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Religious Identity and Education: Making Sense of South Asian and Arab Muslim
Student Experiences in Higher Education

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

by

Rodaina El-Haj-Ibrahim

September 2026

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2026

The Dissertation of Rodaina El-Haj-Ibrahim is approved:

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Religious Identity and Education: Making Sense of South Asian and Arab Muslim
Student Experiences in Higher Education

by

Rodaina El-Haj-Ibrahim

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Education
University of California, Riverside, September 2026
Dr. Lorena Gutiérrez, Chairperson

The educational values of Muslim students are largely informed by their religious beliefs as the pursuit of knowledge holds significant importance within Islam. Yet, higher education institutions have often disregarded the religious and educational needs of Muslim students. This study examines the way religious identity interacts with structures of race and gender on campus in shaping the educational experiences of Muslim undergraduate students attending four-year public higher education institutions in Southern California. To examine such dynamics, this study uses a qualitative case study approach, drawing on document analysis and semi-structured qualitative interviews with South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students.

The findings from this study highlight 1) Muslim students' educational experience and background, 2) their religious commitment and practice in higher education, and 3)

how they negotiate their Muslim religious identity in higher education. In chapter five, I highlight why Muslim students choose to pursue higher education, what factors affect their educational trajectory, and how they navigate the opportunities and challenges they encounter. In chapter six, I examine how Muslim undergraduate students sustain their religious commitment and practice in university. In chapter seven, I explore how religious organizations shape Muslim religious identity and practice in higher education. Religious organizations on campus include the Muslim Student Association which serves as a campus-based religious community that provides Muslim students with accessible religious resources and the opportunity to create interpersonal relationships. Lastly, in chapter eight, I focus on how institutions respond to Muslim student activism and political participation. This reveals how administrations frame Muslim students as a threat to campus order, regulate free speech, and impose disciplinary control. With these findings in mind, I then present implications and contributions for both higher education research and practice.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Muslims are individuals who practice Islam, a monotheistic faith centered on the belief in one God and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad. Islam is the second largest religion in the world with a diverse global population spanning various racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. In the United States, Muslims represent a growing group, including native-born and immigrant populations from different regions such as the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, and beyond. According to a Pew Research Center study (2017), Muslims are one of the most racially and ethnically diverse religious groups in the United States, including South Asian, Arab, Black, and Latino communities. Despite this diversity, Muslim Americans share a strong emphasis on education, a value deeply rooted in Islamic teachings.

The emphasis on education is reflected in their academic achievements. In the United States, Muslims hold more post-secondary degrees compared to the general public (Haniff, 2003), yet higher education institutions have often disregarded the religious and educational needs of Muslim students (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003, 2010; Stubbs & Sallee, 2013). The educational values of Muslims are strongly based on their religious beliefs as the acquisition of knowledge is considered a key element in education for those who follow Islam (Callaway, 2010). While Muslims live as a highly visible minority within the United States that is secular (non-religious) in ideology (Haddad & Smith, 2009), whether or not Muslim college students maintain their faith and practice of Islam requires attention. Muslim students lead lives that include both secular and religious aspects that are in constant negotiation with each other. They attend secular universities but

participate in religious organizations on campus or engage religion on campus through prayer (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Scott-Baumann, 2017).

Higher education institutions across the United States are complexly both religious and secular (Stevenson & Aune, 2017). While higher education systems started off with religious foundations and many were originally founded on religious principles, the rise of science from the seventeenth century onwards led to an increasing emphasis on secularity over religion on college campuses (Stevenson & Aune, 2017). Even though most public institutions today are not religiously affiliated, student populations remain largely religiously identified (Bowman, 2017) and committed to their religion (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). Stevenson and Aune (2017) affirm that religion is undeniably present on campus, therefore scholars and universities need to engage with religion regardless of their personal beliefs and opinions.

For Muslim students, secular public institutions are not a religion-free space because their religious beliefs and values are central in their manner of living (Oberoi & Trickett, 2018). Within such institutions, their religion, religious expression, and religious identity become racialized as racial meanings apply to cultural symbols and signifiers for those who exhibit outward identification with Islam (Qamar, 2022). For instance, the hijab, a headscarf worn by some Muslim women as an expression of modesty and religious identity, serves as a religious signifier that exposes them to racialization. Similarly, attributes such as having an accent, a beard, or a Muslim name (i.e., Muhammad, Ahmad, Abdul) inform Muslim men's experiences with racialization. This racialization occurs despite the secular nature of most public institutions, where religion

still plays a significant role in shaping student experiences (Bowman, 2017). Stevenson and Aune (2017) highlight tensions between religion and secularity on college campuses which include social hostilities such as the increase in abuse of religious minorities, violence, and harassment of women over religious dress. Such tensions can impact Muslim college students' identities, sense of belonging on campus, and educational experiences (Stevenson & Aune, 2017). Muslim students report facing a hostile climate on university campuses which ranges from misunderstandings of their religious practices to blatant discrimination and hate speech (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023; Ali, 2019; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010).

Little research evaluates the religious identity of Muslim students attending secular higher education institutions and how it shapes their experiences from a social and academic perspective. Existing studies in K-12 and higher education highlight the experiences of Muslim students in public schools and public higher education institutions (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Seward & Khan, 2016), how Muslim identity is associated with academic performance (Oberoi & Trickett, 2018), Muslim students' confrontation with Islamophobia within school settings (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023; Ali, 2019; Rahman, 2021), and the experiences of Muslim students based on religion, race, or gender (Abbas, 2003; Ahmed & Muhammad, 2024; Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Britto, 2008; McGuire et al., 2016; Salinas et al., 2022; Shams, 2020). Understanding how various forms of religious socialization shape the educational experiences of Muslim students while attending such institutions brings to the forefront the impact higher education has on the development of Muslim students, an area of study that is under researched.

To fill this gap, I conducted a qualitative case study using background surveys, participant interviews, and publicly available data to highlight educational experience and background, religious commitment and participation, and religious identity and higher education interactions of Muslim undergraduate students in Southern California.

Research Questions

This study focuses on the experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim students to enable a more complex understanding of the way religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim undergraduate students attending four-year public higher education institutions. My study is guided by three research questions:

1. What role does religious identity play in shaping the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students in public higher education institutions?
2. In what ways does the intersection of religion, race, and gender influence the experiences of Muslim college students?
3. How do Muslim students negotiate their religious identity within the broader social and political climate of higher education institutions?

This study contributes to the growing literature on religion and higher education by centering the lived experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students in secular institutions, highlighting how religious identity interacts with structures of race and gender on campus. I focus on students attending four-year public higher education institutions by drawing on relevant themes, concepts, and frameworks primarily from higher education literature. The purpose of this study is to contribute much needed

scholarship about Muslim undergraduate students as little empirical research focuses on the way religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students who attend public higher education institutions.

I draw on sociocultural perspectives to define religion, identity, and religious identity. According to Geertz (1973), religion is understood as a cultural system in which individuals construct meaning and interpret the world around them. Identity is viewed as a socially constructed and continuously negotiated understanding of oneself that develops through interaction with others and broader social, historical, and cultural contexts (Hall, 1996; Jenkins, 2014). Building on these concepts of religion and identity, religious identity refers to the integration of religion into one's self-concept and the ways religious beliefs, practices, and community membership shape how individuals understand themselves (King, 2003). Religious identity is constantly negotiated and reconstructed as individuals respond to changing social environments and lived experiences (Peek, 2005). In this study, religion is understood as a system of beliefs and practices, but also as an identity that shapes experiences and sense of belonging for South Asian and Arab Muslim students within higher education. This conceptualization is particularly relevant to how Muslim students understand, express, and negotiate their religious identity as they navigate university spaces.

Furthermore, the theoretical concepts guiding this study include intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), racialization (Garner & Selod, 2015; Joshi, 2006; Selod & Embrick, 2013), and religification (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012) to avoid a monolithic perspective that centers religious identity alone. This study focuses on the various experiences of South

Asian and Arab Muslim students due to the fact that Muslim religious identity intersects with other historically marginalized identities, especially with respect to race and religion or gender and religion (d'Urso & Bonilla, 2023). Such an approach brings forward the various aspects of Muslim social identity to enable a more complex understanding of the Muslim experience. To examine these dynamics, this study uses document analysis and semi-structured qualitative interviews with South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students enrolled in four-year public higher education institutions. Through their narratives and lived campus interactions, this study captures how intersecting identities inform their social and academic experiences within secular university settings. First, I briefly outline the importance of education in Islam. Then, I review the literature underlining the social and academic experiences of Muslim students.

This study recognizes that a consideration of religious identity is necessary in understanding the ways Muslim students navigate university campuses. In Islam, seeking knowledge may be viewed as a form of worship (i.e., religious engagement), so long as it is undertaken within the boundaries defined by Divine revelation. Thus, Islam, which gives purpose and direction for Muslims, must be at the heart of all education (Halstead, 2004). This includes giving purpose and direction for all subjects by reconstructing disciplines to fall in accordance with Islamic principles. This means that the subject or discipline uses religion as a means to stay in line with Islamic beliefs and values (e.g., sex education must not transgress Islamic rules on modesty and decency). Halstead (2004) acknowledges that a considerable amount of theoretical work has been conducted by Muslim intellectuals in this regard. While the depth of religious practice undeniably

differs from one person to another, this study acknowledges the value knowledge holds in Islam and how it manifests in the lives of Muslim undergraduate students.

Islam and the Pursuit of Knowledge

Muslims accept that all knowledge comes from God and that knowledge is interpreted by the soul through its spiritual and physical faculties (Al-Attas, 1980). The *'aql*, or intellect, serves as the connecting link between the spiritual and physical. It is God-given knowledge that refers to an individual's spiritual faculties and senses, while acquired knowledge refers to an individual's physical faculties and senses. Various concepts such as meaning, knowledge, wisdom, intellect, and interpretation lead to the Islamic concept of education. Al-Attas (1980) defines education as the "recognition and acknowledgement, progressively instilled into man, of the proper places of things in the order of creation, such that it leads to the recognition and acknowledgment of the proper place of God in the order of being and existence" (p. 21). He asserts that the purpose of seeking knowledge in Islam is to promote goodness in the self—a concept derived from *adab*, the discipline of body, mind, and soul, which is central to all education. Furthermore, the heart of the Muslim concept of education is the aim of producing good Muslims with an understanding of Islamic rules and behavior with a strong knowledge of and commitment to the faith (Halstead, 2004).

Halstead (2004) identifies three Arabic words that are often translated as "education." These three words are *tarbiya* (growth to maturity), *ta'lim* (emphasizing knowledge), and *ta'dib* (development of good manners). Al-Attas (1980) explains how the emphasis on *adab* includes *'amal* (action) in education and the educational process is

to ensure that *'ilm* (knowledge) is being put to good use in society. Essentially, the combination of *'ilm*, *'amal*, and *adab* leads to *ta'dib*. Halstead (2004) highlights the significance of these three dimensions in Muslim education:

The different emphases of these three terms [*tarbiya*, *ta'līm*, *ta'dib*] suggest a possible analysis of Muslim education in terms of (i) aiding individual development, (ii) increasing understanding of society and its social and moral rules and (iii) transmitting knowledge, though of course such an analysis is by no means exclusive to Islamic thinking. What creates a distinctively Islamic view of education is the application to these three dimensions of the principle that no aspect of a Muslim's life can remain untouched by religion (p. 522).

Thus, the pursuit of knowledge as an Islamic tenet can encompass forms of knowledge outside the scope of Islam. Within Islam, many *aḥadīth*—narrations from the words of Prophet Muhammad—reinforce the importance of seeking knowledge. For Muslim students, this can serve as a justification to pursue higher education, especially when considering the promised reward that comes with it. For instance, one *ḥadīth* mentions that “Whoever travels a path in search of knowledge, God will make easy for [them] a path to Paradise.” Another *ḥadīth* mentions how “Seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim.” While these teachings primarily refer to Islamic knowledge, when thinking about them from an educational context, any form of academia may be viewed as a form of worship in Islam so long as it is undertaken within the boundaries defined by revelation (Halstead, 2004). This means that religion must be at the heart of such education and that the knowledge gained is in accordance with Islamic principles.

The Qur'ān further underscores the value of knowledge. One verse reads “My Lord, increase me in knowledge” (Qur'ān 20:114). In the entire Qur'ān, this is the only verse in which believers are given a supplication to ask God for an increase in something, highlighting the significance of knowledge. Also according to the Qur'ān, those who are knowledgeable or educated will be raised in degrees and rewarded with satisfaction and happiness in this life and in the hereafter (Achour et al., 2017). Education holds profound value in Islam, shaping not only personal growth, but societal contributions as well. Given this theological foundation, the educational experiences of Muslim students are deeply intertwined with their religious identity. Yet, existing research on Muslim students in higher education has not fully explored how religion intersects with other aspects of identity on university campuses in the United States.

Positionality

As a Muslim woman who wears the hijab, I occupy a position that both informs and shapes my research. My hijab makes me visibly Muslim and may influence how Muslim student participants perceive me or engage with my research. This shared religious background provides me with a deep understanding of the religious and social contexts that shape the experiences of Muslim students in higher education. As a result, participants may feel more comfortable discussing topics that might be more sensitive with someone they perceive as understanding such experiences firsthand. At the same time, I recognize that shared religious identity does not mean shared experiences. Muslim students represent diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and theological backgrounds and their religious commitment, practice, and identity may vary significantly. As a researcher, I

remain mindful of the potential to make assumptions based on my own experiences or interpretations of Islam. For this reason, I approach the narratives of the participants with an openness in which I acknowledge that their perspectives may differ from my own and that the Muslim experience is not monolithic.

My positionality also shapes how I interpret concepts such as religious engagement and sense of belonging. While my own experiences as a Muslim woman inform my interest in this topic, I recognize that religious engagement cannot be reduced to visible practices or levels of observance. With this in mind, I continuously reflect on how my personal beliefs, experiences, and assumptions may influence my data collection, analysis, and interpretation throughout this study. By reflecting on such, I seek to center the voices and experiences of my participants while remaining mindful of how my positionality influences the research process. In all, my connection to the Muslim community is what motivates this research and informs my commitment to understanding how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students in higher education by ensuring that participant experiences remain at the forefront of this study.

Organization of Dissertation

In chapter two of this dissertation, I review existing research and highlight the gaps in literature regarding the various educational experiences of Muslim students in the United States. In chapter three, I explain the theoretical concepts (i.e., intersectionality, racialization, and religification) guiding this study. In chapter four, I introduce my research methodology in which I implement a qualitative case study approach, drawing on document analysis and semi-structured qualitative interviews with South Asian and

Arab Muslim undergraduate students. Chapters five, six, seven, and eight highlight my findings on educational experience and background, religious commitment and participation, and religious identity and higher education interactions. In chapter five, I discuss the educational experience and background of Muslim college students, including why they pursue higher education, what factors affect their education, and what opportunities and challenges arise as they navigate higher education. In chapter six, I address the religious commitment among Muslim college students and how they sustain their religious practices in university. In chapter seven, I describe how Muslim students negotiate their religious identity in higher education. I focus on the Muslim Student Association (MSA), a religious organization on many university campuses that serves as a campus-based religious community in which Muslim students have access to religious resources and build interpersonal relationships through the organization. In chapter eight, I highlight the way institutions respond to Muslim student activism. I present how Muslim students were framed as a threat to campus order, how administrative control limited the free speech of Muslim students, and how Muslim students were reprimanded through disciplinary actions due to their involvement in student encampments. Lastly, in chapter nine, I conclude with a discussion of the implications and contributions of my research and areas for future research regarding Muslim undergraduate students, the Muslim community, and higher education practitioners.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This study focuses on identifying how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students attending secular higher education institutions in the United States. However, few empirical studies specifically highlight this area of research (Salinas et al., 2022; Virkama, 2017). Various social identities play a significant role in the experiences Muslim students encounter. While Muslim students may name their religious identity as a primary self-identifying categorization, the experiences of Muslims in America are entangled in the workings of religion, race, and gender (Abdul Khabeer, 2016). South Asian, Arab, and Black Muslims make up the largest racial and ethnic groups representing Islam in the United States (Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Schmidt, 2004). Their religious, racial, and ethnic identities undeniably shape their educational experiences within higher education institutions. Such forms of identity are particularly useful in recognizing the varying educational experiences they encounter as minorities on campus. This study identifies how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim students within higher education by separating educational experiences into two specific categories: social experiences and academic experiences. The social experiences acknowledge both the macro and micro levels, recognizing that each level plays an important role in shaping the experiences of Muslim students. The macro level encompasses broader experiences within the campus environment, while the micro level includes interactions with peers, faculty, and campus-based religious organizations. Academic experiences include the educational attainment of Muslims, their perceptions of higher education, the influence of Muslim identity on

academic achievement, and the relationship between religious commitment and education. Together, these dimensions provide insight into how Muslim students navigate and make meaning of their experiences in higher education.

Social Experiences

Social experiences range from the type of recreational experiences Muslim students encounter on campus, their involvement with religious organizations on campus, socialization with religiously engaged students, and so forth. It is essential to consider social experiences as the environments at both the macro (campus) and micro (friendship groups) levels contribute critically to religious commitment (Small & Bowman, 2011). Social experiences at the macro level encompass the diverse experiences of Muslim students within higher education (Ahmed & Garcia, 2020; Ali, 2018; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; McGuire et al., 2016; Mubarak, 2007; Seward & Khan, 2016; Speck, 1997), including a range of personal, social, and structural challenges and experiences Muslim students face on college campuses (Stubbs & Sallee, 2013). The micro level includes involvement in campus-based religious organizations, interactions with various peer groups and faculty, and socialization with religiously engaged students (Asmar et al., 2004; Hill, 2009; Small & Bowman, 2011).

While current global geopolitics, the post-9/11 surveillance and security atmosphere, and depictions of Muslim stereotypes in the media reinforce a monolithic Muslim category (Shams, 2020), distinct differences exist based on racial and ethnic backgrounds. Several studies have examined the role of such identities in relation to the experiences of Muslim students (Abbas, 2003; Ahmad, 2001; Ahmed & Muhammed,

2019; Shams, 2020; Qamar, 2022). Shams (2020) approaches her study through ethnographic observations collected as part of a larger, three year-long research on Bangladeshi, Pakistani, and Indian Muslim immigrants in California. In conducting semi-structured and guided interviews with 60 South Asian Muslim Americans over the course of her fieldwork, Shams (2020) found that while talking about day-to-day concerns of the effects of global geopolitics on immigrant identities, interviewees often brought up issues related to their education and careers. This emphasis on education and professional achievement indicates the significance of these issues in their lives. Shams (2020) highlights how South Asian Americans have been praised as model minorities because of their high levels of education and economic attainment, but South Asian Muslim Americans, despite having a safety net of high academic and professional achievements, become susceptible to targeted Islamophobic backlash and targeted surveillance because society associates them with Muslim and “Muslim-looking” groups. Shams (2020) found that the racialized positionality of these groups combined with the stigma attached to their religious identity leads to a sense of insecurity and vulnerability. The “Muslim” identity category itself has become racialized so that being “brown” associates one as intrinsically violent, anti-American, and prone to extremism (Shams, 2020). Shams (2020) argues that many South Asian Muslim Americans’ stigmatized Muslim identity undermines their sense of security based on their academic and financial successes. Various factors such as the current global geopolitics, the post-9/11 surveillance and security atmosphere, and depictions of Muslim stereotypes in the media all work to create a monolithic Muslim category that justifies the othering of Muslims as an inherently

violent outsider group in America (Shams, 2020; Qamar, 2022). South Asian Muslims view college degrees as a way to not only open pathways to upward mobility, security, and stable jobs, but also make them indispensable additions to American society in a way that would prevent their workplaces from firing or discriminating against them because of their religious identity (Shams, 2020).

Pew Research Center (2016) found that religious minorities often have more education than a country's majority religious group, which is important to consider when recognizing the experiences Muslim students encounter within educational settings in the United States. While the experiences of Muslim students may differ based on locality, it is necessary to consider studies from various countries in the West because Muslims are religious minorities in these countries. Living as a minority in non-Muslim countries impacts the experiences of Muslim students in university, including how they are treated, the challenges they face, and how they navigate their identity. Comparing studies from different countries in the West helps identify common experiences shaped by being part of a minority group in these contexts. Notably, various research has been conducted on South Asian Muslims in the United Kingdom (UK). Existing literature on South Asian Muslim students often focus on women pursuing education from both a religious and cultural lens (Abbas, 2003; Ahmad, 2001). Abbas (2003) takes on a phenomenological methodological approach in understanding how domestic religio-cultural norms and values affect the educational attitudes, perspectives, and experiences of young South Asian women. His study takes place in Britain as part of a wider doctoral research study which explores the processes of educational achievement for different South Asian

groups. To determine most effectively how different South Asians perform in education, the empirical analysis presented by Abbas (2003) incorporates the variables of social class, ethnicity, and gender to allow for a wide variation in his sample. In a similar study, Ahmad (2001) aims to explore the motivations and experiences of South Asian women in Britain entering higher education while they negotiate and renegotiate their cultural, religious, and personal identities. She considers how past and present life experiences of South Asian women shape their individual perceptions alongside structural factors such as social class, ethnicity, gender, and racism. Ahmad (2001) found that those interviewed were more culturally and religiously aware as a result of and despite their educational experiences.

Religion appears more important for those who perceive their experiences of education from the point of view of the religio-cultural domain (Abbas, 2003). Abbas (2003) found a strong bond between religion and the individual in his study on how domestic religio-cultural norms and values affect young South Asian Muslim women pursuing education. While religion is crucial in the lives of Muslims, certain practices happen to be more cultural than religious, resulting in marginalization in education. South Asian Muslim women claimed their parents had confused Islam with South Asian culture, which impacted how they negotiated their educational paths so that they could carry on in education (Abbas, 2003). Abbas (2003) explains how:

[Young South Asian Muslim women] are developing increasing levels of confidence, becoming surer of the directions they want to take in education and life, and have the full support of their parents. However, there appears to be a

limit to how far this acculturation occurs as it is tempered by the operationalization of domestic religio-cultural norms and values inhibiting educational progression beyond a certain point (p. 413).

In a similar study on South Asian Muslim women, Ahmad (2001) found that these women continuously negotiate and renegotiate their cultural, religious, and personal identities within higher education. Regardless, the overall empirical findings in Abbas's (2003) study show that young South Asian women had supportive parents who actively encouraged them in education and Ahmad (2001) similarly found that parents play a major role in encouraging and motivating their daughters into higher education.

Scholars often categorize the existing literature on Arab Muslim adolescents into three broad categories: research on Muslims, research on Arabs (including immigrants and Arab Americans), and research on Arab Muslims (Britto, 2008). While Arabs and Muslims have lived in the United States for more than a century, they have received little scholarly attention in the field of higher education (Shammas, 2017; Qamar, 2022). In the United States, only about 23% of Arab Americans are Muslim (Wingfield, 2006), but the experiences of Arab Americans are similar for both Muslims and non-Muslims. While Muslim students face unique problems, it is not possible to completely separate anti-Arab and anti-Muslim incidents (Wingfield, 2006). An Arab identity is equated with Muslimness and the conflation of Arab with Muslim has led to the idea that all Arabs are Muslim (Shammas, 2009). This has resulted in hostility directed indiscriminately at Arabs, Muslims, and anyone mistaken for them (Wingfield, 2006).

While there is a limited amount of research on the experiences of Arab and Muslim students in higher education, two national surveys reported high rates of discrimination in the school and workplace among young Arab and Muslim Americans of traditional college age (Arab American Institute, 2007; Muslims in the American Public Square, 2004; cited in Shammas, 2017). Shammas (2017) used a mixed-methods approach to gather a set of narrative responses from focus groups that support the claim of underreporting campus discrimination based on the two aforementioned surveys. The focus groups included Arab American and Muslim American students from two community colleges in southeastern Michigan and Southern California. Shammas (2017) employed a quantitative data analysis preceding the qualitative data collection to follow up on why Arab American and Muslim American students exhibited significantly higher mean scores on perceived discrimination on campus. The quantitative portion of the study focused on the findings from the perceived discrimination measure while the qualitative portion, which includes the focus group recruitment, procedure, and the set of focus group questions, focused on supporting and making meaning of the quantitative results. In identifying the underreporting of campus discrimination toward Arab and Muslim students in community college, Shammas (2017) found that Arab and Muslim students exhibited significantly higher mean scores on a perceived discrimination scale than other ethnic groups. Arab and Muslim students were two to four times more likely to feel discriminated against by other students, faculty, and administration because of their ethnicity or religion in comparison to their non-Arab and non-Muslim counterparts

(Shammas, 2017). Undoubtedly, discrimination, prejudice, and stereotypes each affect the experiences of Muslim students in higher education (Salinas et al., 2022).

There is also a limited understanding of the lived experiences of Arab Muslim men in higher education. Salinas et al. (2022) examined and reported the findings of the experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men navigating higher education in the United States based on a larger study in which men of Color (i.e., Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Middle Eastern Muslim) college students participated in focus groups and individual interviews. They found differences in responses and that Middle Eastern Muslim men commit to education, but they experience both social and academic challenges. For these men, their families supported their commitment to education, and their education was essential and upheld in their family and culture. Similarly to young South Asian Muslim women who had supportive parents who actively encouraged them in education (Abbas, 2003; Ahmad, 2001), families instilled education as necessary for financial security, a comfortable life, and a sense of freedom for Middle Eastern Muslim men (Salinas et al., 2022). This familial emphasis on higher education relates to Islam due to the connection between family support, education, and the Islamic faith. Salinas et al. (2022) found that Islam also played a significant role in the commitment to education for Middle Eastern Muslim men.

Social Experiences at the Macro Level

Undeniably, the experiences Muslim students confront on college campuses is impacted by their religious identity (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). Stubbs and Sallee (2013) emphasize that universities are often not structured to accommodate the needs of Muslim

students. Even though Muslims have a significant presence at American universities, campus policies largely ignore Muslim students as they navigate environments that challenge their religious values and practices. These challenges, which include personal, social, and structural obstacles, call for greater recognition at the institutional level (Ahmed & Garcia, 2020).

Stubbs and Sallee (2013) incorporated a qualitative approach to understand the experiences of Muslim students in higher education by utilizing an interpretive case study in which data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews. This study was conducted at a large, public research university in the southeastern United States in which Muslims make up a small percentage of the campus population. Although the campus did not provide explicit services for Muslim students, the campus had an active Muslim Student Association (MSA). Their findings revealed that Muslim students in their study experienced the university as members of a religious, cultural, and ethnic minority. They found that the degree to which their Muslim identity affected their experience varied according to students' decision to wear the hijab, their race, their adherence to Islamic practice, and their personal attitudes regarding faith and religious identity (Stubbs & Sallee, 2013). In addition, Stubbs and Sallee (2013) found that Muslim students struggled with the way the tenets of their faith influenced their overall campus experience and they often had to explain and defend their religious values to non-Muslims. Muslim students on college campuses often serve as representatives of Islam in which they often have to make choices between fitting in and confronting ignorance, as well as reconciling Islamic values with the campus's predominant social culture. A campus's social culture typically

includes activities such as moving away from home, alcohol consumption, dating, and casual social interactions which conflict with Islamic values such as maintaining family ties, abstaining from alcohol, and maintaining boundaries when it comes to relationships with the opposite gender (Mir, 2014). In addition, Muslim students contend with a number of challenges as members of a religious minority including lack of accommodation for religious practice, social expectations that conflict with Islamic values and behavior, and incidents of discrimination and prejudice in and out of the classroom (Stubbs & Sallee, 2013). Muslim students endure moments of both blatant and indirect discrimination while navigating a campus culture that conflicts with their beliefs in various ways. In addition, Muslim students are prone to different forms of discrimination that manifests through Islamophobia, a form of racism that targets Muslims and causes them to encounter discrimination due to their religious identity (Garner & Selod, 2015). Islamophobia leads to harm against Muslims and has increased within education spaces after September 11, 2001 (Muedini, 2009).

