, with whom to build friendships, and how to respond to injustices. They used the concept of "activeness" to cover efforts to tackle root causes of injustice, ranging from organizing protests, leading educational trainings, advocating for policy changes (in universities, legal systems, or government), and challenging the behaviours of those around them.

The interviewees were all born and raised in North America,[4] and the project concentrates on those whose parents immigrated from South Asia, the Middle East, or North Africa. My interlocutors represent some aspects of the diversity of the Muslim community: gender, ethnicity,[5] class, religious sect (from those who self-describe as affiliating with various Shia sects to Sunnis), and sexual orientation. They all however fall in the educated elite (and they discuss the link between education and activism in various ways), as they currently attend or have recently graduated from top-ranked universities across the United States.

Theoretical Framework

The Ideology of Ummah

Exemplified in Islamic history, the ummah was used as a powerful Islamic ideology to bridge lines of difference. At the time of Prophet Muhammad, communities were divided powerfully along the lines of tribal affiliation and

place of origin (Armstrong 2006; Hodgson 1974). As historian Marshall Hodgson (1974, 174) described, the ideology of the ummah helped unite Muslims across previously hierarchical tribal connections. While it did not erase those loyalties, it did ideologically supersede them (Al-Ahsan 1992; Karim 2009). This cohesive ideology continues today and is best reflected in the *hajj,* demonstrating the power of shared community over language, culture, race, and religious sect. In the US, the concept of the ummah supports a transnational Muslim social and economic network (Afzal 2014). Much like it did historically, the ummah does not erase diversities but minimizes them in favor of shared religious identity.

Ideologically, the ummah emphasizes belonging to a shared faith (Asad 2003, 229), thus serving as an instantiation of values of social justice and equity. Given the diverse identities of Muslim students on one campus, university Muslim Student Associations (MSAs) have the potential to be an equitable space for the whole ummah. However, as many college students note, MSAs vary in how universal those feelings are shared across intersectional identities of Muslims (race, sect, sexuality, etcetera). More broadly, historical and contemporary examples of intra-religious violence (sectarian, ethnic, etcetera), illustrate the disconnect between ideology and practice. Further, hierarchical divisions both inside and outside the Muslim community can impact the social contexts of the mosque. As legal scholar Khaled Beydoun (2015, 1) discusses when he talks about anti-blackness and racial hierarchies in the Muslim-American community, under the guise of being "one ummah," Muslim spaces may excuse "tribal and racial affiliation."

One consequence of the ideology of the ummah is also a generalization of the ummah, making it easier for Muslims to overlook intra-community complexity. Even the young Muslims that I describe here, who regularly fight to legitimate diversity in Islam (sectarian, gender identity, sexual identity, etcetera), sometimes equate the exclusionary practices of some Muslims with the entirety of the community. A combination of a few non-progressive leaders and experiences with some peers, their parents, or "uncles and aunties," lead to critiques of the entire ummah's lack of social justice. Thus, the racism or patriarchy of some Muslims comes to represent all Muslims. Even though they recognize that it is "not all Muslims," they also occasionally make broad judgments as one interlocutor did, saying, "most young Desi [South Asian] people … will act on the things that personally affect them but not necessarily the liberation of all people."

The ideological power of the ummah also intensifies due to the easy circulation of conservative, global Islamic discourses. In their ethnographic work with gay Muslims, both Ahmed Afzal (2014) and Scott Kugle (2014) argue that Muslims "internalize" global Islamic discourses where Islam is seen in conflict with non-traditional sexual and gender identities. Afzal (2014) argues that personal relationships Muslim-Americans have with Islam cannot be separated from global Islamic revivalist movements. Kugle (2014, 2) importantly reflects on the role of activism and "camaraderie with like-minded individuals" in negotiating the tension between identity and Islam. My project builds on works such as Afzal and Kugle because while some of my participants struggled with their own sexual identities in relation to Islam, others act as "like-minded individuals" and advocated alongside their peers. These supportive peers are instrumental in advocating for change in the Muslim community. The young adults I examine are interpreting Islam through larger discourses like Islamophobia and anti-progressive Islamic revivalism. While their blind spots and generalizations occasionally perpetuate a monolithic view of the Muslim community, it is their very activism that seeks to counter those perspectives, in themselves and others. They recognize and struggle with their own biases, while deliberately working to remediate bias where they can.

