THE “SPIRITUALIZATION” OF ISLAM IN AMERICA:
A STUDY OF HIGHLY INDIVIDUALISTIC FORMS OF ISLAMIC PRACTICE IN THE U.S.

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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This thesis analyzes the way in which American Muslims in the United States have emphasized highly individualized modes of Islamic practice as they integrate into the fabric of American society. A large number of Muslim immigrants arrived in the U.S. at the same time that there was a growing focus on “spirituality” in society. In concert with these trends, U.S. Muslims have increasingly accentuated forms of Islam that give them significant autonomy and that place more emphasis on religious experience than doctrine and formal institutions. The thesis focuses in particular on Hamza Yusuf, the founder of Zaytuna College in Berkely, California. He sought to familiarize American Muslims with highly individualistic modes of Islamic practice by stressing their compatibility with tradition and by seeking to differentiate them from Islamic mysticism (Sufism). To varying degrees, three additional prominent Muslim thinkers, Yasmin Mogahed, Suhaib Webb, and Yasir Qadhi spread similar ideas among the U.S. Muslim population. The concluding chapter highlights how the events of 9/11 have further motivated Muslims to adopt more “spiritualized” forms of Islamic practice that resonated with widespread trends in U.S. society.
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INTRODUCTION

In 2014, renowned Muslim thinker, Tariq Ramadan, published an open letter in which he vowed to no longer take part in the annual Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) convention. Being that ISNA is the largest and most established Muslim organization in America, Ramadan’s letter naturally created much controversy and consternation among Muslims in America. Ramadan’s open letter not only indicated his withdrawal from the conference, but also served to criticize the “type” of Islam ISNA was propagating to the thousands of Muslims who attend the conference annually. Ramadan’s brutally unapologetic letter led Muslims to question the objectives of ISNA and its esteemed conferences, and it also raised a much more fundamental question: were Islamic leaders in North America, and in particular the United States, pushing the tradition away from “orthodox” beliefs and practices?

Islam and the Pressure to “Americanize”

The passage of the Immigration Act in 1965 forever changed the religious landscape in the United States by repealing the “country-of-origin quotas established in the 1920’s that predominantly favored Western European, mostly Judeo-Christian, immigrants.”

1 Prior to the 1965 Immigration Act, the bulk of the immigrants in America belonged to different Christian denominations. After 1965, however, as more immigrants

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arrived from Asia, Africa, the Middle East and even Latin America, religious diversity became a reality to a much greater extent. More and more immigrants spoke unfamiliar languages, carried with them different cultures and most importantly (for this discussion, at least) had religious persuasions that fell outside of the realm of Christianity.

While Muslims were present in the U.S. prior to 1965, the new immigration laws greatly expanded and diversified the Muslim population. Today, the Muslim population in America exceeds five million and is described as the “most racially diverse religious group” in the United States. While Muslims were present in the U.S. prior to 1965, the new immigration laws greatly expanded and diversified the Muslim population. Today, the Muslim population in America exceeds five million and is described as the “most racially diverse religious group” in the United States. Although African Americans make up 40% of the Muslim population in America, making them the largest ethnic group amongst American Muslims, the Muslim community in the U.S. includes individuals from around the world. An article by Ihsan Bagby relates the impact of the Immigration Act on the growth of Muslim immigrants in the U.S. Bagby includes a chart that differentiates mosques in the U.S. according to the “dominant ethnic group”: 28% of mosques are predominantly South Asian; 27% are African American, 15% are Arab; 16% are “mixed evenly South Asian and Arab”; and 14% are “all other combinations.”

Significantly, a study conducted in 2011 by the Pew Research Center confirmed the large number of recent Muslim immigrants in the U.S. As of 2011, 65% of Muslim Americans were foreign-born, while only 35% were native-born. Thus, it must always be

kept in mind that Muslims are a diverse group in their ethnic, social, cultural and even religious understandings and backgrounds. Due to the fact that majority of the Muslims in America are foreign-born, they naturally follow in the footsteps of previous immigrant groups, and feel significant pressure to adapt to American society.\footnote{Unlike many previous immigrants in the United States, such as the Irish, the vast majority of Muslim Americans do not have to struggle to find their place economically in the United States. Most belong to the middle class.}

It must also be noted that Muslims’ religious acclimation to U.S. society has been a complex process, and numerous scholars both from within the Islamic tradition and from those outside it have striven to properly describe the transformation of Islam in America.


Scholars who discuss “Americanization” typically take into account the fact that Muslims come from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and by no means follow a monolithic form of Islam. Rather, Muslims in America carry very diverse understandings of Islam. A study conducted in 2012, in fact, asked Muslims whether there was only one true way to understand Islam, or if multiple interpretations/understandings were possible. Fifty-seven percent of respondents were of
the opinion that Islam was open to numerous understandings. This survey highlights the
diversification of Muslim thought in the United States, and is important to keep in mind
when discussing “Americanization”: Some Muslims over the past fifty years saw no
opposition between American culture/politics and their core values. Other Muslims held
very different sentiments.

It also must be noted that Muslims who have not isolated themselves from the
greater society may still consider their American identity to be secondary to their Muslim
identity. According to a 2011 survey, although over half of the Muslims in America
stated that they wanted to adopt American customs and ways of life, only 26% of
Muslims thought of themselves first and foremost as Americans.10

Politics and the “Americanization” of Muslims in the U.S.

As previously mentioned, scholars have noted the diverse expressions of Islam in
the United States. And many scholars have analyzed Muslim political engagement in
particular in order to provide a more nuanced narrative that goes beyond discussions of
Muslim “isolation” or assimilation” in the U.S. Ihsan Bagby, a Professor of Islamic
Studies at the University of Kentucky, for example, has dedicated ten years to the
research of Muslims in America.11 Bagby has written extensively on Muslim involvement
in American society and completed a study on the way in which mosques in America
directly impact Muslim interaction in America. Throughout his works, Bagby strives to

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9 The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity," PEW Research Center, accessed Friday 20, 2015,
10 "New Pew Research Center Finds Moderate Attitudes Among Muslim Americans," PEW Research
Center, accessed February 15, 2015, www.pewforum.org/2011/08/30/new-pew-research-center-
survey-finds-moderate-attitudes-among-muslim-americans/
11 Ihsan Bagby Bio, University of Kentucky Faculty, accessed November 4, 2015,
www.as.uky.edu/faculty-10
reflect the intricacies of Muslim interaction with the broader U.S. society by highlighting Muslims who “insulate” themselves from American culture, instead of assimilating or isolating themselves. For Bagby, Muslims in this third category do not completely segregate from society, nor do they fully blend in at the cost of their religious identity. Rather, these Muslims “insulate” themselves and endeavor to maintain their Islamic values and practices for the purpose of protecting themselves against the perceived immorality and evil in America.12

Bagby stresses in his works that American Muslims are politically “moderate” and that they strongly lean toward being involved in American institutions and the political process. He uses his research to emphasize how political involvement in the U.S. is one of the primary ways in which Muslims can protect their identity while simultaneously weaving themselves into the fabric of American society.

Overall, Bagby finds that majority of Muslims living in America do not, in fact, fall under the “isolate” or “assimilate” classification. Rather, they all are “virtually unanimous in their desire to be involved in society and to be recognized as a respected part of the mosaic of American life” while simultaneously retaining their Islamic values and practices.13 Importantly, Bagby does not suggest that all Muslims who “insulate” themselves have identical understandings of Islam. Rather, he acknowledges the diversity of their Islamic understanding and backgrounds, while managing to find important similarities that link them together.

13 Bagby, Ihsan. The Mosque In America, 23
Professor Amaney Jamal is a professor in political science at Princeton University. She also delves into the topic of the political participation and engagement of Muslims in America, but hones in on the specific mechanisms that lead to Muslim political engagement. Jamal identifies the mosque as the vehicle of communication between Muslims and American society. She ultimately concludes that mosques in America take on the “multifaceted role of mobilization vehicle and school of civic participation.” Jamal’s work emphasizes that Muslims are neither fully isolated nor assimilated into American society. Rather, she seeks to highlight just how complicated making such a claim is by noting how mosques can facilitate civic involvement, but do not necessarily translate to political involvement. Although Jamal makes it clear that Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds often have different reasons as to what motivates them to engage politically in the U.S. society, she highlights some of the reasons as to why Muslims are inclined to take part in politics. For example, Jamal feels that the primary motivation for Arab Americans to engage in politics stems from their desire to improve their standing in U.S. and to have a say in U.S. foreign policy, specifically in the Middle East. South Asian Muslims, on the other hand, are not necessarily as eager to participate in politics, and are much more inclined to focus on their spiritual and ethnic activities. She brings to light the diversification of Muslim

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15 Jamal, "The Political Participation and Engagement of Muslim Americans," 521
16 Jamal states the reasoning for this is because each ethnic group has their own unique experiences in the U.S. which have shaped their desire (or lack of) to participate in politics.
17 Jamal, " The Political Participation and Engagement of Muslim Americans, 524
18 Jamal, " The Political Participation and Engagement of Muslim Americans, 524
involvement in American society by emphasizing the reasons why American Muslims engage (or shy away) from politics.

Kambiz Ghaneabassiri’s *A History of Islam in America*, also notes that the 1970’s and 1980’s marked a period in which Muslims argued in growing numbers that Islamic teachings and American values were very much compatible. Thus, Muslims were more actively engaging in politics as a means to truly embrace their American identities and to integrate into American society. Ghaneabassiri finds that the “experience of dealing with American social, political and legal norms on the one hand and with diversity Muslim beliefs and practices on the other has helped shape the contours of American Islamic history.”

Ghaneabassiri’s perspective nuances the aforementioned “isolate/assimilate” models because it emphasizes how the diversity of Muslim practice and thought ultimately influences the extent of engagement with the broader society. It isn’t simply that Muslims are either isolating or assimilating into society. Rather, the degree and scope of interaction for American Muslims is very much dependent on their ways of practicing and interpreting Islam. For example, Ghaneabassiri notes that most Muslims who engage in politics are activists who have “Islamist leanings,” and Islam itself motivates them to engage in politics. He also found that events like 9/11 pushed many Muslims to engage in political discussion in order to remove themselves from the widespread stereotypes. However, like Jamal, Ghaneabassiri stresses that political engagement is very much intertwined with various ethnic experience in U.S. society. Thus, although he emphasizes the way in which political involvement reflects Muslim

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19 Kambiz Ghaneabassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 3
engagement with society, it is also understood that the way in which Muslims react is contingent on their strand of Islamic practice.

Along much of the same lines, Kathleen Moore, a Professor Political Science at the University of California Santa Barbara, has extensively researched how “religion and politics intersect to construct ‘Muslim’ as a public identity.” Moore’s work stresses how “there exists a strain or pressure, even, for Muslims to preserve the authority of religion while simultaneously adapting to local and social and political demands of modern society which embraces pluralism and secularism.” She goes well beyond the idea that Muslims simply assimilate or isolate. Rather, she emphasizes the fact that different motivations exist for Muslims to embrace or reject aspects of American society, one being the pressure to politically engage. For example, Moore divides Muslims into three categories, which highlight the range of perspectives on integrating vs. assimilating into U.S. society: “Grasshoppers,” “Oysters,” and “Owls.” Grasshoppers are Muslims who “align themselves with secular humanists...and hope to blend into the sea of names that constitute America the nation of immigrants, in the process of shedding anything distinctive.” Oysters on the other hand, “plan on sheltering their spiritual lives from plain view…and seek to isolate themselves.” While Owls “consider themselves to be individually equipped with a moral compass sufficient to guide their encounters” with Muslims and non-Muslims alike,” and are the most likely to engage in dialogue with

21 Kathleen Moore Bio, University of California Faculty, accessed November 4, 2015, www.religion.ucsb.edu/people/faculty/kathleen-m-moore/
23 Moore has adopted this model from the works of Sulayman Nyang (1997)
24 Moore, "Muslims in the United States," 127
25 Moore, "Muslims in the United States," 127
society at large. She goes on to mentions how the events of September 11th have forever altered Muslim interaction and encounter with American pluralism. Moore notes that the younger generation of Muslims in particular are much more embedded into the American fabric. They are influenced by national cultural trends to a greater degree than other generations, and they also show signs of increased political involvement.