Since then, Muslims have faced increasing Islamophobia emerging from both individuals and institutions as the climate within higher education reflects the broader social context (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003, 2010). In his 18-month study working with Muslim student activists in New York City, Ali (2018) examined how Muslim university and college students understand what they are “allowed” to discuss in public spaces and how they construct their roles and identities as Muslims within the United States body politic. He found that Muslim students regularly expressed concern that their words and perspectives would be misunderstood. College campuses served as another space for

political disciplinary action for Muslim students and not a space for free dialogue. This is a result of Muslim students on college campuses being treated as suspects and being exposed to surveillance and policing both on and off campus (Ali, 2018). Muslims have and continue to be criminalized, targeted, and subjected to increasing threats of violence and discrimination in which Ali (2018) argues that these practices, which have become synonymous with Islamophobia, often happen within schools. As a result of such practices, Muslim students find themselves and their religion misunderstood by peers and faculty (Speck, 1997).

Muslim students attending higher education institutions may find that their professors misunderstand their religious practices, introduce misunderstandings about them, lack respect for their religion, or may not accommodate their religious practices (Asmar et al., 2004; Speck, 1997). Muslim students often feel responsible for representing Islam, correcting misconceptions, and addressing stereotypes (McGuire et al., 2016; Oberoi & Trickett, 2018; Seward & Khan, 2016). MSAs play a crucial role in this regard, serving as platforms to dispel any misconceptions and stereotypes about Islam and Muslims (Mubarak, 2007). MSAs are found in almost every university across America and serve many additional purposes such as helping Muslim students understand their religion better, maintain their religious commitments, and provide a source of support (Mubarak, 2007). As a result, MSAs have shown to have a beneficial impact on the college experience of Muslim students (Mubarak, 2007). While religious organizations provide a safe environment for practicing beliefs and constructing religious

identities, MSAs offer a setting in which Muslim students collectively examine specific aspects of Islam and what it means to be Muslim (Peek, 2005).

Social Experiences at the Micro Level

Social experiences at the micro level include involvement in campus-based religious organizations, interactions with various peer groups and faculty, and socialization with religiously engaged students (Bryant, 2009; Peek, 2005; Small & Bowman, 2011). Bryant (2009) examined the effects of involvement in campus-based religious organizations on first year students' adjustment and development using longitudinal data derived from the 2000 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey and 2001 Your First College Year (YFCY) survey. Both surveys addressed several aspects of the first-year experience such as residential and personal experiences, academic and social adjustment, levels of satisfaction with campus life, personal views, degree aspirations, and measures of self-concept. The results of the regression analysis predicting involvement in religious groups underscore the student characteristics associated with participation in campus-based religious organizations (Bryant, 2009). Bryant (2009) suggests that characteristics such as gender, religious affiliation, political opinions, and prior religious involvement are all significant predictors of involvement on campus. When examining the effects of involvement in campus-based religious organizations, Bryant (2009) found that student communities enable students to grow more competent, interdependent, and purposeful. Such communities also foster social integration and enhance student development during college (Bryant, 2009). Participating in religious groups showed to have a small positive correlation with feeling

successful in developing a network of friends. This could be in part due to the way friends who meet through religious organizations attend religious services together and find community through which they establish close friendships. Bryant (2009) also found that those with a history of religious, student club, or volunteer involvement demonstrate higher levels of religious group participation in the first year of college than those who do not.

In addition to meeting spiritual needs, participation in religious organizations offer many other benefits including community networks, educational resources, peer trust, and peer support (Peek, 2005). For Muslim students specifically, Peek (2005) found that peers and close friends play a significant role in constructing, reinforcing, and affirming a strong emerging religious identity. Peek (2005) conducted a study shortly after 9/11 that explored the process of religious identity formation and the emergence of religion as the most relevant source of personal and social identity for Muslim students. She gathered data through participant observation, focus groups, and individual interviews with Muslim students attending university in New York and Colorado. In interviewing 127 Muslim students during this two-year period, Peek (2005) found that the majority of participants agreed that beginning college marked the most critical period of reflection and identity transition. For these participants, it became easier to identify as a Muslim because they had discovered a larger Muslim peer group to associate with and new friends with whom they could relate to.

In another study, socialization with religiously engaged students and students with similar religious beliefs revealed an impact on religious commitment (Small & Bowman,

2011). Small and Bowman (2011) used a longitudinal sample of over 14,000 undergraduate students across 135 secular and religiously affiliated campuses in the United States to explore whether and how students' religious transformations during the college years are associated with their religious affiliation, religious experiences, and the institutional characteristics of their college or university. They found that religious engagement is strongly associated with increased religious commitment and decreased religious skepticism, and that socializing with students who have similar religious beliefs is also related to greater religious commitment and diminished skepticism. Small and Bowman (2011) underline that both religious and secular students with religious friends become more religiously active in college than students with non-religious friends. This is crucial to consider in relation to the social experiences of Muslim students as universities in which religious behaviors are highly integrated into the social environment reinforce religious practice for students (Hill, 2009; Small & Bowman, 2011). Additionally, Small and Bowman (2011) found that religious commitment, religious engagement, and having friends with similar religious beliefs build upon and contribute to one another.

Academic Experiences

The existing research on the academic experiences of Muslim college students explores their education levels (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; McClendon et al., 2004; Pew Research Center, 2016), their perceptions of higher education (Ahmad, 2001; Jamal Al-deen, 2019; Salinas et al., 2022), the influence of Muslim identity on academic achievement (Abdullah et al., 2022; Abu Khalaf et al., 2023; Oberoi & Trickett, 2017),

and the relationship between religious commitment and education (Bowman et al., 2014; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). I review these studies below.

Educational Attainment Among Muslims

The Pew Research Center (2016) gathered data on the educational attainment of Muslim adults in 2010; they found that Muslims with a higher education level (e.g., post-secondary education) made up 57% of the North American population whereas non-Muslims (combined) with a higher education level made up 40%. The number of Muslims with a higher education level within North America appears higher than the global average of Muslims with a higher education level and compared to any other one region (i.e., Europe, Asia-Pacific, Middle East-North Africa, and Sub-Saharan Africa) of Muslims with a higher education level.

Trends in educational achievement show that Muslims have made some of the greatest gains in recent decades. In addition, Muslim women tend to have more years of education, on average, in countries where they make up a religious minority than in countries where they make up the majority of the population (McClendon et al., 2018). On average, studies have shown that religious minorities often have more education than a country's majority religious group and found that religious minorities have more education, especially when foreign born and come from a distant country (Pew Research Center, 2016). While about a quarter of the Muslim population have been in the United States for three generations or longer, a majority of Muslims in the United States were born in another country or have at least one parent born in another country (Pew Research Center, 2017). Immigrants' prior education when they enter the United States

plays a major role in the subsequent educational attainment of their children (Baum & Flores, 2011). Historically, highly educated Muslims migrate from less-educated countries to better-educated countries (McClendon et al., 2018). For instance, South Asian Muslims are among the United States' most educated immigrant groups and many Arab Muslims who immigrated to the United States were highly educated (Schmidt, 2004). In the United States, more than 20 percent of South Asians age 25 or above have degrees higher than a bachelor's compared with only 11 percent for the general population within that same age range (Shams, 2020). Higher education appears to be a high priority for Muslims in the United States and the number of Muslims among college students is proportionately higher than the numbers within the general population (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). While 0.6% of the general United States population is Muslim, 1.0% of students in higher education are Muslim (Bowman et al., 2014). Even though they make up less than 2% of the total university population, more than one fifth of Muslim adults in the United States are currently enrolled in colleges or universities (Bowman et al., 2014; Stubbs & Sallee, 2013).

Perceptions of Education Among Muslim College Students

When identifying the concept of education within Islam, Halstead (2004) mentions that the heart of the Muslim concept of education is the aim of producing good Muslims and developing societies. This includes understanding Islamic rules of behavior and holding a strong knowledge of and commitment to the faith. Education serves as a means for emphasizing knowledge, maturity, and the development of good manners (Halstead, 2004). Islamically, education aims to develop humans through knowledge and

enables them to become useful members of society (Salinas et al., 2022). The Muslim community in general perceives education as a means for advancing human experiences, developing societies, and preserving values (Salinas et al., 2022).

As previously mentioned, academia may be viewed as a form of worship in Islam as long as it is undertaken within the boundaries defined by revelation (Halstead, 2004). Within Islam, education is viewed in a positive manner by the Muslim community. Several studies have identified the ways Muslim students view higher education as a means of social mobility, status, integration, and a necessary asset in maintaining and gaining social prestige (Ahmad, 2001; Jamal Al-deen, 2019). Jamal Al-deen (2019) implements a qualitative approach with an in-depth exploration to examine the experiences and aspirations of Muslim women in Australia. Her participants included 12 women recruited through centers for Muslim women and Muslim organizations at five local universities in Melbourne, Australia. The data collected through interviews included various experiences with consideration to family background, family support and parental involvement, higher education experiences, career aspirations, and structural inequalities such as racism, sexism, and classism. In analyzing the narratives of these Muslim women, Jamal Al-deen (2019) found that higher education was highly perceived as a means for academic success and that this success leads to upward social mobility and financial independence.

In a similar study, Ahmad (2001) explores the motivations and influences of South Asian Muslim women entering higher education. The research presented in her article represents early findings of ongoing qualitative fieldwork with South Asian

women who are either studying at universities in London or have already graduated. The interviews conducted covered various topics such as family background, educational experiences, motivations and influences, social activities, issues concerning religious and cultural identity, and future hopes and expectations. Ahmad (2001) found that South Asian Muslim women view higher education and careers as a necessity, and apart from social mobility and status, they gained other personal benefits. Personal benefits included confidence in their abilities and in their cultural, religious, and personal identities. Even though her study focused on a small sample of Muslim women, Ahmad (2001) found that those interviewed were far more culturally and religiously aware as a result of and despite their educational experiences.

In another study, Salinas and colleagues (2022) explore how Middle Eastern Muslim men make sense of their experience navigating higher education institutions in the United States. Salinas et al. (2022) examined and reported the findings of the experiences of Middle Eastern Muslim men based on a larger study in which men of Color (i.e., Black/African American, Latino/Hispanic, and Middle Eastern Muslim) college students participated in focus groups and individual interviews. Their study aimed to answer the following research question: How do Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a four-year university within the divisive political context? Their phenomenological study included semi-structured interviews with seven Middle Eastern Muslim men attending an urban, large-size public university located in South Florida. The purpose of their study aimed to understand how Middle Eastern Muslim men college students navigate a four-year university within the United States political context and

how these students made sense of their experience navigating higher education institutions. They found that while Middle Eastern Muslim men experienced challenges, they were committed to education. Salinas et al. (2022) found that education was an essential practice critically upheld in their family and culture. Support and expectations from their family motivated them to enroll in four-year universities and earn a higher education degree. Parents viewed education as a necessity for financial security and a means to live a different and better life than the one they had growing up. Salinas et al. (2022) also found that family emphasis on higher education was intrinsically connected with their faith in that religious traditions, family support, and Islam played an extensive role in Muslim students' commitment to education.

Furthermore, how Muslim students perceive education often reflects how their parents view higher education. Many Muslim parents believe a university degree is necessary for their children and such a degree prevents downward social mobility or increases upward social mobility (Jamal Al-deen, 2019). Parents view higher education as a means for the success and financial stability of Muslim men (Salinas et al., 2022) and for the success and economic independence of Muslim women (Jamal Al-deen, 2019). Parents want their children to get the highest education to ensure they have the greatest chance for future success (Salinas et al., 2022).

Muslim Identity and Academic Achievement

Relevant research highlights how levels of Muslim identity impact academic achievement in different ways (Abdullah et al., 2022; Abu Khalaf et al., 2023; Oberoi & Trickett, 2017). Abdullah and colleagues (2022) conducted a descriptive study that aimed

to determine the effect of Islamic lifestyle on the academic success of Muslim students in Russia. They implemented a 20-item Islamic lifestyle questionnaire and a 15-item academic success inventory to collect their data using a structural equation modeling (SEM). SEM's implementation evaluated the relationship between one's Islamic lifestyle and the student's academic achievement. An Islamic lifestyle includes a person's relationship with himself or herself, a person's relationship with God, and a person's relationship with other people (Abdullah et al., 2022). Abdullah et al. (2022) found that Islam has a positive and significant effect on academic achievement and that focusing on students' lifestyles can encourage success in education. Abdullah et al. (2022) claim that based on their findings, following Islamic teachings in lifestyle was an effective factor in this regard.

Abu Khalaf and colleagues (2023) conducted a mixed-methods systematic review of the literature consisting of 44 qualitative and quantitative studies from 34 journals. They systematically examined experiences of discrimination faced by Muslim students in pre-K-12 and university settings. The reviewed studies discussed student experiences, the context of school as a means for discrimination, how students responded to instances of discrimination, and protective factors and recommendations for future research and policy. Their phenomenological research approach informed their analysis of the current literature by focusing on the similarities of lived experiences (discrimination and Islamophobia) for Muslim students. Abu Khalaf et al. (2023) explain how students with higher rates of cultural and religious engagement reported higher levels of perceived discrimination. This is in part due to Muslim youth standing out as a result of their

minoritized background in secular countries as compared to their non-Muslim peers.

Undoubtedly, experiences of discrimination for Muslim students have lasting impacts on educational expectations and achievement (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023). Students more engaged in Islamic practices had higher academic performance and their educational expectations highly correlated with their academic achievement (Oberoi, 2014; cited in Abu Khalaf et al., 2023). Despite the harm associated with discriminatory acts, Muslim students affirmed gaining strength from their religion, families, and Muslim community organizations (Abu Khalaf et al., 2023).

Oberoi and Trickett (2018) conducted a mixed-method study that included focus groups and a survey addressing the public school experiences of Muslim adolescents in a Midwestern state and how those experiences relate to academic achievement, educational aspirations, and psychological adjustment. They found that Muslim adolescents cope well in the school context in terms of academic achievement, high educational expectations, and relatively low levels of psychological distress. In addition, Oberoi and Trickett (2018) found that Muslim identity was significantly associated with academic performance and Muslim high school students who report higher levels of Muslim identity and educational expectations also report higher academic achievement.

Religious Commitment and Education

Few studies discuss the potential benefits religion has on education (Bowman et al., 2014; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). Bowman et al. (2014) found that religious identification upon entering college is significantly related to various indicators of student success. Their study explored the relationship between religious/worldview identification and

student success (i.e., college satisfaction, perceived growth, academic achievement, and graduation) using a large, multi-institutional dataset that separated religious groups with adequate sample sizes. Previous studies have relied on small, single-institution samples that do not consider whether observed differences in experiences and outcomes might be attributable to other student characteristics. Bowman and colleagues (2014) included a sample of 28 academically selective institutions with diversity in terms of student demographics, region, and institutional type while controlling for characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status. They found that religious engagement and commitment are associated with numerous positive outcomes for college students.

Mayrl and Oeur (2009) review contemporary scholarship which identified three major areas of research: 1) What do college students believe, and how do they practice their faith? 2) How does the college experience affect students' religious beliefs and practices? and 3) How do students' religious commitments affect their college experience? In their review of the existing literature, Mayrl and Oeur (2009) found that, overall, spiritual engagement results in student satisfaction with their college experience. In addition, while they found that religion benefits some student outcomes, they acknowledge that religion may not benefit all student outcomes. For instance, religion appears to be positively associated with student satisfaction and a variety of prosocial behaviors, but research does not convincingly show that religious students do better academically or have greater emotional well-being. Mayrl and Oeur (2009) conclude that religion's effect on student outcomes is best described as mildly, but inconsistently positive. They acknowledge that the literature on religion and higher education has been

normative or theoretical in character, and claims within the literature lack empirical justification. They found that methodology is a major contributing factor for inconsistent findings. Their main conclusion in reviewing the existing literature highlights the following:

Research shows that college students are more religiously engaged than has traditionally been thought, but that this interest appears to be more broad than deep; that the college experience does not lead to apostasy in most students, though its effect on students' religious engagements is still unclear; and that religion has a beneficial effect on some student outcomes, but not on others (Mayrl & Oeur, 2009, p. 261).

They mention that the clearest and most consistent findings indicate that religious students appear to be more satisfied with their college experience and spiritual engagement appears to enhance students' satisfaction both in and out of the classroom.

The connection between religious commitment and education is important to consider as Muslim college students tend to be more religious than other minority groups on campus (Hailu et al., 2018; Herzig et al., 2013). This area of study requires further development regarding the religious commitment of Muslim students in higher education, especially when considering the existing correlation between higher education and religious participation among Muslims (Haniff, 2003). While research has found connections between religion and education, this area of study is underestimated when it comes to Islam's impact on the education of Muslim students.

Although existing scholarship has documented the experiences of Muslim students in higher education, less attention has been given to understanding how these experiences collectively shape the religious commitment of Muslim students during their college years. By examining the relationship between social experiences, academic experiences, and religious identity, this study seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Muslim students navigate their faith within higher education contexts. This study contributes to the fields of higher education, religious studies, and Muslim education by centering the perspectives of Muslim students and exploring the ways in which religious identity shapes the social and academic experiences of Muslim students in university. In doing so, it extends existing scholarship to consider how religious commitment is sustained, transformed, or challenged as Muslim students pursue higher education. These findings may also inform institutional practices aimed at creating more inclusive and supportive environments for Muslim students on university campuses.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Concepts

The theoretical concepts guiding this study include *intersectionality* (Crenshaw, 1989), *racialization* (Garner & Selod, 2015; Joshi, 2006; Selod & Embrick, 2013), and *religification* (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012). As this study explores how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students in secular higher education institutions, I will draw on the aforementioned concepts to examine how religion, race, and gender influence these experiences while providing an overview of each concept and how it informs my study.

Intersectionality

In my study, I use intersectionality as a methodological and theoretical concept to address the many ways in which the social identities of Muslim students shape their social and academic encounters at higher education institutions. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined intersectionality as “a metaphor for understanding the ways that multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage sometimes compound themselves and create obstacles that often are not understood among conventional ways of thinking.” Crenshaw (1989) developed this framework to highlight how varying social identities interact with systems of oppression and power to create unique experiences for individuals. Individuals with particular combinations of identities (e.g., gender and race or race and religion) may be subjected to unique lived experiences that cannot be captured by one identity or the addition of two identities (d’Urso & Bonilla, 2023). Welborne et al. (2018) explain how in particular, “research on intersectionality suggests that addressing the social reactions to race and gender as separate categories is insufficient because individuals at the

intersection of these systems of inequality experience unique and cross-cutting forms of discrimination” (p. 81). Intersectionality addresses the need to attend to multiple, intersecting identities as individuals have unique experiences with privilege and disadvantages because of such intersections (Rosenthal, 2016).

Utilizing intersectionality as a concept goes beyond understanding the experiences of Muslim students from a monolithic perspective that centers their religious identity alone. Muslim religious identity intersects with other historically marginalized identities, especially with respect to race and religion (e.g., Black Muslims) or gender and religion (e.g. women who wear the hijab) (d’Urso & Bonilla, 2023). Intersectionality brings forward the various aspects of Muslim social identity to enable a more complex understanding of the Muslim experience through the workings of religion, race, and gender. Ahmed and Abdallah (2022) acknowledge that most studies have failed to consider religious experiences from an intersectional lens, which considers the multidimensional nature of individuals’ lives and how they navigate numerous social identities and experiences. In this study, I consider the intersectionality of religion, race, and gender to develop a more nuanced understanding of how varying social identities intersect and shape the experience of South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students. Even though there is limited intersectional research covering Muslim student experiences (Karaman & Christian, 2020), an intersectional lens is necessary to form a stronger understanding of how social categories and contexts intersect and contribute to the religious experiences of religious and racial minority students (Ahmed & Abdallah, 2022).

South Asian and Arab Muslims make up the largest racial and ethnic groups representing Islam in the United States (Ali & Bagheri, 2009; Schmidt, 2004) and their religious, racial, and ethnic identities undeniably shape their educational experiences within higher education institutions. d’Urso and Bonilla (2023) mention that focusing on Muslim identity alone “precludes us from understanding how anti-Islamic attitudes toward those already in the United States are not uniformly distributed across Muslim racial identity groups” (p. 204). Specifically, intersectionality helps center the various experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim students as their religious, racial, and ethnic identities undeniably shape their social and academic encounters at secular institutions in many ways. In addition, the implementation of intersectionality avoids monolithically grouping all Muslims as one and it gives a more nuanced explanation as to how the varying identities Muslim students hold impacts their lived experiences.

The implementation of intersectionality as a methodological and theoretical concept addresses the various aspects of Muslim social identity with an intentional consideration to religion, race, and gender. As mentioned previously, intersectionality goes beyond understanding the experiences of Muslim students from a monolithic perspective that centers their religious identity alone. It brings forward the various aspects of Muslim social identity to enable a more complex understanding of the Muslim experience. At the same time, it is important to note that using intersectionality to explore Muslim student experiences requires recognizing that this concept stems from a secular and feminist framework that may not fully align with Islamic values. For Muslim students, this difference can impact how they perceive and navigate their social identities

in academic settings. However, acknowledging such distinctions makes it possible to consider Islamic values while drawing on the valuable insights intersectionality provides when it comes to understanding the unique challenges Muslim students face as a result of their various social identities.

Racialization

“Racialization” is a concept that arises as an extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group (Omi & Winant, 2015). Selod (2015) defines racialization as:

A process where new racial meanings are ascribed to bodies, actions and interactions. These meanings are not only applied to skin tone, but other cultural factors such as language, clothing, and beliefs. Racialization enables a discussion of how new racial meanings are created, transformed, and destroyed. It aids in understanding how race and racism are constantly fluctuating and being transformed due to the political and social contexts in which they exist (p. 79).

The concept of racialization is a useful theoretical tool to discuss the experiences of Muslims as racial (Selod & Embrick, 2013; Qamar, 2022). It provides a theoretical explanation of how racial meanings apply to cultural symbols and signifiers, such as the hijab or a Muslim name (Selod, 2015). Additionally, racial identity is often seen as parallel to other forms of status-based group identity including that of “hyphenated American” groups, gendered groups, and religiously identified groups (Omi & Winant, 2015; Qamar, 2022).

Racialization of religion is a phenomenon in which an individual's race creates a presumption of their religious identity (Joshi, 2006). That is, race links aspects of physical appearance to an ascribed social identity and physical traits and characteristics can mark someone as "Muslim" (Love, 2017). Muslims in America are racialized, and the racialization of Muslims is essential in recognizing the way Muslim students experience racism. For Muslim students specifically, their religious and racial background shapes their experiences. Joshi (2006) acknowledges the need to identify situations in society "where race and religion appear to be conflated or mutually marked categories—or those situations where race appears to replace or subsume other identity categories such as religion" (p. 211). Even though Muslim identity is one of religion, it is often thought of as a racial category (d'Urso & Bonilla, 2023).

Selod (2015) claims that theories of race should develop as the American racial and ethnic landscape changes. Race scholarship in America has been dominated by a binary understanding of "race" as black and white, but racial categories undergo constant change (Love, 2017). While Muslims in America negotiate a color line between whiteness and blackness, Muslims become racialized as foreign and brown in the moments when they are perceived as Muslim (Husain, 2017; cited in Karaman & Christian, 2020). Since race is a social construct, racial categories are based on the social and historical context in a given time. For Muslims specifically, their identity has been historically racialized and shifted over time based on political, sociohistorical moments (Karaman & Christian, 2020). Whether it is through historical media or current media, mass media contributes to the discrimination and oppression of Muslim students. Zaal

(2012) explains the way “Muslims in the U.S., and Arabs specifically, have been vilified in images, cartoons, film, and television for many decades” leading to the “demonized and dehumanizing images...[that] have served to desensitize the U.S. populace and to legitimize fear and hatred against Muslims and Islam” (p. 556). While present in the United States for decades already, Islamophobia steadily increased after 9/11 and the 2016 presidential election through various forms of media (Salinas et al., 2022).

Love (2017) claims that race must be part of the analysis when expanding the understanding of Islamophobia beyond religious frameworks. Because of the racialization of Islam, Islamophobia has little to do with religious beliefs and more so with perceptions of Muslims (d’Urso & Bonilla, 2023). Garner and Selod (2015) describe Islamophobia as a specific form of racism targeting Muslims, and racialization as a concept that helps capture and understand how this works. The concept of racialization is particularly relevant for Muslim students as their religion, religious expression, and religious identity become racialized (Qamar, 2022). Qamar (2022) develops the concept of “racist religious nativism” which is defined as “the hegemonic group’s perceptions, informed by racialized assumptions about religious differences, against which people of non-dominant racial and religious groups are judged and rendered foreign threats” (p. 61). She explains how Muslim Americans experience the hegemonic group’s racist religious nativism informed through racializing narratives, orientalist assumptions, and inaccurate and/or incomplete portrayals that maintain the dominance of a western religious identity at the expense of other religious identities not deemed American or Western.

Selod (2018b) addresses the way in which the racing of a religious identity brings newer racialized experiences to South Asian and Arab Muslims. Selod (2018b) defines racialized surveillance as:

The monitoring of select bodies by relying on racial cues, to describe the type of surveillance Muslim American men and women have had to endure in the United States since September 11. Muslim surveillance is triggered by the stereotypes that riddle their bodies, making it racialized surveillance that is guided by gender. Muslim men [are] targeted because of their name, while Muslim women [are] surveilled because of the hijab (p. 6).

Through racialized surveillance, the racial experiences of Muslims intensified, moving them from an invisible minority to a visible minority. This became more common following 9/11 in which the stereotypes and opinions of Muslims became increasingly negative and led to an increase in hate crimes against Arab and Muslim communities and individuals stereotyped as Arabs (Salinas et al., 2022). The racialized surveillance of Arab and Muslim populations has a long history of constructing these groups as threats, a perspective that continues to shape institutional responses to pro-Palestinian protests across U.S. campuses in the aftermath of October 7, 2023. Shammass (2017) found that Arab Muslim students more likely feel discriminated against by other students, faculty, and administration because of their ethnicity or religion in comparison to their non-Arab and non-Muslim peers. All things considered, Selod (2018b) claims that religion, race, and gender are not distinct identities, but often interconnected to the other and these

intersections become imperative to understanding the complexities of how bodies are marked as racial.

For instance, South Asians endure susceptibility to intersecting systems of discrimination, but in various ways. Shams (2020) addresses that while South Asians previously experienced praise as model minorities because of their high levels of education and economic attainment, South Asian Americans no longer find themselves a glorified model minority after 9/11. Instead, individuals conflate South Asians with Muslim and “Muslim-looking” groups which exposes them to Islamophobia, targeted surveillance, and censorship. For South Asian Muslims specifically, their sense of security based on their academic and financial successes weakened because of their stigmatized Muslim identity (Shams, 2020). Similarly, individuals conflate Arabs with Muslim and “Muslim-looking” groups which also exposes them to Islamophobia, targeted surveillance, and censorship (Shams, 2020). While racially classified as white according to the United States Census, 9/11 increased the visibility of Arabs as a minority and as a result, Arabs are denied the privileges that a white racial classification affords (Selod, 2018b; Tehranian, 2008). Essentially, Arabs fall under the categorization of an “invisible minority” and are denied access to whiteness. Ajrouch and Kusow (2007) explain how a key issue to consider in any discussion of race is the definition of whiteness because in the United States, whiteness is an identity that includes physical characteristics and an ideological premise that designates superiority in relation to the “other.” This idea of Arabs as an invisible minority recognizes that while Arabs are classified under a majority racial group (i.e., white), they do not experience the same

privileges typically associated with that group. For Arabs in the United States, this classification means that they might be counted as “white” statistically, but they are denied the privileges associated with being white and their experiences with racism have largely been ignored because of their racial classification as white (Selod, 2018b). Selod (2018b) acknowledges that there is a problem in talking about a universal Arab experience with race because some Arabs pass and enjoy privileges of whiteness, but other Arabs do not and the conflation of the terms “Arab” and “Muslim” makes it difficult to understand what specific factors cause racialization to occur.