Islam and Social Justice in the US Context

While movements for reform and social justice are taking place across the global Muslim world, my young Muslim interlocutors heavily cite social justice influences rooted in the history and context of the US. In her book *Being Muslim,* Sylvia Chan-Malik (2018, 4) argues that being Muslim "is an iterative and reiterative practice that arises out of racial and gendered structures of feelings within the domestic United States," which continues to influence Muslim-Americans today. For the young people examined here, their race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender intersect as they negotiate what it means to be Muslim. Particularly for women, patriarchal assumptions about women impact their relationship with Islam and the Muslim community (see Maira 2009; Zine 2006). Their resilience in the face of gender discrimination can be seen in their demand for equitable prayer spaces on campus or advocacy for gender balance in MSA events.

Scholars of Muslim-Americans have highlighted the challenges facing a divided Muslim community (Beydoun 2015; Chan-Malik 2018; Khabeer 2016; Patel 2018). Some Muslims have faced the challenge head on, combining the foundation of religious faith and the principles of social justice to unite

the Muslim community, exemplified in Rami Nashashibi's work with Inter-city Muslim Action Network (see also Khabeer 2016). Using foundations of feminism, Hind Makki's Side Entrance Tumblr project aired "dirty laundry" about the sometimes problematic prayer spaces for women (Makki 2018). Both Nashashibi and Makki serve as a model for merging Islam and social justice that has inspired many of the interlocutors.

Conviviality across Communities

While this article focuses on the effects of conviviality inside the community, creating community across differences (within Muslim and non-Muslim groups) is often both a cause for intra-Muslim conflict and an effect as they seek conviviality elsewhere. Synthesizing the research on practices and ideologies of conviviality, three important aspects of the definition drive this project: a bridging across lines of difference, necessity of disagreement and active challenging, and the centrality of everyday interactions and relationships. Conviviality and pluralism beyond the Muslim ummah are central foci of Muslim-American activist efforts. For example, Muslim-American Eboo Patel's (2007, xvii) Interfaith Youth Core has diverse students enacting conviviality through discussions and community service projects. Diana Eck (2007, 743) the founder of the Harvard Pluralism Project, calls pluralism "today's *convivencia.*" She explains that "the challenge of pluralism is not to obliterate or erase difference … but rather to discover ways of living, connecting, relating, arguing, and disagreeing in a society of differences" (Eck 2007, 745).

As Eck highlights in her definition of pluralism, "arguing and disagreeing" are necessary for building accepting communities. This carries into my definition of conviviality, which demands attention to the history, context, and manifestations of discrimination underlying the interactions of diverse groups. As anthropologist Rebecca Bryant (2016, 7 and 26) explains, unlike "'coexistence,' which appears to imply passively 'existing' together," conviviality requires work, as community "may not be assumed but must be constantly reaffirmed and reproduced, emphasizing the conscious effort or labor involved."

Conviviality draws attention to everyday interactions, particularly the treatment of others in line with justice and in recognition of unequal histories (Blommaert 2014; Freitag 2014; Wise and Velayutham 2014). Building on Gilroy, Les Back and Shamser Sinha (2016, 522) add that conviviality provides "another way of interpreting culture based on everyday interactions "rather than always reducing them to their cultural origins." Focusing on ordinary relationship

building and everyday practices of Muslims help us to explore the attempts (and failures) at building convivial communities.

Islam and Social Justice: Defining Islam as Interactional

Before exploring the ways in which the Muslim-Americans whom I interviewed negotiate injustices in Muslim communities, I start by exploring the connections they made between their current social justice work and their ideas about faith. During their interviews, they described grappling with evolving, contradicting, and confusing interpretations of Islam, religious practice, and their fellow Muslims. However, for most of them Islam served as the foundation for thinking about the equal dignity of others and their responsibility to treat others in alignment with those expectations. They cited religious teachings and texts, Islamic ethics of "tolerance," "humility," "generosity," and the Islamic belief that "everyone deserves compassion, forgiveness, and mercy," as "the seeds" of their active efforts.