As the above examples illustrate, scholars who focus on Islam and U.S. politics have refreshingly provided entirely new ways of looking at Muslim involvement and interaction in America. They remind readers that Muslim societies in the U.S. are diverse, that Muslims interact with U.S. society in a wide variety of ways, and that it is important to challenge overly simplistic categories.

**The Aims of This Study**

This study seeks to build on the types of insights that appear in studies of Muslim politics in the United States. While the scholarly work mentioned above sheds much light upon Muslim engagement and establishment in American society, political participation by itself does not reflect whether one is fully engaged and participating in American society.

With this in mind, this work endeavors to further complicate the narrative of Muslim presence in America. It will support the claim that many Muslims in the United States have worked toward becoming part of the fabric of American society, while simultaneously trying to protect their Muslim identity and uphold their Islamic ideals and practices. Instead of focusing on political engagement, however, this work will highlight

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26 Moore, "Muslims in the United States," 128
27 Moore, "Muslims in the United States," 124-126
prominent American Muslims’ promotion of a highly individualistic form of Islam that fits in neatly with the widespread emphasis on “spirituality” in U.S. society since the 1960s.

The history of Americans’ focus on “spirituality” is discussed more fully in Chapter 1. When I use the term, I have the following set of characteristics in mind: “spirituality” involves forms of religious practice that 1) are very much related to the individual and the private sphere of one’s life; 2) encourage individuals to take an active role in choosing their method of religious practice from an array of religious philosophies and understandings; and 3) are more focused on religious experiences than on formal institutions, rituals and doctrine.

In addition, Chapter 1 will hone in on the way in which an influx of Muslims immigrants arrived to the country just as this focus on “spirituality” began to grow in American society.

Chapter 2 will then focus on Hamza Yusuf, whom I identify as the key figure spearheading the aforementioned prioritization of individualistic, “spiritual” expressions of Islam in America. It will also hone in on his relationship to the Sufi tradition (Islamic Mysticism). It will not only analyze Yusuf’s understanding of Islam and the way he projects his more “spiritual” brand of Islam to American Muslims, but will also assess his efforts to dissociate himself from the Sufi tradition.

Chapter 3 will cover the works of three additional prominent voices that appeal to Muslims in America (both the growing number of immigrants and the second generation of Muslims in the U.S.): Yasmin Mogahed, Suhaib Webb and Yasir Qadhi. Mogahed, Webb, and Qadhi present their understanding of Islam in very different ways, but like
Yusuf, they do so while still emphasizing a very individualistic brand of Islam. In analyzing these three figures, this chapter will highlight the way in which this underlying message of a highly individualistic spirituality has been manifested and projected in very diverse ways.

Lastly, the conclusion will discuss the impact of 9/11 on the trends highlighted in this thesis. Due to the rise of Islamophobia (dislike and prejudice against Muslims) after 9/11, and the growing numbers of Americans who often equate Islamic fundamentalism to all Muslims, 9/11 has pushed Muslims to find expressions of Islam that fit easily into U.S. society, and that are highly individualized and apolitical. The more Islam is presented in a fundamentalistic light, the more attractive it becomes for some Muslims to essentially embrace a type of Islam that embodies the exact opposite. 9/11 has ultimately pushed many Muslims to rethink the way in which they understand and adhere to their faith and has encouraged modes of religious expression that are in line with this growing focus on “spirituality” in U.S. society.

This conclusion will also use Anthony F.C. Wallace’s theory of “revitalization movements” to make sense of the trends discussed in this thesis. Wallace proposes that cultures sometimes change throughout history because individuals are highly unsatisfied with them. In terms of this study, Wallace’s theory can help us understand that many Muslims actively promote certain interpretations of Islam over others due not only to Muslims’ growing presence in the highly “spiritual” climate of American society, but also due to the growth in Islamophobia in a post-9/11 world. More than ever, there exists an incentive for Muslims to adopt a personalized, “spiritual” practice of Islam in order to deal with the “stress” around them, as Wallace puts it.
Loose Ends

It must be noted that although this work seeks to focus on prominent voices within the American Muslim community, it by no means suggests the figures covered in this work are the only thinkers who contribute to the prioritization of individualistic, “spiritual” expressions of Islam in the U.S. This work also does not address the unique experiences of African American Muslims, most of whom are not first of second generation Americans. Although it will be argued that many of the thinkers to be discussed in this work have Sufi-like tendencies, it also must be understood that this work is not a history of Sufism in America. Rather, this work is interested in American Muslim thinkers who embrace and promote Sufi-like themes (which happen to closely mirror the emphasis on “spirituality”), but do so while maintaining a connection to more “mainstream” expressions of Islam.

In addition, it is important to note that individualized expressions of Islamic practice are not unique to American Muslims. Throughout history, Islam has been understood and practiced in various ways by its followers depending on the social and historical context. Hamza Yusuf and the other Muslim thinkers to be discussed throughout this work, in fact, view themselves as part of a mainstream Islamic tradition with deep roots in history. They are also a part of larger global discussions regarding the direction of Islam and have been influenced by contemporary ideas from outside the U.S. These larger historical and global contexts make it quite hard to pinpoint how much the aforementioned modes of Islamic practice reflect trends in the U.S., and how much they reflect longstanding emphases in Islam or global trends.
With all of this in mind, this study does not aim to define what “true” Islam is or is not. Nor does it identify the original origins of the highly individualistic expressions of Islam that flourish in the U.S. It is understood that Hamza Yusuf and other American Muslim thinkers are inevitably influenced by global trends and that they draw inspiration from Islamic history. At the same time, this thesis seeks to highlight the way in which specific social and historical developments in the U.S. have influenced and shaped the American Muslim experience. In particular, it helps to illuminate why so many Muslims in the U.S. have found highly individualistic, “spiritual” expressions of Islam so appealing.
CHAPTER 1

Individualistic Religion in the United States

Before highlighting the promotion of highly individualistic, “spiritual” forms of Islamic thought by prominent Muslims since the 1960s, it is important to note that key trends throughout American history have pushed religion in the U.S. in a more individualistic, anti-establishment direction. Looking as far back as the 18th century, for example, Nathan Hatch claims that the American Revolution and its aftermath is the key to understanding much of the religious history of the United States. Hatch states that the democratic ideals associated with the American Revolution encouraged many Americans to exercise their religious creativity and focus on what religion meant to the individual.¹ This “democratization of religion,” which taught Americans to create their own religious perspectives and outlooks, naturally gave rise to more “consumer-oriented” expressions of religion. The religions that succeeded within the U.S., he argues, were those traditions that appealed to the common masses, and that were quite anti-elite and anti-intellectual by nature.²

In addition to the American Revolution, the establishment of the First Amendment also paved the way for more individualistic forms of religion in the United States. The Amendment protected the plethora of religious beliefs and practices in the United States, and restricted the promotion of one favored religion by the government. These legal protections helped create an environment where religion in the U.S. was not

² Hatch, *The Democratization of Christianity*, 188.
(and is not) “confined to what might be called classic or traditional theological, spiritual, and devotional categories”. Rather, the growing religious pluralism in the U.S. made it quite difficult to keep these numerous religious customs and practices in the U.S. from interacting and influencing one another. Paradoxically, the U.S. became a society where the government had no formal ties to religion, but a plethora of religious beliefs existed and flourished. Moving forward, these 18th century developments would continue to shape the religious observance, practice and affiliation of everyday Americans right down to the present.

The growing “therapeutic culture” in the United States beginning in the late 19th and early 20th centuries also helped set the stage for more recent trends, and represents another relevant turning point in American religious history. Essentially, a therapeutic culture pushes individuals to be engrossed with emotional and physical wellbeing. Wade Clark Roof explains therapeutic culture to be “explicit attention to the self.” As Katja Rakow argues, American therapeutic culture can be traced back to the nineteenth century mind cure movement (also referred to as “New Thought”), which essentially shaped and met the ethical and moral demands at the time. The growth of therapeutic culture was a result of key historical events such as the second Industrial Revolution. Although economic and technological advancement were defining features of the period, the lifestyle and role Americans played in society drastically shifted as well. The U.S. economy subsequently shifted from a producer-oriented culture to one primarily focused

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4 Carol B. Green, *Spiritual Transformation in America: What It Means to All of Us* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2010)
6 Supported by the works of Philip Rieff, Christopher Lasch and T.J. Jackson Lears.
on consumers. In his article, “From Salvation to Self-Realization,” T.J. Jackson Lears describes the aftermath of the aforementioned change. He finds that, “to thrive and spread, a consumer culture required more than a national apparatus of marketing and distribution; it also needed a favorable moral climate.”\(^7\) According to Lears, such a moral climate consequently impacted the way in which religion was practiced and understood. He argues that “the crucial moral change was the beginning of a shift from a Protestant ethos of salvation through self-denial toward a therapeutic ethos stressing self-realization in this world,” which he categorized as “an almost obsessive concern with psychic and physical health defined in sweeping terms.”\(^8\) Thus, the therapeutic emphasis in regard to religious practice and understanding was a natural byproduct of the second Industrial Revolution.

In terms of religion in the U.S., the emerging therapeutic culture pushed Americans to adopt an extremely optimistic opinion of God. Many individuals began to view God as an entity whose “primary function was to aid humans in their effort to attain total happiness and satisfaction in this world.”\(^9\) Such a movement ultimately challenged the widespread Protestant notion that the pursuit of individual satisfaction in the temporal world was somehow opposed to religious teaching.\(^10\) More important, New Thought

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\(^8\) T.J. Jackson Lears, "From Salvation to Self-Realization," 4.


\(^10\) Supported by the works of Phineas Quimby
“helped reconcile Americans’ interest in achieving self-realization without compromising their belief in a higher spiritual power.”\(^\text{11}\)

Over the course of the twentieth century, more “therapeutic” forms of religion continued to appear with greater frequency, and reinforced a highly individualistic style of religiosity. As Eva Moskowitz argues in her book, *In Therapy We Trust*, therapeutic faith is so engrossed in the private life of the individual that it subsequently pushes religion to turn a blind eye to the social, economic and political issues of society.\(^\text{12}\) The “focus of change is not external circumstances that may lie beyond the individual’s reach and influence,” but rather changing one’s mind and the inner-depths of one’s being.\(^\text{13}\) This overwhelming emphasis on “inner-growth” has altered the way Americans ultimately are defining religious practice. And the preoccupation with the inner psyche as the connection point to the divine is especially prominent New Age religion and other religious movements that stress “spirituality over religion.”

**Post 1960s Trends in American Religion**

There is no doubt that the American Revolution, the First Amendment, and the growing therapeutic culture all played a vital role in the rise of new, more individualistic forms of religious expression in the United States. Even so, more recent trends in U.S. religious history have reinforced these trends and introduced new dynamics. Beginning especially in the 1960s, a number of changes have pushed many Americans to very freely and explicitly shy away from more organized forms of religious practice, and instead,


\(^{12}\) Eva S. Moskowitz, *In Therapy We Trust*, 284

emphasize “spirituality” over institutional religion. The following discussion seeks to answer three important questions: What events contributed to the growing focus on highly individualistic “spirituality” in the United States since the 1960s? How have religious practitioners defined the term? How will the term be used throughout this thesis?

Several historical developments paved the way for Americans’ increasingly individualistic forms of religious expression. The 1960’s counterculture, for instance, reflected important shifts in American religiosity. The counterculture movement was a period in which American youth very openly rejected the societal and cultural norms supported by many among the generation of their parents. This movement signified strong resentment and lack of faith in the government, specifically in reaction to America’s involvement in the Vietnam War and the growth of the Civil Rights Movement. The counterculture movement was a push for equality, global peace and harmony. It was during this movement that youth took hold of their freedom of speech and vehemently fought for gender and racial equality, and protested war. This period gave birth to the “live-and-let-live” mentality, in which people were encouraged to embrace what liberated them on the individual level, whether that be opposing the governing powers, or turning to inspiring music and drugs.