In addition, gender issues intersect with those of religion and race in distinct ways for Muslim students. Selod (2015) claims that the state has played a role in the racialization of Muslims as anti-American, perpetually foreign, misogynistic, and violent. Dominant discourses frame Muslim women as cultural threats and Muslim men as national threats (Selod, 2015; Watt, 2012; Qamar, 2022). This is a form of “gendered racialization” where gender identity and religious signifiers inform female and male Muslim experiences (Selod, 2015; Qamar, 2022). This includes attributes tied to Muslim religious identity such as wearing the hijab, having an accent, or having a Muslim name. For Muslim men, their religious identity and gender comprise two of the main characteristics associated with terrorism (Selod, 2015). They are seen as terrorists, threats to national security, and disloyal to America regardless of citizenship (Selod, 2018b). In turn, Muslim men and women in America experience racialized surveillance. While Muslim women experience forms of discrimination similar to Muslim men, their hijab marks them as terrorists, terrorist sympathizers, unassimilable foreigners, and oppressed

(Aziz, 2012). The idea that all Muslim women who wear the hijab are oppressed is strongly conveyed through stereotypes, misinformation, or limited information (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003). Muslim women face particular forms of discrimination at the intersection of religion, race, and gender in ways that a Muslim man, a White woman, or another racial minority would not face (Aziz, 2012). It is important to consider the various ways gender intersects with processes of race and processes of religion for Muslims.

Religion, race, and gender are social identities that interact in complex ways for Muslim individuals. For example, the experiences of a Black Muslim woman differ significantly from the experiences of an Arab Muslim woman. While they are both exposed to Islamophobia due to their religion, a Black Muslim woman is exposed to anti-Black racism due to her race. A Black Muslim woman's experience also differs from a Black Muslim man's experience. While they are both exposed to Islamophobia due to their religion and anti-Black racism due to their race, they experience different forms of gender discrimination. Additionally, research shows the prevalence of "gendered racialization" (Selod, 2015) and "gendered Islamophobia" (Zine, 2006) as Muslim men and women are racialized differently (Selod & Embrick, 2013). Muslim women of all races and levels of religiosity face unique forms of discrimination (Aziz, 2012) as gender issues intersect with those of religion and race in unique ways for Muslims (Asmar et al., 2004). Aziz (2012) claims that an analysis of anti-discrimination that does not take intersectionality of race, religion, and gender into account does not sufficiently address the particular ways in which Muslim women face subordination.

As mentioned earlier, racialization defines how racial meanings apply to cultural symbols and signifiers, such as the hijab or a Muslim name (Selod, 2015). Current scholarship focusing on the gendered experiences of Muslim women in college often focus on Muslim women wearing the hijab (McGuire et al., 2016). Muslim women who wear the hijab are exposed to racialization because their hijab makes their Muslim identity visible (Karaman & Christian, 2020). While some studies found that Muslim women who wear the hijab perceive the campus religious climate as welcoming to a certain extent, they still experience mild exclusion and marginalization (Seggie & Sanford, 2010). Muslim women who wear the hijab experience more daily microaggressions such as hostile stares, rude behavior, dismissive statements, and disrespect (Aziz, 2012). More specifically, Muslim women who wear the hijab are disproportionately victims of hate encounters and subjected to harassment based on stereotypes about their religious, racial-ethnic, and gender identities (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017).

While Muslim women and Muslim men are racialized differently due to their gender, they are both subjected to gendered racialization through hyper surveillance by the state and private citizens (Selod, 2018b). Dominant discourses frame Muslim women as cultural threats and Muslim men as national threats (Selod, 2015; Watt, 2012; Qamar, 2022). Muslim men are associated with terrorism, abusiveness, and barbarism (Selod, 2015) that renders Muslim women as terrorist sympathizers, oppressed, and unassimilable foreigners (Aziz, 2012). The assumption that Muslim women are oppressed stems from the way Muslim men are perceived as threats, which is directly related to

their racialization. While the hijab serves as a religious signifier that exposes Muslim women to racialization, religious signifiers that inform Muslim men's experiences with racialization include attributes such as having an accent, a beard, or a Muslim name. These attributes in conjunction with religious identity and gender comprise the main characteristics associated with terrorism (Selod, 2015). Muslim men are seen as terrorists and disloyal to America regardless of their citizenship (Selod, 2018b).

In her study on the experiences of Muslim Americans since 9/11, Selod (2018b) found that Muslim men were more likely to be questioned about their loyalty to the United States and whether or not they were terrorists. The Muslim men she interviewed recalled friends and acquaintances joking around with them about being a terrorist. These slights result from post-9/11 policies put into place by the state which marked Muslims as potential terrorists. Such forms of racialization are damaging to Muslim men and associate the Muslim body with terror. Selod (2018b) mentions that the Muslim men in her study repeatedly mentioned wanting to avoid any association with terrorism as they feared the punitive consequences of being associated with terror.

Religification

Islam serves as the predominating value system that informs daily life for many Muslims (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007) and several studies have identified the ways in which Muslims view religion as integral to their everyday lives (Peek, 2005; Rayside, 2011; Seggie & Sanford, 2010). For many Muslim students attending higher education institutions, religion has become the primary source of personal and social identity (Peek, 2005). This process in which Muslims define themselves more through a religious

identity than through a racial, national, or ethnic one has been termed as religification (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012). Ghaffar-Kucher (2012) acknowledges that while racialization continues to be the dominant form of categorizing individuals and groups, Muslim students are often viewed through a religious lens even though race, class, and gender are implicated in the process of racialization. As religious minorities, Muslims recognize their heightened visibility, and this awareness leads them to assert their Muslim identity more (Peek, 2005). However, the extent to which their Muslim identity affects their experience varies according to their race, adherence to Islamic practice, and their perspective regarding faith and religious identity (Stubbs & Sallee, 2013). In this study, the concept of religification is necessary for connecting the ways in which religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students in higher education. It acknowledges that religious beliefs, practices, and values are central to how many Muslims understand themselves and make sense of the world. Additionally, it explains how religious identity does not only shape the spiritual lives of Muslim students, but also their educational experiences and sense of belonging on campus. More importantly, religification examines how religion becomes a lens through which Muslim students interpret their experiences and through which others perceive them. It highlights how religious identity is continuously negotiated within social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Furthermore, religification enables an understanding of how the educational experiences of Muslim students are not only shaped by their religious commitment, but by campus environments, institutional practices, and broader societal perceptions of Islam.

In the following section, I outline the research design I implemented to enable a more complex understanding of the way religious identity shapes the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim students attending four-year public higher education institutions in Southern California.

Chapter 4: Research Design

For this study, I used a qualitative case study to explore three main research questions: 1) What role does religious identity play in shaping the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students in public higher education institutions? 2) In what ways does the intersection of religion, race, and gender influence the experiences of Muslim college students? 3) How do Muslim students negotiate their religious identity within the broader social and political climate of higher education institutions? To answer these questions, I collected data over the span of five months starting in September 2025 until January 2026. To be eligible for this study, individuals had to (a) be at least 18 years of age, (b) self-identify as South Asian or Arab, (c) self-identify as Muslim, and (d) be an undergraduate student enrolled in a four-year higher education institution in Southern California for at least one year. Their enrollment for at least one year was necessary to provide a more comprehensive account of their experiences at the institution they attend. The inclusion of students from undergraduate programs allows for a broader examination of the diverse experiences of Muslim students across different stages of higher education. This approach provides insights into how their experiences change over time, from early exposure of higher education environments to more advanced stages of academic and professional preparation. In addition, I focus on Muslim students in Southern California as focusing on one locality yields details of daily life that broader studies cannot offer (Schmidt, 2004). While there is a significant Muslim population residing in this area, limited studies have been conducted within this locality. Based on the aforementioned studies conducted in the

United States, Southern California may vary in important ways compared to other regions. Recognizing such differences provides a valuable perspective for understanding how religion, education, and identity intersect for Muslim students.

Participants were recruited to participate in this study through a recruitment email sent to their university's Muslim Student Association (MSA), a religious organization on campus. Those who were interested were asked to complete an online background survey that served as a participant selection tool that collected demographic and other relevant information from self-identifying Muslim students. After participants completed the background survey, I read through the responses to learn more about each individual, including their religious identification, racial/ethnic background, religious engagement, and educational trajectory from their personal perspective. The background survey ensured that participants aligned with the objectives of my study while accounting for the diversity of experiences among Muslim students. Of the 24 participants who completed the background survey, 12 were selected to participate in remote semi-structured interviews to allow for a detailed account of their experiences.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of administering an online background survey to 24 individuals and conducting 45- to 60-minute remote semi-structured interviews with 12 of them. Of the 24 individuals, 15 were women and nine were men. From the women, five identified themselves as Arab, seven identified themselves as South Asian, one identified themselves as African, one identified themselves as half Arab and half Persian, and one identified themselves as half Arab and half South Asian. From the men, four

identified themselves as Arab, four identified themselves as South Asian, and one identified themselves as Persian. Of the 12 individuals who participated in the interviews, seven were women and five were men. When asked about their racial and ethnic background, four of the study's participants identified as Arab and eight of the study's participants identified as South Asian. I provide more information on each participant in a later section.

A recruitment email was sent to Muslim students through their university's MSA and students who expressed interest were asked to complete an online background survey that served as a participant selection tool that collected demographic and other relevant information from self-identifying Muslim students. The survey provided me with more information on each individual, including aspects such as their religious identification, racial/ethnic background, religious engagement, and educational trajectory from their personal perspective. Before completing the survey, students were provided with an informed consent form and indicated their consent to participate.

The background survey was essential because it ensured that I recruit participants who align with the objectives of my study while accounting for the diversity of experiences among Muslim students. Without the survey, I risked relying on assumptions about participants' religious engagement, experiences, or relevance to the research. This may have resulted in an incomplete understanding of Muslim student experiences. Of the 24 participants who completed the background survey, 12 were purposefully selected to participate in remote semi-structured interviews. This sample size was intentionally selected to allow for a detailed account of participants' experiences. Additionally, the 12

participants met all the requirements needed to be part of this study (i.e., be at least 18 years of age, self-identify as South Asian or Arab, self-identify as Muslim, and be an undergraduate student enrolled in a four-year higher education institution in Southern California for at least one year).

Upon submitting their background survey, I emailed each participant and invited them to participate in an interview that would last anywhere between 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews consisted of three sections focusing on educational experience and background, religious commitment and participation, and religious identity and higher education interactions. Altogether, participants were asked a total of 29 questions. Prior to each interview, participants reviewed an informed consent form and provided consent to participate and to have their interviews audio recorded. With permission from participants, I audio recorded each interview and then transcribed them verbatim. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and that they could decline audio recording or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

After conducting the interviews, I was initially planning to conduct participant observations with students who are involved in the MSA. MSAs on campus raise religious awareness and provide a platform for Muslim students to share their common beliefs and practices (Mubarak, 2007). Through observations, I originally hoped to better understand how religious socialization occurs within these spaces. I would observe the types of events students attend, how regularly they participate, how they contribute to the organization, and how they interact with one another.

After further reflection, however, I decided not to include observations as part of this study. While observations are a common qualitative method, conducting them in religious spaces raises concerns about unintentionally observing individuals who are not research participants and engaging in the hyper surveillance of Muslims—an issue in which Muslim communities have long experienced heightened levels of surveillance (Ali, 2018; Selod, 2018b; Shams, 2020). In addition, my study occurred shortly after the pro-Palestinian student encampments in 2024. During this time, Muslim students were highly surveilled and experienced disciplinary actions as a result of their engagement and organizing in student encampments. Even though I am Muslim myself and initially believed that participant observations would allow me to seamlessly join these spaces and build rapport, I became aware that my presence as a researcher might contribute to a sense of being watched or surveilled.

Religious organizations on campus are meant to be places of community. In order to respect these spaces and avoid causing discomfort or harm, I revised my research design to focus on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with consenting participants. This change reflects my commitment to conducting research that is ethical, respectful, and attentive to the broader social and political context in which Muslim students navigate higher education. While observations are no longer part of this study, the interviews provided me with a rich and meaningful way to understand how Muslim students experience religious community, support, and belonging on campus.

In addition, I further modified my research design by replacing participant observations with document analysis. I use a document analysis approach that draws on

publicly available materials relevant to Muslim student experiences on campus. These materials include publicly accessible online forums and official university websites. All documents analyzed in this study are publicly available and do not require login credentials, institutional access, or direct interaction with students. The document analysis is informed by themes that emerged from participant interviews and is used to better contextualize students' experiences within the broader campus environment. Specifically, these materials will help elucidate how Muslim students, Muslim student organizations, and issues related to religion are represented at the institutional level. By combining in-depth interviews with document analysis, this study centers participant voices while also attending to the broader structures and campus climates that shape Muslim students' educational experiences.

Data Analysis

In this section, I describe how I analyzed the different forms of data collected in this study to understand the extent to which religious identity shaped the educational experiences of Muslim students attending four-year public higher education institutions in Southern California. The data sources included background survey responses, semi-structured interviews, and publicly available documents relevant to Muslim students on campus. Even though these data collection methods served different purposes, I analyzed them in relation to one another in order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how participants made meaning of their experiences within higher education and how those experiences were shaped by broader campus contexts.

I analyzed the qualitative data through a phenomenological approach by using an inductive process to establish a comprehensive set of themes (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological approach gave me access to lived experiences by centering the individual experiences and understandings of the participants (Creswell, 2007). This process of data analysis was critical because this is where I transformed all my data into findings (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). In this study, the findings arose from social interactions and constructions of interpretations based on the data collected (Freeman et al., 2007). While the background survey, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis served different purposes, they were all necessary as I centered the narratives and personal perspectives of Muslim students.

After participants completed the background survey, I read through the responses to learn more about each individual, including their religious identification, racial/ethnic background, religious engagement, and educational trajectory from their personal perspective. Of the 24 participants who completed the background survey, 12 were selected to participate in remote semi-structured interviews. Following participant consent, I audio recorded the semi-structured interviews, transcribed them verbatim, and began analysis through repeated readings of the transcripts. As I transcribed and read through the interviews, I identified commonalities, differences, and patterns across participant responses. I then coded the interview transcripts based on common ideas through a line-by-line analysis of the themes, patterns, and concepts that arose from the data (Emerson et al., 1995). The codes I developed reflected what participants shared about their educational experience and background, their religious commitment and

participation, and the extent to which religious identity shaped the way they navigated higher education. I anticipated codes related to religious identity, religious participation, religious engagement, academic experiences, social experiences, religification, racialization, and Islamophobia, while also leaving room for inductive codes that emerged directly from the interviews.

After completing the interviews, I conducted a document analysis approach that drew on publicly available materials relevant to Muslim students on campus. These materials included publicly accessible online forums and official university websites. All documents analyzed in this study were publicly available and did not require login credentials, institutional access, or direct interaction with students. The purpose of analyzing these documents was not to replace what participants shared in interviews, but rather to provide additional context for the broader campus environment in which Muslim students navigated higher education. The document analysis was informed by themes that emerged from the participant interviews and helped me better understand how religion, Muslim students, and campus climate were represented publicly. I coded documents for themes that connected to my interview findings and paid close attention to the types of language used to describe religion, Muslim students, and institutional responses to campus issues.

To support credibility and consistency throughout the analysis process, I used repeated readings and ongoing refinement of codes as patterns emerged across the background survey responses, interview transcripts, and documents. Throughout the coding process, I wrote analytic notes to track patterns, questions, and connections across

the data. The themes that emerged were grounded in the literature and theoretical concepts guiding this study, while remaining centered in participants' own narratives and interpretations of their experiences.

Participant Profiles

For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 participants. This sample size was intentionally selected to allow for a detailed account of participants' experiences. At the time of this study, all 12 participants were attending a four-year public higher education institution in Southern California. Seven of the study's participants identified as female and five identified as male. All 12 participants identified themselves as Sunni Muslims, including one of the participants who reverted to Islam. When asked about their racial and ethnic background, four of the study's participants identified as Arab and eight of the study's participants identified as South Asian. In what follows, I provide a list of participants (see Table 1) and then introduce each individual who participated in the semi-structured interviews as their narratives are the ones that guided the findings in this study.

Table 1*Muslim Student Participants Including Racial/Ethnic Background and Religious Practice*

Participant	Racial/Ethnic Background	Religious Practice
Maha	Arab Palestinian	Consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship.
Yousef	Arab Syrian	Consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship.
Zaid	South Asian Bangladeshi	Consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship.
Hind	South Asian Indian and Pakistani	Consistently practices Islam.
Amira	South Asian Pakistani	Consistently practices Islam.
Leena	South Asian Pakistani	Consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship.
Omar	Arab Syrian	Consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship.
Hamza	South Asian Pashtun	Consistently practices Islam.
Aisha	South Asian Indian	Consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship.
Arooj	Arab Iraqi	Consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship.
Hala	South Asian Indian	Consistently practices Islam to some level.
Ahmad	South Asian Indian and Southeast Asian Filipino	Consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship.

Maha

Maha self-identifies as an Arab Palestinian Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship. She pursues an undergraduate degree in Psychology while striving to maintain religious practices, drawing support from her family and selective involvement in Muslim student organizations as she navigates academic pressures, identity, and belonging.

Yousef

Yousef self-identifies as an Arab Syrian Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship. He is pursuing an undergraduate degree in Social Sciences and has a strong commitment to religious practice, drawing confidence from the Southern California Muslim community and involvement in Muslim student organizations on campus.

Zaid

Zaid self-identifies as a South Asian Bangladeshi Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship. He pursues a double major in Social Policy and Quantitative Economics while maintaining a high level of religious commitment. Zaid is supported by a strong Muslim community on campus and active participation in leadership roles within the Muslim Student Association.

Hind

Hind self-identifies as a South Asian Indian and Pakistani Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam. She navigates a Biological Science major while practicing

core religious obligations. Hind finds structure, community, and spiritual growth through active involvement in her university's Muslim Student Association.

Amira

Amira self-identifies as a South Asian Pakistani Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam. She pursues an undergraduate degree in Psychology while maintaining strong religious commitment. She is grounded in her family's guidance, her hijab observance, and active involvement in the Muslim Student Association.

Leena

Leena self-identifies as a South Asian Pakistani Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship. She is pursuing an undergraduate degree in Business while continuing to strengthen her religious practice. Leena engages with campus organizations that provide religious support, community, and a sense of belonging.

Omar

Omar self-identifies as an Arab Syrian Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship. He is pursuing a pre-law academic path while navigating the demands of higher education. Omar maintains his religious practice through part-time seminary study and daily acts of worship. His faith is reinforced by family support and sustained through active involvement in a strong and supportive Muslim community on campus.

Hamza

Hamza self-identifies as a South Asian Pashtun Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam. He is pursuing a pre-medical track while balancing his academic goals with his religious obligations. Hamza is supported by an educated family, a sense of community, and regular engagement with Muslim spaces on campus.

Aisha

Aisha self-identifies as a South Asian Indian Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship. She is pursuing a rigorous major in Computer Science while maintaining her religious practices as a recent revert. Aisha is supported by her Muslim roommate and her involvement in the Muslim Student Association on campus.

Arooj

Arooj self-identifies as an Arab Iraqi Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship. She manages her demanding STEM coursework while upholding consistent religious practices. Arooj feels supported by her family, local mosques, and active involvement in the Muslim Student Association.

Hala

Hala self-identifies as a South Asian Indian Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam to some level. She manages her Engineering studies alongside essential religious practices, supported by her family and involvement in the Muslim Student Association.

Ahmad

Ahmad self-identifies as a South Asian Indian and Southeast Asian Filipino Sunni Muslim who consistently practices Islam and implements voluntary acts of worship. He pursues Engineering with a strong sense of religious purpose, supported by a deeply practicing family and extensive leadership within the Muslim Student Association and community organizing.

This study would not have been possible without the willingness of the participants who shared their time and experiences. I am deeply grateful to the 24 Muslim students who filled out the background survey and the 12 Muslim students who allowed me to interview them and trusted me with their personal narratives. Through their openness, participants provided meaningful insight into how religious identity shapes their educational experiences and how the intersections of religion, race, and gender influence their lives as Muslim undergraduate students in public higher education institutions. Their voices are central to this study and inform the research questions that guide this work.

Chapter 5: Educational Pathways in Context: Family, Finances, and Faith

To answer this study's research questions and better understand what role religious identity plays in shaping the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students, it is necessary to understand what motivates and influences Muslim students to pursue higher education. While participants identified many motivators and influences, South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students commonly acknowledged their parents and their own career interests as motivation for pursuing higher education. Beyond personal motivation or professional goals, they also described family expectations, financial realities, and religious identity as various factors that shaped their educational trajectory.

Parental Motivation to Pursue Higher Education

In this study, a majority of participants were motivated to pursue higher education by their parents who emphasized the importance of education or by their parents who completed an undergraduate degree. When interviewing Yousef, he mentioned how both his parents and maternal grandfather attended university in California. Yousef states: "I was really motivated by them [parents and maternal grandfather]. Also, I think just the idea of pursuing knowledge is something that I always strive for. So, *inshallah*, you know, even after undergrad, I'm planning on going to grad school and doing that" (Yousef, Interview). This inspired him to pursue higher education and further his plans to attend graduate school in the pursuit of knowledge. Even though he has not completed his undergraduate education yet, Yousef is already thinking about what comes next for him. Zaid's parents also attended university and it is now an expectation that he does the same.

He also attended a school district that was academically competitive, so striving to do well academically and continue on to higher education was a given. Amira too was motivated by her parents, but she viewed education as a way to give back for the love and care they showed her through their *tarbiya*, which refers to nurturing growth and character development, which is often translated as “education” in Arabic (Halstead, 2004). In my interview with Amira, she noted that her mother is the only one who sees her success since her father passed away two years ago. She mentions how:

I would say this is a gift for my parents, because...they’ve done a lot, and I feel like in a way...to show them that their *tarbiya*, their ability to raise me and love me, has its benefits. Though, of course, this is the only thing that my mother is seeing, because I lost my father two years ago. But again, this should be *sadaqah jariyah* for my father. (Amira, Interview)

Sadaqah jariyah refers to an ongoing charity in Islam that provides benefits to others and reward to the giver even after they have passed away. For Amira, higher education was not just a way to honor her parents and their *tarbiya*, but also an act of faith. She viewed her education as a means of benefiting her deceased father by serving as an ongoing source of reward for him in the afterlife. This finding demonstrates religification by showing how religious identity shaped the meaning participants attached to higher education. In this example, Amira integrated both religious and educational goals. Her motivation explains how educational aspirations can be understood by fulfilling both family obligations and religious commitments. Ahmad similarly recognizes the sacrifices his parents have made for him and mentions that he is motivated to pursue higher

education for his parents who come from immigrant families. In his interview, Ahmad shares how “Both of my parents are from immigrant families, and my mom is a direct immigrant, and so their sacrifices kind of led me to pursue higher education, and they also encourage [me]” (Ahmad, Interview). He acknowledges that their encouragement, immigrant background, and sacrifices all led him to pursue an undergraduate degree.

In addition, several participants described growing up in families where higher education was normalized through the educational attainment of parents and family members who held undergraduate and graduate degrees. For example, Omar shared that he comes from an educated family with members holding bachelor’s degrees to doctoral degrees. Hamza also shared that he comes from an educated family where higher education is highly valued. With family members holding bachelor’s degrees, doctoral degrees, and medical degrees, the environment Hamza grew up in made education something that was always looked upon positively in his family. While Arooj feels that pursuing higher education is expected since both her parents have undergraduate degrees in electrical engineering, she mentioned in her interview how:

It’s kind of like expected of me. But even if they didn’t [encourage me to go into electrical engineering]...I just love education and being given the opportunity to, like, better my knowledge in something I’m interested in. (Arooj, Interview)

She explained how she genuinely loves education and values the opportunity to increase her knowledge. These participant experiences suggest that family educational attainment shaped their educational aspirations by creating an environment in which higher education was viewed as an expected part of one’s future. These findings echo several

studies that have highlighted the role Muslim parents play in shaping their children's perceptions of higher education and their educational trajectories (Abbas, 2003; Ahmad, 2001; Salinas et al., 2022). How Muslim students understand education often reflects how their parents view higher education. For many, higher education was encouraged by their parents and seen as the next step in their educational trajectory since education was valued within their households.

Career Interests as Motivation to Pursue Higher Education

Alongside family expectations surrounding higher education, participants were motivated by their interests in certain fields of study. Muslim students described the practicality of higher education in relation to their career goals and how certain career paths require additional schooling. In addition, there are certain skills they gained that they appreciated and looked forward to implementing once they entered their respective career choice. For example, Maha is interested in Psychology and acknowledges that she needs to pursue higher education for her field of study. After getting involved in research at her university, Maha began to take her education more seriously and mentioned how she now knows more about the field of Psychology, what she wants to do with her degree, and what path she wants to take in the future. Hind knows she wants to pursue a career in healthcare as she finds the field interesting. She mentions how she has family in healthcare who encouraged her to pursue this path, but it was ultimately the education she was receiving in university which affirmed this for her. Leena's experience was similar and her experiences in university led to significant personal growth that clarified why she wants to pursue Business. In her interview, she explained that:

When I first started Business, when I picked that major, I was, like, “Oh, I don’t really know if I’m really that interested in anything else.” And I think Business is a stable career. And I liked math, so I wanted to go into finance, and that’s still what I want to do. But I think that, like, going through classes and understanding more about how the world works, and being able to, like, get different perspectives on the global economy as well has, like, made me realize that there are specific reasons that I want to do Business and that, like, I want to be able to help my community be able to understand, like, how global politics affect the U.S. economy as well. (Leena, Interview)

She goes on to mention that through classes, professors, and interactions with people from diverse and international backgrounds, she gained a deeper understanding of how global politics and the economy are connected. This reshaped her professional goals and strengthened her desire to use her knowledge to help her community, something she feels would not have been possible without going to university. While Yousef mentioned that education has always been something he strives for, he mentioned how his education has taught him tangible knowledge that he will use in his personal and professional career. He believes that some of the skills he gained is his ability to communicate and interact with different people, as well as leadership skills through both the classroom and various organizations on campus. Omar felt that his education helped shape his professional goals by allowing him to meet professors and professionals in his field, which confirmed what he wanted to do and better understand his career direction. While he shared that “I have, like, an interest in doing Law, so obviously I have to get an education” (Omar,

Interview), it was also those he interacted with which shaped his professional goals. Hamza was very optimistic and shared that his education has opened up a world of possibilities for him. He explained that through hard work and higher education, he feels that he is able to achieve his dreams. He sees education as something that expands what is possible for his personal and professional future. Aisha explained that her major, Computer Science, aligns closely with coding, which is what she is passionate about. She said she has been good at coding since seventh or eighth grade and that is why she chose this field. Aisha also shared that she hopes to continue with graduate school and aims to become a professor. She believes higher education is critical for reaching that goal. Arooj explained that her education has shaped both her personal and career goals. On a personal level, she feels that she is intelligent and wants to use her knowledge to do something meaningful. In her interview, she mentions how “I feel like I’m smart so I should use my knowledge to do something good...to pursue something I like, something hard, challenging, STEM-y” (Arooj, Interview). Arooj recognizes her capabilities and wants to pursue something she enjoys that is challenging and STEM-focused. On a professional level, she is drawn to Engineering, partly because her parents followed that path. This sentiment echoes earlier findings in that participants were motivated to pursue higher education by their parents. Hala felt that her professional goals were shaped by her education. She explained that:

Education has shaped mainly my professional goals. Because as I’ve gone through, like, my first year of college, I’m, like, more sure on what I want to do for my future career, in terms of, like, what field in Engineering I want to do. I

think my education has shaped my professional goals in that way, and also, I feel like a lot of my personal goals are aligned with, like, doing well in school and, like, in my future career. So, I think it also shaped my personal goals in that way.

(Hala, Interview)

Along with her professional goals, many of her personal goals were closely aligned with doing well in school and succeeding in her future career. Ahmad shared that his education, especially his classes, helped develop many of his ideas and passions. He said that university changed his life in many ways, including through the connections he made, the organizations he worked with, the people he studied with, and the topics he studied both inside and outside of the classroom. He explained that these experiences shaped his worldview and helped cement the worldview he already had. He also shared that pursuing both a major and a minor gave him knowledge in Transportation Engineering and Global Muslim Studies, which shaped his politics and his view of the world.