Their interpretations of Islam particularly called for interactions rooted in equity. One of my participants, Chandni, a college senior engaged in issues of international aid and policy, made connections back to stories of the Prophet Muhammad when she started to explore activism. She explained, "Prophet Muhammad was this guy with a lot of resources, right, who gave of himself to try and lift the bottom line. Instead of increased outcome for everyone, he was trying to help the people who didn't really have [anything]." Chandni's comments not only tied her personal ethics to Islam but conveyed her approach towards economic inequity: recognizing where economic inequity is and correcting the imbalance. Chandni described Prophet Muhammad as "this guy," indexing familiarity and accessibility. The informality expressed the Islamic ideal of Muhammad as a model for how to live and the adaptability of the prophet's way of life to Chandni's everyday interactions. During our interview, Chandni explained how her Islamic principles met her study of social justice through the example of her earlier referenced service project, raising funds to fulfill the requested needs of a Kenyan orphanage. Years later, Chandni now reflected on what she learned, particularly her discomfort over her "ignorance" at the time and the trap of increasing donations through "a sad story that appeals to people." However, Chandni explained she needed to learn from those mistakes to now integrate a concern for economic inequity while also addressing the agency and power dynamics of those most in need. Chandni merged her interpretations from Islam with her personal experiences in combating economic inequity.

A foundation in Islam was a common motivation for active efforts. Ebrahim's activism during college influenced his decision to enter a PhD program in Political Science. Regardless of the cause, he explained that at social justice events, "I always feel like I'm standing there as a Muslim. Maybe not first as a Muslim, but on some level, I always feel like I'm standing there as such." Bushra saw activism as an act of faith that led to her current job, working at a non-profit that consults to make public services more equitable. She explained, "when I was engaging in social justice work … I really DID feel like I was living my [Islamic] values." Social justice work provided a means for Bushra to "feel Muslim," especially when working for the benefit of all people.

Rather than define Islam primarily as individual faith, practice, or belief, these individuals focus on defining Islam as interactional. Islam is not only about how they thought of themselves ("I am Muslim" or "I believe in Islam"); it is also about the impact Islam has on how they relate to others, both Muslim and non-Muslim. The interactional focus of Islam harkens back to the role everyday interactions play in conviviality. These Muslims reference Islam to define not just their social justice approach but to mediate all their interactions with others.

Disconnecting with Religious Community: Islam as Relational

For the interviewees, defining Islam as interactional was part of a process of developing personal ethical frameworks that drove their behaviours. In particular, they used their definition of Islam as relational to critique existing intra-Muslim instantiations of hierarchy and power. Seeing unequal relationships between some segments of the ummah triggered their active efforts. However, their calls for change were met with resistance from fellow Muslims. Without the space to have the difficult conversations needed to build conviviality, most of the students I interviewed were withdrawing from religious spaces and relationships with their fellow Muslims. It was not the doctrinal content of Islam that they critiqued but actions of those Muslims that did not uphold the equal dignity of all people. In this section, I argue that despite attempts at building conviviality with other Muslims, these young people felt disillusionment with Muslims and were largely retreating from connection to religious community.

For Chandni, the creation of a hierarchy of identities, that is, the stigmatization of particular intersectional identities (like recent immigrant Muslims), was one of her biggest frustrations with the mosque she attended growing up, a predominantly South Asian mosque. As a first-generation college

student with immigrant parents in working-class jobs, Chandni was especially triggered by stigmas toward recent immigrants. Within minutes of starting our interview, she vented to me, "[my mosque] community is racist against people in our own community, so for example [before a big celebration] someone was like … 'I don't want to sit in a room full of people who smell like curry.'" Even though the person Chandni quoted was also the child of immigrants, the comments stigmatized recent immigrants whose smell of curry coded them as undesirable. The comment reflected privilege, as "assimilated" members discriminated against recent immigrants from their own countries of origin.