Significantly, the anti-establishment nature of the counterculture and related movements strengthened a growing focus on individual autonomy and experience. The historian Sarah Pike, for instance, argues that the more experiential brand of religiosity associated with the counterculture resulted in a “progressive democratization of personhood” in which Americans measured up areas of life such as relationships, diet and
fashion by the extent to which they offered personal growth. During this period, people “explored their inner selves” and were “grounded in an intensive examination of the self, of the buried wealth of personal consciousness.” The preoccupation with the self pushed Americans to embark on a “quest for personal fulfillment,” and it taught individuals that they had full autonomy over their own narrative and experience.14 “Moral authority,” in other words, fundamentally rested in the self rather than in one’s family or even religious institutions.15

Mark Oppenheimer’s discussion of the 1960s counterculture movement also confirms the growing focus on individual experience and its impact on religion. In his book, *Knocking on Heaven’s Door: American Religion in the Age of Counterculture*, he claims that this period in history was not defined primarily by theological or doctrinal change in American religions, but rather, by changes to the form of the religious traditions. This was time of what he calls “aesthetic” change for mainline religions, in other words, as opposed to a time of major political or theological shifts. Religion became more concerned with how followers felt or what they experienced when in contact with religious texts or traditions.

Both Pike and Oppenheimer highlight two key features of the post-1960s changes in American religion. First, they emphasize forms of religion and religious practice that were very much related to the individual and the private sphere of one’s life. Second, they stress Americans’ increased attention to religious experience as opposed to formal institutions, rituals and doctrine. Both of these traits are defining features of the growing

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focus on spirituality in the U.S.

Wade Clark Roof hones in on a third major component of Americans’ focus on spirituality: individuals’ growing tendency to combine forms of religious practice drawn from an array of religious philosophies and understandings. In particular, Roof argues that after the 1960s many Americans (specifically the baby boomers) became “spiritual seekers.” These individuals, according to Roof, do not strictly adhere to one religious mode of thought. Rather they shop for “bits and pieces of religious wisdom from various traditions.”

Roof goes on to argue that these individuals differentiate “religion” and “spirituality” and personally tend to find religion to be “culturally constructed ideas about truth, whereas spirituality was what they knew personally to be true from their own experience.” Thus, Roof brings together all three facets of our definition of “spirituality”: “Spirituality” and “combinationism” are on the rise mainly because of the growing fixation on individualism and experience in American society.

Related Changes in American Religion during the Late Twentieth Century

While the discussion above lays out my basic definition of spirituality, it is important to note related changes in American religiosity since the 1960s. For example, Alan Wolfe has come to conclusion that Americans typically are approaching religion with the “live-and-let-live” mentality. He finds that this trend to find personal “truths” fundamentally “encourages people to consider different points of view and to believe that

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17 Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace*, 137.
we more closely approximate truth by entertaining multiple perspectives than by clinging to only one.”

It is also important to note that many who engage and focus on “spirituality” try to apply the term in a universal fashion, so that the concept of “spirituality” embodies the underlying essence of all religions. In an essay entitled, “Procreating Women and Religion: The Politics of Spirituality, Healing, and Childbirth in America,” however, Pamela Klassen challenges the idea that “spirituality” and religion are completely separate entities. She highlights how much of the research done on contemporary American spirituality completely overlooks how practitioners of “traditional” religions can be active “spiritual seekers.” She goes on to suggest that spirituality can indeed be rooted in religious tradition, rather than being viewed as a completely separate entity.

Similar to Klassen, this work will hone in on thinkers who not only have been impacted by the growing focus on spirituality, but who also make it very clear that they find Islam to be unique and true. The prominent Muslims I will be discussing never go so far as to deny or reject the validity or authenticity of Islam and thus understand spirituality through this lens.

Given the growing emphasis on “spirituality” in America, it becomes quite crucial that we take a step back and question the extent to which these trends have trickled down to the Muslim community. After all, this community exceeds five million people, and as

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20 Pamela Klassen, “Religion and Healing in America,” 80.
discussed earlier, the majority have shown little desire to completely isolate themselves from society.

**The Rise of American Islam in a “Spiritual Age”**

Muslims have been in America for quite some time. Some observers, in fact, trace a Muslim presence in North America back to the 17th century, when Muslim immigrants arrived in the colonies as slaves from Africa. During the 19th century, the United States witnessed the first influx of Arab Muslims and by 1920, Arab-American Muslims had established “communal institutions, including mosques, in various cities across the country” and became more integrated into society. It is unclear exactly how many Muslims immigrated to the United States during this period, partly because the U.S. government did not actively seek to classify which immigrants came from the Ottoman Empire. However, by 2000, the U.S. Census estimated that Arab American Muslims made up approximately one-fifth of all Muslims in America.

The largest influx of Muslims to settle on American soil occurred after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. This Act forever changed the religious landscape in America because these immigrants brought with them a multitude of religious beliefs and practices. Specifically in terms of Islam, the Immigration Act opened the door for the United States to receive Muslims from ethnically diverse backgrounds, and many of them

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possessed very diverse understandings of Islam. Just three decades later, Muslims immigrants numbered well over 1 million, and were well established economically.\textsuperscript{25}

While Muslim immigrants fit quite comfortably in the U.S. in terms of their socio-economic status, a major question remained: How would Muslims respond to the growing focus on “spirituality” within religious traditions? Due to the fact that Muslims in the U.S. are so diverse, both ethnically speaking and also in their understanding of the faith itself, the answer to this question is complex. In the following chapters I argue that some prominent Muslims have promoted forms of Islam that neatly correspond with the growing focus on “spirituality,” but they have done so in a way that allows Muslims to still feel connected to “traditional Islam.”

CHAPTER 2:
Hamza Yusuf, Sufism, and “Spirituality” in the U.S.

Hamza Yusuf is said to be one of the most influential Islamic figures in the Western world.¹ In the 1990s Yusuf “shot to fame as a young, eloquent and moving speaker, able to grip an audience with his oratory and almost encyclopedic knowledge, moving seamlessly from the Islamic tradition to modern Western thought, philosophy, and sociology.”² Unlike many of the Islamic leaders who were primarily immigrants, Yusuf was a full-fledged American who had fluent command of the English language. This alone set him apart from other Muslim figures because it ultimately broadened his audience and made him much more relatable, especially to the second generation American Muslims. The U.S. government also acknowledged the great impact Yusuf was having on Muslims in the U.S. when the Bush administration requested advice from Yusuf in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Yusuf was not only seen as the spokesman for American Muslims, but created a viable platform to further establish himself as a prominent Muslim voice in America. In 2008, Yusuf co-founded Zaytuna College, the first accredited Muslim liberal arts college in the United States. Zaytuna has further allowed Yusuf to firmly place himself in a position of leadership as he helps many other Muslims learn, understand and practice Islam in America.

Having been born and raised in the United States, many Muslims in America view Yusuf as an emblem of the future of Muslims in America. Of course, it must be noted that Yusuf also has his fair share of critics within the American Muslim community. These individuals are concerned with the “type” of Islam Yusuf represents and worry that he holds too much influence in American society. However, despite his critics’ sentiments, Yusuf’s unique background has distinguished him as a prominent voice among American Muslims.

Hamza Yusuf was born Mark Hanson to third generation Irish American parents. Both of Yusuf’s parents were academics, and they enveloped Yusuf in the world of Western academia and scholarship. After having converted to Islam at the age of 17, Yusuf went on to formally receive an education in Islam from England and the Middle East. When Yusuf was 18, he decided to relocate to England in order to formally study Islam under Abdalqadir as-Sufi and his Sufi community. Like Yusuf, as-Sufi converted to Islam. Yusuf’s mentor came to accept the practice of Sufism (the mystical practice of Islam) and emphasized the practice of _tasawwuf_ (science of sincerity (Ihsan) in Islam). As-Sufi vehemently rejected the notion of a “quietist, apolitical” Sufism and noted that history can attest to just how involved Sufis were in society. As-Sufi’s mode of Islamic practice and thought profoundly shaped Yusuf’s understanding of Islam in his early years as a Muslim. Yusuf began traveling and staying with as-Sufi’s followers while he embarked on his quest to understand

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5 As-Sufi defines _tasawwuf_ as such. Scholars have described the term in many different ways throughout history. For example, Junayd al-Baghdadi, an early mystic, defined it as “being dead to one’s self and alive in God.” However, the main essence is connecting to the divine through one’s inner-self
Islam. Yusuf was given the opportunity to pursue a degree in Islamic studies in the United Arab Emirates and stayed there for four years, where he studied the Arabic language, *Fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *Aqeedah* (matters of belief) and *shari’ah* sciences under esteemed Muslim scholars from diverse backgrounds in Islamic thought. Yusuf then went on to study in Mauritania, under the supervision of Shaykh Murabit al-Hajj, whom he still studies under today. Al-Hajj is known to be well-versed in Islamic sciences, and as a follower of Islamic mysticism.

In many ways, Yusuf’s Islamic thought is very much an amalgamation of the aforementioned areas of study, and it also shows the influence of academic trends in the West. More important, this chapter will stress just how much Yusuf’s presentation of Islam resembles the growing focus on “spirituality” in the U.S. Before I delve into Yusuf’s presentation of Islam, however, it is necessary to examine the role that Sufism (Islamic mysticism) plays in such a discussion. After all, Sufi emphases fit neatly with the growing focus on “spirituality,” but Yusuf has vehemently distanced his understanding of Islamic thought from the label of Sufism.

**A Brief Overview of the Relationship between Sufism and Mainstream Islam**

A study conducted in 2012 stated that over 20.4 million (yes, *million*) Americans are now practicing yoga. Now, many of these classes incorporate inspirational quotes as part of the yoga experience. A participant, for example, may come across the following quote: “I have been a seeker and I still am, but I stopped

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asking the books and the stars. I started listening to the teaching of my Soul.” While this saying is inspirational and spiritually uplifting, the average American may fail to notice that the author of the quote is Rumi, who was a Sufi mystic who lived in the 13th century. Like other Sufi writers, much of Rumi’s poetry pushes the individual to be one with God, mainly through the Sufi practice of fanaa (self-annihilation). Fanna ultimately was the process of rejecting not only the notion that one’s existence is purely independent from a Higher Being, but also ridding oneself of her or his ego and temporal desires. Prior to Rumi’s time, Sufi scholars had “mapped out a mystical path by which the Sufi ascends towards the ultimate goal of union with God and knowledge of reality...they began to describe their experience of annihilation in God and the realization that only God exists.” This concept of fanaa became a cornerstone of Sufi practice and tradition. One of Rumi’s most distinguished works, Masnavi, reflects and emphasizes the importance of fanaa. In Book 1 of the Masnavi, Rumi states: “Through divine love, the lover is effaced and only God, the beloved, lives on.” Rumi furthers the importance of fanaa when he calls upon humans to “recognize their non-existence and to strive to become effaced in God, in order to truly exist through Him.” These passages demonstrate how the Sufi tradition goes well beyond the concept of looking within oneself for Divine guidance and truth. Rather, Sufism essentially encourages one to become and live through God.

Like mainstream Muslims, most Sufis are very much attached to the Prophetic example (sunnah) and believe the Qur’an to be the word of God. In fact,
historically speaking, Sufism and mainstream Islam were not always seen as two separate entities.\textsuperscript{10} The teachings of the many early Muslim scholars, like al-Ghazali (c. 1058-1111), for example, presented ideas that were in tune with key Sufi beliefs and practices.

Despite these past connections, it is important to note that some mainstream Muslims in the past and the present have been very suspicious of Sufi emphases. Many Sufis throughout history did not find adherence to \textit{sunnah} and \textit{shari’ah} (Islamic law) to be synonymous with being close to God. Rather, for some Sufis, closeness to the God came strictly through the constant remembrance (\textit{dhikr}) of God, and the realization that God is attainable through the inner-dimension of the self. Therefore, although both Sufis and more traditional Sunni Muslims essentially worked toward the same goal of spiritual purity, the way in which they went about doing so was often very different.