Zaid's education shaped his personal and professional goals quite differently than other participants. He is pursuing a double major in Social Policy and Quantitative Economics because he wants to address social issues through a more technical and quantitative aspect, but his religious identity takes precedence as he thinks about his career aspirations. While Zaid knew what major he wanted to pursue and why, he was questioning what path he wanted to take after graduating. While he mentions he does not know what he wants to do after graduation just yet, he explains how:

Education has shown me that a lot of what I learned does not align with the Islamic law [or] values that I prioritize and the principles that I see reflected in the Qur'ān and the other teachings that I consume. And so through that kind of disillusionment with a lot of things that I came into college with, such as, like, you know, being very passionately involved with policy work and engaging with elected officials...as the years have gone, I have been more disillusioned with that, and I have personally just seen kind of a misalignment with that type of stuff and how I have grown personally within my Islam that has reshaped my personal goals and caused me to question things. (Zaid, Interview)

As a result, he questions whether he should go into academia or just study Islam abroad. His concern is regarding secular education and how he feels that the education he has received does not necessarily align with the values and principles he prioritizes. Zaid's experience exemplifies how Muslim students lead lives that include both secular and religious aspects that are in constant negotiation with each other (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Scott-Baumann, 2017). It also demonstrates religification by highlighting how his religious identity serves as a framework for which he evaluates educational and career pathways, leading him to consider how they align with his Islamic commitments.

In all, while Muslim students may have additional motivations for pursuing higher education, parental expectations and career interests were widely acknowledged by participants. Whether it was parents who emphasized the importance of education or parents who completed an undergraduate degree, parental influence shaped the educational trajectory of Muslim students. Understandably, how parents view higher

education significantly influenced the way Muslim students understood education and its importance. For ten out of the 12 participants in this study, higher education was encouraged by their parents and seen as the next step in their educational trajectory since education was perceived as valuable in their households. This was also reflected in Muslim students' motivation for pursuing certain fields of study they were interested in. Some participants expressed interest in the same fields their parents were in or were simply encouraged by their parents to pursue higher education. In addition, higher education provided participants with the skills and opportunities they believed would lead them to be successful within their careers and help them achieve their personal and professional goals. Beyond the aforementioned motivating factors, Muslim students' educational trajectories were shaped by various external factors such as family expectations, financial realities, and religious identity.

Building on what participants shared earlier about their motivations for pursuing higher education, family continued to emerge as a key external factor shaping their educational pathways. The same family context that motivated many to pursue higher education also shaped why participants understood higher education to be important. For several participants, higher education was already viewed as the expected next step because it was normalized at home and reinforced through what they saw their parents and other family members do. For many of the Muslim students in this study, their parents' educational background impacted their own. Maha mentioned familial factors and how university is seen as a "tradition" in her family since both her parents are college graduates (Maha, Interview). Yousef felt the same way as a lot of his family members

have attended college and he is motivated by their experiences. He mentions that he has seen how important it is to gain an education both inside and outside of the university setting (i.e., at a workshop or a lecture at the mosque). Zaid also mentioned the expectation to go to university since both his parents are U.S. college graduates. He also grew up in a socioeconomic status that encouraged education without needing to worry about financial stressors. Zaid explained in his interview how:

In terms of other factors, financially and family, I come to that very support by my parents. I would say, like, we're middle class, and so I don't really have to worry about, like, paying rent or paying tuition, like, my parents cover pretty much all that for the most part. And so, like, compared to other people who obviously have to, like, work a lot to pay for their basic needs and whatnot, I haven't really had to worry about those things, which has really allowed me to just truly focus on my education to the maximum, and really explore all of these different topics that I'm interested in, engage in extracurriculars...and also, just, like, growing up, I was able to just engage with so many different activities and just, like, focus on my academics and, like, get to the place where I am today.

(Zaid, Interview)

He specifically mentioned how they shaped his educational path by providing him the financial means to pursue higher education and not have to worry about the financial burden that comes with paying tuition. This also opened up opportunities for him to be more involved with his education, extracurriculars, and topics he found interesting. Zaid was in an environment that allowed him to focus on aspects related to education without

having to worry about factors that might impact that commitment. For Hamza, his mother holds a medical degree and he has other family members with post-graduate degrees. He mentions this as a major external factor shaping his educational path because higher education is highly valued within his family who he describes as well-educated. Hala echoed the same and explained how everyone in her family attended a four-year university, which created an expectation for her to do the same. Arooj explained that her parents placed a strong emphasis on education and have always encouraged her to earn a post-secondary degree. She mentioned that they believe education should come before things such as marriage or other major milestones, constantly reminding her that “You’re not going to get married until you have a degree” (Arooj, Interview).

Additionally, some participants mentioned family more broadly and how their racial and ethnic backgrounds played a role. For instance, Omar comes from an Arab family and stated that “in many Middle Eastern countries, you have like three or four [fields], which are usually engineering, law, medicine or business” (Omar, Interview) that you are encouraged to pursue. This influenced his own decision regarding what career path he chose. For Middle Eastern Muslim men, families supported their commitment to education and education was essential and upheld in their family and culture (Salinas et al., 2022). Similarly, South Asian Muslim women had supportive parents who actively encouraged their education (Abbas, 2003; Ahmad, 2001). Leena specifically mentions her South Asian Pakistani background and how higher education has always been encouraged. She was motivated by seeing women in her family pursue college, but not always finish or have stable careers, which made education feel like an important safety

net for her. Consistent with prior research, South Asian Muslim women view higher education and careers as a necessity (Ahmad, 2001) due to the way it opens pathways to upward mobility, security, and stable jobs.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that while participants described education as a highly valued pursuit, the motivations and expectations surrounding higher education were shaped by the intersection of religion, race, ethnicity, and gender. An intersectional lens shows that educational encouragement through family expectations reflected the racial and ethnic backgrounds of Muslim students, constructing different understandings of why higher education mattered. For Omar, educational success was linked to culturally defined professional pathways within his Arab family. For Leena, higher education represented economic security and independence shaped by the experiences of women in her South Asian Pakistani family. These findings also highlight how racialization and ethnicity are intertwined with religious identity. They demonstrate how participants' educational aspirations cannot be understood through religion alone, but through social identities that shape their family expectations and educational experiences.

Financial Support and Stability

Participants identified how their parents view education as a necessity for financial security. While participants talked about their financial realities in varying ways depending on their circumstances, finances shaped their educational decisions in comparable ways. Amira, Leena, and Aisha addressed finances as an external factor that has affected their educational path in some way. Amira mentioned how financial

challenges in her family led her to be more careful and intentional with finances as it related to education. She mentions how “When it comes to finances, my family has gone through some financial crisis” (Amira, Interview). While this was a factor affecting her education, she mentions that such an experience helped her become more mature. Aisha believes that as an international student, the tuition she is paying to study in the United States is worth the cost, especially if she earns a degree from a prestigious university. At the same time, she mentions the burden of studying abroad. Leena mentioned that financial concerns and economic uncertainty influenced her decision to pursue higher education in order to support herself and maintain a certain quality of life. Additionally, Leena compared how education led to better job opportunities which led to more financial stability. She explains how:

I think for me, in my mind, I was like, okay, college equals getting a job which equals, okay, I’m stable now. So, I think that was something that really motivated me as well, financially. Also, I think just because, like, the economy has been changing so much, it’s really hard to expect, like, your parents to support you, or if you get married, for your husband to, like, solely support you as well...I’ve grown up with certain things that I would like to have as an adult. So, I’m like, okay, I need to have money for that. So, I think that definitely has shaped why I’ve wanted to pursue education. (Leena, Interview)

For Leena, her educational pursuit encompassed more than financial concerns and economic uncertainty. She wanted to keep up with a certain lifestyle and recognized that it might not be sustainable without a well-paying job which she saw as attainable through

education. Leena went on to mention how she recognizes that her ethnic background as a South Asian Pakistani woman meant that higher education is encouraged and seen as a way to secure a good job. She mentions how “I think that Pakistan and, like, South Asian countries...encourage higher education, because there is very much, like, ‘Oh, you need to have, like, a good job.’ You support your family and [yourself] as a woman” (Leena, Interview). For Muslim women, higher education was perceived as a means for academic success and that such success leads to upward mobility and financial independence (Jamal Al-deen, 2019). Ahmad (2001) found that South Asian Muslim women view higher education and careers as a necessity, and apart from social mobility or status, they gained other personal benefits as it related to their cultural, religious, and personal identities. While Hala also commented on finances and how she wants to be financially independent in the future, she did not mention any concerns or challenges when it comes to finances affecting her education. Based on participant responses, there were clear gender differences in how factors related to finances shaped their education. Omar, Yousef, and Zaid also mentioned financial factors that shaped their education, but not in terms of financial challenges or concerns compared to Amira, Aisha, and Leena. Their socioeconomic status as Muslim men, which transferred to financial support, looked different than that of Amira, Aisha, and Leena. Omar was motivated to pursue higher education due to the financial relief it brings and because he believed he would be able to financially support his family if they ever needed help. Yousef felt that his financial reality benefited him because he was raised in a financially well-off Southern California community. He explains how:

You know, just being in this community in Southern California, a lot of the families here are very well-off, *alhamdulillah*. And we have a very financially stable community here and that's definitely helped support me. Not only just, you know, directly with my family, but also just seeing all the Muslim leaders we have in this community and seeing how they're successful financially, but they're also, you know, staying in touch with their *deen* and they're not, like, forgetting about their *deen* and they've become, you know, community leaders in Southern California. (Yousef, Interview)

Yousef feels that the socioeconomic status of his community supported him both directly and indirectly. Even the religious leaders he knew were not just financially successful, but they were able to stay in touch with their *deen* (i.e., faith) and become community leaders, which is something he admired. Zaid also grew up in a middle-class family and mentioned never needing to worry about the financial aspect of university since his parents supported him financially. As touched upon earlier, he acknowledges the following in his interview:

Compared to other people who obviously have to, like, work a lot to pay for their basic needs and whatnot, I haven't really had to worry about those things, which has really allowed me to just truly focus on my education to the maximum, and really explore all of these different topics that I'm interested in, engage in extracurriculars...and also, just, like, growing up, I was able to just engage with so many different activities and just, like, focus on my academics and, like, get to the place where I am today. (Zaid, Interview)

Because of the financial support from his parents, Zaid was able to focus on his education and engage in any activities or extracurriculars he was interested in. At the same time, he recognizes that his family's socioeconomic status led him to these opportunities, while others might not have had the same access as him. While Muslim men are encouraged to pursue higher education as a means for financial stability, their experiences as it relates to finances is different than that of Muslim women.

In other countries, higher education access is more limited for Muslim women and uncontrollable factors have led to low levels of education for Muslim women (McClendon et al. 2018; Pew Research Center, 2016). This has encouraged Muslim women in the United States to pursue higher education. For these women, they recognize how obtaining an undergraduate degree is a sense of security that protects them from undesirable socioeconomic conditions or structural constraints. For them, higher education is viewed as something that is attainable and leads to economic independence and social mobility. They recognize that their opportunity to attain higher education is different from Muslim women in other countries. At the same time, the experience of Muslim women in other countries highlights why Muslim women see education as a means for economic independence. In their eyes, their education is a safety net. Interestingly enough, studies have highlighted how parents often connect higher education to financial stability for Muslim men (Salinas et al., 2022) and economic independence for Muslim women (Jamal Al-deen, 2019). This same sentiment was displayed in participant responses where Muslim men saw education as a form of

financial stability and Muslim women saw education as a form of economic independence.

Factoring Faith into Education

Muslims in the United States share a strong emphasis on education, which is a value deeply rooted in Islamic teachings. Alongside family and finances, religious identity presented itself as a factor shaping the educational path of participants. As mentioned earlier, Yousef admired how the religious leaders from his community were financially successful, but successful in practicing their religion as well. Yousef explains how:

Just seeing all the Muslim leaders we have in this community and seeing how they're successful financially, but they're also, you know, staying in touch with their *deen* and they're not, like, forgetting about their *deen* and they've become, you know, community leaders in Southern California...I think that also ties into, like, religion...I feel like I can never take this for granted. Just the amount of *masajid* we have, the programs we have every weekend. You know, the youth programs that are going on...I think, very much, had an effect on me, and it specifically, like educationally, just being able to have access to all those resources and be able to gain all that knowledge. (Yousef, Interview)

Yousef appreciated the Muslim community around him and how religion facilitated a means to gain more knowledge. Along with secular knowledge, Yousef touched upon his religious knowledge and how there is so much access to Islamic education and accessible

resources that have helped him gain more knowledge in general. Zaid also addressed faith and how university has been a time where he has grown religiously. He explains how:

It's kind of just informed, like, the way that I view the world. In any class that I take, especially those related to, like, society, or whatever it may be, I kind of compare that in my head to how, like, an Islamic worldview would look like, and kind of contending with, how do we, how do we kind of, as Muslims, like, going in these, like, leadership roles, or, like, into the workforce, kind of manage these various things that we're seeing that may not align with our faith? And so that's just something that, like, internally in my mind, that I think about in terms of other factors. (Zaid, Interview)

As a result, thinking about religion while in university has informed his worldview and how he compares things using an Islamic worldview. This perspective has shaped his educational path and how he views society and the world around him. He goes on to mention how this leads him to think about Palestine, immigration issues, changing governments and politics, discriminatory policies towards Muslim, and how his role in education and the knowledge he is gaining can either contribute to these issues or how it can help combat these issues. During his interview, Zaid mentioned that he continuously asks himself, "Is the knowledge that I am learning contributing to these issues [i.e. what is happening in Palestine, immigration issues, change within government and politics]? Or how can I use the knowledge that I am learning to combat these issues?" (Zaid, Interview). Zaid's narrative exemplifies religification by demonstrating how religious identity shapes not only what he learns, but how he evaluates the purpose and ethical

implications of knowledge. He understands knowledge through an Islamic worldview that requires him to consider its moral consequences. In this example, higher education becomes a space where academic learning is interpreted through religious commitments, shaping both Zaid's understanding of the world and his sense of responsibility within it. Leena similarly views education from an Islamic worldview. She explains how:

I think Islam really, it's a very just religion. So...those are principles that I try to take with me as well, like, when we're learning about global politics and how they affect the economy. Being cognizant of the fact that maybe the things that are going on here aren't necessarily what's correct and they definitely are hurting people. I think the religious perspective has really helped me with that as well. I think it's also, like, shaped what kind of classes that I want to take. I've taken a lot of classes outside of my major that have just, like, helped with that perspective. For example, I took, like, a global religions class, just because learning about Judaism and Christianity also really helped me, like, better understand the world that we're living in as well. (Leena, Interview)

Her religious beliefs shaped how she approaches her education by guiding her sense of justice, influencing how she understands global politics and the economy, and motivating her to take classes beyond her major to gain broader perspectives on religion and the world. For both Zaid and Leena, their religious perspective to education enables them to become useful members of society (Salinas et al., 2022). Their experiences illustrate religification and how higher education was understood through an Islamic framework that shaped why they pursued knowledge. Education was seen as a way to fulfill ethical

and religious responsibilities, using education to promote justice, contribute to their communities, and engage with broader social issues. Furthermore, Amira says that her religious identity has strongly shaped her educational path, explaining that Islam gives women many rights. She feels encouraged to take advantage of those rights and fulfill the duty of seeking education and helping others. Similarly, Omar mentioned his faith and how it shapes his educational path, explaining that Islam emphasizes education and how education is obligatory for Muslims. He references Islamic text and mentions that “I know there’s, like, a Qur’ān verse or ḥadīth where it says, like, education is obligatory upon every Muslim. That’s a religious part that, like, shaped my educational path” (Omar, Interview). Arooj also mentioned religion and how it teaches her to always strive to be the best version of herself. For her, pursuing higher education beyond high school is one of the ways to do so. She feels that education is closely tied to personal growth and bettering herself as a person. Lastly, Ahmad shared that religion was a major external factor shaping his educational path. He explained that his involvement in the Muslim Student Association (MSA) at his university heavily impacted his college experience. His involvement in the MSA resulted in his suspension for two and a half quarters for his participation in the pro-Palestine encampments, which is addressed in greater detail in chapter eight. Religion and religious identity proved to be an external factor that shaped the educational path of Muslim students. It also played a role in how they view and approach higher education.

Overall, parents expected their children to pursue higher education as a necessity to advance future goals and aspirations. Participants described family expectations,

financial realities, and their Muslim identity as common factors that extended beyond personal motivation or professional goals. While participants mentioned family expectations and religious identity independently, a previous study by Salinas and colleagues (2022) found that family emphasis on higher education was intrinsically connected with their faith. This meant that religious traditions, family support, and Islam all played a considerable role in the commitment Muslim students had to education. For the purpose of this study, the following chapter looks at religious identity in more detail to better understand how the educational values of Muslims are strongly based on their religious beliefs (Callaway, 2010). This approach enables a more complex understanding of the way religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students.

Navigating Higher Education: Opportunities and Challenges

To better conceptualize the educational experiences of Muslim students attending four-year public higher education institutions, it is crucial to understand both the opportunities and challenges Muslim students come across as they navigate higher education. Participants found that higher education provided them with the opportunity to broaden their perspectives within the classroom and find a sense of community. At the same time, higher education came with challenges. Participants expressed difficulty with time management and balancing school with work, family, religion, or extracurriculars. This eventually led to burnout for some students. Participants also mentioned feeling at odds with their university's administration in regard to political activism and participation, which is addressed in more detail in chapter eight.

Opportunities within Higher Education

While participants mentioned many opportunities that contributed to a positive higher education experience, the opportunity to broaden their perspectives within the classroom and find a sense of community were the most common. In terms of broadening their perspectives within the classroom, Muslim students were able to express their ideas and have their ideas challenged, they were able to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds, they were able to be in community with people who value learning, and they were able to benefit from course content and subject matter.

Participants appreciated being able to express their ideas and have their ideas challenged because it gave them room to engage in open dialogue. In his interview, Yousef mentioned how within the classroom, he feels that he is able to share his ideas freely and professors do a good job at facilitating discussions within the classroom as he explains:

I think the most important thing is, you know, for those smaller classes...you're able to challenge other people's ideas, but your ideas are also able to be challenged. And I think that is very important. Obviously, a lot of universities emphasize free speech, and they emphasize how, you know, anyone's idea can be shared. But, you know, we've seen that to not be true in the past couple years. But I still think from the classroom sense...we are able to share our ideas pretty freely and it helps that a lot of the professors and students around us are also, you know...they kind of agree with us, agree with me, on a lot of issues. But at the same time, I also appreciate when there's someone that I don't agree with, and

we're able to kind of like have that discussion and have our ideas challenged.

(Yousef, Interview)

Yousef highlights the way professors and the classroom environment encourage dialogue between classmates that foster opportunities to challenge other people's ideas and for his ideas to be challenged. While he feels that the university limits what can be said regardless of their policy on free speech, he appreciates that the classroom is different in that he is able to have dialogue with professors and students. Whether it is something they agree or disagree upon, there is room for ideas to be discussed and challenged.

Leena also expressed that university gave her a space to express her ideas more freely and she was able to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds. Leena explains:

I think the fact that it's a public [institution] means that there's, like, a bunch of different people from a variety of backgrounds, so I've really liked that. I think just being able to talk to people who are like, not from the U.S., or people who have grown up in, like, different types of families than my own has given me a lot more appreciation for where I come from and other people's backgrounds as well. I think also something that I really, really like that has happened recently is the fact that there's a lot of social mobilization on campuses. For example, [pro-Palestine] encampments that happened a few years ago...But obviously the purpose and the reason that it was happening was horrendous, but to be able to see that people on the campus cared, and that there's other people who cared as well, and that together, we had a greater collective voice. I love that aspect of higher

education because I don't think that in primary education that you receive in the U.S. you really have the opportunity to be an individual and to express your own ideas and thoughts...you don't really get to express it as loudly until you're in college. (Leena, Interview)

She found that attending a university with students from many different backgrounds helped her better appreciate both her own experiences and those of others. She valued being exposed to international perspectives and diverse family backgrounds, as well as witnessing student activism and social mobilization on campus. She mentioned how all these things showed her the power of collective voice and communities that care. In turn, this gave her the opportunity to engage with student groups around issues that mattered to her. Leena's experience was specific to her university as her primary education did not give students such opportunities to express themselves.

Participants also felt that their perspectives were broadened within the classroom by being in community with people who value learning and through course content and subject matter. Maha found that the environment she was in reinforced the value of learning because everyone in the room valued learning just as much as she did. Hind felt similarly and mentioned how helpful it is being surrounded by motivated and driven peers. Another benefit to being in an environment that reinforces the value of learning is discovering what subjects you are genuinely interested in. She mentions how:

When there is a class that I do have interest in, like, I will actually enjoy studying for it or doing the assignments for it. And so, it's definitely really nice that there

are classes that are so, like, interesting and engaging that you actually want to continue learning more about that subject. (Hind, Interview)

For Hind, she explains how these experiences contributed to a more positive learning environment for her. Aisha shared a similar experience and mentioned her appreciation towards her exposure to different mindsets. She felt that the people she was surrounded with were more focused and genuinely interested in what they were studying.

By broadening their perspectives within the classroom through various approaches, participants gained various skills as a result. Ahmad goes into detail about how he gained a greater understanding of the world and how it works. He developed stronger connections to his community and to other individuals and feels that his qualities as a person and as a member of society were improved. He explained that he gained many personal skills such as public speaking, organizing, and leadership skills. Ahmad confidently shared that “I believe my qualities as a human being, as a person, as a function of society, got sharpened when it comes to other aspects” (Ahmad, Interview). The opportunity to broaden their perspectives within the classroom gave Muslim students room to grow as individuals and many expressed personal improvements as a result.

Challenges within Higher Education

While most participants identified positive classroom environments, some participants had to contend with classroom environments that conflicted with their religious values. For Yousef specifically, being a Humanities major before switching to Social Sciences was challenging in terms of the liberal ideologies he felt were pushed in

the classroom and how a lot of liberals have a negative perception of religion. During his interview, Yousef stated the following:

My morals don't really align with a lot of the people that were in Humanities and some of the things we were being taught about, like, gender ideology and those types of stuff. Also, you know, not just those types of liberal ideas, but I'm also talking about, like, you know how a lot of liberals are not very...they don't have a lot of very positive ideas about religion. So, you know, I've noticed religion a lot of times is mocked in some ways, in the classes that I've been in, and people just kind of laugh about it and kind of mock people who are very religious. Or, you know, we'll be reading some old texts, and, you know, like, there'll be someone religious in the story, and they'll be kind of made to be like, you know, they're blindly following a faith or something, and they're made to look pretty stupid.

(Yousef, Interview)

While Yousef eventually switched majors and felt more comfortable in Social Sciences, he felt that the ideologies he was exposed to through his Humanities major were challenging as they conflicted with his views on religion and how religion was viewed in those spaces. His experience highlights religification in the way religious identity became a central lens through which he interpreted and navigated his educational experiences. Rather than viewing classroom discussions as neutral, Yousef assessed the curriculum according to his Islamic beliefs, eventually leading him to consider changing majors. In this way, religification shaped how he understood classroom interactions and how he navigated educational spaces.

Additionally, many participants struggled to balance academics with work, family obligations, religious commitments, and extracurricular involvement. For some, the struggle to balance academics contributed to exhaustion and lower academic performance. The pace and rigor required for their coursework was overwhelming at times, especially during exams or due to their university's quarter system. Hind explains how a challenging aspect of higher education is how accelerated the classes felt due to their 10-week quarter system. She describes being in a continuous cycle of studying, taking exams, and immediately returning to studying. Even though she is only taking three to four classes at a time, the workload feels overwhelming and hard to keep up with because the content is more detailed. Amira also found challenges academically. She described exam season as especially tough and emotionally draining during her interview. She states that:

I would say it's more tough during exam season, because that's when...education doesn't have mercy on you at that moment. Like, it's really, really brutal at times, especially in university...I will say, it kind of scares me because I don't want to lose the passion that I have for my degree...I'm kind of, like, expecting that I will kind of have, like, burnout...I've had burnout before. (Amira, Interview)

For Amira, exam season gets overwhelming and she worries it might lead her to burnout and temporarily lose interest in her degree. Aisha, Hala, and Arooj also shared the challenge of balancing academics. Aisha shares how a challenge for her has been keeping up with course content because it moves very fast and is hard to understand. She said that personally, she feels like she has given up on her personal life and is not in a good place

right now. Hala felt that balancing all her academic work was a challenge, and university has required much more effort and time to complete her work. She also mentioned struggling to balance her personal interests and hobbies with school. Arooj also expressed difficulty with balancing everything, which added to feelings of exclusion as someone who was an international student and was already dealing with feelings of isolation. Balancing academics left little time for rest or personal well-being, which shows that the challenges Muslim students face in higher education are multifaceted.

Furthermore, Muslim students were exposed to opinions that conflicted with their own. Omar mentions difficulty dealing with opposing opinions, particularly around issues in the Middle East and how institutions respond to conflicts and violence. He described this as one of the hardest parts of his experience, as did others. In chapter eight, I explain how several participants identified the broader campus climate as a challenge, including administrative responses to student organizing and experiences of feeling targeted or unsupported by the institution. Participants mentioned being at odds with their university's administration in regard to their political activism and participation, especially in relation to student encampments and protests in support of Palestine. The encampments surfaced as a significant point of reference for Muslim students, both in terms of institutional engagement and personal involvement. Participants described heightened campus tension as an institutional response to student organizing which framed student activism as a potential threat to safety and order. Muslim students faced a range of repercussions in the aftermath of their participation in student encampments including disciplinary actions such as being suspended or dropped as students. Zaid

experienced this firsthand and mentioned his grievances with admin, the institution, and the police officers who were deployed due to the pro-Palestine encampments. Hamza, who was directly involved in the student encampment on his campus, also faced challenges related to disciplinary actions by his university. Similarly, Ahmad mentioned the challenge with university administration, explaining that he and others were targeted for the events they organized, which led to academic repercussions. The challenge of being at odds with their university's administration in regard to political activism and participation is outlined in more detail in chapter eight.

In all, Muslim students are faced with opportunities and challenges as they navigate higher education. While higher education provided Muslim students with the opportunity to broaden their perspectives within the classroom and find a sense of community, they were met with hostility from their university's administration and burnout as they expressed difficulty with time management and balancing school with outside responsibilities.

The following chapter discusses religious commitment and practice among Muslim students in higher education now that the educational experience and background of Muslim students have been addressed with consideration to participants' motivations for pursuing higher education, the external factors that shaped their educational pathways, and the opportunities and challenges they encountered along the way.

Chapter 6: Religious Commitment and Practice in Higher Education

This study acknowledges the value knowledge holds in Islam and how it manifests in the lives of Muslim students as a result of their religious identity. For Muslim students, religification helps illustrate how religious identity not only shapes their spiritual lives, but how it also informs their educational experiences and sense of belonging on campus. Since this study looks at how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students attending secular higher education institutions, it is necessary to consider the religious commitment among Muslim college students and how they sustain their religious practices while in college. Callaway (2010) has highlighted that the educational values of Muslims are strongly based on their religious beliefs. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how the religious beliefs and values of Muslim students are essential to the ways they live and engage with the world. Without acknowledging the religious commitment among Muslim college students and how they sustain their religious practices while attending university, there is a reinforced lack of understanding as to how the educational experiences of Muslim students are shaped by their religious identity.

In general, understanding Muslim religious identity and practice acknowledges how religion is deeply integrated and central to the way Muslims engage with the world around them. Participants consistently described their religious identity as the foundation to how they interpret who they are and who they want to be. They consistently positioned Islam as the foundation for how they live, suggesting that religious identity is a framework for how Muslim students understand themselves, how they relate to others,

and how they navigate the world around them. With consideration to religion in the lives of Muslim students, this chapter addresses the religious commitment of Muslim students and how they sustain their religious practices while in university. I then look at the religious tolerance and perceptions of Muslims to consider whether these commitments and practices are tolerated on secular campuses where Muslim students make up a religious minority.

Religious Commitment Among Muslim College Students

The impact religion has on the education of Muslim students has been underestimated when considering the value education holds in Islam. While the Islamic purpose of seeking knowledge is to promote goodness in the self, this extends to forms of knowledge outside the scope of Islam. The three forms of education (i.e., *tarbiya* [growth to maturity], *ta'lim* [emphasizing knowledge], and *ta'dib* [development of good manners]) create a distinctively Islamic view of education in which no aspect of a Muslim's life can remain untouched by religion (Al-Attas, 1980). Hence, the religious commitment among Muslim college students should be understood when examining how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students.