One common trend across participants was frustration with the lack of dialogue around equity and conviviality. Chandni chose to call out speakers for disparaging comments because she saw an inconsistency between her relational ethics (Islamic values she described as "tolerance and acceptance for everyone") and actual practices. In *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, political theorist Bhikhu Parekh (2000) argues that communities based on shared culture or ethnicity do not provide the space for conversations and contention over racism, sexism, and other hierarchies. Building on Parekh, Chandni's example suggests that shared religious identity is equally as limiting, as it excuses "all these conversations that need to happen within our community that just don't happen" (Chandni). However, during her interview, Chandni used Islamic ethics of justice to argue that shared religious trauma should in fact be the starting point for productive discussion about equity. "A lot of times, our [Muslim] community is quick to point out [Islamophobia]. But when it comes to empathizing with other [marginalized] communities and realizing how much our experiences relate, there's absolutely no conversation about that at all." Chandni focused on the difficult conversations necessary for conviviality, recognizing that equity demanded work. Chandni was frustrated by the Muslims in her childhood mosque who privileged specific relationships of direct similarities and ignored their biased treatment towards class and ethnic others. While Chandni continued the spiritual practices of Islam that give her peace and comfort, when she started college, she stopped attending mosque and rarely participated in MSA events.

Like Chandni, Ebrahim concentrated not on the fact that unequal interactions existed, but on the fact that some of the Muslims in his mosque were unwilling to put in the work necessary to build a more convivial ummah. He elaborated, "I think it would be okay if [my mosque community] had these [racial] issues. Everyone does. But … we pretend like they don't exist. And I think that's what

really gets me. It's hypocritical." The hypocrisy created a rift between ideals of the ummah and reality, leading Ebrahim to select aspects of Islamic history, art, and culture, to build his own personal interpretation of Islam. Like Chandni, he narrowed his framework of Islam to only the things and people that allowed his "inquisitive spirit the desire to grow." As anthropologist Stanley Thangaraj (2015, 179) described in his research on gay Muslim athletes, "Islam is not the source of their marginalization," however, religion is used by Muslims "as a force of exclusion." This marginalization can lead to retreat, and impacts not just LGBTQ+ Muslims, but also their like-minded peers. While their selective withdrawal from Muslim spaces and community equated problems of "some" Muslims with the entire ummah, it was precisely because those Muslims were unable to talk about diversity that these young Muslims retreat.

Despite pockets of injustice each participant found in their mosques and Muslim Student Associations, there were also some participants who found encouragement of social justice work. Gulnaz, who served as the president of her university's MSA, continued a strong relationship with her childhood mosque even during college. She shared examples of the support she received, including having the imam of the mosque celebrate her activism, and of being invited to participate in mosque-led social justice themed events. In these cases, the leadership of the mosque encouraged activism, modelled it for the congregation, and reinforced the connections between Islam and relationships built on justice.

While most of the interviewees remained at least somewhat connected to Islam and/or Muslim community, Isra reflected the most disillusionment, describing Islam as the "culture and the ideology and spirituality of [her] upbringing" but no longer part of her identity. Isra cited her realization of the anti-blackness and homophobia of some members of her mosque as a key reason for her disconnection. As she grew more critical of her privileged South-Asian upbringing, Isra saw an inconsistency between the Islamic ideology of racial acceptance and the realities of inequity, especially towards the large population of Somali Black Muslims in her Midwestern mosque. Like Ebrahim's earlier categorization of hypocrisy, Isra contrasted the ideology of respect for Black Muslims through the historical example of Bilal, and the everyday disrespect of Black Muslims especially "the really messed up things all the Arab [and South Asian] aunties would say [about Black Muslims]." Bilal was a respected Black Muslim companion of Prophet Muhammad, known for being the first person to recite the *adhan,* or call to prayer. References to Bilal served