These differences over time have steered some Muslims to vehemently reject the teachings of Sufism altogether. Muslim fundamentalists, for example, are one of the groups who openly reject the Sufi “notion of any saintly mediation between God and humanity.”\textsuperscript{11} Islamic fundamentalism views Sufism as something that inherently has distorted “pure” Islamic practice. Fundamentalists ultimately seek to restore Islam to the way it was practiced and understood by the Prophet Muhammad, and they view Islam in an extremely systemized, doctrinal manner. It should therefore come as no surprise that they find the “purified symbol of Islam must have nothing

\textsuperscript{10} Carl W. Ernst, \textit{Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam} (Boston: Shambhala, 2011).
\textsuperscript{11} Ernst, \textit{Sufism}, 213.
to do with saints, miracles, music, or the countless local customs and beliefs that give distinctive flavor to a host of Muslim cultures around the world."¹²

In addition to the debates between Muslims, academic histories of Sufism often added to the tendency to see Sufism and Sufi-like emphases as entirely separate from traditional Islam. In 1821 the German theologian Tholuck wrote the first European book on Sufism, in which he accepted previous British orientalists’ distinction between Sufism and Islam.¹³ Orientalists essentially defined Islam as strictly legalistic tradition. Therefore any Muslims who did not seem to fit that particular mold were consequently described as exotic mystics who were not truly Islamic.¹⁴

The separation of Sufism from Islam by early observers had two major consequences. First, Sufi involvement in Muslim society and politics was typically overlooked. Secondly, the importance that Sufis place on Islamic law stemming from the Qur’an and prophetic tradition was significantly downplayed.

The diversity of modern Sufism complicated the discussion even more. Modern Sufis still seek “union with God,” though the tradition has definitely changed since Rumi’s lifetime. In the United States, for example, there is no one authoritative understanding of practice of Sufism. In fact, some who openly identify was Sufis do not mention or even emphasize Sufism’s ties to Islam. The Sufi Foundation of America Center is a prime example that reflects the reality of how modern Sufi practice is at times viewed as a separate entity from Islam. A brochure for the

¹² Ernst, *Sufism*, 213.
¹³ Ernst, *Sufism*, 15.
¹⁴ Ernst, *Sufism*, 16.
movement does not even mention Islam. Instead, the foundation advertises itself as a way to help “develop higher intelligence and awareness...and helps to destroy all types of bad habits which inhibit people's ability to live full and happy lives.” The overall aim of the Sufi Foundation is to provide people with a spiritual experience that will in turn fill them with a sense of self-fulfillment and tranquility. The founder, Adnan Sarhan, tours the world on a mission to provide people with peace, contentment and harmony, by using his skills of drumming, dance, breathing and moving exercises, meditation, chanting and whirling. Sarhan’s foundation is reflective of the way in which remnants of Sufi practice are used presently, but are at times displayed in a manner which divorces Sufism from its Islamic roots.

Expressions of Sufi practice that revolves around individual contentment and happiness are very much in line with the focus on “spirituality” in the U.S. Yet as the above examples make clear, there are a number of reasons why Muslims in the United States (like Yusuf) may distance themselves from Sufism. Despite this tension, it must be kept in mind that many non-Sufi Muslims in the U.S. have also been influenced by the growing focus on “spirituality” and this work will primarily focus on such trends among mainstream Muslims who have for the most part avoided any identification with Sufism. These individuals still see themselves as very much attached to pre-established Islamic tradition, and have not fully turned to the more mystical practices of Sufism. Despite these individuals’ open rejection of

Sufism, their teachings likewise resonate significantly with the growing emphasis on spirituality in the U.S. In the remainder of the chapter, I will emphasize the mode of Islamic thought that Yusuf propagates. I will highlight the close connection between his thinking and discussions of “spirituality” in the U.S., and I will question the sharp distinction that he makes between his teachings and prominent Sufi teachings.

Hamza Yusuf and the Founding of Zaytuna College

In order to appreciate Hamza Yusuf’s influence, it is important to understand the mission of Zaytuna College, which he founded in 2004, along with Zaid Shaker and Hatem Bazian. Zaytuna was the first Muslim liberal arts college in the United States. According to Zaytuna’s mission statement, its primary ambition is to “bring the sacred knowledge (Islamic understanding)…into conversation with classical texts of the Western tradition.”17 Thus, the purpose of Zaytuna is not only to acculturate students to Islamic ideals and principles, but also to provide them with a foundation in the “intellectual heritage of the Western civilization.”18 Zaytuna students “engage the shared traditions of Islam and the West, studying Aristotle and Avicenna, Galen and Ghazali, side by side.”19 Politics appear to be secondary concerns to Zaytuna and the message of Islam they project. According to one observer, “the founders are a lot more interested in the Islamic intellectual

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17 Rollo Romig, "Where Islam Meets America,"
19 "Mission Statement," Zaytuna College
traditions of centuries of the past...than they are in current Muslim factional disputes and political movements.”

Having received official accreditation in 2015 from The Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), Zaytuna now, more than ever, has the opportunity to bridge gaps between the Muslim world and the rest of U.S. society. Accreditation gives Zaytuna and its teachings validation among Muslims and non-Muslims alike. And as the co-founder of the first Muslim liberal arts college in America, Hamza Yusuf’s understanding of Islam is influential not only within Muslim communities throughout America, but also in the broader society.

**Yusuf’s Publications**

Living as a minority within American society, the Muslim community has always sought ways to maintain their Islamic identity while fitting into the surrounding society. Having been described as “the Western world’s most influential Islamic scholar,” Hamza Yusuf is well aware of the struggle Muslims are facing in America. And given his focus on a more “spiritual” version of Islam, Yusuf’s message is perfectly suited to help Muslim’s in the U.S. create an American-Muslim identity.

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20 Rollo Romig, ”Where Islam Meets America”

21 “WASC is one of the six official academic bodies responsible for the accreditation of public and private universities, colleges, secondary and elementary schools in the United States.” "ACS WASC Overview," accessed November 26, 2015, www.acswasc.org/wasc/acs-wasc-overview/


While Hamza Yusuf has published an array of books, it is hard to overlook the fact that the majority of them deal directly with aspects of Islam that pertain to the individual. Yusuf’s clear focus on the individual speaks volumes not only regarding his understanding of Islam, but also regarding the reasons for his success with many Muslims in the U.S. His most well-known book, for example, is *Purification of the Heart: Signs, Symptoms and Cures of the Spiritual Diseases of the Heart.* This book aims at exactly what the title suggests – to identify the “diseases” of the heart, and to provide practical ways in which one can “cure” her or his heart.

Not surprisingly, Yusuf makes frequent references throughout the book to various Qur’anic verses and *hadith* (sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad). One of the first *ayat* (verses) of the Qur’an that Yusuf introduces references how the Qur’an describes the Day of Judgment as “a day in which neither wealth nor children shall be of any benefit (to anyone), except one who comes to God with a sound heart.” He then follows up with a *hadith* in which the Prophet Muhammad said, “surely in the breast of humanity is a lump of flesh, if sound then the whole body is sound, and if corrupt then the whole body is corrupt. Is it not the heart?” Yusuf’s use of the above Qur’anic verses and *hadith* immediately sets the tone of the book. It confirms the importance of the topic at hand and validates Yusuf’s area of study. After all, traditional Islamic thought (as understood by Yusuf) identifies the heart as the center of one’s being.

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24 Qur’an, 26:88-89
Significantly, the book is a translation and commentary on a poem written by the 19th century Islamic scholar, Muhammad Mawlud, titled *Matharat al-Qulub* (Purification of the Hearts). And as pointed out by Yusuf, Mawlud based much of his work on the pre-existing material written by the aforementioned 11th century scholar, al-Ghazali.26 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali is often described as “one of the greatest Islamic theologians of Islam.”27 The historian Montgomery Watt referred to him as “the greatest Muslim after Muhammad.”28 And his contributions to theology, philosophy, mysticism and the Islamic sciences won him the title of *hujjat al-Islam* (the Proof of Islam) by his contemporaries during his lifetime.29

Most important for this study, Al-Ghazali is well known for his combination of a more mystical version of Islam with mainstream Islamic practices. A key turning point in his life occurred when he was serving as a professor of theology in Baghdad. At the time, he had been trying to establish a rational explanation and foundation for the core principles of Islam, but he became skeptical, and underwent a “spiritual crisis” that would forever alter his life.30 It was during this spiritual crisis that he discovered Islamic mysticism. Based on this discovery, he accepted the possibility of arriving at truth through non-intellectual means. The ultimate truth rested in one’s

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26 Especially Al-Ghazali’s *The Revivification of the Sciences of the Religion*


28 Montgomery W. Watt, preface to *Muslim Intellectual: A Study of Al-Ghazali*.


30 Montgomery W. Watt, chapter 3 to *Muslim Intellectual*.
knowledge and connection with the divine. And essentially the way one came to find this truth was experiential, unique, and not necessarily rooted in logic or rationale.

Eventually, al-Ghazali left his teaching position in Baghdad and moved to Syria, where he would spend significant time with Sufis. During a pilgrimage to Mecca, al-Ghazali formally adopted a monastic lifestyle in which he spent ample time in seclusion. His pilgrimage was also the point in which he dedicated himself to reconstructing the Islamic sciences through the teachings of Sufism. In his famous book, *Ihya’ Ulum al-Din* (The Revival of the Religious Sciences), he covers a wide array of topics including the rules of fasting and praying, our duties toward society, manners of marriage, eating and friendship, as well as the relationship one should have with her or his soul and inner-being. Even more important, *Ihya’ Ulum al-Din* reflects al-Ghazali’s ability to integrate Islamic orthodoxy and Sufism. Al-Ghazali ultimately stressed that practicing Islam inwardly was simultaneously fulfilling the commandments and core tenets of the traditional Islamic texts.

By referencing not only the Qur’an and hadith, but also noting that his work served to build on scholarly discussion dating back to figures such as al-Ghazali, Yusuf wanted to convince his readers that his work was inherently traditional, valid, and orthodox in terms of its content and focus. Similarly, by focusing on al-Ghazali and also Mawlud, Yusuf also clearly wanted to validate his focus on a more inner, “spiritual” form of Islam. Yusuf made it a point to mention that al-Ghazali dedicated approximately 40 books to the curing of the heart. And like al-Ghazali, Yusuf’s

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31 Hamza Yusuf, introduction to *Purification of the Heart*
book covers a wide array of human emotion and feeling that distance the heart from
God. Some of these categories include envy, anger and vanity.

Significantly, Yusuf emphasizes throughout his work that the proper way one
should go about curing the diseases of their heart should always be in accordance to
the *sunnah* (the life of the Prophet Muhammad). Thus, Yusuf makes it a point to
stress the importance of holding firm to the Islamic tradition. In the introduction of
the book, Yusuf states that “the knowledgeable scholars of spiritual purification
have given us the treatment, as they have gleaned it from the teachings of the Quran
and the exemplary model of the Prophet.”  

By making this claim, Yusuf is
emphasizing the that the “treatments” he will be presenting throughout the book
are in line with Islamic sacred texts and are also an extension of the work of
previous scholars of Islam.

More important for this thesis, the message emphasized throughout Yusuf’s
book clearly fits with the “spiritualization” of religion in the U.S. Yusuf states that
“the very purpose of revelation and of scripture is to remind us that our hearts need
to be nourished.”  

Yusuf essentially is stating that the purpose of religion itself is to
cultivate a “spiritual” experience with the Divine Reality. This individual and inward
strand of religiosity echoes the trend of “spiritualization” present in the U.S.