Participants in this study self-identified their religious commitment in the background survey on a scale: 1) I consistently practice Islam and implement voluntary acts of worship, 2) I consistently practice Islam, 3) I practice Islam to some level, or 4) I practice Islam to some level, but my religious practice is limited. Eight out of 12 participants (e.g., Maha, Yousef, Zaid, Leena, Omar, Aisha, Arooj, and Ahmad) self-identified their religious commitment as 1) "I consistently practice Islam and implement

voluntary acts of worship.” Meanwhile, Hind, Amira, and Hamza self-identified their religious commitment as 2) “I consistently practice Islam.” Hala was the only participant who self-identified her religious commitment as “I practice Islam to some level.” None of the participants mentioned that their religious practice is limited. On average, Muslim students have little religious skepticism and are highly religious and committed to their faith (Bowman et al., 2014). I mention this to acknowledge the religious commitment of these Muslim students since the religious beliefs and values of Muslim students are central in their manner of living (Oberoi & Trickett, 2018). Participants detailed their religious commitment at length during interviews.

Muslim students who are committed to their faith experience a variety of character strengths such as kindness, spirituality, hope and optimism, and leadership (Ahmed, 2009). These characteristics guide how they understand themselves, how they relate to others, and how they navigate the world around them. For Muslims whose everyday life is guided by their religion, such character strengths are a result of their religious commitment. Maha mentions how her perspective on being a Muslim is very dependent on treating people with kindness and having good intentions. She explains that “I would say that I feel like being Muslim is, like, very dependent on just, like, treating people with kindness or, like, having good intentions. So, for me, when I go about my day, I try to avoid, like, having bad intentions with people” (Maha, Interview). Hind similarly shared that her religious identity shapes how she carries herself and interacts with others as she states in her interview:

I think I try to make sure my character, the way that I interact with people, whether they're Muslim or non-Muslim, is apparent because I feel like that's one of the biggest things that people can see as a Muslim. Like, if you have good character, and if you treat other people kindly, then they'll have a good view on Islam. (Hind, Interview)

Her kindness not only reflects a character strength as a result of her religious identity, but it also reflects her awareness of how she represents Islam to others. She places an emphasis on having good character and treating people kindly because she believes this is one of the most visible ways people form perceptions of Islam. In his interview, Zaid mentions how being Muslim shapes his perspective on all aspects of life, and one of the ways is how he presents himself. In consideration to character, he states how he considers:

If I'm acting appropriately according to Islamic standards, am I treating people respectfully and, like, you know, abiding by, like, those principles of, like, respect, kindness, and how a good Muslim person should be acting. (Zaid, Interview)

For these participants, how they treat others is rooted in their Muslim identity and beliefs. One of the ways Muslim students treat others is through kindness, a common character strength they hold since Muslims care about how they interact with others.

By acknowledging that the way they act is representative of how others may view Islam, Muslim students recognize that there are certain perceptions of Muslims that are negative and reinforced through certain biases and stereotypes. For practicing Muslim

students, their commitment to the faith includes representing Islam in a positive light to bring awareness on who Muslims really are. Hind emphasizes that the environment she grew up in consisted mostly of non-Muslims and she felt it was important to behave in a way that would not reinforce negative views about Muslims. She explains how:

I feel like [my character is] one of the biggest things that people can see as a Muslim. Like, if you have good character, and if you treat other people kindly, then they'll have a good view on Islam. So, growing up, like, I was around mostly non-Muslims in my schools and just to make sure that, like, they didn't think anything negative about Muslims, like, it was very important for me to not, like, act a certain way and that was just, like, something I did for myself too. (Hind, Interview)

For Hind, having good character was a way for others not to have a negative perception about Muslims. She mentions how it was also something she did for herself. Furthermore, as someone who wears the hijab, she acknowledges how this renders her Muslim identity visible and influences how people interact with her and how she interacts with them. In her interview, Hind mentions:

How you dress, like, wearing the hijab to school, like, makes it obvious that you are Muslim and that is something that shapes, like, how people interact with you and how you interact with them. It becomes more important to act well with others so that they do not have, you know, any animosity towards Muslims. (Hind, Interview)

As a Muslim woman who openly wears the hijab, Hind feels a sense of responsibility in the way she represents Islam. Because of this visibility, Hind feels the need to act respectfully and thoughtfully so that others do not develop negative feelings toward Muslims.

Spirituality was another common character strength that arose as a result of one's religious commitment. When one is committed to their faith, their perspectives are guided by their religion which reinforces their spirituality. The participants in this study exemplified spirituality as a character strength in the way they perceived certain things through an Islamic perspective. Yousef gives the following example in his interview on how religion shapes his perspective on what he learns within the classroom:

For example, I think, like, one situation I can think of is [how] I took, like, a random class on astronomy and learning about, like, the planets and, you know, our solar system. It was just the intro level class for one of my general education requirements and that class specifically just made me appreciate Allah's creation. Being able to see, like, the detail, the amount of details that are in our solar system, our stars, the planets, the way the Earth rotates, and, like, all those specific, precision related things made me really appreciate Allah's creation. And it's just things like that, you know, whether it's astronomy or other classes I'm taking...my Islamic identity has really, you know, been able to shape my perspective on that. (Yousef, Interview)

This narrative exemplifies the way religious identity appears within academics for Muslim students and how there is a spiritual element that is present. Yousef was able to

appreciate the intricacies of what he was learning in the classroom because he was able to relate it back to his religion and acknowledge that this is God's creation. This also exemplifies how Yousef perceives things from an Islamic perspective.

Along with spirituality, hope and optimism was another character strength that arose in the way Muslim students approached certain challenges or situations. Leena felt that her religious commitment shaped how she understands life, especially when she felt that she lacked a deeper sense of purpose. In her interview, Leena explained how:

Now I realize that, like, Islam has given us this foundation for, like, how we should be living our lives. That even if they aren't perfect, and even if you're experiencing, like, a lot of hardship, it's because you have, like, a higher something that comes after this that *inshallah* will be like eternal happiness. So that's kind of given me, like, more perspective into, like, why I'm going through certain things, or, like, how to deal with certain things, or how to handle certain people. (Leena, Interview)

Islam gave her a framework for understanding hardship, contentment, and long-term purpose. This helped her feel more grounded and confident in her choices. Furthermore, her faith also provided guidance through Islamic principles, helping her navigate moral decisions, respond to injustice, and reflect critically on societal issues. In her interview, she ponders on how:

I think [Islam] gives us, like, this framework to analyze our lives in and to, like, understand what the best decision is. So, thinking that, like, are we these people who are ignoring the cries of children? And are we the ones who, like, will

actively hear things, but just ignore it because it's just easier to ignore than to address it? So, I think that has definitely given me more perspective on, like, even though everyone else is doing something, is it really the right thing? (Leena, Interview)

For Leena, viewing things from an Islamic perspective lets her compare what she is doing to that happening around her and it gives her the chance to reflect on whether she is doing the right thing. Amira also mentioned how she views situations through an Islamic perspective and regularly asks what an appropriate response from an Islamic sense is. She states the following in her interview:

For me, I would say anything that's happening in this world or anything that happened in my family or amongst my friends, I always look at it from an Islamic perspective. What would Islam want me to do? What does Islam say in this [regard]?...Was it said in Islam? What does Islam say to do about it? And when it comes to basic things in life, I make sure to integrate Islam because I feel like, again, this is the way of life and it just makes things in life so much more smoother. So, I want to say that it's integrated in probably everything and, *alhamdulillah*, that's why it's kept me at least hopeful to this day. (Amira, Interview)

For Amira, integrating faith into everything has helped her remain hopeful and understand how she can apply Islam to different situations, including challenges she might face. Omar also exemplified spirituality and hope and optimism as a character strength. His spirituality as a result of his religious commitment has shaped how he views

and responds to everyday situations when dealing with people, facing challenges, or feeling discouraged. He used it as a way to look for direction and “find answers” (Omar, Interview), which Hamza similarly notes. Hamza described it as the lens through which he sees the world, and it represents the ideal way he strives to live. He also shared that when things happen to him, he tries to understand and respond to them through an Islamic worldview. Ahmad also felt strongly that his religious identity has “everything to do with [his] perspective on various aspects of life” (Ahmad, Interview). Ahmad’s religious commitment was evident in his spirituality and how it guided his worldview. He shares the following perspective:

I believe that my religious understanding of the world and my religious identity heavily, heavily affects my views on politics, my views on ethics, my views on work, my views on why I do what I do every single living second. Why I study, why I work, why I clean my room, why I cook food, why I eat, why I sleep, why I work out. All of these things emulate from, I believe, my *niyyah*, my intention, and serving Allah and being an obedient Muslim. And I would say that my moral code is very influenced by my religious identity. (Ahmad, Interview)

For Ahmad, his everyday life is guided by his religious identity. All his decisions are guided by his intention to serve God and be an obedient Muslim. Ahmad goes on to mention how religious identity also shaped his involvement in the MSA and why he was involved in community work. He mentioned that his involvement with both was to help other Muslim students strengthen their identity. Ahmad is not just exemplifying spirituality as a character strength, but leadership as well. Hala, who was the only one

who described herself as practicing Islam to some level, was unsure of how her religious identity shapes how she approaches the world. For Muslim students who consistently practice Islam and for those who also implement voluntary acts of worship, their religious identity played a significant role in shaping their perspective on various aspects of life. As a result, their religious commitment led them to experience various character strengths such as kindness, spirituality, hope and optimism, and leadership (Ahmed, 2009). This reflects religification by exemplifying how religious identity extends beyond personal belief to shape the values, decision-making, and understanding of Muslim students and the world around them. When considering the religious commitment among Muslim students and the way it guides their worldview, it is just as important to reflect on how Muslim students sustain their religious practice while in college.

Sustaining Religious Practice in University

There are various religious practices within Islam such as praying, fasting, giving charity, helping those in need, and so on. While Muslim students attending higher education institutions struggle to balance academics with other responsibilities, they are able to sustain their religious practices in various ways (see Table 2). All 12 participants mentioned that they regularly pray their obligatory prayers and 11 participants mentioned that they fast during Ramadan. Along with fasting during Ramadan, Leena and Ahmad mentioned fasting on days that are not obligatory, but they are recommended because of the religious significance of those days. Both prayer and fasting are pillars of Islam which make up some of the main religious obligations and foundation of life for Muslims. The participants in this study highlighted the importance of these pillars for sustaining their

religious practice in university. Hence, there are certain practices that are implemented into the daily lives of Muslim students regardless of their busy schedules. Table 2 highlights the different religious practice(s) Muslim students in this study consistently engaged in while in higher education.

Table 2

Religious Practice(s) Muslim Students Consistently Engaged In

Participant	Religious Practice(s) Participant Engaged In
Maha	Prays, fasts, is involved in community service, and attends the mosque.
Yousef	Prays, fasts, attends Friday congregational prayer, and attends the mosque.
Zaid	Prays, is involved in community service, and reads Qur'ān
Hind	Prays, fasts, is involved in community service, and wears hijab.
Amira	Prays, fasts, and wears hijab.
Leena	Prays, fasts, is involved in community service, and attends the mosque.
Omar	Prays, fasts, and is involved in community service.
Hamza	Prays, fasts, attends Friday congregational prayer, and attends the mosque.
Aisha	Prays, fasts, attends Friday congregational prayer, reads Qur'ān, and wears hijab.
Arooj	Prays, fasts, is involved in community service, and wears hijab.
Hala	Prays, fasts, is involved in community service, and reads Qur'ān.
Ahmad	Prays, fasts, attends Friday congregational prayer, attends the mosque, and reads Qur'ān.

Even with their busy schedules, many participants mentioned finding time to attend the mosque. Yousef attends congregational prayer at the mosque regularly and attends for different events, lectures, and activities. He mentions how:

I'm very blessed to be able to live, like, five minutes from a *masjid* by car. So having that as well has, you know, allowed me to be able to go to the *masjid* for a lot of daily prayers and also been able to, you know, attend a lot of the events that our *masajid* have. You know, I feel like every week there's a different talk or a different activity at a different *masjid* in the area...a lot of my friends will, like, send these events in our group chat and we'll all be able to go together. And so, I think I've been able to go pretty regularly to a lot of like lectures and, like, activities and, like, events [the] different *masajid* have. (Yousef, Interview)

While living near a mosque makes it easier to attend often, the mosques surrounding the area Yousef lives in provide different avenues to learn about Islam and get involved. He also has friends who encourage one another to attend the events, lectures, and activities they host. Hamza and Ahmad also attend the mosque frequently and make an effort to at least attend the congregational prayer on Friday. Along with prayer, participants often attended the mosque for community service and volunteering events. Leena became more involved at her mosque once she started an internship there. In her interview, she explained how:

I've been trying to get more involved in my *masjid* as well...because I really wanted to help out the *masjid*, that's what I'm doing it for. Because I think, like, being engaged in the community is really important too, even though I'm not always remembering *Allah* actively while being there. (Leena, Interview)

While she recognizes that her internship does not increase her spirituality through an active remembrance of God while she's working, there is benefit to being there.

Additionally, she saw this internship as an opportunity to serve and grow alongside others. This was a common perspective others had in relation to community service. Maha mentioned that she would attend the mosque for community service events such as preparing hygiene packages or food packages for those in need. Hind was also involved in community service work and mentions how it has become an integral part of her life. In her interview, she mentions that “Recently, I’ve been very interested in serving the community...that is something that’s actually become, like, a bigger part as I have attended college. It’s something that I didn’t really think about growing up” (Hind, Interview). She also mentioned how she appreciates the fulfillment she feels as a result of her volunteering and “how good it makes you feel to do something for your community” (Hind, Interview). Omar, Arooj, and Hala did not mention how consistent they were in community service, but they all acknowledged that it is something they enjoy doing when they have time.

The aforementioned practices are not an exhaustive list of the religious practices Muslim students partake in. Zaid mentioned how he works on reviewing his Qur’ān memorization. He also mentioned trying to learn Classical Arabic in order to better understand religious texts. Ahmad also tries to stay consistent with reading the Qur’ān and mentions studying Islam through Islamic education programs that focus on high-quality instruction. Similarly to Zaid and Ahmad, other participants mentioned reading the Qur’ān as a religious practice they do often. Aisha, who is a revert to Islam, had a distinct mindset when approaching the Qur’ān because of her experience as a revert. She explains how:

I make a good practice of, like, reading Qur'ān verses at least in the morning once or twice. And I feel like there are days where I just think that "Oh, maybe I could do it tomorrow." And so, I think that is there. But other than that, I believe I am very firm in my faith. I love Islam and since I'm a revert, I chose this for myself. And I think that is what makes me believe in it absolutely more is because as much as I respect people who are born as Muslims, I feel like I chose this. I wasn't born into it, so I have to, like, do more to prove it to myself as well.

(Aisha, Interview)

While being a revert to Islam does not diminish from your worth as a Muslim, Aisha's relationship with the Qur'ān was dependent on her reverting to Islam. She mentions how this is something she does to prove being Muslim to herself, which reaffirms her religious identity for herself. Whether it is in the morning for Aisha or Hala who is trying to be more consistent with it, Muslim students try to prioritize reading the Qur'ān as a religious practice they regularly engage with.

In addition, a common way Muslim students are able to sustain their religious practice while in college is through religious organizations on campus. Whether it was leadership positions or consistent attendance at said organizations, Muslim students sustained their religious practice through community involvement. Religious organizations on campus, such as the Muslim Student Association (MSA), provide a safe environment for students to practice their beliefs and construct religious identities (Peek, 2005). In chapter seven, I discuss how the MSA emerged as a space through which students were able to practice their faith, build community, and access religious support.

In all, Muslim students sustain their religious practice in university through everyday acts of worship. Whether it is completing the obligatory acts that make up the pillars of Islam or extending beyond that by implementing time for community service, reading the Qur'ān, or being involved in the MSA, Muslim students find time to fulfill everyday acts of worship that strengthens their commitment to Islam. As a result, this commitment helps sustain their religious practice while attending university. With this in mind, it is necessary to consider whether these commitments and practices are tolerated on secular campuses where Muslim students make up a religious minority.

“When Things Get Political:” Religious Tolerance and Perceptions of Muslims on Campus

The religious commitment among Muslim college students and how they sustain their religious practices while attending university calls attention to whether Muslim students experience religious tolerance. For the purpose of this study, I define *religious tolerance* as the acceptance of religious beliefs, practices, and identities that allow individuals to practice their religion without fear of discrimination. With this in mind, there is a need to understand the religious tolerance on campuses as this plays a role in shaping the educational experiences of Muslim students, especially in relation to their social interactions and how they are perceived by others. Islamophobia, which is a form of racism that targets Muslims and causes them to encounter discrimination due to their religious identity, is a concern that arises when religious tolerance on campus becomes a point of contention.

While Muslims are susceptible to Islamophobia from both individuals and institutions, participants felt that individuals were religiously tolerant because of the large and apparent Muslim presence on campus. While 0.6% of the general United States population is Muslim and 1.0% of students in higher education are Muslim (Bowman et al., 2014), Muslims made up about 2% of the student population at participants' university campuses (Nojan, 2020). However, the broader political climate has continued to make Muslim students susceptible to Islamophobia or feeling that their institution is not tolerant towards them. On an individual level and based on interactions with their peers, 10 of the 12 Muslim student participants described the greater campus climate as generally religiously tolerant. Participants felt that those from other faiths are accepted and not treated differently for their religious views, in part due to the locality of living in Southern California and attending a religiously diverse higher education institution. Maha and Hala shared that people on their campus have been tolerant of Muslims and they do not feel that they have been treated differently or experienced Islamophobia for being Muslim. Maha felt that those she interacts with on campus have been accepting of her religion and religious diversity in general. She described how "Individuals are pretty accepting of other people's faiths. Whenever I mention I'm Muslim, it doesn't really affect, like, how people treat me after I tell them" (Maha, Interview). Amira, who was surprised by how religiously tolerant and accepting her campus is as a public university, mentioned that the representation of different religions on her campus shows that religious diversity is welcomed and accepted. Hind describes the level of religious tolerance on campus as generally positive based on her experiences, in part due to the

religious diversity on her campus. She explains that many people have some knowledge of Islam, often because they have Muslim friends, and therefore do not react negatively to religious practices such as praying in public spaces. She notes that this familiarity makes it easier for her to feel comfortable and integrate into campus life. At the same time, Hind acknowledges that there are some groups on campus that are not tolerant of Muslims. She asserts that:

Obviously, there are some groups on campus that are not exactly tolerant of Muslims, but in my experience, I just try to stay away. I don't engage with people like that because it's not really the reason why I'm on campus. I'm there to get an education and not to, you know, get into an argument with somebody else. (Hind, Interview)

Hind clearly chooses not to engage with people who are not tolerant of Muslims on campus by explaining that her focus is to pursue her education rather than to enter into conflict with others. While Leena attended a religiously diverse university, she mentioned that religious acceptance on campus often depends on how religion is presented, regardless of one's faith. She explained how religious tolerance depends largely on how visibly and openly someone practices their religion on campus. She noted that students who are very outspoken or visibly religious may experience lower tolerance, especially when others perceive their religious expression as imposing their religion on them. Leena acknowledges, though, that as someone who does not wear the hijab and is not visibly Muslim and does not frequently bring up her religion, she has generally experienced high

levels of tolerance when she chooses to share her beliefs or explain her practices to others. For instance, she mentioned that:

For me, specifically, as someone who, like, doesn't really mention my religion in every conversation or anything and I'm not visibly Muslim, I think the tolerance is really high when I do want to talk about it. Or when I do talk about, like, "Oh, hey, like, this is why I don't do x, y, z" or "This is why I do x, y, z," people are more willing to have those conversations. But I think it kind of depends on, like, how you present yourself as a religious person, like, no matter your religion.

(Leena, Interview)

Based on this narrative from Leena, religious tolerance is also dependent on how you represent your religion and whether others think you are imposing your religion on them or just educating them about your beliefs and practices.

Hamza mentioned that he finds his campus to be religiously tolerant due to being able to practice his religion publicly. When it comes to praying on campus in a public setting, his professors have been understanding when he needs to step out to pray and students do not react negatively when they see him. However, he acknowledges that some people may have unexpressed feelings, but most people are just curious and do not bother him. For example, he states how "People may look, you know, but anybody that has made a comment has been out of curiosity... So, I feel that the campus is very tolerant. Maybe they feel some type of way inside, but they won't ever express it" (Hamza, Interview). Yousef mentioned that his campus allows for the presence of religious organizations on campus, which allows religious groups to exercise their free

speech. He feels that these organizations lead to a more religiously tolerant campus because people of different faiths are able to be in community with those of similar beliefs. While Aisha agrees with Yousef's sentiment, she mentioned some situations that she found concerning. For instance, there have been people who approach the Muslim students and interrogate them for not believing in Jesus, not knowing that Muslims do believe in Jesus and consider him to be a prophet sent by God. Aisha's concern is that:

And then they film you, and then they, like, put those videos on Instagram. And there are messages...that you should avoid this place today, because these people are making videos. Unless you want to be in the video and you want to debate with them. (Aisha, Interview)

She feels strongly that the administration should be doing more to mitigate this pestering and further mentioned how Muslim students are often recorded without consent, making them feel uncomfortable on campus. Ahmad mentioned the presence of religious organizations on campus as well, and he feels that the faculty and administration are tolerant of Muslims practicing on campus when it comes to praying their obligatory daily prayers and providing them a space to do so. He mentions that:

When it comes to administration and faculty, they're very religiously tolerant when it comes to, obviously, the practice of *'ibadah*, you know, *jummah*, Ramadan, prayer area, things like that. They're tolerant and they work actively with the MSA to help provide these spaces and these services to the Muslim community. (Ahmad, Interview)

Nonetheless, he mentioned that Islamophobia is still present and religious tolerance diminishes when things get “political.” In regard to Islamophobia, Ahmad shared how some individuals have an “Islamophobic lifestyle” and “there’s been...a few instances of Islamophobia, especially against Muslim women” that he feels “is active and needs to be addressed” (Ahmad, Interview). However, he does acknowledge that his campus is tolerant towards other people from different backgrounds so the “student body usually rallies around the Muslim community” and he “wouldn’t say that these isolated incidents are indicators of the university student body at large” (Ahmad, Interview). In regard to the political climate though, Ahmad mentioned some frustration with how the greater Muslim community is reprimanded or treated by the institution when they engage in activism on campus:

Now when it comes to tolerance, to aspects of Islam, like justice, like *‘adl*, you know, activism, protesting, speaking truth to power. We found a lot of obstacles and roadblocks that will be put in place to stop certain events from happening or to punish the MSA for participating or organizing certain events. But these were shrouded in claims of “Oh, we’re just trying to preserve and follow the guidelines, student guidelines or protest guidelines,” or, you know, “community guidelines.” But we found out that these guidelines have been softer for other organizations, but harsher for the Muslim Student Association. So, anything [that] has to do with Palestine, basically, they’re not tolerant of. (Ahmad, Interview)

In this quote, Ahmad first mentions *‘adl*, which is the Islamic concept of justice. The Qur’ān emphasizes justice as fundamental to faith, requiring believers to act righteously

and ensure equity in all aspects of life. One verse reads “O you who have believed, be persistently standing firm in justice, witnesses for Allah, even if it be against yourselves or parents and relatives” (Qur’ān 4:135). Another verse mentions “O you who believe, be upright for God, and be bearers of witness with justice!” (Qur’ān 5:8). While these are not the only verses in the Qur’ān referring to being just, they explain why Muslims like Ahmad see the value in activism, protesting, and speaking truth to power. As a result of Muslim students participating in acts of *‘adl* on campus, Ahmad gives an example as to how there are certain guidelines imposed on Muslims that are not as explicitly imposed on others. While the reasoning for these guidelines is hidden behind the excuse that the guidelines are for students or the community as a whole, the political climate shapes how these guidelines are imposed differently on MSAs compared to other organizations.

Ahmad gave the example of Palestine, referring to student encampments that occurred on his campus in 2024 to protest the ongoing genocide in Gaza and to disclose and divest from financial ties to Israel and weapons manufacturers. Those who were involved in the student encampments experienced repercussions and disciplinary actions as a result of their involvement due to “guidelines” enacted by the institution. In chapter eight, I detail what these experiences looked like for Muslim students who were actively involved in student activism during heightened political tension surrounding what was happening in Gaza.

Omar also addressed the impact of the political climate at his campus. While his campus is generally tolerant towards religion, he mentioned how negative comments about Islam still appear on his campus, often framed politically or through stereotypes.

For instance, Omar described in his interview how “There’s always those that attack Islam from, like, a political perspective. And I don’t, like, mention Islam [in conversation], but it’s like... ‘Oh, like, Islam did, like, 9/11 or, like, all Muslims are terrorists’” (Omar, Interview). Omar explained that there are limits when it comes to Muslim students expressing certain views due to such stereotypes, especially around Palestine. He mentioned that:

There’s, like, some opinions, where you can’t express as much, where [you] could [get] in trouble. This is, for example, talking about *Falasteen*, as usual. Like, those events are usually much more restricted by the school where, like, you can also, like, see events where they talk about, like, Israel and they invite, like, for example, I think, like, last year they tried to invite a Zionist soldier and there was, like, no one opposed to it. (Omar, Interview)

In his example, Omar describes how speaking out about Palestine gets restricted, but those participating in the genocide are invited to speak on campus with no opposition. He goes on to explain how pro-Palestinian events face more restrictions and backlash compared to others since Muslim and justice-oriented groups face tighter controls than other organizations. He shared that this creates an uneven environment, even with an otherwise tolerant campus. Arooj shared a similar sentiment. While she feels that her campus is overall religiously tolerant because Muslim students are allowed to host events and express their beliefs publicly, she shared concerns about unequal treatment and how Muslim students faced more scrutiny. She said protests, such as those supporting Palestine, were more complicated. She mentioned how:

You're always entitled to free speech, and it cannot be silenced unless it incites violent behavior, which the students participating in the encampments were not inciting anything violent. They were just sleeping on campus... That was not constitutional when [the institution was], like, trying to, like, cut off their food, take down their tents. (Arooj, Interview)

Arooj felt that the university tried to shut down student encampments in ways she believed were unfair and not aligned with free speech protections. While Zaid did not go into as much detail as Ahmad, Omar, or Arooj regarding this, he also mentioned that most of the issues arise when things get “political.”

While having a large and apparent Muslim presence on campus led to what participants felt was a more tolerable environment when interacting with their peers, that was not always the case based on interviews with participants. Even though most participants described the greater campus climate as generally religiously tolerant, many acknowledged that there were instances when peers made negative comments regarding Muslims or Islam. These comments show that the micro level interactions Muslim students encounter were in fact not religiously tolerant, but they reflect the deeply ingrained biases individuals hold toward Muslims. These deeply ingrained biases also reflect how Muslim students are viewed and treated by the administration or institution, depicting a lack of religious tolerance that is more blatant on a macro level. Undeniably, the way Muslims are perceived is largely dependent on the political and social context prevalent at that time, thus impacting the way Muslim students are perceived on university campuses.