as a “colorblind” discourse (Bonilla-Silva 2006) to deny anti-black practices and uphold the integrity of the ummah. Further, turning to Bilal helped avoid the difficult conversations necessary for equity of Black Muslims. Isra’s ethnic privilege buffered her childhood, allowing her to not see the mistreatment of Black Muslims. However, she came to accept the personal critique of her Somali peers who challenged her thinking when they would tell her, “‘Hey, there are all these other Muslims that are kinda horrible to us … They don’t stand by us but we stand by them. We show up for the Palestine marches, but nobody’s showing up for our marches.’” Isra’s peers helped her realize the imbalance in how Black Muslims were treated by non-Black Muslims like her and her family. Her disillusionment with Islam was furthered by evidence of homophobia. Identifying as bisexual, Isra was unable to reconcile her beliefs and what she learned from her “parents’ perception of Islam” that “homosexuality is wrong,” and no longer identifies as a Muslim.

For Isra, who now works on issues of equity and justice at her former university, evidence of anti-blackness and homophobia were too closely tied to justification in Islam. Even though Isra knows many Muslims find acceptance for their LGBTQ+ identities in their interpretation of Islam, she personally could not reconcile the vastly different interpretations of Islam—from Muslims who justify homophobia to those who find religious acceptance for their sexuality.[6] However, for Isra, she felt she had her own “innate moral compass” that she could confidently rely on to help her decide how to feel and act in any situation and so she no longer identifies as Muslim.

Developing a Framework for Ethics Based on Dignity

While Islam served as the most common ethical foundation, it was only by thinking beyond a Muslim ummah that these young people developed their understanding of social justice. In this section, I explore the role that dignity plays in the movement towards active work. What I label as dignity is about developing an understanding of the “common humanity” in all people. I argue that distance from the Muslim community created space for the work necessary to understand and recognize the dignity of others. My interlocutors prioritized community built on the acceptance and recognition of difference.

Instead of continuing to privilege dominant segments of the ummah, these young people found models of equal dignity in other spaces. Seeing parallels between Islamic ideals and broader themes of social justice, they formed ethical

frameworks that were motivated by an obligation and responsibility to every other person. Judith Butler explores this concept when she argues that there is

> a certain intertwinement between that other life, all those other lives, and my own … the life that is *not* our own, is also our life, since whatever sense "our" life has is derived precisely from this sociality … the political aim is to extend equality regardless of cultural background or formation, across languages and religions, to those none of us ever chose (or did not recognize that we chose) and with whom we have an enduring obligation to find a way to live (2012, 140–141; 146).

Butler underscores the necessity of finding connections across lines of difference. In particular, seeing equity in those groups "none of us ever chose." Butler importantly expands the frame beyond the easy (those like us) to relational connections in spite of not sharing aspects of identity. This approach centres some of the issues that drove my interlocutors away from the Muslim community, that is, the privileging of some aspects of identity and the degradation of others. It is the continual privileging of familiar identities or those of power that both Butler and my interlocutors critique. What I saw in my interviewees was that getting to Butler's vision required continual effort of recognizing their own privileges, seeing dignity in all differences, and working towards equity in those unlike themselves. My participants highlight that this is a difficult, self-reflective, and continual process.

Based on the interviews, there were three common and co-occurring stages as these young people developed what I label as their understanding of dignity. The first was distance from religious spaces. Remaining tightly bound to the religious community made it a challenge to find the space for critique, sometimes because of the lack of diversity and exposure or because of the privilege they gained based on their class, ethnicity, or education. Moving to college allowed my interlocutors to step away from religiously-filtered interactions common at home. Additionally, these experiences created a space to build social relationships across differences (see Harris 2016). Ebrahim grew up in the Southern US and college was the first space where he could understand and talk about injustice. He explained,

> [Thinking about LGBTQ Muslims] was definitely a college kind of awakening. And I think it was because we were all disconnected from our home communities. So we didn't have the influence of like older family members or older friends … that was really cool for a lot of us

to like, for the first time, have those conversations openly, like in the context of [being] Muslim and also part of the [LGBTQ] community (Ebrahim).