It is also very important to note the controversial nature of Yusuf’s reference
to al-Ghazali and Sufi-like spirituality for some Muslims. Although many applaud al-
Ghazali for his contribution to bridging Islam and Sufism together, he also has his

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critics in the past and present. Medieval scholar, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328 CE) and the scholar of theology, Ibn Jawzi, (1117 -1201) both criticized al-Ghazali for his usage of weak hadith to support the turn to an inward practice of Islam. In addition, Ibn Taymiyyah criticized the notion of esoteric experiences and frowned upon putting experience over Islamic law. He made clear his respect for al-Ghazali, however he stood firm in his belief that the Shari’ah is sufficient, and that one should turn strictly to Islamic sacred texts rather than rely on spiritual practices.

Much like Ibn Taymiyyah, the majority of scholars who have disagreed with al-Ghazali throughout history did so on the basis that he was abandoning codification of Islamic law to a certain extent in exchange for an ascetic, spiritual path that was not fully rooted in traditional texts. In the modern era Islamic fundamentalists in particular rejected any form of Islam that was “tainted” by Sufi-like emphases, including al-Ghazali’s teachings.

As a well-trained scholar of Islam, Yusuf is very aware of this history, and of the resistance that he would attract by emphasizing al-Ghazali’s and Mawlud’s Sufi-like emphases. To be clear, the focus of this work is not to resolve or settle the aforementioned debates between Muslims on the relationship between Sufism and orthodox Islamic practice. Rather, it is to highlight how Yusuf’s mode of Islamic understanding and practice fits quite neatly into the language of “spirituality” in the U.S.

Yusuf, along with Zaid Shakir, also published the book in 1999 titled, *Agenda to Change Our Condition*. Both Yusuf and Shakir co-founded Zaytuna College, and it

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34 Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmu’ al-Fatawah*
can be argued that this book is an overall representation of the goals and focus of their institution and the message of Islam they expound to the American Muslim community. And like *Purification of the Heart, Agenda to Change Our Condition* simultaneously appeals to Islamic tradition even as it describes a picture of Islam that aligns closely with the focus on spirituality in the U.S. The aim of the book is to provide Muslims with a way to fix their relationship with God and to be productive Muslims. Shakir and Yusuf find the solution to both areas of study through the understanding of *taqwa* (the consciousness of God). They emphasize that Muslims today are “morally bankrupt” and that they must follow in the footsteps of the pious predecessors who “engaged the world with the power of truth and dispelled darkness with their spiritual light.”\(^35\) They also note that the only way one is capable of achieving *taqwa* is “through the spiritual struggle (*mujahhadah*)”.\(^36\) In fact, Appendix A of the book is entirely dedicated to the scholar Sidi Ahmad Zarruq’s “Foundations of the Spiritual Path.” Zarruq (1442-1993 CE) is a Sufi scholar described as “one of the most prominent and accomplished legal, theoretical, and spiritual scholars in Islamic history.”\(^37\) As these examples suggest, Yusuf repeatedly highlights a mode of Islamic practice that fit seamlessly with the growing focus on “spirituality” in the U.S. The heart of his message stresses an inward, individual experience.

Finally, the book also covers ways in which one can gain *taqwa*, including *salah* (prayer) and *da’wah* (invitation to Islam to the public via preaching). On the one hand, *salah*, as highlighted by Yusuf and Shakir, is a “vast spiritual light that radiates in the


\(^{36}\) Yusuf and Shakir, *Agenda to Change Our Condition, 15.*

\(^{37}\) "Perennial Faculty," *Zaytuna College.*
hearts of those who truly pray, but is obtainable by one who has humbly submitted himself."

Here again, Yusuf’s and Shakir’s discussion neatly aligns with a highly individualized, experiential focus on “spirituality.” Terminology like “spiritual light,” for example, is often used by those who describe themselves as more “spiritual” than “religious.”

But Shakir and Yusuf also make it a point to include a Muslim’s duties on the societal level as part of the attainment of taqwa. They stress the involvement of every Muslim in their society by spreading knowledge of Islam and also contributing positively to society at large. Although Shakir’s and Yusuf’s emphasis on Muslim involvement on the societal level seems to be in tension with the emphasis on a more “spiritual” form of Islam, the more social dimension of their message does not change their overwhelming focus on equating Islam to individual experience.

Yusuf, the ISNA, and Controversy regarding “Apolitical” Islam

In addition to his publications, Hamza Yusuf is also regularly invited to speak at the annual Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) conventions. The ISNA convention, for example, serves to educate Muslims in America about various topics that help “build bridges of understanding of understanding and cooperation within the diversity that is Islam in America…it plays a pivotal role in extending those bridges to include all people of faith within North America.” ISNA itself is the largest Muslim organization in North America, and there have been over 50

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38 Yusuf and Shakir, Agenda to Change Our Condition, 44.
39 Yusuf and Shakir, Agenda to Change Our Condition, 62.
conventions held by ISNA since 1963, where crowds that numbered approximately 50,000 attended.\textsuperscript{41} Therefore, it is quite clear that this convention and the messages propagated by it are not only popular, but are being expounded to a remarkable number of Muslims. The convention itself takes place over the span of two days and consists of parallel lectures on a wide array of topics.

As a sign of the ISNA’s influence, President Barack Obama himself stated that it was an organization that “upheld the American Muslim contributions to our national fabric” and that the convention was “a testament to that tradition.” Obama went on to describe how grateful he and those within his administration were for the work ISNA has done to advance interfaith understanding and cooperation.\textsuperscript{42}

The RIS convention is also an annual convention that strives to achieve the same goals of ISNA; it too focuses on tolerance within society. However, it is not as firmly established as the ISNA convention (as it only started up in 2003), and also takes place in Canada.

Yusuf regularly is used as a key speaker for both the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS), as it is understood by the coordinators of the events that he embodies the various characteristics and Islamic ideology that the conventions seek to spread among Muslims.

Yusuf’s involvement with the conferences, provides further confirmation of his stress on a more individualistic, “spiritual” brand of Islam. Here, it is especially important

\textsuperscript{41} About ISNA,” ISNA, accessed July 14, 2015, www.isna.net/about-isna.html

to note that not all prominent Muslim scholars within the United States are fans of such conventions. Tariq Ramadan, for example, a prominent Muslim scholar and academic, published an article in 2014 describing why he no longer will take part in either the RIS or ISNA conventions in the upcoming years. Ramadan, like Yusuf, has attended and lectured at both conferences in the past. However, he finds that overall objectives of both conventions and the organizations they belong to quite problematic. Ramadan states in his open letter that “they (the conventions) wish to convey the impression of favoring a plurality of voices” but ultimately fail to do so, as they offer their own agenda as to what Islam and Muslim practice is and ought to focus on.43

Significantly, Ramadan goes on to say, “it is the so-called “Sufi” and “apolitical” trend that lies at the core of the convention.” Such approaches, he argues, consequently entice Muslims to stay silent and turn a blind eye to the aftermath of unjust foreign policy, specifically taking place in the Middle East. It is key to note that Ramadan does not seek to undermine the practice of “true” Sufism. Rather, he finds these conventions shy away from discussing politics and thus, present Sufism and Islamic spirituality itself in a skewed manner. Ramadan states that such conventions propagate ideas that “transform Sufism, a historical underpinning of so many liberation movements, into a school of silence and cowardly calculation.”44 Ramadan’s distinction between “true” Sufism and “false” Sufism goes beyond the purpose of this thesis, but his comments do

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44 Ramadan, "Why I will not attend the ISNA (August 2014) and RIS (December 2014) conferences"
confirm the fact that institutions that Hamza Yusuf aligns himself with are perceived to facilitate a much more individualistic, apolitical, and spiritualized brand of Islam.

In some of his own talks, in fact, Yusuf seems to confirm the apolitical nature of his message. In July 2013, Yusuf gave a talk in Turkey on the “Introduction to Logic.” Although the talk was not directed to a U.S. audience, it reveals his thinking about the relationship between Islam and politics. In the lecture Yusuf argues that Islam and secularism are not mutually exclusive and he brushes off the notion of an Islamic state as being a fantasy in the minds of modern scholars. Yusuf also notes the fact that “religion has very little to do with the running of the state.” This statement ultimately speaks volumes as to the message Yusuf is expounding to the Muslim populace at large within the United States. Yusuf implies that Islam is primarily a highly individualistic faith that is largely disconnected from actions of government in a society.

Along similar lines, Yusuf declares that justice does not necessarily equal God’s law. For example, if one were to look at countries like Norway and their implementation of social justice, according to Yusuf, that would provide a sufficient model of justice for Muslims rather than enforcing the Islamic penal code. Yusuf states that even within Islam, rules that spill over into the public realm of existence, such as the *hudud* (punishments fixed in the Qur’an and hadith for crimes that are considered to be against the right of God) are fluid laws that are never set in stone and that always have the ability

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45 Hamza Yusuf, "Introduction to Logic," Lecture, Rihla (July 2013).
46 Yusuf, "Introduction to Logic," 0:43.
47 Yusuf, "Introduction to Logic," 1:08.
to change over time. As these comments make clear, Yusuf is convinced that Islam, by nature, is fully capable of being practiced within a secular and democratic society. And he believes it is able to do so without losing any of its core teachings. This should come as no surprise, for as noted above, Yusuf also believes that Islam’s teachings, after all, revolve primarily around the individual heart.

**Adapting to the Times**

An important question remains. Would Yusuf ever admit that his interpretation of Islam not only fit with broad trends in the U.S. society in recent decades, but may have been influenced by them? Yusuf provided some clues along these lines in a speech that he gave at a Rethinking Islamic Reform conference in 2010. Speaking of Islamic reform within the United States, Yusuf stated that “reformation can be a complete restructuring of something, whereas in the Islamic tradition the idea that the house is fundamentally sound – it is of a sound foundation, but often needs renovating.”

It is important to note that Yusuf is very smart in the way he goes about calling for changes in Islamic thought. When he calls for a “renovation” of Islam, it does not give off the sense that he is changing anything fundamental, rather just polishing and revamping Islam to fit modern times. However, in actuality, the idea that Islam should be renovated leaves the door open for significant changes, because the process can continue indefinitely. Yusuf’s statement indicates that the alteration of Islamic principles is not only natural, but also needed, especially for those living in the United States.

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Clearly, Yusuf believes that Islam needs to be refined in order to survive and to keep up to date within its surrounding environment and society. By affirming the need for constant adaptation within the Muslim community in American society, Yusuf reflects common characteristics of religion in the modern United States. As Amanda Porterfield states in her book regarding recent trends in the U.S., “Once students begin to compare the social functions of their own religions with those of others, and once they begin to think about their own religions in terms of standards of human flourishing, the urge to revise, reinterpret, and reform is almost inevitable.”51 Christian Smith also highlights how “religious actors are quite capable of reclaiming and reinvigorating lost and dormant sacred themes, traditions, and practices; of generating new religious goods while relinquishing others; and of using quintessentially modern tools to strengthen and promote their traditional worldviews and ways of life.”52 Yusuf’s sentiments exemplify this scholarly discussion on the reality of religious creativity and change in the U.S.

Significantly, Yusuf’s strong individualism only reinforces his emphasis on religious adaptation. During a lecture given at ISNA in 2004, Hamza Yusuf encouraged his listeners to “take a fatwa (religious ruling) from your own heart, even if people give you fatwa,” and he also instructed his audience to “ask your own heart what the prophet would do.”53 By saying such a statement, Yusuf ultimately gave American Muslims the green light to be largely autonomous in their practice of Islam, so long as the matter was sound in their heart. While it is true that Yusuf clearly values tradition and Islamic sacred

texts, he also tells American Muslims that they should not blindly follow previous scholars or widespread Islamic ideas, but instead choose their mode of practice based on what feels right inwardly. In an interview with Sky News, Yusuf stated that “the most important part of tarbiyya (education) is accounting yourself.” Accounting oneself ultimately entails ensuring one is being true to core Islamic principles and the status of one’s heart is pure and connected to God. Thus, accountability is rooted in a process of inward reflection of one’s actions and more importantly, on one’s heart.