When defining the experiences of Muslim students as it relates to religious tolerance or religious perception, eight out of 12 participants mentioned the hijab and acknowledged how it affects the way Muslim women are treated and viewed. The dominant discourses surrounding Muslims lead to certain biases that arise in the way others interact or think about them. Muslim women who wear the hijab are othered and well aware of how their bodies are read by their peers (Ali, 2019). Hind mentioned how wearing the hijab “makes it obvious that you are Muslim and that is something that shapes how people interact with you and how you interact with them” (Hind, Interview). While she mentions not experiencing any indifference for wearing the hijab, there is a certain responsibility that comes with wearing the hijab because of your visibility as a Muslim. While Amira did not experience any Islamophobia for wearing the hijab, she mentioned how her hijab very clearly gives away her religious identity and it impacts how others perceive her as a result. Amira saw this as a good thing and mentioned that the people she has been in contact with have been understanding about her religious values and expectations. Otherwise, experiencing gendered racialization as a Muslim woman in the United States is the default. Aisha mentioned how the hijab impacts the way she is perceived by others who do not personally know her. She mentions how some individuals see her hijab and make assumptions that she might be too introverted, too judgmental, or unapproachable. This perspective changes once they speak with her and realize she is just like anyone else. She rhetorically contends that “Yeah, I mean, just because I wear a hijab, that doesn’t change anything, right?” (Aisha, Interview). Aisha is a revert to Islam and the assumptions made about her shows the gendered racialization

that occurs as a result of wearing the hijab. While she is South Asian and is consequently racialized as foreign and brown, her hijab becomes a physical marker that makes her susceptible to gendered racialization. Arooj also felt that others might have made assumptions about her based on her hijab. Interestingly enough, she experienced gendered racialization both before and after wearing the hijab. Before wearing the hijab, she felt that others would not reach out to her and she questioned “if it was more of a race thing” (Arooj, Interview). After wearing the hijab, she felt similarly and mentioned how others would not interact with her, making her an “other.” Arooj’s narrative exemplifies the way “the hijab...can diminish privileges associated with having a lighter skin tone. It is important to note that South Asian and Arab women who have a darker skin complexion are not able to pass for white even without the hijab” (Selod, 2018b, p. 84). While their experiences were not the same, each woman recognized that their hijab marks them visibly Muslim, controlling the way they are perceived by others. Selod (2018a) states that:

Muslim women, in particular, in the United States embody distinct visual subjectivities that render them racially ‘visible’ by wearing hijabs, but not all Muslim women wear hijabs, are American, self-identify as the same ‘race,’ or are from similar cultural backgrounds. These distinctive markers intersect, producing how Muslim women experience outcomes of racialization, a conception of their own racial identities, and how they respond to and manage racism. (Selod, 2018a; cited in Karaman & Christian, 2020, p. 518)

Undoubtedly, Muslim women face unique forms of discrimination as gender issues intersect with those of religion and race in distinctive ways (Asmar et al., 2004). Based on participant experiences, wearing the hijab made them visibly Muslim and impacted the way they were perceived by others on campus.

The hijab as a physical marker of religious identity is undeniable. When participants reflected on whether their religious identity impacts the way they are perceived on campus, it was not just hijab-wearing Muslim women who brought up the way hijab impacts how Muslims are perceived. Even the Muslim men and the Muslim women who did not wear hijab made some comment acknowledging it. Maha mentions how she does not wear the hijab but argues that if she did wear the hijab and was visibly Muslim, it would definitely make people see her differently. She reflects on how she is surrounded by more open-minded people so she feels that it does not affect how others perceive her as a Muslim now, but she experienced how people would “immediately change their view on [her when] they find out [she’s] Muslim” (Maha, Interview). Hala also mentioned how she does not think she is visibly Muslim because she does not wear the hijab and thus it does not affect how others perceive her, but she mentioned how others who know she is a practicing Muslim might view her as someone who is more religious. While Leena also felt that she was not viewed a certain way “outwardly” because she does not wear the hijab, she still experienced forms of gendered racialization. Leena mentioned that most people assume she is Indian and she has received a lot of remarks about it over the years, leading to assumptions about her ethnic background and her religious beliefs. She explains the following experiences in her interview:

I think, in a way, I think it really affects, like, how people think about me as well because the way sometimes people approach me is, like, they think a lot more in terms of stereotypes of Indian people, rather than like Muslim people [or] other South Asian or Middle Eastern people. So I'll get a lot of comments about, like, being vegetarian, or like, being really smart in school...I think that definitely impacts how people perceive me...but as soon as I tell people, like, my religion, or I talk to them about, like, why I don't want to go to a party, or why I don't want to drink, or the fact that, like, I only eat *halal* meat, I think that definitely does impact their view of me, too. I think in some ways, some people start thinking that, like, maybe I'm just, like, a super strict person and, like, a really orthodox person and they don't want to talk to me about certain things. Or, I think also, some people kind of will automatically jump to conclusions about Muslim and South Asian people. For example, I've gotten asked a lot if, like, I'm going to have an arranged marriage, or, like, if my parents will marry me off. Even though I've never had a conversation about these types of things with these people, they're just kind of stereotypes that play in their head, and they just will project it onto me. (Leena, Interview)

Based on Leena's narrative, the gendered racialization she experienced was not because of a hijab, but because of her identity as a South Asian Pakistani Muslim woman who is mistaken as Indian. Those who make these assumptions about her assume that because she has a darker complexion and is Desi, she is immediately Indian. Also, those who make assumptions about her being a Muslim woman assume that she is going to have an

arranged marriage or be “married off” because of her intersecting identity as a Muslim and as a woman. These assumptions are built off dominant discourses and stereotypes that wrongly perceive South Asian and Muslim women. Her narrative represents the way the experiences of Muslims in America are entangled in the workings of religion, race, and gender (Abdul Khabeer, 2016). Muslim men also recognize the gendered racialization Muslim women experience, especially as it relates to their hijab. Hamza and Yousef both mentioned that they are not easily recognized as Muslim the way a Muslim woman who wears the hijab is easily identified and they acknowledge that their religious identity is more hidden. However, Muslim men are racialized in other ways.

Racialization explains how Muslims are “marked” as such through their physical appearance. For Muslim men, this can be through a beard, a Muslim name, or religious dress such as wearing a *thobe* or *kufi*. Some of the Muslim men in this study were easily identified as Muslim because of certain signifiers. While most experienced gendered racialization, Yousef was one of the only participants who felt that people did not change their behavior towards him when they knew he was Muslim. He notes that:

I don’t really notice a change in their behavior when they do figure out that I’m Muslim. You know, at least in most cases, I feel like people are pretty welcoming and accepting. And you know, even for people who are not religious themselves, they are still able to respect my religion and my religious identity. (Yousef, Interview)

He felt that those he interacted with were accepting and respected him and his religion. While Hamza shared that he is not visibly Muslim, he did feel like non-Muslims pick up

on him being “different” which he described as “a quick and immediate sense of like, ‘Oh, this person is different when it comes to certain things,’” (Hamza, Interview) which causes some people to limit their engagement with him. Zaid felt that he is not easily perceived as Muslim and that it does not affect how others view his religious identity, but his beard makes it easy for someone to identify him as South Asian. He gives an example that he usually wears cultural clothing on Fridays so he could easily be viewed differently, but he is usually interacting with Muslims anyway. In addition, he wore a *kufi* after returning from *umrah* and this is when he might have been perceived a specific way. He mentioned how during this time:

It was more obvious that I was Muslim. I did feel a little bit more perceived. I wouldn’t say it was, like, inherently negative or inherently positive. I think it was just a perception that “Oh, this person is, like, a little bit different,” but, like, I haven’t really dealt with any problems or, like, discrimination in that sense. (Zaid, Interview)

For him, he is racialized due to physical markers such as his beard and his religious dress, but it does not necessarily affect how others view his religious identity since it is based more on his race. Regardless, Zaid exemplifies how Muslims experience gendered racialization as a result of their religion, race, and gender. Ahmad was also racialized due to certain physical markers, but he proudly mentions that it makes him visibly Muslim and more comfortable on campus. Ahmad explained that he outwardly practices Islam by wearing a *kufi*, having a beard, and wearing *thobes* or *shalwar kameez*. He shared that people often recognize him as Muslim right away, and while he notices uncomfortable

glances, he also experiences curiosity and interest from others who ask questions about Islam. He said being visibly Muslim has helped him understand different personalities and attitudes in the West. He shared that he believes being visually Muslim is important and sees it as a form of *dawah*, which has led people to ask about Islam and allowed him to engage with others who may not have otherwise approached Muslim spaces. During his interview, Ahmad goes on to mention that:

It's because of me wearing *sunnah* on campus that actually a lot of people who wouldn't have been involved with MSA walked up and said, "Hey, you're Muslim. Is there, like, an organization on campus?"...Because of it, I've also been able to give dawah to interested passer buyers. (Ahmad, Interview)

He also shared that his visibility encouraged other Muslim students to feel more confident expressing their religious identity regardless of the discrimination they might encounter. He embraces how his religious identity shapes how others see him and actively encourages others to do the same. Omar also acknowledged that his religious identity affects how he is perceived on campus. He shared that people from different backgrounds, including non-Muslims, atheists, and people with opposing political views, often see his identity differently. He said he no longer changes himself to fit others' expectations and does not care as much about negative judgments. He explained that he sometimes limits how much he shares depending on the situation, but when people are genuinely curious, he is open to answering questions about Islam. Omar's narrative shows how Muslim students often feel responsible for representing Islam, correcting misconceptions, and addressing stereotypes (McGuire et al., 2016; Oberoi & Trickett,

2018; Seward & Khan, 2016). However, when people are accusatory, insulting, or racist, he usually ignores them because he believes they do not want to be educated. Clearly, Muslim men are racialized and perceived a certain way because of their religious identity. While some feel that they are not treated any differently, others experience how their beard or religious dress mark them as Muslim.

How Muslim men are racialized is important to consider because dominant discourses frame Muslim men as national threats (Selod, 2015; Watt, 2012; Qamar, 2022). The perception of Muslim men as threats was evident in the way Muslim men were reprimanded during student encampments following October 7, 2023. In chapter eight, student encampments are addressed in more detail by explaining how Muslim students have been subjected to surveillance and policing on campus, making higher education institutions feel like places where expression is monitored and punished through disciplinary actions (Ali, 2018). Oftentimes, disciplinary actions directly affect Muslim men. This is in part due to decades of dominant discourses that have created certain stereotypes and biases of them.

Overall, four-year public higher education institutions were more religiously tolerant depending on the religious diversity of the campus and whether there was a large and apparent Muslim presence on campus. While Islamophobia exists and is perpetuated by the administration or institution as a whole, the day-to-day interactions Muslim students experience with their peers led them to believe that they are accepting and tolerant of Muslims. This did not necessarily mean that Muslim students were not susceptible to being racialized. The concept of racialization explains how race was linked

to aspects of their physical appearance that marked them as “Muslim” due to symbols and signifiers such as the hijab, a beard, religious dress, or a Muslim name. As a result, they become racialized as foreign and brown in the moments when they are perceived as Muslim (Husain, 2017; cited in Karaman & Christian, 2020). This leads to certain stereotypes and biases because of dominant discourses that have been present for decades. Due to Muslim students contributing to the religious diversity within these institutions, it is important to understand their experiences with religious tolerance and how their Muslim identity is perceived. In all, religious tolerance was defined as the acceptance of religious beliefs, practices, and identities that allow individuals to practice their religion without fear of discrimination. While Muslim students described their campus as generally religiously tolerant, it was evident that that was not always the case on a macro level. Even on the micro level, Muslim students experienced forms of discrimination that showed up in the ways they were racialized by their peers. These instances are important to consider since the religious tolerance on university campuses plays a significant role in the educational experiences of Muslim students.

Chapter 7: Negotiating Muslim Religious Identity in Higher Education

The following sections focus on how Muslim students negotiate their Muslim religious identity while attending four-year public higher education institutions. Many of these experiences focus on the social experiences of Muslim students such as the recreational experiences encountered on campus, their involvement with religious organizations on campus, and socialization with religiously engaged students. These social experiences encompass both the macro (campus) and micro (friendship groups) levels. The macro and micro levels include a range of personal, social, and structural challenges and experiences Muslim students face on college campuses (Stubbs & Sallee, 2013) to involvement in campus-based religious organizations, interactions with various peer groups and faculty, and socialization with religiously engaged students (Asmar et al., 2004; Hill, 2009; Small & Bowman, 2011).

The opening section centers on Muslim Student Associations (MSA), a religious organization found in almost every university across the United States that helps students understand their religion better, maintain their religious commitments, and provide a source of support (Mubarak, 2007). In the following sections, I identify the MSA as a campus-based religious community, the interpersonal relationships formed within it, and the accessible religious resources it provides. I then conclude with ways to better accommodate Muslim students at an institutional level. Overall, this chapter highlights how Muslim undergraduate students negotiate their religious identity while attending secular campuses by understanding how Muslim students navigate campus life, religious practice, and belonging within secular university settings.

Practicing Islam on Campus: The Muslim Student Association

Muslim Student Associations (MSA) have shown to have a beneficial impact on the college experience of Muslim students and serve many purposes such as helping Muslim students understand their religion better, maintain their religious commitments, and provide a source of support (Mubarak, 2007). In addition to meeting spiritual needs, participation in religious organizations offer many other benefits such as community networks, educational resources, and peer support (Peek, 2005).

For many Muslim students in higher education, Islam is a guiding value system that informs everyday life and identity (Ajrouch & Kusow, 2007; Peek, 2005). Scholars note that Muslim students often come to understand religion as a central source of personal and social identity during college, particularly as they navigate campus environments in which they are highly visible as religious minorities (Peek, 2005). This process in which students increasingly define themselves through a religious identity has been described as religification (Ghaffar-Kucher, 2012). In this study, religification provides an important framework to understand how Muslim students' religious identities shape not only their spiritual lives, but also their educational experiences and sense of belonging on campus.

For participants in this study, practicing Islam on campus was deeply intertwined with their involvement in the MSA. I found that the MSA emerged as a space through which students were able to practice their faith, build community, and access religious support in university and higher education contexts. Rather than functioning as a student organization alone, participants often viewed the MSA as a space for encouraging Islamic

practices and navigating campus life as Muslim students. The MSA provided institutional support through which students could engage in both individual and congregational religious practice, while also nurturing relationships made through shared religious identity and lived experience. Through their participation in the MSA, students developed a sense of religious belonging, described forming meaningful connections, and had access to resources that supported their spiritual and educational needs.

While previous research has examined MSAs as spaces for identity formation and religious community, this study extends existing scholarship by highlighting how MSAs function as spaces that enable Muslim students to navigate the relationship between religious identity and higher education. The MSA functions as a bridge between Muslim students and the university campus by creating a space for religious practice, belonging, and support. At the same time, it becomes a space where religification occurs as religion becomes central in the educational experiences of Muslim students. The following sections focus on the MSA as a campus-based religious community, the interpersonal relationships formed within it, and the accessible religious resources it provides. I also address the ways in which Muslim students believe universities can be more accommodating at an institutional level.

The Muslim Student Association as a Campus-Based Religious Community

Muslim Student Associations (MSA) play an important role as campus-based religious communities within higher education institutions. Participants in this study consistently described the MSA as a community that made religious practice on campus more accessible and helped shape their sense of belonging and identity as Muslims. This

was especially important for individuals who navigated spaces where they felt that their religious expression was constrained in the past, such as Aisha who is a revert to Islam. Aisha shared a heartfelt experience about the MSA in her interview in which she described the following:

It [the MSA] made me feel like I belonged somewhere in college, because back home, I couldn't openly practice my religion, but on the beach, we were all praying *maghrib* together, and it really made me happy. And then I went to a few *jummah* prayers, and I believe I almost cried because they were talking about community that day and I was just so grateful. So, I feel like the religious community in our colleges makes me feel really grateful for having people around who believe in the same thing as you do, and you don't have to hide anything from them. (Aisha, Interview)

Aisha was particularly grateful for the community her MSA provided her. She recalls attending the bonfire at the beach where everyone prayed *maghrib* together as an experience that made her feel like she belonged somewhere in college, especially as someone who was not able to openly practice her religion back home. She emphasized the emotional significance of practicing in community and mentioned another example of attending *jummah*, the Friday congregational prayer, where she recalled feeling overwhelmed and how she almost cried because the *khutbah* centered on community. It made her feel grateful for being around people who believe in the same thing she does and she did not have to hide her religion from them. Aisha's narrative exemplifies how a

campus-based religious community such as the MSA can be a space in which religion becomes a shared practice that strengthens one's sense of belonging.

Other participants shared similar sentiments on how the MSA fostered a sense of belonging on campus. Hala explained that while she was not heavily involved in MSA leadership and was more of an attendee, attending MSA events helped her find a Muslim community she could rely on and relate to. For instance, she mentioned in her interview how:

It has really shaped my campus experience, though, because it has helped me find, like, a good, small Muslim community that that I can, like, rely on and relate to. I do not share classes with a lot of these people, so I do not see them as often, but just the fact that I have met so many Muslim people and I know that they're there has, like, helped me, I guess, like, feel more confident in being a Muslim on campus, because I know that there's other people who share similar experiences.

(Hala, Interview)

Even though she did not see many Muslims in her classes or outside of the MSA, she mentions that meeting other Muslims and simply knowing they were on campus helped her feel more confident as a Muslim on campus. Her experience also shows how it is easier to identify as a Muslim when you discover a larger Muslim peer group to associate with and make friends who you can relate to (Peek, 2005). For Hamza, simply being around other Muslims created a sense of community that extended beyond his participation in the MSA. Although his attendance decreased over time, he emphasized that the MSA remained meaningful to him. Hamza mentions that:

Just knowing that this is where people of my community are...helped build community for me. It went from a place where I just go to my class and leave to...I belong there. There is more on campus for me than just my studies and the class I have to be in. (Hamza, Interview)

Hamza's reflection illustrates how peer relationships within the MSA transformed an academic environment into a place of connection and belonging.

In addition, participants described the MSA as a religious organization that helped support everyday religious practice on a secular campus. It offers a setting in which Muslim students collectively explore aspects of Islam and what it means to be Muslim (Peek, 2005). Arooj mentions that regardless of her coursework, she needs to pray her five daily prayers. She states that "Yes, I have my classes, but I need to make sure I'm praying my five daily prayers, which is why I'm grateful for MSA, because sometimes they'll have, like, joint prayers, like, where you can pray together" (Arooj, Interview). She further attributes finding a balance between her academics and religious practice to her university's MSA. While they provide opportunities for students to pray in congregation, Arooj mentioned how their reminder for congregational prayers also reminds her to pray independently the days she is not able to join them in prayer. She found value in the MSA as a campus-based religious community that helped her "balance school and personal life" (Arooj, Interview), especially on a campus where Muslims are a minority and make up about 2% of the student population at her university (Nojan, 2020). Similarly, Leena described the MSA as her main religious resource on campus, stating that "Being in college, the main religious resource for me, that I experience every day, is

the MSA. I think they provide a lot of things, like, where they have religious and educational workshops for those who are interested” (Leena, Interview). She also highlighted the importance of the MSA during Ramadan:

I think also during Ramadan specifically, that was kind of an isolating time where, like, I would have finals or I’d be on campus really late and I’d see, like, my siblings and my family having iftar and I’d be really sad that I couldn’t go home because I had class. So having MSA there as well was, like, a great foundation of support that I didn’t need to be at home to, like, practice Ramadan, or the way that it’s supposed to be felt like. If I wanted a community, I could go to MSA. (Leena, Interview)

What could have been an isolating time for Leena became a time where she found support away from home and a community to observe the month of Ramadan with. She also noted that these resources are easily accessible for those who are seeking them out.

Along with providing a space for prayer and religious practice, participants described the MSA as a community that reinforced their religious principles. In his interview, Zaid described the MSA events and community as a “resource to kind of strengthen your *iman*” (Zaid, Interview), noting how the MSA community aligned with his religious practices and values. He compared this with dominant campus social norms such as “clubbing or drinking” where alcohol consumption was a part of his campus’s social culture which conflicts with one of the Islamic values of abstaining from alcohol (Mir, 2014). Zaid explained how he appreciates having friends with similar religious commitment and explained how:

I met a lot of, like, good brothers there and, like, some of my closest friends who made my campus experience more enjoyable by just, like, having a community to go to that aligned with my religious practices. People who are down to do things like just hang out or, you know, play sports or go to the beach and just, like, sit and talk as opposed to doing things like going out clubbing or drinking or, like, engaging in *haram*. (Zaid, Interview)

Zaid found such a community to be impactful both spiritually and personally, further mentioning how it has supported his personal growth and his campus experience. Omar similarly highlighted how the MSA created a more comfortable and accessible space to practice Islam on campus. In his interview, he explained that being part of a strong MSA meant he could interact with other Muslim students without feeling “embarrassed” to say *salaam*. He also mentioned how attending the MSA is:

Usually much more organic than, like, for example, going to the *masjid*. I would say, like, if you go to the *masjid*, there is, like, some forms of expectation or there’s, like, some form of, like, cultural stuff that you have to deal with.

Compared to over here, there are some cultural [aspects] but, like, you’re not expected to, like, know them all. (Omar, Interview)

Omar appreciated that the MSA did not require students to “know everything” about Islam in the way he associated with other religious spaces such as the mosque. While there might be some expectations held within the MSA, it puts less pressure on Muslims to know everything. This was particularly important for Omar and would be beneficial for Muslim students who may not be as practicing, but still want to be involved with the

MSA or surround themselves with other Muslims. Similarly to how others felt that the MSA reinforced their religious principles, Hind mentioned in her interview how the MSA connects multiple dimensions of student life and described it as an “outlet for expanding Islamic knowledge” alongside academic learning. She mentioned how the MSA was a support system on campus for her and how the MSA was helpful in integrating religious practice into the routine of university:

Just being a part of MSA and being able to be around Muslim students in a lot of my classes, like, I’ve gravitated towards, like, Muslim classmates...having, like, a double connection where you also attend class together, but you also, like, go pray together and, like, remind each other, like, “Oh, don’t forget to do this,” or that you’re fasting together during the year. So it’s a nice connection between, like, the different aspects of attending university. (Hind, Interview)

She emphasized how practicing Islam in community deepened connections with Muslim classmates by attending class together, praying together, and sharing religious routines throughout the year. Taken together, these narratives position the MSA as a campus-based religious community that integrates Islamic practice, learning, and social life within the everyday structure of university.

Altogether, the MSA provides a campus-based religious community for Muslim students attending secular institutions. As they engage religion on campus through prayer and participate in religious organizations on campus (Cheruvallil-Contractor & Scott-Baumann, 2017), the MSA becomes a space where participants’ religious practice becomes more accessible and supported. In addition, the MSA is a space of belonging

where Muslim students are able to sustain and develop their religious practice while embracing their Muslim identity as they attend higher education institutions.

Accessible Religious Resources Through the Muslim Student Association

Muslim Student Associations (MSA) are an important resource for Muslim students on university campuses due to the various accessible religious resources they provide. While serving many functions, they have more importantly become a source of support and information on Islam for Muslim students themselves (Mubarak, 2007). The participants in this study all attended a university with a MSA that provided religious resources such as chaplaincy services, *halaqas*, workshops, meals during Ramadan, congregational prayer, and more. In large part due to the MSA, Muslim students on university campuses have access to resources that support their spiritual and educational needs.

While not all four-year public higher education institutions provide chaplaincy services for Muslim students, chaplaincy is becoming a more common resource found within the MSA. Muslim chaplains on university campuses serve as educators and faith-ministers, but their role within chaplaincy is still emerging as having Muslim chaplains is a relatively new concept within the university context. As Khoja-Moojli (2011) found, chaplains are working to define their role in response to campus contexts as their responsibilities are shaped by the specific needs of Muslim students and their own background and training. For some of the participants in this study, chaplaincy was provided through the MSA versus their institution, demonstrating that the establishment of Muslim chaplaincy at public universities is limited. It is also useful to note that while

public higher education institutions often do not support chaplaincy offices, religious communities such as mosques or MSAs have to provide the space and funding for chaplains (Khoji-Moojli, 2011).

Chaplaincy services proved to be valuable for participants when asked whether they found a support system on campus that helps them navigate their educational and religious life, as well as when asked what religious resources were easily accessible to them. Through their MSA, participants had access to both female and male chaplains who were religious scholars. The male chaplain was also a religious leader local to the area who would give *halaqas* and dedicate three to four hours a week for office hours. With time, it was clear that participants began to build relationships with their chaplains and found their MSA's chaplaincy program to be an accessible religious resource. Yousef and Omar specifically mentioned how they viewed their university's chaplaincy as a support system on campus. Yousef was especially thankful for his MSA's chaplain, who he found to be a really good resource when it came to Islam and enthusiastically shared that "[Chaplaincy has] been, like, one of my main support systems. We have, like, the community chaplains for the MSA...One of the chaplains has been, like, a really good resource. So he's, you know, such an amazing *sheikh* and we're so blessed to have him" (Yousef, Interview). Omar felt similarly and appreciated how accessible his university's chaplain was. Omar explained in his interview that:

We have a chaplain once a week and he's usually also available through the phone, like, you can contact him on his cell phone. I'm able to, like, kind of navigate my religious life, or navigate, like, doubts or if I need help. And, you

know, like even, like, the chaplain, he's a former student, so, like, he knows our struggles from, like, a purely religious format. (Omar, Interview)

Omar mentioned how easy it was to contact him to help navigate his religious life or any doubts he may have. He also felt that as an alumni to the university he currently attends, his chaplain knows what struggles they may face from both a religious and academic standpoint, and it was evident in the way he would address their MSA community. Their chaplain's own educational background made it easy for students to relate to him and feel a sense of understanding when they needed to speak with him regarding their personal lives. Omar continued on to explain how having a chaplain made spiritual guidance more accessible. Ahmad appreciated this as well and found value in having access to '*ulamā*, scholars of Islamic knowledge. He mentioned how this connection led him to access more resources and "If I have any questions about the *deen*, I can just message one of them. My involvement in university specifically...gave me a lot more accessibility to the events around [my area], *hufadh*, to other students of knowledge, and other '*ulamā* throughout California" (Ahmad, Interview). Hind felt similarly and mentioned that being able to speak with the chaplains in office hours and before or after their *halaqas* was a blessing. She notes that spiritual guidance was an easily accessible religious resource as a result. She mentioned that:

We do have [spiritual guidance] on our campus that's easily accessible. Being able to talk to our chaplains, like, for free. Their office hours, or just before or after their *halaqas* is definitely, like, a really big blessing because sometimes,

like, you don't know who to ask when you have certain questions and they're just available. (Hind, Interview)

She was thankful that it was easy to be in contact with the chaplains if she had certain questions and felt that they made themselves easily accessible and available to all students. It was also helpful to have a Muslim woman chaplain. Leena explained in her interview how "I've talked to, like, a Muslim woman, *sheikha*, and that was really helpful too, because I had some, like, personal questions that I didn't want to talk to a man about" (Leena, Interview). Leena felt that it made things more comfortable when she had personal questions she did not feel comfortable asking a man. This is important to note because some Muslims consider maintaining boundaries when it comes to relationships with the opposite gender (Mir, 2014), even when asking a scholar a more personal question.

In addition to chaplaincy services, *halaqas* were another accessible religious resource participants mentioned. A *halaqa* is a religious, educational gathering where Muslims meet to study Islam, the Qur'ān, and *aḥadīth*. These gatherings regularly happened in the meditation room, which Muslim students used as a space for congregational prayer. While often led by the chaplains, participants mentioned that other community members and leaders would visit the MSA to support the students and lead *halaqas*. Yousef explained that these community members are regular mosque attendees who would make it a point to be involved, whether it was leading *halaqas*, giving *khutbahs*, or interacting with Muslim students by simply asking them about their experiences and extending their support where needed. This let Hala feel that her "college

has been pretty accessible in terms of engaging with our community” (Hala, Interview) by providing a space for spiritual and religious lectures. In addition, the MSA held workshops that provided both religious and educational information.

Another resource the MSA provided that proved to be helpful for Muslim students was *suhoor* and *iftar*, the pre-dawn and post-sunset meals during the month of Ramadan. Every weekday, the MSA provided complimentary meals for *suhoor* and *iftar* and held congregational *taraweeh* prayer shortly after *iftar*. Leena mentioned that if she wanted community during Ramadan, the MSA was the way she could seek it. She mentioned how “They also, like, had prayers and stuff, and they prayed *isha* and *taraweeh* together. And they did *iftar* too. So that was also really nice” (Leena, Interview). Many students expressed how important this was for them to feel a community presence during Ramadan, which is a significant aspect of the holy month for many people. It was also helpful for Muslim students who lived in dorms without Muslim roommates or away from family and Muslim students who had classes ending later in the evening. Omar explained how the “MSA usually tries to take care of [Ramadan accommodations]. They try to, for example, have *iftars*, and try to have *taraweeh* for those that can’t make it to the *masajid*” (Omar, Interview). This was particularly useful for people like Ahmad who mentioned that “For two years of my college experience, I didn’t have a car, so the Ramadan *iftars* on campus that the MSA provided were super helpful for me. *Iftar*, *taraweeh* on campus...those are resources” (Ahmad, Interview). The MSA made breaking their fast and praying together in community more easily accessible. Although, a concern some participants acknowledged was the lack of funding the MSA receives

from their institutions as they rely on donations from the greater Muslim population, such as mosques or Muslim organizations, to fund their *suhoors* and *iftars*. While having *suhoor*, *iftar*, and *taraweeh* together created a meaningful sense of community, participants noted how sustaining them required coordination beyond what the institution provided.