Ebrahim's interview illustrated Butler's argument, as Ebrahim was able to see his own life (even though he does not identify as LGBTQ) as interconnected to the lives of LGBTQ Muslims. In order to get to a convivial mindset, he needed physical and mental distance for a more objective look at the hierarchies that existed and are still being perpetuated within the ummah. Ebrahim found open discussions in university social spaces. This openness was not necessarily the case in religiously-marked spaces, as he experienced pushback from some Muslim peers in his southern university. Instead, Ebrahim constructed another narrative with like-minded classmates that grounded compatibility between Islam and LGBTQ+ identities. While the Muslim ummah certainly entails diversities of sexual orientation and gender identities, in Ebrahim's Muslim community, growing up the "ummah" erased LGBTQ Muslims.

In the second stage, I identified a common push towards intellectual study, which advanced their thinking along this concept of dignity or "common humanity." Jamal, who now organizes on issues of justice for Palestine, made this quite explicit in our conversation, saying "the backlash I was facing as being a Muslim Arab kid, made me read more, which made me listen to certain intellectuals and academics who were anti-imperialists, like Edward Said." College intellectual and social spaces encouraged those conversations for Jamal and others, through their ability to access privileged, intellectually rigorous undergraduate programs. Colleges may provide both exposure to intellectual development and habitual contact with difference. And while this does not necessarily mean cultural exchange will happen, colleges act as a destabilizing setting "offering individuals the chance to break out of fixed relations and … to learn to become different through new patterns of social interaction" (Amin 2002, 970).

A final trend that surfaced in the ethnographic interviews was needing an intellectual process to help my interlocutors synthesize Islamic ethics and social justice learnings beyond the frame of Islam. Diab, a recent graduate who turned his prison abolition work into a career, found that his intellectual development in college, and in particular the social justice orientation in his education, was key to understanding what it meant to recognize dignity in all people. He explained, "I think that [my university education] and my different forms of capital that I've had access to have given me more information and

more spaces to critique capitalism, patriarchy, and anti-blackness. And I think that those are the things that show up most for me and fracture my relationships with other [Muslims].” While challenging his intra-Muslim relationships, Diab found community in a student group that worked against the prison industrial complex. He explained, “Prison abolitionist politics made me really aware of just how [Muslims] deal with harm and how we dispose of people and think of certain bodies as unworthy of being a part of our community.” Even though he included himself in that “we/our” of an unjust community, Diab articulated a contrast between ideologies (like ummah) and the realities of practices that “harm” unworthy bodies. Diab explained to me that he had rethought ideas like ummah; rather than “limited to Muslims,” Diab’s definition of community was tied to the concept of humanity. He recognized this was a challenge because he included the clients that did not treat him well and the police officers he struggled against; the goal was “being able to see humanity in all of them.” Countering the idea of “unworthy bodies” demonstrates attention to dignity in all people and active confrontation of historical and contemporary injustice.

Similar to Diab, Farah, a college senior preparing for dental school, discussed the concept of dignity by bringing together Islam and the attention to autonomy and power in social justice work. Farah elaborated as she explained her research and volunteering with communities that have faced health disparities and food insecurities:

> The Prophet (peace be upon him) always constantly was being kind to everyone, even people that were awful to him. And I think that is something I definitely am … trying to embrace as much as I possibly can. That … is what Islam is to me. It is being kind to every single possible person and it doesn’t matter if you agree with their decisions or not … At the end of the day it’s definitely reaffirming people and giving them that autonomy and their own power to decide [what is good for them].