Considering his clear promotion of creative adaptation to the surrounding culture, it is at least somewhat ironic that Yusuf criticizes the consumerist culture in America and views it as extremely dangerous to society. On multiple occasions he has referred to consumers as “mindless” and “spineless.” In 2004, Yusuf addressed the issue of consumerism during his speech at the ISNA conference and warned that Muslims who are consumed with the distraction of what this world offers are incapable of fully focusing on their spiritual reality. Yusuf may constantly criticize consumerism, but he also plays into that very notion in his presentation of Islam. Like a good marketer, he consistently presents a palatable version of Islam that corresponds to trends in U.S. society over the past several decades, and that people from all walks of life can accept.

**Concluding Thoughts on Hamza Yusuf:**

Given Yusuf’s presentation of Islam as a highly personal form of religiosity that emphasizes spiritual experience, one might naturally assume that he falls into

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54 Sky News, Hamza Yusuf Interview (Dubai, July 1, 2015).
the Sufi camp or at least supports it. However, Yusuf has clarified (on multiple occasions) that he is in no way an endorser of the Sufi tradition, and he has spoken at length on the topic.

Yusuf notes that the point of divergence between his understanding of Islam and the Sufi understanding involves the importance of upholding Islamic law. According to Yusuf, the Sufis stress the outcome of their experiences rather than traditional practices and doctrine. For example, the idea of *fana* or self-annihilation within the Sufi tradition is meant to reflect a person’s love of God. *Fana* is when a person is so deep in their levels of love of God that they feel they themselves have vanished, and only God has remained. This can be achieved through acts of dhikr (remembrance of God), and Yusuf finds these acts to be the most virtuous action of a Muslim. But Yusuf also finds that a deep love of God that is rooted in esoteric experiences has the tendency to lead one astray. For example, the famous Persian mystic, Mansur Hallaj, stated “I am the Truth” while in a state of *fana*. Such an example is used by Yusuf to describe the differences in his understanding of spirituality and spirituality found within the Sufi tradition. Yusuf is convinced that unbalanced Sufi practices blur the lines between the idea of an inward spirituality that draws one closer to God, and an esoteric experience that unifies man and God.

Despite Yusuf’s attempts to distance himself from Sufism, it is important to note the overlap between his teachings and this particular Islamic tradition primarily because it provides us with a clearer picture of how his message corresponds with the growing focus on “spirituality” in the American context.

56 “Sufism and Dhikr,” Hamza Yusuf lecture, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-2c3ZM51JQ
other words, Yusuf’s very Sufi like emphasis on an inward, individualistic practice of Islam, coupled with references to traditional Islamic sacred texts, directly plays into the focus on “spirituality” in the U.S.

In conclusion, Hamza Yusuf has not only established his presence among the American Muslim populace, but has also spoken internationally as well. He continues to influence and inspire Muslim masses around the world through the many lectures his followers upload to YouTube, and through his live speeches that fill college auditoriums and mosques throughout America. It is quite safe to say Hamza Yusuf and his understanding of Islam are here to stay in America. Not all U.S. Muslims agree with his claims, and my analysis does not aim to evaluate the validity of Yusuf’s particular interpretations of Islam. Rather, my purpose is to showcase just how influential Yusuf’s contributions are as he encourages Muslims to adopt a highly individualistic, spiritualized brand of Islam, which ultimately allows them to adhere to the sacred without having to compromise their American identity.

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CHAPTER 3:
Other Prominent Figures in the “Spiritualization” of American Islam

Hamza Yusuf is far from the only prominent Muslim to promote a non-Sufi, highly “spiritualized” interpretation of Islam. This chapter hones in on additional voices, and will focus especially on the thought and contributions of Yasmin Mogahed, Suhaib Webb and Yasir Qadhi. To a significant degree each of these individuals emphasize a more individualistic, “spiritual” form of Islamic practice, but they propagate their perspectives in an extremely diversified manner. Their varying methods and messages reflect the versatility of such a message, and its ability to reach groups of Muslims from all walks of life.

Yasmin Mogahed: Background and Contributions to Islamic Thought

Yasmin Mogahed is an Egyptian American who has become a leading female Muslim voices among American Muslims. Mogahed received her Bachelors degree in Psychology and her Masters in Journalism and Mass Communications from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She started off her career teaching Islamic Studies and serving as youth coordinator, and then formally started publishing her work as a staff columnist for the Islam section of InFocus News.¹

Mogahed published a book entitled Reclaim Your Heart and she is currently the first female instructor at AlMaghrib Institute (The Institute’s headquarters are in Houston, Texas, but its instructors speak throughout the nation). AlMaghrib Institute targets Sunni Muslims, though it is not associated with any particular

strain of Sunni Islam. In addition to teaching seminars at AlMaghrib Institute, Mogahed is also regularly invited to speak at the ISNA and ICNA annual conventions, as well as mosques throughout the nation. Her official YouTube channel has over 32 thousand subscriptions and over 1.5 million overall views.  

Clearly, Mogahed’s voice holds much authority for many Muslims in America. And a big part of her success is due to her message and focus of Islamic study. As noted on her blog, the majority of her work focuses on “spirituality” and self-development, and Mogahed is very much a part of the “spiritualization” of Islam in America.

“Reclaim Your Heart”

Mogahed published Reclaim Your Heart in 2012. The book is a series of Mogahed’s personal insights on what she describes as “breaking free from life’s shackles.” The overall aim of the book is to revive the inner depths of one’s relationship with God. Mogahed covers a wide array of topics, all of which pertain to the individual. These topics include detachment from the temporal world, the individual’s relationship with God, and love.

Mogahed’s goals are very similar to Yusuf’s. Her book attempts to revive an intense, inward practice of Islam. She embeds various Qur’anic ayat and hadith throughout it in order to back up her claims regarding Islamic spirituality. And even more than Yusuf, Mogahed’s attention is focused solely on the inward dimension of

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humanity. For example, Mogahed has an entire chapter dedicated to attachments. She states that Muslims’ ultimate attachment should be to God, even if at times such an attachment makes them stand out (through dress-code or obligatory tenets of faith, like prayer). She quotes a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad which states, “Islam began as something strange, and it shall return to being something strange as it began, so give glad tidings to the stranger;” in order to emphasize that “by being ‘strange’ to this dunya (world), we can live in it, without being of it.” She goes on to state that “it is through that detachment that we can empty the vessel of our heart in preparation...for its true nourishment: God.”

She argues that the Prophet Muhammad detached his heart from this world and his “ultimate attachment was only to God and the home with Him,” because he understood the following verse from the Quran: “What is the life of this world but amusement and play? But verily the Home in the Hereafter, -- that is life indeed, if they but knew.” It is interesting to note that Mogahed’s writing does not only stress an underlying inward and spiritual message, but also resonates significantly with the Sufi practice of fana. Mogahed encourages her audience to almost lose themselves and their bond with this world and to completely devote themselves to God because He is the real air, food and source of nourishment.

Even the way in which Mogahed’s book is marketed reflects her eagerness to spread an individualized and “spiritual” form of Islam. Reclaim Your Heart is advertised as a way to find “your own awakening,” and to “awaken the heart and

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3 Yasmin Mogahed, Reclaim Your Heart: Personal Insights on Breaking Free from Life’s Shackles (San Clemente, CA: FB, 2012), 24
4 Yasmin Mogahed, Reclaim Your Heart, 30
5 Yasmin Mogahed, Reclaim Your Heart, 26
provide a new perspective on love, loss, happiness, and pain.” It also aims to “teach readers how to live in this life without allowing life to own them...and to protect their most prized possession: the heart.” Interestingly enough, Islam is not mentioned at all in the book description. Although Mogahed embellishes her message with Islamic sacred texts throughout her book, the purpose of the book itself is not necessarily Islamic or aimed at Muslims. She makes it clear that her book is aimed to help readers find their own unique awakening.

Mogahed presents the Qur’an and hadith solely as sources meant to spiritually rejuvenate the individual and has very little concern over the social sphere of life. She actively chooses to emphasize more individualistic, inward themes in Islamic “spirituality” that fit quite seamlessly with prominent trends in American society.

Suhaib Webb: The DJ Imam

Suhaib Webb is a contemporary American Muslim scholar who has made quite a mark on the Muslim community over the past decade. Webb, who also goes by “Imam Will,” converted to Islam in 1992 after feeling “completely empty inside and spiritually dissatisfied.” Webb is by no means the “average” convert to Islam. He openly speaks on his past as a gang member and his career as a DJ prior to his interest in Islam. Webb is from Oklahoma, but he attended the acclaimed Al-Azhar University in Cairo, which is understood to be the “chief centre of Arabic literature

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6 Reclaim Your Heart description
and Islamic learning in the world.”8 Along with receiving a Bachelors degree from Al-Azhar, Webb also is fluent in Arabic and has memorized the entire Qur’an.

Observers have described Webb as one of the “500 Most Influential Muslims the World,”9 and Nour Mattar, the founder of the country’s first Muslim radio station referred to Suhaib Webb as “the most approachable imam in the United States.”10 What makes Webb so unique that Muslims are finding him so relatable and approachable? And more important, what type of Islam is Webb presenting, and how has it contributed to his growing influence within the Muslim community in America? Significantly, although Webb’s qualifications in Islamic studies scream traditionalism, his understanding of Islam is not nearly so traditional.

Webb’s target audience is second generation America Muslims who have grown up with American culture, but are being pulled by Eastern tradition and cultures passed down to them from the first generation of Muslim Americans. A clear sign that Webb targets a younger Muslim audience involves his means of communication. Not only does Webb regularly attend the ISNA conference and serve as the Imam of the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center since 2012, but he also has an extremely strong presence on social media. He has almost 70,000 followers on his official Twitter account and receives over 13,000 visitors daily on his website, which is entitled “Virtual Mosque.” In fact, his website was voted best “Blog of the Year” in 2009 by the Brass Crescent Awards and his continuous tweets

9 Named by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center
won him the vote of “Best Muslim Tweeter” of 2010. Webb uses social media not only as a platform to expound his idea of “American Islam,” but also to build a strong following among Muslims throughout the world.

In addition to his use of social media to target American Muslims, Webb is well known for calling for an “American Islam.” He encourages his followers to undergo “true jihad,” which he defines as assimilation into American society.11

Webb has stated publically that he is intentionally trying to Americanize Islam.12 Webb clarifies that “American Islam” is merely what he calls “moderate Islam.” And moderate Islam, according to Webb, is necessary because Muslims living in America “cannot merely regurgitate sixth or seventh century text and try to answer the crisis of humanity.”13 Rather, Webb states that it is up to Muslims in America to fuse both American culture and Islamic tradition together.

Ultimately, much of Webb’s message fits with the highly individualistic emphases seen in Yusuf’s and Mogahed’s work, and he promotes his message of individualism and spirituality using traditional Islamic references. The overall objective in Webb’s “American Islam,” for example, is “closeness to God, love and following the Prophet and loyalty to the Muslim community.”14 Webb states that basic tenets in Islam do not change, such as the concept of Tawhid (belief in the

11 Abdulrahim, "Imam Teaches Islam with a Distinct U.S. Style"

Oneness of God) or establishing *salah* (prayer). But he downplays the importance of the vast majority of laws that have developed in Islamic societies throughout history. Webb categorizes 95% of Islamic law, or *shar'i* rulings, as laws that are not from the Qur’an and *sunnah*. He states that only 5-10% at most of the laws are fixed laws from God, while the vast majority of Islamic law practiced today is “based on understanding of legal minds that engage Islamic texts.”

As should be clear, such claims make considerable space for highly individualized expressions of Islam that depart significantly from widespread traditions in Muslim communities.

Webb claims that his idea of a “moderate Islam” is not one that completely deconstructs Islam. Rather, he argues that Muslims should stick to the underlying meaning of the text, and reject historical traditions that are not directly mentioned in the earliest sources, and that are not “relevant” to Muslims living in America. Thus, Webb states that “Islam should be moderate and moderation encompasses fixed concrete concepts like God, *Hajj* (Pilgrimage), [and] modesty,” while numerous other areas of Islam are open to negotiation.”