Without diminishing the value of the aforementioned resources, one of the most significant religious resources Muslim students had access to was a space for congregational prayer. The MSA had set times for congregational prayer that was facilitated through the meditation space on campus, which served as the prayer space for Muslim students. Having access to a space such as the meditation space was specifically relevant for Muslims who must complete their five obligatory daily prayers at an appointed time. Participants emphasized how accessible this space was and appreciated that their institution accommodated them. While the meditation space was not just used by Muslim students, it gave them a space for their *halaqas*, workshops, and prayers. Hind mentioned how her institution's meditation space was "officially and unofficially" for Muslim students because of how often they used and occupied the space. Other participants felt similarly in that it was well-known that Muslim students often used the meditation space to host their *halaqas*, facilitate workshops, and ensure there were scheduled times for congregational prayer. Due to the meditation space being so accessible and designated for prayer, participants felt comfortable praying on campus and in public. While the meditation space undoubtedly made praying on campus more

accessible, Yousef felt that having one meditation space on such a large campus was limiting for students who had classes further away. He explained that:

So, you know, I'll have to find, like, a different space that might not be the best option, but, you know, I have to, because, you know, that's pretty much the only space we have for [congregational prayer]. There's a different space, but that one is just for *jummah*, so we can't use that daily. So yeah, it is pretty limited for prayer spaces, for sure. (Yousef, Interview)

He mentioned how difficult it would be to walk across campus for prayer when you have class at a certain time. If there were more spaces on campus, Muslim students would not need to worry about finding a random space to pray in public as they walk to their next class.

The participant experiences above exemplify how the MSA functions to make it possible for Muslim students to practice Islam while navigating a secular university. The MSA helps meet both spiritual and practical needs while revealing how uneven support can shape what religious accommodations look like in practice. The tension between accessibility to religious resources and limited institutional support leads into an upcoming section where accommodating Muslim students at the institutional level is addressed.

Interpersonal Relationships Within the Muslim Student Association

Interpersonal relationships within the Muslim Student Association (MSA) were found to be consequential to how participants experience Muslim life on campus. The MSA serves as a community in which friendships, peer support, and shared religious

identity shape a sense of belonging for Muslim students. Previous literature has identified how peers and close friends play a significant role in constructing, reinforcing, and affirming a strong emerging religious identity for Muslim students (Peek, 2005). Similarly, interpersonal relationships become deeply intertwined with religious development, particularly during university.

Peer relationships formed through the MSA become transformative, especially as students build friendships with other Muslims who are committed to their faith and participate in religious activities together (Mubarak, 2007). Participants highlighted lasting relationships formed through the MSA which shaped how they understood community during and after college. For instance, Amira mentioned how:

Even amongst my friend group, something that we've done is that we kind of promised ourselves [that] right now we are keeping separate [educational] paths, but...maybe when [we are in] our 30's or our late 20's, we're going to meet up and we're going to be somewhere strong in life. (Amira, Interview)

While Amira and her friends recognized they are taking different paths in terms of their education, they hope to remain friends who support each other. They look forward to the day they meet a decade later and they have all become successful. Amira was not the only one who mentioned lasting peer relationships formed through the MSA. Yousef noted that the alumni he knew still maintain strong friendships from their MSA and that is something he has “really taken to heart” (Yousef, Interview). For Yousef, the value of interpersonal relationships in the MSA was not limited to just his college years, but it was

also tied to the expectation that these relationships can extend beyond university and provide a lasting connection to the Muslim community.

While participants emphasized friendship and belonging, they also described these relationships as deeply connected to shared religious commitment and everyday decisions about how to live as Muslim students. Zaid acknowledged that there were times he did not feel motivated to attend the MSA, but described the relationships he formed as central to his college experience: “At the end of the day, I met a lot of, like, good brothers in there and, like, some of my closest friends who made my campus experience more enjoyable” (Zaid, Interview). He explained how that community was not only about socializing, but about having a community to go to that aligns with his religious practices. As mentioned earlier, Zaid framed the MSA as offering a different kind of social life centered on everyday hangouts rather than the campus party culture he associated with “going out clubbing or drinking or, like, engaging in *haram*” (Zaid, Interview). In his perspective, MSA friendships did more than offer companionship. They created a social space where religious values were normalized and easier to maintain. This illustrates the role of peers in affirming religious identity and sustaining it through supportive relationships (Peek, 2005).

In addition to friendships, participants described the MSA as a structured support system. Ahmad emphasized the collective responsibility he experienced within the Muslim community on campus, repeatedly describing community members as “very, very supportive and very, very helpful” (Ahmad, Interview). He experienced how people “come forward and help” both personally and through observing others. Ahmad also

described how shared Muslim identity created what he called “an immediate connection,” especially when students shared similar academic paths or majors. He mentioned how “Just you being a Muslim in the MSA gives you an immediate connection to another Muslim in the MSA that might be in the same major as you” (Ahmad, Interview).

Ahmad’s narrative demonstrates how interpersonal relationships within the MSA extend as peer mentoring networks that support students both academically and religiously. The MSA also provided students with friends who supported them within their educational endeavors. Omar explained how “I have some close friends where I’m able to talk to them about my educational goals” (Omar, Interview). Similarly, Hala mentioned how “Specific people or specific friends have, like, helped create, like, a sense of relatability and has helped me, like, relate to the experience of being Muslim and also being in higher education” (Hala, Interview). Aisha found this kind of support from her Muslim roommate. She explained how “My roommate is my support system...and she helps me religiously because I’m a new revert. So she helps [me] religiously and, like, getting adjusted to the American education system [as an international student]” (Aisha, Interview). These various connections made through the MSA turned into academic support such as help navigating what classes to take, what professors to take, and help with coursework. For participants, the MSA did not only meet spiritual or social needs, but it also functioned as a source of support that helped Muslim students navigate higher education institutions. Participant narratives show how the interpersonal relationships within the MSA shaped how Muslim students experienced campus belonging, religious commitment, and peer support. These findings underline the role of peer relationships in

affirming religious identity during college (Peek, 2005) and highlight how MSA-based friendships can become a lasting source of community and support (Mubarak, 2007).

Accommodating Muslim Students at the Institutional Level

While Muslim students have access to various religious resources through the Muslim Student Association (MSA), there are other resources needed to more easily practice Islam on campus and simply make being a religious minority on campus easier. Muslim students feel that certain resources should be implemented and approved through their institution since it is not feasible to be implemented through the MSA alone. These resources include more accessible prayer spaces, *wudu* stations to make ablution for prayer, accommodations during Ramadan and Eid, and more *halal* food spots. Mubarak (2007) notes that as the number of Muslim students on college campuses has increased, Muslim students have also become more vocal in requesting that administration accommodates their religious needs.

While all participants mentioned having some sort of prayer space on campus, more accessible prayer spaces would make their campus more accommodating to the needs of Muslim students. As mentioned previously, having classes across campus made praying in the meditation space more limiting since there is often only one space on such a large campus. There is no doubt that fulfilling the obligatory five prayers is a concern for Muslim students and securing a clean and relatively quiet space to pray their daily prayers is one of the most important religious accommodations that Muslim students seek in college (Mubarak, 2007). Mubarak (2007) rightfully points out that understanding the significance of praying five times a day for Muslim students helps one understand why it

is important to facilitate a space for them to practice their religion on campus and how performing the prayer is an indication of one's commitment to Islam. For Muslim students, religification helps us understand how religious identity shapes Muslim's spiritual lives, but also their educational experiences and sense of belonging on campus.

Along with accessible prayer spaces, *wudu* stations to make ablution for prayer was recommended by several participants. They believed that having a *wudu* station near the prayer space would be helpful for various reasons, especially considering the way Muslims might be perceived. For instance, the last step of *wudu* is washing your feet, and Hamza mentioned how if you were to make *wudu* in a regular restroom, it is not a good look for Muslims when someone walks in and you have your foot in the sink. Ahmad mentioned how if you use the restrooms near his university's meditation space, you will find brothers with their feet in the sink, which resulted in the administration posting a sign that read "Please, do not put your feet in the sink." He rhetorically responds with "Listen, let's create *wudu* spaces where we can actually [make *wudu* then]" (Ahmad, Interview). Even though the MSA has been trying to implement *wudu* stations for years, he mentions how "one estimation they gave us was over \$100,000 to install \$3,000 stations that you can import from France. Like, I don't know what was going on there, but they have been pretty difficult with that" (Ahmad, Interview). Leena also mentioned that using a public restroom for *wudu* makes things difficult, especially when you need to wash your feet or uncover your arms by pulling up your sleeves or removing your sweater. She mentioned how she often feels bad doing so because she might be disturbing other people since she is using a public restroom. Participants described the difficulty that

comes with making *wudu* on campus where some Muslim students will actually visit their friends who dorm so they can make *wudu* in a more private restroom. Arooj explained how convenient it was to have friends who dorm, especially if they live near campus. She mentioned that “I’ll just go to their house. I’ll make *wudu*. I’ll pray there” (Arooj, Interview). For Arooj, it was as simple as that. For other participants, there was some difficulty present. In general, Hamza felt that having a *wudu* station would help provide Muslim students with a cleaner space to fulfill a crucial step for prayer and Hind mentioned how this would be useful for students who are on campus all day and need a place to make *wudu*. While there are public restrooms students can make *wudu* in, participants felt that having an appointed *wudu* station separated by gender is more useful, less disruptive, and necessary to fulfill a religious obligation.

Additionally, Muslim students might need certain accommodations to be able to participate in religious holidays (i.e., Ramadan and Eid) during the academic year. Most participants mentioned that while they might have been accommodated within the classroom by their professors, they felt that their institution had room to improve in accommodating them during religious holidays. During Ramadan, many students might need to re-schedule their exams or break their fast while in class. Hala has experienced needing to take an exam at a different time because it was scheduled during Ramadan. She mentions how her professor was accommodating and felt that her needs were taken into consideration, especially considering this was the first time she requested a change in her academic schedule. Amira mentioned that accommodations like this are often based on the professor and how understanding they are. She also recalls having professors who

were lenient when she needed to break her fast during class and was surprised that some of them would remind her when *maghrib* came in. In her interview, Amira explained how:

When it came to fasting, Ramadan, a lot of my professors were actually very, very lenient. Sometimes I would have to open my fast during class time or during test time, so of course I would let my professor know, but they would—which surprised me even more—they would already know it. And they would actually, like, come behind me [and] they pat me on the back and say, “You need to go break your fast. You can go break your fast outside.” (Amira, Interview)

Amira did not just have professors who accommodated her, but professors who were understanding and genuinely considered her needs. She mentions feeling taken care of, but also acknowledges that her experience is not the same as other Muslim peers. While her professors understand she has not eaten anything for the entire day, she has seen some cases where professors are not lenient and do not make an exception for students. She said it largely depends on how her university addresses Ramadan, which is an important point to make since the experiences of Muslim students are largely dependent on what occurs at the institutional level.

Maha mentioned how her university has never purposefully accommodated students during Ramadan and claims that her university’s administration does not account for Muslim students and their religious observances. She acknowledged how:

A lot of the holidays just, like, tie in with, like, national holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving. Last quarter, like, last Ramadan, the last ten days happened to

be our spring break. That was just, like, out of chance. They never, like, do it on purpose...but usually, like, the administration does not account for Muslim holidays. (Maha, Interview)

She mentioned how her spring break happened to align with the last ten nights of Ramadan the previous year, but that was by chance. While not on purpose, she was able to observe the last ten nights without having to worry about her academic schedule. Hind experienced the same, but was more worried for this upcoming year since her finals are anticipated to be during the last ten nights of Ramadan. She mentions that while this is something she has become accustomed to, it would be nice if Muslim religious holidays were taken into consideration. She mentioned how “It’s just something, like, I don’t know, just used to it not being, like, integrated into the academic calendar, so...it would be nice, like, if it was integrated because, like, non-Muslims get to have their winter break and that correlates with their holidays” (Hind, Interview). When Maha and Hind compared it to the religious holidays of non-Muslims, they recognized state-institutionalized preferences for Judeo-Christian traditions (Mubarak, 2007). Zaid also mentioned how difficult it has been when finals align with the end of Ramadan or even Eid:

If there’s Eid, and the last couple years, like, Ramadan has been overlapping with, like, finals week and, like, finals in general, or just the end of the quarter where things get very difficult. I wouldn’t say that’s a barrier. It’s just, like, kind of like another test and something that you have to, like, kind of navigate and deal with and manage [your] time wisely. So it is a little bit difficult during Ramadan to

just, like, deal with so much stuff and then...I think this year, it might be the case where Eid will fall on the same day as, like, when people might have finals. So that might be hard. (Zaid, Interview)

While he did not view this as a barrier, he did find it difficult. He, along with other participants, have experienced exams falling on the same day as Eid, which commemorates the end of Ramadan. While some participants made sure not to miss Eid prayer, others did not have that luxury and would have to attend their classes because the risk of missing a day or two was too significant. In his interview, Omar mentioned how “I have to delay my holidays, or, like, if I have midterms, I might not be able to go to Eid *salah* or events” (Omar, Interview). Based on the various accommodations Muslim students might receive in Ramadan or Eid, Muslim students felt that their institutions do not consider their religious holidays when it comes to the academic schedule, but they might find professors who are willing to accommodate them within the classroom.

In addition, Muslim students felt that having more variety when it comes to *halal* food spots would be helpful for those who follow certain dietary regulations. *Halal* meat refers to dietary items permissible for consumption under Islamic law prepared through specific, humane, and sanitary slaughter methods that ensures the blood is fully drained. The majority felt that their university did accommodate their religious needs when it came to providing *halal* food options, but they also felt that their options were limited, which made it difficult for individuals who wanted more healthy food choices. For instance, Leena listed *halal* food as an accommodation her university could provide. She mentioned how:

I think that, like, if you live on campus your first year, it's really hard to, like, meet your nutritional needs if you're only eating pizza or fries. The school does have, like, vegan and vegetarian food as well, but those also aren't, like, ever the best tasting options. And I think if you're used to, like, having protein, like, meat protein, fulfill your nutritional needs, it's really hard to go from that to suddenly, like, being vegan or vegetarian always. So I would definitely, like, recommend that that could be something that the school could accommodate more. (Leena, Interview)

Based on Leena's narrative, some Muslim students resort to eating just vegan or vegetarian options if they are not able to eat *halal* food. While most campuses do have *halal* options, participants mentioned that it was just within the last year or so where their institution opened up a specific restaurant that provided a full *halal* menu. Maha mentions how it was the first fully *halal* spot locally, both on and off campus, and she feels that it was not an accommodation they had before. Hind also mentioned how helpful it was to have this as an option and felt "it is a step in the right direction" (Hind, Interview). Zaid agreed and mentioned how it was not just another fast-food restaurant, but it provided good quality *halal* food that was easily accessible. Many shared similar sentiments that they appreciated having *halal* food options and hope to see more in the future.

Ultimately, the experiences shared by these participants suggest that while the MSA provides a sense of community, the responsibility for religious inclusion should not rest on religious organizations alone. As the religification of these students continues to

shape their educational experiences, it is important to consider that there are other resources Muslim students need that acknowledges their presence on campus as religious minorities. It is crucial that public higher education institutions consider the needs of Muslim students and understand how Muslim students' religious identities shape not only their spiritual lives, but their educational experiences and sense of belonging on campus as well.

Chapter 8: Institutional Responses to Student Encampments

In 2024, student encampments emerged across university campuses in response to the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Students called on institutions of higher education to disclose and divest from financial ties to Israel and weapons manufacturers. The first Gaza Solidarity Encampment was launched at Columbia University. Encampments quickly spread to universities across the United States, with more than 130 campuses participating nationwide. Participants in this study all attended an institution where student encampments and protests in support of Palestine occurred during their time on campus. The encampments lasted just over two weeks before police intervened and cleared the encampments out. Ulfelder (2024) highlights:

Responses to encampments in particular have generally followed one of three trajectories: 1) tolerance and negotiation until students voluntarily decamped, sometimes but not always under an agreement with administrators; 2) begrudging tolerance until some critical juncture when police were called in to dismantle the camp, almost always around dawn; or 3) immediate and aggressive hostility, with police and staff sweeping the camp almost as soon as it was put up.

The participants in this study experienced a blend of the second and third response, in which there was begrudging tolerance until some critical juncture when police were called in to dismantle the camp, and in which there was aggressive hostility with police and staff sweeping the camp.

The encampments surfaced as a significant point of reference for Muslim students, both in terms of institutional engagement and personal involvement. Of the 12

participants, six mentioned institutional responses to the student encampments and three shared their direct involvement in organizing or participating in the student encampments. While more participants mentioned the encampments in their interviews, I focus on the participants who specifically mentioned institutional responses and shared that they were directly involved to better elucidate the direct experience of Muslim students who were on the frontlines. The following sections examine institutional responses to student encampments from various University of California (UC) institutions to provide examples of heightened campus tension as a response to student organizing. This includes Muslim students being framed as a threat to campus order, the suppression of Muslim student voices, and disciplinary actions which include the removal of Global Middle East Studies (GMES), more commonly referred to as Global Muslim Studies (GMS) among students. This analysis is centered on the UC system as its status as a public higher education system offers a clear site for examining institutional responses to student encampments. Additionally, institutional responses to student encampments across UC campuses received widespread national media attention, making them critical for examining how public universities respond to Muslim student activism. Given that this study focuses on Muslim student experiences within four-year public higher education institutions in Southern California, the UC system provides a relevant context for understanding broader institutional structures. In the following sections, I draw on both my interview data and document analysis to share the experiences of Muslim students. The publicly available data from the document analysis further explain

the encampment experiences of Muslim students by providing further evidence of what administrative and institutional responses to student encampments entailed.

Framing Muslim Students as a Threat to Campus Order

Participants described heightened campus tension as an institutional response to student organizing, particularly during the student encampments. This tension was often promoted through campus-wide messaging that framed student activism as a potential threat to safety and order, despite the absence of violence or hate speech among student organizers. This framing was easily executed due to decades of the Muslim community experiencing heightened levels of surveillance and being racialized as threats to American safety (Ali, 2018; Selod, 2015). As Ali (2018) mentions, these Islamophobic practices frequently extend into educational spaces, shaping how institutions interpret and respond to Muslim political expression. Leena believed that the framing of student activism as a threat to safety and order shaped how the university responded to the encampments, noting that “the crackdown on students wasn’t warranted at all” and that it was “really hard to see how harsh they were with students” (Leena, Interview). Rather than engaging student concerns, institutional leadership responded through enforcement and control, thereby exacerbating a climate of tension and portraying Muslim students as threats. Leena emphasized that these reactions were not isolated, but reflected deeply ingrained structures within the university that systematically harm Muslim students.

The UC system’s framing of student activism as a potential threat to safety while student encampments were present “justified” its use of police intervention. In several cases, student encampments ended with significant aggression from police and staff

sweeping the camp. At one University of California campus, the Chancellor sent out a campus-wide message the day the encampment was swept stating:

I was prepared to allow a peaceful engagement to exist on the campus without resorting to police intervention, even though the encampment violated our policies and the existence of the encampment was a matter of great distress to other members of our community (Gillman, 2024d).

This statement describes how he framed his response to the student encampment as measured. By stating he was “prepared to allow a peaceful engagement to exist on the campus,” he positioned the institution as one that is willing to tolerate student activism so long as it remained peaceful. However, the statement also emphasized that the encampment violated campus policies and caused “great distress” to other members of the university community. As a result, the encampment was framed as a disruption to campus safety and this framing helped construct police intervention as a justified response rather than an escalation by the institution. He goes on to claim that “It is their decision to transform a manageable situation that did not have to involve police into a situation that required a different response” (Gillman, 2024d). At another University of California campus, the Chancellor justified directing their institution’s police department and outside law enforcement to enter and clear the encampment, stating that “Several days of violent clashes between demonstrators and counter-demonstrators put too many...in harm’s way and created an environment that was completely unsafe for learning” (Block, 2024b). This is referring to events that unfolded at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) on the night of April 30th to the early hours of May 1st,

2024 in which “a mob of more than 100 masked outsiders armed with toxic spray, fireworks, pipes, bottles, and other weapons attacked nonviolent protesters in the encampment” (American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, 2024). Following this external attack on UCLA students, “the UCLA Police Department and partner agencies...violently destroyed the encampment, resulting in the arrest of more than 200 students, staff members, and supporters” (American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California, 2024). While the students involved in the student encampments were the ones who were attacked, administrative rhetoric portrayed the encampment as reinforcing a harmful environment. Rhetoric included statements such as the following: “We have seen instances of violence completely at odds with our values as an institution dedicated to respect and mutual understanding” (Block 2024a), “ultimately, the site became a focal point for serious violence as well as a huge disruption to our campus” (Block, 2024b) “the encampment...was both unlawful and a breach of policy. It led to unsafe conditions on our campus and it damaged our ability to carry out our mission,” (Block, 2024b), and “our campus has been shaken by events that have disturbed this sense of safety and strained trust within our community” (Block, 2024c). These statements reveal a consistent pattern in which administrative messaging framed the encampments as a place of violence and unsafe conditions. By repeatedly mentioning safety, disruption, and violence, the university administration constructed a narrative in which institutional force was positioned as a necessary response to a supposedly dangerous environment created by student organizers and Muslim students. This framing diminished the role of police intervention in escalating tension and shifted responsibility for harm onto the student

encampment and those associated with it. In doing so, administrative rhetoric not only minimized the violence experienced by Muslim students and allies, but it justified punitive measures by portraying Muslim and pro-Palestinian student activism as a threat to campus order.

When Zaid described his experience with his university's student encampment, he also emphasized how the rhetoric used by campus administration framed Muslim students as a threat to campus order. He explained that because Muslim students were vocal about Gaza, the administration released campus-wide messages during the encampment that implied "these people are doing something bad" and "they're breaking this law or this policy" (Zaid, Interview). According to Zaid, this rhetoric increased once police were deployed, with campus-wide messages portraying the encampment as violent. He mentions how when the encampment was shut down, his university sent 200 police officers from over 20 different police departments that met them with hostility. This deployment exemplifies how university campuses leveraged local resources to dismantle encampments and to criminalize Muslim students and allies who participated in the encampments. He recalls how "The cops came and made things violent. They started beating people up" (Zaid, Interview). Instead of the police being seen as the ones who incited such violence, he mentions how the rhetoric from administration depicted Muslims negatively and portrayed them as the ones inciting violence. Through this framing, the messages from administration shifted responsibility for violence away from law enforcement and onto student organizers. For Muslim students, this messaging reinforced the perception that their political participation was inherently dangerous, even

though the encampment included both Muslim and non-Muslim participants. This framing reflects a broader pattern in which Muslim students are routinely treated as suspects on their own campuses, with policing agencies describing college campuses as specific “sites of radicalization” without any evidence (Ali, 2020). This framing encourages policing while positioning Muslim students’ political participation as inherently dangerous.

Administrative Control: When Free Speech Stops for Muslim Students

The concept of free speech as a response to campus protests became a common topic across higher education institutions during the student encampments. The former University of California President, Michael V. Drake, claimed,

The University has a long and proud history of supporting freedom of speech and First Amendment rights. We readily accept our obligation to protect the rights of our students, faculty, staff and visitors to our campuses. The right to protest and demonstrate against policies and practices of governing authorities is among the most important privileges of a democracy (Drake, 2024).

Within the same announcement, he further claimed that “There are countless ways to protest lawfully, and the University of California campuses will work with students, faculty and staff to make space available and do all we can to protect these protests and demonstrations” (Drake, 2024). Despite this rhetoric, the protests and demonstrations were not protected and several University of California campuses reached critical junctures leading to aggressive hostility with police and staff sweeping the camp. This resulted in numerous arrests and injuries for students and other demonstrators across

different campuses. In later announcements, the former University of California President publicly supported the Chancellors who called on police departments to arrest students and to dismantle the encampments. One of this study's participants, Leena, highlighted the contradiction between administrative rhetoric of protecting free speech and the punitive measures in response to the encampments. Leena mentioned how "I don't think it was warranted at all and it was really hard to see how harsh they were with students. I think there's also, like, a lot of deeply ingrained parts of campus that we don't realize [where] they kind of systemically hurt Muslim students" (Leena, Interview). In her interview, she described the crackdown on students as harsh and expressed the feeling that these actions reflect broader institutional practices that routinely harm Muslim students.

Individuals who participated in the student encampments began to question their right to free speech and expression and whether this constitutional right extended to them. Based on prior experiences, Muslim students in the past have indicated concern in regard to expressing free speech out of fear of repercussions from higher education institutions (Ahmadi et al., 2019). For example, the Irvine 11 are a group of eleven students who interrupted the speech of Michael Oren, the Israeli Ambassador to the United States, when he was delivering a speech at the University of California, Irvine in 2010. The students interrupted and shouted their disapproval with Oren and his role in shaping the destruction of Gaza during Operation Cast Lead. The Irvine 11 students were ordered to leave the auditorium, were subsequently arrested, and were subjected to university disciplinary proceedings (Majeed, 2012). Additionally, the Orange County District

Attorney's Office pressed criminal charges against the students for their nonviolent political protest.

Many viewed the response to the Irvine 11 as a form of suppression for the Muslim community (Ahmadi et al., 2019). Ahmadi et al. (2019) note that after the Irvine 11 case, Muslim students became more cautious about becoming involved with the Muslim Student Association (MSA) or expressing their free speech or religious beliefs out of fear of repercussions from higher education institutions. Over a decade later, Muslim students are once again engaging with the idea of free speech and its application to their political and religious expression. Yousef mentions that while universities emphasize free speech, that has proven to be false in the past couple of years. He mentions that while "A lot of universities emphasize free speech, and they emphasize how, you know, anyone's ideas can be shared, we've seen that to not be true in the past couple years" (Yousef, Interview) when speaking about his experience. While participants described free speech as an institutional standard that is accepted, campuses have not been the safest places for Muslim students to engage in such dialogue (Ahmadi et al., 2019). While universities often promote their commitment to free speech and college students are often encouraged to explore and challenge ideas in student-run organizations (Majeed, 2012), participants found campus-wide messaging from administration to be constraining Muslim students' speech.

On the first day where one of the student encampments was positioned, a University of California Chancellor sent out a campus-wide message stating that "we have seen protests in this area that are in violation of our policies that are designed to

help ensure free expression on our campus” (Gillman, 2024a). As the encampment continued, the campus-wide messages became more hostile towards Muslim students and those involved in the student encampment. The Chancellor states that “there are also members within our community who view the protestors’ opinions as objectionable, even hateful, and feel they should be censored and punished merely for expressing those views” (Gillman, 2024c) The “hateful” views that should be “censored and punished” are views of both Muslim and non-Muslim students protesting the ongoing genocide in Gaza and calling on institutions to disclose and divest from financial ties to Israel and weapons manufacturers. Zaid explained that while the messages around free speech were framed in ways that might seem neutral, they carried implicit biases toward Muslim and pro-Palestinian students alongside warnings about respecting others and avoiding infringement. Zaid understood these messages to mean that Muslim students’ political views and participation in the student encampment were under scrutiny. Leena shared a similar sentiment and mentioned how the Board of Regents noted that free speech was acceptable, so long as it was not hate speech. Leena emphasized that those involved in the student encampments were not producing any type of hate speech, but “they were more-so calling out the school and the establishments for the wrong that they’re doing” (Leena, Interview). She further argues that whether you are Muslim or not, she is certain that institutions creating “engineering accelerators to help build weaponry and military grade technology” (Leena, Interview) would conflict with people’s values, irrespective of their religion.

Based on the campus-wide messages, Zaid felt that Muslim students had been singled out, and Leena felt that institutions systematically hurt Muslim students and failed to support them. Zaid feels that Muslims are not taken care of within institutions, especially considering the political climate in recent years. He hopes for more inclusivity and mentions the need to actually listen to the concerns of Muslim students when they bring up things like divestment, institutional complicity, and the genocide in Palestine. He specifically mentions how important it would be if his institution was “more willing to actually hear Muslims out and not send a bunch of cops to beat them up” (Zaid, Interview). Taken together, experiences of administrative control and framing Muslim students as a threat to campus order has left participants feeling that their voice has been silenced and suppressed at an institutional level.