Farah connected her public health work on the right to autonomy with Islamic values. She contrasted autonomy with paternalism, where decisions are often made for individuals in food-insecure communities. By prioritizing the value of autonomy, Farah linked Islamic messages with her social justice work, explaining that both prioritize acceptance of individual choice. During the interview, Farah expressed the need for acceptance of autonomy twice—in the opening anecdote about acceptance of LGBTQ+ Muslims and again with food-insecure communities. Both Farah and Diab took seriously the humanity in

populations often ignored and erased. This allowed them to move beyond the frame of a narrowly defined ummah that only includes Muslims, to a global ummah that encompasses all humanity, centred on their evolving ideas of dignity. Diab centred humanity by seeking justice for all imprisoned bodies, equating their justice as his responsibility, while also holding dignity for the police that facilitated their imprisonment. Farah connected the mistreatment of Prophet Muhammad with contemporary situations like the denial of autonomy to individuals living in food-insecure neighbourhoods. In both cases, my interviewees used what they had learned about marginalization to develop ideas of equal dignity across all differences.

Reclaiming Conviviality through the Lens of Social Justice

One of the central challenges the young Muslim-Americans I spoke with admitted was the difficulty of forming relationships centred on justice and equality, that is, creating conviviality. They described the difficulty of creating conviviality as a continual process that required correcting mistakes and continuous improvement. Conviviality entailed accepting where one is ignorant, and seeing how one's privilege had aided them. They continued to create convivial community at work, school, and sometimes even in social spaces targeting Muslims. Overall, their conviviality recognized difference, centred equal dignity, and broadened their community beyond Muslims.

Chandni's path to conviviality entailed confronting her own racism to develop a new understanding of dignity. Prior to university, Chandni admitted that she attributed racial difference and subsequent measures of worth and value to biological difference and that allowed her to justify racism. She did not question theories of racial inferiority attributed to genetic differences, placing blame on people of colour for their continued oppression. She explained her "ignorance" on lack of exposure, education, and her "sheltered" upbringing. However, a sociology course called "Racial Politics" in her first year of university gave Chandni a chance to challenge her own deeply embedded bias. The class motivated her to confront her biases further by forcing herself into uncomfortable situations and difficult conversations with people who were not like her. She explained, "I sought out talking to people from other communities … and sought to be socially uncomfortable." For example, talking about growing Islamophobia in the period soon after the 2016 election, she told me,

> I was talking to my Resident Assistant who was Black. And I was like, "I hate that I feel like everyone is staring at me as I walk around

> campus." … And she was like, "Honestly, that's how I feel. That's how my family feels, that's how my grandfather feels, that's how all of my past generations felt and will probably continue to feel." And that was a huge moment for me because before then I didn't realize what our shared experience was. Obviously not everything will be the same, but there's still a degree to which we can empathize with each other on certain aspects of our experience.

Chandni had to accept the biases she held, and her own racism. She needed to first confront where her privilege made it difficult to see the denial of others' equal dignity. Even though she faced Islamophobia in the past, she escaped extreme examples of social stigma. Accepting her ignorance allowed her to see challenges facing Black Americans and other marginalized groups. Chandni recontextualized social stigmas of immigrant Muslims to the context of Black Americans, by applying her personal experiences of marginalization. However, she importantly recognized the vast differences between the two cases. Her process centred history and stigma to build strong convivial relationships rooted in respecting dignity and discussing issues of equity and justice. Chandni admitted that while she had a lot to learn about how experiences differ, her regular interaction with her Resident Assistant and others was part of forcing herself to learn and grow in areas where she was not familiar.

Chandni's example shows the tremendous self-assessment and change that are necessary to live in line with the ethical framework she is developing. The ongoing growth of the participants comes through confronting their own privileges. Though their privileges varied, given their race and ethnicity (Arab Americans or South Asians), they held privilege within the US Muslim diaspora (Ali 2018; Jackson 2005; Khabeer 2016). They also were legal citizens, adjusted to life in the United States, and successful in the educational sphere. Acting on equal dignity is not easy. Chandni told me, "Whenever I call people out on [their racist comments], I seem like that elite person who knows more than them. And that's never what I want to come off as." Even while trying to prevent hierarchical distinctions and stigmas against certain races or classes, Chandni inadvertently ended up reinforcing power dynamics by seeming more knowledgeable.