Beyond his description of the “essence” of Islam, Webb’s constant references to popular culture confirms his emphasis on a “customizable” version of Islam that can be modified to appeal to the individuals. He uses references to hit T.V. shows like “The Walking Dead,” or to popular musicians like Mary J. Blige and Beyonce, in

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order to captivate his audience. Along similar lines, his response to the rising ISIS scare was to claim that individuals who joined the group simply had “daddy issues” and were “not really drawn to the group on theological grounds.” He stresses how imams and scholars should be familiar with American culture in order to stay relevant to Muslims in America. He pushes them to have “swag” in their sermons in order to keep their following awake and interested. When asked by Muslims for advice on becoming religious leaders themselves, Webb prides himself on telling them to “go watch ‘Nick at Nite’ for a year” as a means to understand and engage themselves within the American culture.

While the references to popular culture above indicate tacit approval of a more customizable version of Islam, other videos and social media posts are much more specific. In one post, for example, Webb argued that “to question the intention, the heart of someone who differs to you in counter to Islam.” Here, Webb seems to suggest that the practice of Islam is an individual matter and should not be subject to social pressure. Webb also posted a video that is a part of his continuing “Taqwa Trips” on the topic of building the proper Islamic frame of mind. In the video, Webb compares the Muslim psyche to a well-structured building. He notes that the foundation of any structure is the most crucial element, and therefore, for Muslims, their foundation should be iman (faith), while their building should be taqwa (God-consciousness) and lastly, their roof should be tawbah (repentence). It is notable

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18 "Suhaib Webb," Twitter Account, January 31, 2015, twitter.com/ImamSuhaibWebb
here that the foundation of Islam is an inner, personal faith. Webb also posted a picture to his Instagram account that said, "I would rather be a sinner with character than a scholar with none," also emphasizing the importance of personal spirituality and "goodness" over pure knowledge and tradition.

It is important to note that Webb’s message is not entirely apolitical. While he does not call outright for his followers to embrace political involvement, he does speak out on his personal support of Obama. In 2008, he spoke to an audience in Florida on the role of Muslims in political involvement. During this lecture, he stated, “...my mathab is Maliki and my siyasa (political affiliation) is Obam-i.”20 It is interesting to note that only a few moments later Webb noted that Muslims should not put their hopes in politicians, but should rely on God for goodness. Webb then went back to argue that if Americans would like good governors or good leaders, they must be good followers. It is extremely clear that for Webb, politics do not play a vital role in his overall message. Rather, the core of his speech, even when directed toward politics, is that individuals should focus on their wellbeing and put their trust and dependence on God alone, because the outcome of politics and the affairs of the world are ultimately in God’s control.

Ultimately, Webb’s message is one that seeks to be loyal to the Qur’an and Islamic law, but he also echoes the customs and culture of America as well. Or, as

\[\text{trips-part-2-laying-your-foundations}\]

Webb describes it himself: “We can live in the past and go nowhere or we can understand how things are now, and live for the future.”

Yasir Qadhi: Background and Ties to “Conservative Islam”

Yasir Qadhi is a prominent Muslim American scholar, born and raised in Texas. Qadhi is often viewed as a bridge between East and West in the field of Islamic studies, due to having attended the prestigious Islamic University of Medina as well as having received his doctorate degree from Yale University. ISNA describes Qadhi as “one of the few people who has combined a traditional seminary training with a Western education.” Qadhi’s credentials in terms of his Islamic and religious understandings set him apart from many contemporary Muslim scholars in America. Qadhi completed classical Islamic sciences at the University of Medina, and received degrees in Hadith Studies as well as Islamic Theology. He then went on to receive his Masters and Doctorate degree from Yale University in Religious Studies.

Not only has Qadhi attained academic degrees from both religious and secular institutions, but he went on to become an educator himself in both an Islamic and secular setting. On the one hand, Qadhi is a Dean of Academic Affairs, and a full-time instructor at Al-Maghrib Institute. He also is an Assistant Professor at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, and teaches in the Religious Studies Department. In addition to his academic duties, Qadhi regularly speaks at the ISNA

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22 "Yasir Qadhi," ISNA, isna.net/yasir-qadhi.html
Conference, as well as many other events organized by Muslims throughout America.

Having established himself not only within the Muslim community, but also with “outsiders” as well, many feel that Qadhi himself presents a form of Islam that balances “the edicts of Orthodox Islam with the mores of contemporary America,” thus making him quite popular amongst Muslim Americans.\(^{23}\) Although Qadhi has on multiple occasions stated that he dislikes labeling himself as an orthodox Muslim, he continues to do so in order “to show that he maintains the views of the first three generations of Islam on theological issues.”\(^{24}\)

Considering Qadhi’s frequent references to conservative orthodoxy and tradition, it is not surprising that his attunement to trends in American society is not always as obvious. For example, his second book, *Du’A: The Weapon of the Believer*, was published in 2001 and it subtly appeals to U.S. Muslims who have been exposed to a strong focus on inward, individualistic forms of “spirituality.”\(^{25}\) Qadhi’s book is focused on putting the heart of Islam itself in perspective for the reader. Very early on, Qadhi makes it clear that Islam ultimately equals one’s independent, intimate relationship with God. He goes on to state that within Islam, the entire purpose of

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\(^{24}\) Elliot, "Why Yasir Qadhi Wants to Talk About Jihad"

\(^{25}\) Qadhi’s first independent publication was in 1999, on the subject of the Sciences of the Qur’an. This book essentially served as an in depth discussion on the historical scholarship regarding the Qur’an in terms of its compilation, recitation, and meanings of particular verses that exemplify the use of abrogation in the Qur’an. Qadhi also discusses the history and highlights his own criticisms of the English translation of the Qur’an and its relationship to Orientalist discourse in Qur’anic study.
human existence can be summarized in individual acts of du’a (supplication to God).\textsuperscript{26}

In order to support this claim, Qadhi cites a saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, which states, “Du’a is worship.” He also draws on the story of Adam and Hawwa (Eve). The only thing that saved them from the punishment of God, he argues, was their du’a for God to forgive them for their disobedience. Thus, for Qadhi, individual acts of supplication to God date back to the beginning of time, and represent the cultivation of true faith.

As Qadhi made quite evident throughout his book, du’a historically has an important place within Islam. The point I am making here, however, is that Qadhi’s absolute prioritization of du’a highlights his fascination with the inner dimensions of a Muslim’s existence. His prioritization of du’a also fits in neatly with the focus on “spirituality” in the United States. Overall, Qadhi’s book exemplifies how adherence to Islamic principles for some Muslims has become synonymous with one’s personal experience and relationship with the Divine. Qadhi’s approach to Islamic law reinforces similar conclusions. Qadhi describes himself, for example, as a “proud patriotic shari’ah practicing American.”\textsuperscript{27} He prides himself on being a Muslim who holds firm to the “traditional” and “authentic” principles of Islam while simultaneously being the best American he can be.

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On their own, Qadhi’s affirmations of tradition here are very vague, but thankfully he elaborates on his claims. In particular, Qadhi defines shari’ah as a “set of ethics and laws Muslims believe will lead them to God’s mercy.” He goes on further to explain the nature of such laws, which essentially make up Islamic theology. He notes that the bulk of shari’ah deals with the personal aspects of Islam, while very few laws have anything to do with society at large. Like Webb, Qadhi even takes it a step further by giving the percentage of Islamic law that constitutes laws that are intended for the individual and national level. How exactly he calculated such statistics are beyond this discussion. However, it is quite interesting to see how exactly Qadhi has compartmentalized and prioritized aspects of Islam, and explicitly focused attention on a more individualistic interpretation of Islam that would be appealing in the United States in recent decades.

He states that 70% of Islamic law pertains to rituals of worship, such as prayer, remembrance of God, charity, and so on. He identifies 25% of Islamic law that are concerned with the dietary restrictions and personal economic and family laws such as marriage and divorce. Thus, a full 95% of Islamic law, according to Qadhi, revolves around the personal sphere of one’s life. What exactly is the remaining 5% of Islamic law intended for then? Qadhi claims that the remaining portion of Islam, irrespective of how small, is “intended for application at the national level,” such as the punishments for murder or theft. This final 5% comes with an added condition, however. Qadhi notes that these laws are intended for what he calls a “hypothetical system of governance,” and do not hold much of a place

28 Qadhi, "A Proud, Patriotic, Shariah Practicing American"
in Islam at all because much of shari’ah itself is “not codified and [is] based on interpretation.” Therefore, according to “one of the most influential conservative clerics in American Islam,” 95% of Islam focuses primarily on what an individual does in their private realm of existence. And a portion of the remaining 5% is only applicable in a hypothetical nation. Qadhi clearly suggests that conservative Islam in the U.S. is not primarily focused on the transformation of the public domain.

**Qadhi on Secularism and Politics**

Despite his highly individualistic understanding of Islam, Qadhi still has much to say about Muslim’ interactions with the rest of U.S. society and also with politics in the U.S. He identifies September 11th as the turning point in his own life, which has pushed him to “build bridges of understanding between Americans and Muslims.” His goal in America, for both Muslims and non-Muslims, is to emphasize “the maturation and acclimation of Orthodox Muslims into America over the last decade and to break common stereotypes that existed of conservative Muslims.” A big part of the way in which Qadhi seeks to achieve his goal is to highlight the “human side of Islam.” And according to Qadhi, the “human side of Islam” is synonymous with the ethical teachings of Islam.

Qadhi also often hones in on Islam’s relationship with secularism and the role Muslims play in American politics. Here, it is important to remember that he

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29 Qadhi, "A Proud, Patriotic, Shariah Practicing American"
31 Elliot, "Why Yasir Qadhi Wants to Talk About Jihad"
32 "Yasir Qadhi," ISNA
describes himself as a “proud patriotic shari’ah practicing American,” and “practicing” shari’ah, according to Qadhi’s logic, involves carrying out one’s individual obligations within Islam. Significantly, however, by definition, in order to be a “proud” and even “patriotic” American, an individual needs to agree and support the systems of governance that are in place. And for Qadhi, the U.S. system is defined by its secularism, which he understands as a system of laws created by man that provides its people with religious freedom to be a “religious person in [their] own right and to realize that this is a civic country that has a certain modus operandi (i.e. laws) that does not challenge one’s religious identity.”

33 Qadhi seeks to speak on behalf of 5-12 million Muslims living in America, when he says, "Muslims appreciate, embrace and support secularism." 34 Ultimately, for Qadhi, the laws of God are not in competition with or out of step with the secular laws of the land.

Understanding Qadhi’s definition of Islam is crucial for understanding his reasoning here. Since Islam is primarily a religion of personal ethics that aims at improving Muslims on an individual level, then it can easily coexist with and even thrive in a secular environment. Qadhi states, “[S]ecular law does not dictate what food items Muslims choose to eat and abstain from; it does not dictate how Muslims worship God.” Therefore, “one’s personal religious laws can easily fit into and be accommodated by the laws of any secular democracy.”

35 Yasir Qadhi, "God’s Law and Man-Made Laws: Muslims Living in Secular Democracies", Muslim
serves as a prominent voice for conservative Muslim thought and orthodoxy in America, tries to ease the concern that Muslims and Islam are inherently in opposition to secularism.

It is important to note that Qadhi does not believe the Muslims should somehow be silent within secular democracies. Quite the opposite. He encourages Muslims to be critical of the laws and policies of the country they live in. For Qadhi, to be critical of a society's system of governance is a part of Islam, for as the Qur’an states in many different passages, a Muslims is one who “enjoins the good and forbids the evil.”\(^{36}\) In other words, Qadhi insists that believers have a responsibility to hold the governing body accountable for the laws and decisions it makes. For example, Qadhi has said for Muslims to “be angry every time a bomb is dropped on innocent civilians in the name of the War on Terror and to be angry every time our tax dollars are spent to oppress yet another group of innocent Palestinians.”\(^ {37}\) Qadhi states that it is the right of Muslim Americans under the Constitution to “morally oppose the decisions of its government and courts if they choose to do so, regardless of whether that disagreement stemmed from religious sentiment or other sources.”\(^ {38}\)

In the end, Qadhi places a strong emphasis on the need for Muslims to involve themselves (individually) in the realm of American politics. But like the other individuals discussed in this thesis, Qadhi continues the pattern of presenting

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\(^{36}\) Qur’an: [16:91], [7:157], [3:104], [9:71], [9:112].