In contrast to the administration’s response to student encampments, participants described widespread student support. Ahmad noted that the student government publicly denounced the administration’s actions and sided with the encampment’s free speech rights. He also observed that conversations about Palestine and the encampment were common across campus spaces. Participants elucidated that the limits put on free speech were not driven by campus-wide opposition, but by administrative power.

Based on her own research on free speech and the First Amendment, Arooj argues that free speech protections only become limited when speech incites violence. She mentions how “You’re always entitled to free speech, and it cannot be silenced unless it incites violent behavior, which the students participating in the encampments were not inciting anything violent” (Arooj, Interview). A separate University of California campus

was also accused of silencing free speech, even though those involved in the student encampment were not inciting any violence. In the *Blair v. Regents of the University of California* court case, two students and two faculty members filed suit against the UC Regents for violating their rights to free speech and expression and for unlawfully arresting students and faculty engaged in nonviolent demonstration (ACLU SoCal, 2024). The American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California (2024) mentions how “When police broke into the encampment, the protestors were not engaged in any violence or criminal activity. Rather than protecting students, faculty, and staff and their right to free expression and association, the university decided to eradicate the encampment, purportedly to protect the demonstrators themselves from future mob violence.” The mob violence is in reference to the counter-protestors who attacked the encampment with toxic spray, fireworks, pipes, bottles, and other weapons. The *Blair v. Regents of the University of California* case further illustrates how the university invoked safety to justify suppressing nonviolent protest. While demonstrators faced credible threats from counter-protesters, they were met with similar threats from police departments and outside law enforcement. For Muslim students, these responses reinforced a pattern in which their political participation was treated as dangerous, revealing how free speech protections are unevenly applied along lines of religion and perceived political threat.

Taken together, these accounts reveal a disconnect between institutional commitment to free speech and the experiences of Muslim students engaging in dissent. Through administrative responses that included police intervention, student encampments and nonviolent protest were represented as a threat to campus order. The same way the

Irvine 11 students exercised their right to free speech but were unaware that there were limitations to their free speech (Ahmadi et al., 2019), Muslim students again learned that constitutional protections were unevenly applied to them. Campus-wide messages that claimed neutrality and opposition to “hate speech” ultimately limited Muslim and pro-Palestinian students’ right to free speech and shifted attention away from student concerns about institutional complicity and divestment. Even though participants described widespread student support for the encampments and emphasized that the protests were nonviolent, decisions about whose speech was protected rested with the administration. In practice, administrative power determined when free speech applied and when it did not. These findings reveal that free speech on campus is not experienced equally. For Muslim students, political participation was often framed as dangerous or disruptive, reinforcing a pattern in which their voices are suppressed within higher education institutions.

Academic Freedom? Disciplinary Actions and the Removal of Muslim Studies

Muslim students faced a range of repercussions in the aftermath of the student encampments, some of which had a direct impact on their education. Many students involved in the encampments dealt with disciplinary actions such as being suspended or dropped as students. Among the participants I interviewed, Ahmad was suspended for two and a half quarters and Hamza was dropped as a student three times. While Hamza does not provide extensive detail about his experience, he shares that a challenge he faced in higher education was being dropped as a student numerous times. While the reasons were initially unclear, he mentions that it was only after the third time where he realized

it was related to his participation in the encampments. Hamza describes feeling targeted and explains that he had to repeatedly contest these decisions in order to be re-enrolled each time he was dropped. Ahmad was also affected by his involvement in the student encampments. At the time, Ahmad served as the president of his university's Muslim Student Association (MSA) and was suspended due to his involvement with the encampments. He mentions how this disrupted his education, especially with "what's happening in *Falasteen*, what's happening in this country, and [what is happening] throughout the world" (Ahmad, Interview). He mentions that being suspended for two and a half academic quarters, alongside broader outside politics, directly impacted his studies. Excluding summer sessions, his suspension accounted for approximately 25 of the 30 instructional weeks in the academic year. Returning five weeks into a quarter places students at a significant disadvantage, as institutional policies make passing courses impossible and increases the risk of administrative withdrawal.

While individual members of the MSA participated in the student encampments, the organizing and leadership of these actions were led by student groups such as the Divest Coalition and Students for Justice in Palestine (SJP). Several participants described overlapping membership between MSA and SJP, reflecting the interconnected nature of student organizing on campus. Alongside students who dealt with disciplinary actions, several faculty members involved in organizing Faculty for Justice in Palestine (FJP) reported facing administrative repercussions from the university as well. These disciplinary actions affected both Muslim and non-Muslim professors and highlighted the

divide between faculty advocacy and an administration that is not representative of the campus community.

Along with disciplinary actions, the department for Global Middle East Studies (GMES), more commonly known as Global Muslim Studies (GMS) among students, was removed. Ahmad was one of the participants who expressed particular frustration with the administration's decision to remove GMS as a major shortly after the encampments. Ahmad was pursuing a minor in GMS before it was removed, which also impacted his studies. He mentioned how this minor, along with the major he was already enrolled in, shaped his politics and his view of the world. Out of all the participants, Ahmad was most affected by the removal of GMS. When asked what would make his campus more inclusive for Muslim students, he claims that "What would make [his] campus more inclusive for Muslim students would be the entire department of Global Muslim Studies, the department that was cut off after the encampment" (Ahmad, Interview). He explains how the curriculum included classes on Islamic History, the Qur'ān, Arabic, and a variety of topics relevant for Muslims. Ahmad mentioned how this institutional response made many Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian students feel unseen and excluded.

The removal of GMS infringed on the right of Muslim students' academic freedom and contradicts campus-wide messages publicly posted during the encampments. One of the University of California Chancellors states:

"Academic programs and centers dedicated to Jewish Studies, Israel Studies, and Antisemitism Studies will continue their work under the principles of academic freedom, even if some disagree with their activities. Embracing a range of

perspectives is fundamental to our identity as an institution of higher education in a free society. It underscores the principle that all members of our diverse community are entitled to participate fully in the vital activities of this university” (Gillman, 2024b).

This reveals a significant discrepancy between the university’s stated commitment to academic freedom and subsequent administrative actions. While institutional messaging emphasizes the protection of academic programs from political pressure in the name of “academic freedom,” subsequent administrative decisions suggest that this commitment is applied unevenly. The removal of GMS in the immediate aftermath of the encampments reflects a double standard in which some students and academic programs are protected while others are not.

Altogether, these experiences highlight the consequences of the student encampments and how they directly shaped the educational trajectory of Muslim students. For decades, Muslim students have been subjected to surveillance and policing both on and off campus, making colleges feel less like spaces for open dialogue and more like places where expression is monitored and punished through disciplinary actions (Ali, 2018). Disciplinary actions such as being suspended or dropped as students and the removal of Global Muslim Studies disrupted students’ academic progress and limited their ability to fully participate in campus life. While university leaders framed these decisions as neutral or policy-based, participants described them as targeted toward Muslim, Arab, and Palestinian students. The contrast between institutional statements emphasizing academic freedom and the selective protection of certain academic programs

reveals a double standard. Rather than safeguarding all forms of political expression, administrative responses following the encampments reinforced feelings of exclusion for Muslim students.

Chapter 9: Study Overview

The purpose of this study is to enable a clear understanding of the way religious identity shapes the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students attending four-year public higher education institutions. The three research questions that guided this study were: 1) What role does religious identity play in shaping the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students in public higher education institutions? 2) In what ways does the intersection of religion, race, and gender influence the experiences of Muslim college students? And 3) How do Muslim students negotiate their religious identity within the broader social and political climate of higher education institutions? Through qualitative research data collection of background surveys, participant interviews, and publicly available data, this study focused on identifying educational experience and background, religious commitment and participation, and religious identity and higher education interactions of Muslim undergraduate students in Southern California.

In chapter five, I highlighted the educational experiences and background of Muslim students including why they pursue higher education, what factors affect their education, and what opportunities and challenges arise as they navigate higher education. In my study, I found that Muslim undergraduate students in Southern California were motivated to pursue higher education by their parents and career interests. Muslim parents often emphasized the importance of education and held undergraduate degrees themselves. Muslim students also recognized that higher education was a means to achieve their career goals since certain career paths require additional schooling. Beyond

parental motivation or career interests, Muslim students emphasized family expectations, financial realities, and religious identity as various factors that shaped their educational trajectory. Family emerged as a key external factor shaping the educational pathway of Muslim students. Some parents viewed education as a necessity for financial security and a means to live a different and better life than the one they had growing up (Salinas et al., 2022). The findings from this study echoed other studies that have highlighted how parents often connect higher education to financial stability for Muslim men (Salinas et al., 2022) and economic independence for Muslim women (Jamal Al-deen, 2019). Alongside family expectations and financial realities, religious identity played a role in how Muslim students view and approach higher education.

As Muslim students navigate higher education, certain opportunities and challenges arise. Higher education provided them with the opportunity to broaden their perspectives within the classroom which became a space for intellectual engagement, open dialogue, exposure to diverse perspectives, and community with peers who shared a commitment to learning. Muslim students also found a sense of community within the Muslim Student Association (MSA) that served as a space through which Muslim students were able to practice their faith, build community, and access religious support. At the same time, Muslim students experienced challenges that led to burnout for some. Many struggled to balance academics with work, family obligations, religious commitments, and extracurricular involvement. In addition, some students identified the broader campus climate as a challenge, mentioning feeling at odds with administrative responses to student organizing and experiences of feeling targeted or unsupported by the

institution. This was especially salient during student encampments in 2024, which resulted in heightened campus tension and the framing of student activism as a potential threat to safety and order.

In chapter six, I highlight religious commitment and practice in higher education, focusing on religious tolerance and perceptions of Muslims on campus. Recognizing the religious commitment among Muslim college students and how they sustain their religious practice highlights how religion guides their everyday lives and shapes who they are as individuals. Muslim students who are committed to their faith experience a variety of character strengths such as kindness, spirituality, hope, optimism, and leadership (Ahmed, 2009). These characteristics result from religion serving as a guiding framework for how they view the world around them.

Furthermore, the religious tolerance and perceptions of Muslims on campus was heavily influenced by how Muslims are racialized and face increasing Islamophobia emerging from both individuals and institutions. The findings from this study found that Muslim students felt that their peers were religiously tolerant; however, the broader political climate continued to make Muslim students susceptible to Islamophobia or feeling that their institution is not tolerant towards them. Even if the greater campus was generally tolerant towards religion, Muslim students expressed how negative comments about Islam still existed, often framed politically or through certain stereotypes.

In chapter seven, I examined how Muslim students negotiate their religious identity in higher education by focusing on how they navigate campus life, religious practice, and belonging within secular university settings. Religious organizations on

campus such as the MSA explain the impact such organizations have on the university experience of Muslim students. This study found that the MSA serves as a campus-based religious community that offers a space where Muslim students are able to explore aspects of Islam and establish interpersonal relationships. The relationships they created were deeply connected to shared religious commitment and everyday decisions about how to live as Muslims. It was a community where friendships, peer support, and shared religious identity shaped a sense of belonging for Muslim students. The MSA also provided Muslim students with accessible religious resources which made navigating a secular institution easier. However, there were certain resources the MSA was not able to provide because they required institutional support. Thus, there are additional accommodations Muslim students need implemented from an institutional level that would acknowledge the presence of Muslim students on campus and that the responsibility for religious inclusion should not rest on religious organizations alone.

In chapter eight, I highlighted the institutional responses to student encampments and examined how Muslim students were framed as a threat to campus order, how administrative control limited the free speech of Muslim students, and how Muslim students were reprimanded through disciplinary actions. This was a significant point of reference for Muslim students that highlighted how public universities respond to Muslim student activism, and on a much larger scale, how broader institutional structures systematically harm Muslim students. During the student encampments, Muslim students described how institutional responses to student organizing led to a heightened campus tension that framed student activism as a threat to campus safety and order. The ability to

continuously frame Muslims as a threat shapes how institutions interpret and respond to the political expression of Muslim students. As a result, the free speech of Muslim students was suppressed and limited due to administrative control. The findings in this study underlined how Muslim students exercising their free speech rights faced consequences in the aftermath of the student encampments which heavily impacted their educational trajectory.

Implications and Contributions

While the United States is secular in ideology, higher education institutions across the United States are complexly both religious and secular (Stevenson & Aune, 2017). Even though most public institutions today are not religiously affiliated, student populations remain largely religiously identified and committed to their religion (Bowman, 2017; Mayrl & Oeur, 2009). This is significant to note for Muslim students whose religious beliefs and values are a defining part of how they live and make sense of the world. Based on the findings in this study, religious identity is a crucial component of the experiences Muslim students face within higher education institutions. I contend that whether or not Muslim college students maintain their faith and practice of Islam requires attention, especially when considering the religious development that occurs during university and how religious identity impacts their experiences.

Scholars and universities need to engage with religion regardless of their personal beliefs and opinions because religion is undeniably present on campus (Stevenson & Aune, 2017). Accordingly, the findings from this study have significant implications for higher education practice and research. Taken together, they show that the educational

experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim undergraduate students cannot be understood through academics alone. More specifically, they demonstrate the importance of recognizing religious identity as a meaningful aspect of student identity and development. Because Islam serves as a guiding framework for how Muslim students navigate the world around them, their educational experiences are tied to their religious obligations within secular university settings.

Muslim student experiences are shaped by various factors encompassing their educational experience and background, religious commitment and participation, and religious identity and higher education interactions. The findings from this study show that the opportunities and challenges Muslim undergraduate students face are not isolated incidents, but they are structurally connected to the broader campus climate and institutional policies of higher education institutions. Rather than viewing student challenges as individual issues, the findings from this study imply that the well-being of students is dependent on institutional accommodations. Currently, higher education institutions rely on religious organizations on campus such as the Muslim Student Association (MSA) to fulfill the religious needs of Muslim students. However, religious inclusion should not rest on religious organizations alone. It requires institutional changes and additional accommodations from an institutional level such as more accessible prayer spaces, *wudu* stations to make ablution for prayer, accommodations during religious holidays, and more *halal* food spots.

The findings from this study also highlight that students' sense of belonging on campus is shaped by how institutions respond to Muslims and their religious identity.

This response is particularly salient considering that South Asian and Arab Muslim students experience racialization on campus that subjects them to certain biases and stereotypes. Furthermore, as seen with institutional responses to student encampments and the disciplinary actions of Muslim students, institutional policies often suppress Muslim students who engage in political expression. When higher education institutions weaponize surveillance or disciplinary actions against student activism, they harm the educational trajectory of Muslim students and reinforce Islamophobic narratives that position them as threats to campus order. Recognizing these dynamics is necessary in understanding how both the Muslim community and higher education institutions can better support Muslim students more effectively.

Based on my findings, this study offers several contributions for Muslim undergraduate students, the Muslim community, and higher education practitioners. The findings from this study highlight the educational experiences of Muslim undergraduate students with consideration to how their identity shapes said experience. As a result, the contributions from these findings provide students with an understanding as to how their intersecting identities as religious minorities shape their experiences from both a social and academic perspective. More specifically, these findings may help Muslim undergraduate students better understand how their religious identity informs their perceptions of higher education, their sense of belonging, their engagement on campus, and their relationships with peers and faculty. This study offers a framework for Muslim undergraduate students to understand how they navigate belonging, identity, and educational meaning within secular higher education settings.

This study also has contributions in mind for the Muslim community as a whole. The Muslim community is one that encourages communal support and understanding. With this in mind, this study can help the broader Muslim community better understand how Muslim students navigate academic spaces while negotiating their identities as religious minorities in the United States. Since the college years are crucial for the religious development of Muslims, these findings offer valuable insight into the opportunities and challenges Muslim students come across. As a result, the Muslim community may extend their support to Muslim students as they navigate higher education institutions. This could be done through the mosque or by providing support and resources to religious organizations on campus such as the MSA.

Considering the Muslim student population within higher education institutions, the findings from this study are relevant to higher education practitioners who work with and support Muslim students. More specifically, the contributions of this study offer higher education practitioners a better understanding of how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students, how it impacts their sense of belonging, and how they navigate higher education institutions. It is necessary to consider the religious minority status Muslim students occupy and how this presents itself within secular higher education institutions. With this in mind, such findings may help higher education practitioners recognize why it is necessary to create environments that respect, acknowledge, and support the religious identities of students.

In addition, this study contributes to higher education literature by centering the lived experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim students, highlighting how religious

identity interacts with structures of race and gender on university campuses. Previously, limited empirical research focused on religious identity and how it shapes the educational experiences of Muslim students attending secular higher education institutions with consideration to their intersecting identities. This study contributes much needed scholarship on Muslim college students by implementing relevant themes, concepts, and frameworks from higher education literature. To avoid a monolithic perspective that centers religious identity alone, the theoretical concepts guiding this study were intersectionality, racialization, and religification. These concepts were applied to explain how Muslim religious identity intersects with other historically marginalized identities, especially with respect to race and religion or gender and religion (d'Urso & Bonilla, 2023). Such an approach brings forward the various aspects of Muslim social identity to enable a more complex understanding of the Muslim experience. The findings from this study contribute to the research literature by acknowledging the narratives and lived campus interactions of Muslim students in order to capture how intersecting identities inform their social and academic experiences within secular university settings.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insight on how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim students attending public four-year higher education institutions, the limitations should be acknowledged. Participants were recruited through the Muslim Student Association (MSA), resulting in a sample of students who are engaged with religious organizations on campus. As a result, the findings may better reflect the experiences of students who actively participate in

religious organizations on campus and have access to the resources and support such organizations provide. In addition, recruiting solely through the MSA limited the inclusion of South Asian and Arab Muslim students who are not affiliated with the MSA or similar religious organizations on campus. These students may experience and negotiate their religious identity in different ways in which they may be more private in their religious practice, their level of religious observance may vary, or they may choose not to participate in religious organizations on campus for their own personal reasons.

In addition, the broader social and political climate at the time of my study may have influenced participant recruitment and willingness to participate. Heightened campus tensions surrounding Muslims on college campuses, particularly in relation to institutional responses to student encampments, may have led some students to feel hesitant about participating in research that focused on their identity as Muslims. Some students may have been concerned about privacy, possible repercussions and disciplinary actions, or being associated with sensitive issues despite the confidentiality measures implemented for this study. As a result, the narratives and experiences represented in this study may reflect those who felt more comfortable discussing their experiences, while the experiences of Muslim students who were more reluctant to participate may be underrepresented.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that the findings should be interpreted within the context of this study's sample and the broader social and political climate in which the research was conducted. While this study offers important insight into how religious identity shapes the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim

students, it may not fully represent the diverse experiences among Muslim students in higher education. Future research that examines the varying levels of religious engagement and involvement on campus across different social and political contexts would provide a better understanding of the ways religious identity intersects with higher education experiences among Muslim students.

Future Research

Based on the findings of this study, I suggest the following implications for future research: First, more research is needed to examine how Muslim students understand higher education as a faith-related obligation, especially when considering the importance of education in Islam. Second, future research should explore religious identity as a central aspect to the campus experience of Muslim students in terms of how it shapes their sense of belonging and development. Third, alongside religious identity, studies should identify the role of campus-based religious organizations in shaping Muslim students' religious commitment and sense of belonging on campus. Fourth, future studies should continue to examine institutional responses that directly harm Muslim students through their rhetoric, surveillance, and policing. Lastly, more research is needed regarding the intersection of religion, race, and gender to avoid presenting the experiences of Muslim students as monolithic. Each suggestion is further explained in the paragraphs that follow.

Considering the importance of education in Islam, more research is needed to examine how Muslim students understand higher education to be a faith-related obligation when considering religion at the heart of such education. Whether it is through

the Qur'ān or *aḥadīth* further underlining the value of knowledge, education holds profound value in Islam that shapes both personal growth and societal contributions. For practicing Muslim students, knowledge extends beyond that which is related to Islam and any form of academia may be viewed as a form of worship so long as it is undertaken within the boundaries defined by revelation (Halstead, 2004). With this in mind, the value of seeking knowledge in Islam can serve as a justification to pursue higher education, especially when considering the promised reward that comes with it. Along with this is the importance of religious identity for many Muslims whose religious beliefs and values are a defining part of how they live and make sense of the world. Given the theological foundation of knowledge within Islam, the educational experiences of Muslim students become deeply intertwined with their religious identity. However, research has often disregarded the importance of knowledge within Islam and how this invariably shapes how Muslim students view and approach higher education.

Furthermore, future research should continue to explore religious identity as a central aspect to the campus experience of Muslim students in terms of how it shapes their sense of belonging and development. Religion is often disregarded as an important aspect of one's identity, especially for Muslim students whose religious beliefs and values are fundamental to the way they live. For Muslim students in particular, religious identity is how they come to understand the world around them. A more direct exploration of religion would allow future research to develop a better understanding of student experiences and their sense of belonging on campus as religious minorities. When

religion is overlooked, there is an incomplete understanding of how Muslim students navigate higher education and how religion guides their everyday lives.

Alongside religious identity, studies should identify the role of campus-based religious organizations in shaping Muslim students' religious commitment and their sense of belonging on campus. While some research exists on Muslim Student Associations (MSA), further research would elucidate how similar organizations function as support systems for practicing students within secular institutions. Campus-based religious organizations provide an environment for practicing beliefs and constructing religious identities. They foster social integration and enhance student development during college, enabling students to grow more competent, interdependent, and purposeful (Bryant, 2009). Based on the findings from this study, campus-based religious organizations such as the MSA serve as a space where Muslim students build interpersonal relationships, find community, and access religious resources that help reinforce their religious beliefs and commitment. Such spaces should be understood as meaningful environments that encourage religious commitment and a sense of belonging on campus. By overlooking campus-based religious organizations such as the MSA, institutions fail to recognize the important role such spaces play in providing a religious community for Muslim students.

In addition, future studies should examine institutional responses to political activism and how it directly harms Muslim students through the rhetoric, surveillance, and policing used. Institutions should carefully consider how they respond to heightened campus tension and the way this directly affects Muslim students who become more susceptible to Islamophobia as a result of the broader political climate. The way

institutions respond to encampments, protests, speech, and political dissent shapes how Muslim students view their institution. Numerous studies have explained how current global geopolitics, the post-9/11 surveillance and security atmosphere, and depictions of Muslim stereotypes in the media are reinforced within higher education institutions (Ali, 2018; Shams, 2020). Thus, it is not surprising that the racialized surveillance of Muslim populations has a long history of constructing these groups as threats and has in turn shaped institutional responses to protests across campuses. In all, it is crucial to consider institutional responses to political activism and examine them as part of the Muslim student experience and the campus climate they must navigate as religious minorities.

Lastly, more research is needed regarding the intersection of religion, race, and gender to avoid presenting the experiences of Muslim students as monolithic. These three social identities shape every aspect of their life and subject Muslims to unique lived experiences. While limited intersectional research exists concerning Muslim student experiences, social identities interact in complex ways for Muslim individuals and deserve consideration when understanding the educational experiences of Muslim students since these identities intersect and present unique challenges. This awareness brings forward the various aspects of Muslim social identity to enable a more complex understanding of the Muslim experience. In addition, I would argue that more research needs to be done on the educational experiences of Black Muslim students who experience intersections of anti-Black attitudes, institutionalized racism, and increasing Islamophobia (Ahmed & Muhammad, 2019). The multiple identities of Black Muslim students play a central role in understanding the ways in which racialized systemic

injustices appear within their experiences across higher education institutions (Cole et al., 2020). Considering the history of anti-Black racism and violence in the United States, the compounding marginalization Black Muslims experience due to their religion and race is significantly different compared to that of South Asian or Arab Muslims. More specifically, Black Muslim students learn to challenge oppression (Ahmed & Muhammad, 2019), experience intersecting systems of discrimination (Rahman, 2021), and confront anti-Black racism and violence (Auston, 2017). Auston (2017) explains how:

“...current manifestations of Black Muslim engagement with the unique intersectional impacts of marginalization arising out of the combination of being Black and non-Christian in a context where both of those identities have been historically stigmatized is cumulative. To a large extent, Black American Islam has always been about the struggle for racial equality and religious freedom shaped by the intersectional concerns necessitated by the fight on multiple fronts against state power, anti-Blackness, and entrenched White supremacy” (p. 20).

The experiences of Black Muslims are undeniably reinforced within higher education institutions as the climate within higher education reflects the broader social context (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Cole & Ahmadi, 2010). While my research did not focus on the educational experiences of Black Muslims, I mention this to bring light to the gap in literature when considering the experiences of Black Muslim students attending higher education institutions. The underrepresentation of Black Muslim students within the research literature stems from an anti-Black perspective that fails to take seriously the

contributions and experiences of Black Muslims (Rahman, 2021). While this study focused on two racial and ethnic Muslim groups, solely looking at religious identity does not properly demonstrate the intersection of religion, race, and gender in explaining the experiences of Muslim students from various backgrounds. In all, more research is needed to highlight how the experiences of Muslims in the United States are deeply entangled in the workings of religion, race, and gender (Abdul Khabeer, 2016).

Altogether, I hope that this study builds a strong foundation for Muslim undergraduate students, the Muslim community, and higher education practitioners in recognizing the importance of religious identity in shaping the educational experiences of South Asian and Arab Muslim students attending four-year public higher education institutions. The tensions between religion and secularity on college campuses include social hostilities where such tensions may impact the identities of Muslim college students, their sense of belonging on campus, and their educational experiences (Stevensen & Aune, 2017). This is important to consider as religion plays a significant role in shaping student experiences (Bowman, 2017). While more research is recommended, I am hopeful that this study encourages understanding the importance of Islam in the lives of Muslim students. Even if Muslim students are attending secular and non-religious higher education institutions, the beliefs and values of religion are essential to the way they live and engage with the world. Thus, I cannot emphasize how crucial it is to understand how religious identity shapes the experiences of Muslim students from both a social and academic perspective.

Appendix A: Glossary

Adab: Manners; the discipline of body, mind, and soul.

‘Adl: Justice.

Aḥadīth: Narrations from the words of Prophet Muhammad.

Alhamdulillah: All praise and thanks belong to Allah.

‘Amal: Actions.

‘Aql: Intellect.

Dawah: The act of calling people to Islam, promoting understanding of its beliefs, and encouraging the worship of Allah.

Deen: Religion.

Falasteen: Transliteration for Palestine in Arabic.

Ḥadīth: Narration from the words of Prophet Muhammad.

Halal Meat: Dietary items permissible for consumption under Islamic law prepared through specific, humane, and sanitary slaughter methods that ensures the blood is fully drained.

Halaqa: A religious, educational gathering where Muslims meet to study Islam, the Qur’ān, and ḥadīth.

Haram: Forbidden, prohibited, or unlawful under Islamic law.

Hufadh: Plural for individuals who have memorized the Qur’ān.

‘Ibadah: Acts of worship.

Iftar: Refers to the evening meal consumed by Muslims at sunset to break their fast.

‘Ilm: Knowledge.

Iman: Faith, belief, or conviction.

Inshallah: God willing.

Jummah: Friday congregational prayer.

Khutbah: Friday sermon.

Kufi: A brimless, short, rounded cap.

Maghrib: Commonly refers to the daily sunset prayer in Islam.

Masajid: Plural for mosques in Arabic.

Masjid: Singular for mosque in Arabic.

Niyyah: Intention.

Sadaqah jariyah: An ongoing charity in Islam that provides benefits to others and reward to the giver even after they have passed away.

Salaam: Widely used as a greeting in Muslim communities, serving as a shorter form of “asalamu alaykum,” meaning “peace be upon you.”

Salah: Prayer.

Shalwar kameez: A traditional South Asian outfit. Shalwar refers to loose trousers and kameez refers to a long shirt or tunic.

Sheikh: Religious leader.

Suhoor: The pre-dawn meal or pre-fasting meal eaten by Muslims during Ramadan.

Sunnah: Refers to the teachings, practices, and sayings of Prophet Muhammad.

Ta’dib: Development of good manners; often translated as “education.”

Ta’lim: Emphasizing knowledge; often translated as “education.”

Taraweeh: Voluntary night prayer during Ramadan.

Tarbiya: Growth to maturity; often translated as “education.”

Thobe: An ankle-length, long-sleeved garment, typically worn by men.

‘Ulamā: Religious scholars.

Wudu: Ablution for prayer.

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