Each of the interviewees discussed the deliberate attention they paid to building community around those who shared their values. Social spaces can provide the foundation for the work these young Muslims are calling for, especially when they encourage co-ethnic interactions and recognition

of differences (see also Patel 2007, 2018; Thangaraj 2015). Adil described his efforts to build what I label as "convivial community" by deliberately finding diverse individuals to plan and organize a local TEDx event. It allowed him to take representation seriously; not only in building a diverse organizing team, but in "giving a platform to folks who normally or historically have not gotten one." For Adil, conviviality required being honest, open, and humble about diversity and where they still need work. Adil specifically discussed areas of representation that were missing from their TEDx planning group and how they were working to correct the imbalance. The deliberate efforts these young adults make to forming convivial spaces can also broaden the concept of the ummah; because the Islamic ummah is rooted in theology and not grounded in statehood or political unification; in theory "it can and eventually should embrace all of humanity" (Asad 2003, 197–198).

Conclusion

In this article, I explored the often-overlooked consequences of conviviality, that is, the intra-community ramifications of building conviviality. By looking at young Muslims in the United States who are active in social justice causes, I examined contemporary ways in which some social-justice-minded Muslims are reacting to not only injustices in their local communities, but inside their religious communities as well. I argued that, somewhat ironically, in order to develop convivial relationships aligning with what they understand to be the social justice ethics of Islam, some Muslims respond by seeking distance from Islamic community. For some, that distance means limiting which religious events to attend, or selectively choosing what parts of the religious community to align with. Others leave the religion completely. However, through academic study and social justice discourses, they confront their own privilege, and work to build convivial relationships that are grounded in ethical values of equal dignity.

Entering college and finding distance from the religious community they attended with their families before college creates space to prioritize social justice over belonging. While they confronted examples of inequitable treatment in Muslim spaces, most of those I interviewed continue to hold strongly to Islam and their identity as Muslim. Only one of my interviewees felt they could fully engage in active social justice work and feel like a part of their local Muslim community and have a mosque community they loved. Hind Makki, an activist in Chicago, honoured as one of CNN's 25 Influential American

Muslims, faced similar community challenges. Her project #SideEntrance highlights equity and inequity in mosque prayer spaces for women. Even though she is working every day for equity and justice, she describes herself as UnMosqued, lacking a prayer space where she feels included. (Makki 2014).

For now, most of the young adults I interviewed are finding conviviality outside of religious spaces. However, these young people are craving like-minded community, especially if they can pair it with "cultural and religious familiarity" as Diab, the prison abolitionist, articulated. They are seeking the convivial communities they have at school and work, combined with culture and religion. This entails using secular and social spaces to build community, especially those that target Muslims, such as service events, academic discussions, or virtual platforms. These non-religiously marked spaces maintain separation from religious authority and selectively invite or recruit Muslims and allies with shared ideologies of justice. It is what led Diab to help form a Facebook group of Muslims interested in social justice. It affirmed to him that there were other Muslims motivated by shared values. Diab told me,

> I'd imagine that [young Muslims] are itching for social justice spaces … because they are looking for relationships that go deeper. For a more systemic analysis of what's wrong with the world and what we want to do to fix it. And I'd imagine that if that comes with a sort of cultural familiarity and of other Muslims and their experiences … that would be really powerful and I've been craving that for a pretty long time now.

Being able to build a community grounded in equal dignity of all people *and* religion is a powerful goal that these Muslim-Americans active in justice work continue to pursue.

Haleema Welji
University of California San Diego,
hwelji@ucsd.edu

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Notes

1 All names used are pseudonyms.

2 Here, I use college to mark the undergraduate level of education, typically the 18–23 age range.

3 These range from perceived "looks" while in public spaces to verbal comments about their appearance, ethnicity, or religion.

4 Isra was born in Canada and moved to the US at a young age. The rest were born in the US.

5 The focus of this project was on the response of US Muslims of ethnic privilege to unequal dignity in the Muslim community. Thus, the focus was specifically on South Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African ethnicities.

6 See also Ahmed Afzal's ethnographic work on Pakistani gay men and the ways in which Islam remains integral to their sexuality through "reinterpretation" of religious texts and relationships with Allah (2014, 142).

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