\(^{37}\) Qadhi, “God’s Law and Man-Made Laws: Muslims Living in Secular Democracies

\(^{38}\) Qadhi, "God's Law and Man-Made Laws: Muslims Living in Secular Democracies
Islam as a predominately personal and individualistic religion. Qadhi’s focus on personal ethics and presentation of Islam in an individualized manner reflects a subtle focus on more “spiritualized” versions of Islam.

**Concluding Thoughts:**

This chapter focused on three prominent voices in the American Muslim community and their propagation of a highly individualized practice of Islam that fit with the focus on “spirituality” in the U.S. It also emphasizes the distinctive ways in which each thinker expounded their message, thus shedding light on diverse manifestations of more “spiritual” forms of Islam within the Muslim community.

Yasmin Mogahed, for example, is engrossed in portraying Islam as a form of “self-help.” She breaks Islam down into more of a psychological and emotional connection between humanity and God, and thus aligns Islam with the highly individualistic American therapeutic culture. Both her writing and her lectures aim to emotionally awaken her audience. Her works are not overly complicated in terms of content and terminology, but are captivating in the way she presents her subject matter. It also must be noted that although Mogahed references *ayat* from the Qu’ran and hadith sporadically throughout her works/lectures, most of her work is applicable to individuals from all walks of life and nearly all religious persuasions.

On a different note, Suhaib Web constantly tries to find commonality between American culture and Islam. While he identifies with one of the four main Sunni schools of thought, he presents Islam in a very “non-traditional” way due to his use of social media and his references to well-known American musicians and
popular T.V. shows. In the process, he emphasizes those aspects of Islam that pertain to Muslims on the personal level, and his stress on individual conscience reinforces the notion of a more customizable form of Islamic practice. Of the three individuals discussed in this chapter, Yasir Qadhi’s interpretation of Islam is the least compatible with the broad emphasis on “spirituality” in U.S. culture. Qadhi insists that Islam cannot be reduced to the emotions that are felt and experienced by the individual, but it should manifest in our interactions with the world around us (including the political world). Even so, Qadhi preaches that at the heart of Islam is a very individualistic form of practice that can thrive in a society governed by secular laws (even though Muslims should give voice to their criticisms of those laws).

To varying degrees, all three prominent Muslim thinkers presented in this chapter further expressions of Islam that neatly correspond with major religious trends in U.S. society. In their own unique way, they each reflect the potential correspondence between Islam and the growing focus on “spirituality” in America. This diversity in turn highlights the flexibility and versatility of “spirituality” in the U.S. Ultimately, Mogahed’s, Webb’s and Qadhi’s varying backgrounds and personal experiences allow each of them to connect with Muslims from a wide array of environments, interests and experiences.
CONCLUSION

The events of 9/11 dramatically changed the lives of U.S. Muslims. Most important for this thesis, 9/11 pushed many American Muslims to reconsider their particular expressions of Islam. The overwhelming majority of Americans associated the attacks with Islam. *Islamophobia* existed prior to 9/11, but the aftermath of 9/11 brought about an intensified “exaggerated fear, hatred and hostility toward Islam and Muslims” and has consequently changed the Muslim experience in America.  

Following the events of 9/11, the Muslim community in America faced an extreme backlash that made it difficult to acculturate into American society. Politicians such as Allen West described Islam as “a very vicious enemy that we (Americans) have allowed to come in this country.” Anti-Muslim activists such as Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer funded campaigns that targeted Muslims by posting anti-Muslim rhetoric in the New York subway systems. One of the campaigns sponsored by Geller included a picture of the World Trade Center exploding with Qur’anic verses plastered across the image, thereby insinuating that Islam was the root cause behind the attacks. At other times, Geller went so far as to

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refer to Muslims as savages. Muslims in America also had to deal with public condemnations by individuals from other faiths. The pastor Terry Jones for example publically called on his congregation in Florida to join him in the burning of over 200 Qur’ans.

In addition, many prominent figures with significant public backing have spoken at length on their displeasure with Islam and its teachings. Such individuals spew over-generalized messages of hate toward Islam and Muslims. In an interview with Matthew Modine, Bill O’Reilly professed that in order to protect America, it would be necessary to “use every weapon to kill as many ‘Islamic fundamentalists’ you can.” Televangelist Pat Robertson went a step further in 2011 when he claimed that “Muslims are the new Nazis” because they have the intent of “dominating us and imposing shari’a law and making us all part of a universal caliphate.” O’Reilly expressed support for this same view when he stated that 1.6 billion Muslims in the world support some form of shari’ah law and believe it should govern society at large.

The talk-show host Bill Maher is another prominent source of anti-Muslim sentiment. While discussing the criticism he faces for his disapproval of Islamic

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8 Bill O’Reilly, Interview on Fox News, October 6, 2014.
principles, he stated “[W]hat we’ve said all along, and have been called bigots for it, is when there’s this many bad apples, there’s something wrong with the orchard.”

Maher’s denunciation of Islam while simultaneously equating it to Islamic extremism is nothing new. Maher has recently argued that there is a “connecting tissue” that unifies ISIS to the 1.6 billion Muslims today. He goes on to note that many “people say ISIS hijacked Islam. Actually the opposite is truth. Religions have hijackers but the hijackers are the moderates.”

It goes without saying that statements such as Maher’s clearly creates a sense of fear toward all Muslims and lump together a body of 1.6 billion Muslims under the banner of extremism.

Bill Maher is hardly alone. In 2006, the evangelical minister Franklin Graham appeared on NBC Nightly News to discuss his views on Islam. Graham stated Islam was a “wicked religion” and he went on to link Islam as a whole to the 9/11 attacks. “…[I]t wasn’t Methodists flying into those buildings,” he said, “it wasn’t Lutherans. It was an attack on this country by people of the Islamic faith.” Again, the rhetoric used by Graham aims to portray Islam itself as intrinsically fundamentalistic and extreme. Similarly, End Times radio host Rick Wiles argued that “millions of Americans will die in one day in this country” at the hands of American-Muslims because Muslims fundamentally aim “to slaughter the people who do not convert to

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9 “Ben Affleck, Sam Harris and Bill Maher Debate Radical Islam.” Real Time with Bill Maher, published October 6, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlN9D81e060
10 “Ben Affleck, Sam Harris and Bill Maher Debate Radical Islam.” Real Time with Bill Maher
11 “Overtime,” Real Time with Bill Maher, published April 10, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BUiJoV55g
Islam.” In 2006, the conservative radio host Glenn Beck chimed in. He asserted, “Muslim Americans are apathetic to terrorism” and noted that it was “time to stop saying this isn’t about Islam (in reference to ISIS)…ISIS is uber-Islamic. And it’s time it’s said. Otherwise, we perish.” In the same interview, Beck followed in Robertson’s footsteps when he compared Muslims to Nazis and exclaimed that they were “Nazis times 10.”

Maher, Graham, Beck and others of that same ilk do a fantastic job in spreading Islamophobia across America. They fail to clearly distinguish between those who view Islam in strictly fundamentalistic terms, and the remaining millions of Muslims whose diverse understandings of the faith make it impossible to box them into specific categories.

The stereotypical discussions of Islam post-9/11, and the severity of disapproval toward Islamic teachings have pushed many Muslims to cling to forms of Islam that are loosely structured, apolitical, and extremely personal in nature. Since 9/11, the pressure for Muslims to disassociate from any possible connection linking them to the “radical” or “fundamentalist” Islam continues to build and intensify. The more extremists contribute to the vilification of Islam, the more attractive it becomes for some Muslims to essentially embrace a type of Islam that embodies the exact opposite of what is represented by such individuals.

The scholar Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad finds that Muslim adherence to their faith in recent years is very much linked with the monitoring of mosques throughout America. Although the FBI has officially stated that they have stopped monitoring mosques from 2011, Haddad explains that such surveillance speaks volumes regarding the perception of

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Islam in America. She observes that monitoring mosques in America fundamentally sends the message that “the only Islam that can be taught is one approved by the CIA.”15 Due to these pressures, Muslims feel as if they must stress commonalities between Islam and American culture. Karen Leonard similarly discusses life for Muslims in a post-9/11 world. Leonard finds that Muslims feel a need to publically profess their undying loyalty to the United States and to be wary of outspoken criticism of American foreign policy.16

Finally, the scholar Edward Curtis also reflects on the difficult situation that Muslims in America face today. Muslims are in a constant state of anxiety about their standing in the United States, he argues. Significantly, this anxiety has driven Muslims to openly identify themselves as secular while “echoing the oft-heard phrase among Americans that they were ‘spiritual but not religious’.”17

In the end, the events of 9/11 cannot be viewed simply as an isolated occurrence. Rather, the aftermath of 9/11 continues to have a lasting impact on the Muslim community in America. It affects the way in which the public views Islam and Muslims, and the way in which Muslims themselves are choosing to practice their faith. What is especially crucial for this discussion is the way in which 9/11 ultimately gave Muslims that extra push towards forms of Islamic practice that resemble the focus on “spirituality” in the U.S. Muslims continue to be under the microscope and they are seeking to find ways to fit into the fabric of this society without having to be associated a mode of religious practice that echoes the “Muslims” of 9/11. Thus, many Muslims are seeking to

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15 Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “Claiming Muslim Space in America's Pluralism,” Discussion draft for conference on Migration, Religion and Secularism, June 17-18, 15.
practice a brand of Islam that is diametrically opposed to the stereotypical “Islam” portrayed to American society at large, and many are attracted to highly individualistic, “spiritualized” forms of Islam in order to do just that.

The majority of the works discussed in this thesis, in fact, were published after 9/11, and it is therefore no surprise that the tone of Islamic expression throughout these works often echoed a very individualistic, “spiritual” and apolitical message.

**Revitalization Movements**

In his theory of “Revitalization Movements,” Anthony F.C. Wallace describes a process by which cultures have rapidly changed throughout history. He defined a revitalization movement as a “deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.” In particular, Wallace emphasizes the fact that cultures often change because individuals are ultimately unsatisfied with them and experience stress when their culture fails to meet their needs. He states that the revitalization process allows individuals to create a new cultural system and replace the one they deemed unfit.

Significantly, Wallace’s theory of revitalization movements can help us make sense of the growing popularity of more “spiritual” type of religious practice among American Muslims. 9/11 ultimately added to the “stress” that many Muslims would have felt if their mode of Islamic practice did not fit neatly into U.S. society. And as discussed in this thesis, the visions of Islam articulated by prominent and influential Muslims

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offered a variety of ways for fellow believers to adapt to the growing “spiritual” trend in America.

There are over five million Muslims in America today who, like the many groups of immigrants that landed on American soil before them, are in the process of figuring out how to fit into the existing paradigms in American society while still holding on to their distinctive religious identity. In this work I argue that many Muslims have their own unique “Revitalization Movement.” Due to Islamophobia and the increased focus on “spirituality,” they intentionally have sought out highly individualistic versions of Islam that fit quite comfortably with the existing trends in U.S. culture. In their own ways, Hamza Yusuf, Yasmin Mogahed, Suhaib Webb and Yasir Qadhi offer expressions of Islamic thought and practice that focus on personal matters of the “spirit” and one’s heart, and therefore appeal to many U.S. Muslims in the early twenty-first century. While Yusuf and the other thinkers believe they are restoring longstanding Islamic traditions and do not necessarily identify themselves as agents of change, Wallace’s theory nevertheless provides us with a framework to help understand their influence and success. By promoting highly individualistic, “spiritual” expressions of Islam, these prominent Muslim figures have facilitated their fellow Muslims’ creative adaptation to the various pressures and trends in U.S. society.
Bibliography


