

The Qur'an Comes to America: Pedagogies of Muslim Collective Memory

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Abstract

Timur Raufovich Yuskaev: The Qur'an Comes to America: Pedagogies of Muslim
Collective Memory
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This dissertation examines contemporary American Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an. I argue that local interpretations of the Qur'an are shaping a new Muslim culture of global importance, where English serves as a Muslim tongue and the Qur'an as an American sacred text. The dissertation is organized in four sections, each exploring the rhetoric of a prominent Muslim American intellectual who represents a distinct stream of Muslim discourse. The first two chapters focus on written exegesis and highlight the work of Fazlur Rahman, a Pakistani-American modernist scholar, and Amina Wadud, an African-American Muslim feminist. I analyze how Rahman and Wadud translate the modern notion of gender to resonate with the Qur'an. The next two chapters present oral interpretations advanced by two preachers, Warith Deen Mohammed, the leader of the largest African-American Muslim movement, and Hamza Yusuf, the most recognizable spokesperson to the second generation of immigrant Muslims. Mohammed and Yusuf serve as examples of the discourse of Islam as an American public religion. I address written and oral modes of interpretation as pedagogies of Muslim collective memory and argue that the Qur'an emerges as an American sacred text when it becomes a locally resonant spoken word.

To Nadya and Adam

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Introduction

But I hear voices in everything and dialogic relations among them.¹

She frowned but did not turn away. She was an Egyptian-American Qur'an teacher at a suburban immigrant mosque who graciously agreed to be my interviewee for a project, unrelated to this dissertation, which examined American Muslim efforts to prevent possible radicalization. She was taken aback when I asked her: "What do you think about some Muslim radicals claiming that their actions are inspired by the Qur'an?" "Well," she said, "*my Qur'an* never told *me* to be a terrorist. *My Qur'an* never told *me* to kill other people."²

I have heard Muslims say variations of this phrase - "my Qur'an" - many times. There is something strange about this expression. Isn't the Qur'an, as most Muslims believe, an eternal and inimitable speech of God? If it is God's, how can the humans possess it? For this question to have a meaningful response, it has to be contextually

¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Methodology for the Human Sciences: Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, trans. by Vern W. McGee (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 169.

² Anonymous, interview by author, Cary, NC, August 12, 2008. As she said this, her tone stressed "*my Qur'an*" and "never told *me*."

specific. My main concern in this work is an exploration of how the Qur'an, through its human agents, becomes a part of local American Muslim discourse. In other words, how does the Qur'an come to be an American sacred text?

The people who bring the Qur'an to America are its interpreters. They make the global sacred text local. This dissertation is their story. Or rather, it is a collection of analytical essays that reflect on elements of American Qur'an-based Muslim discourses. To truly outline the story of the Qur'an in the U.S. is a herculean task outside of this dissertation. (A more comprehensive story would have to give sufficient attention to the enslaved Africans who were the first speakers and interpreters of the Qur'an in North America.) Instead, I offer an exploration of examples that highlight the two key ways in which public intellectuals have brought the Qur'an into American Muslim religious discourse: I examine written and oral interpretations. My subject is the authoritative side of the ongoing, everyday Muslim dialogue revolving around the Qur'an in the U.S. Specifically, I examine the rhetoric of four American Muslim interpreters of the Qur'an: two writers, Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud, and two preachers, Hamza Yusuf and Warith Deen Mohammed.

These four personalities have become the focus of my analysis because of their prominence and potential to illustrate distinct, though connected, streams in American Muslim religious thought. Fazlur Rahman (1919-1988), was a Pakistani-American scholar known globally as a leading architect of modernist Qur'anic exegesis. His interpretative methodology of Qur'anic interpretation has had many followers, including Amina Wadud (1952-), an African-American feminist Muslim author. My first two chapters address Rahman's contribution to American Muslim discourse. I approach

Rahman as an intellectual who bridged cultures. I search for what he made thinkable in American Muslim discourse and propose that this new, Rahmanian thinkable is partly a reflection of his lifelong engagement with the Indian Subcontinent's key modernist intellectual, Muhammad Iqbal. The first chapter is about Rahman's creative translation of an Iqbalian approach to the Qur'an. My second chapter is about Wadud, who is perhaps the most recognizable American interpreter of the Qur'an. I examine her gender-based interpretations of the Qur'an, expressed both in her writings and sermons. The third chapter examines the rhetoric of W. D. Mohammed (1933-2008), an African-American Muslim leader who transformed his father's Nation of Islam into an orthodox Sunni Muslim movement. I analyze his preaching as a part of a local African-American tradition influenced by the legacy of the Nation of Islam and African-American Christianity. Hamza Yusuf's preaching is the subject of the final chapter. Yusuf (1960-) is an example of "traditionalist" discourse, a relative newcomer on the American scene. He is now perhaps the most visible American Muslim preacher. His current prominence is due in part to his entry into the Muslim political discourse in the U.S. after September 11th, 2001. I explore how he uses the Qur'an as he teaches American Muslim participation in public life.

Rahman, Wadud, Mohammed and Yusuf are public intellectuals, who have been engaged in cultural translation of the Qur'an with the purpose of instructing their audiences on how to understand themselves as Muslims in America. In this process, they have attempted to reshape local Muslim collective memory. How do they teach Muslims to remember the Qur'an? I argue that they carry out a double translation in language and time: in addition to translating the Qur'an into American idioms and

placing it within the framework of American cultural references, they also guide their readers and listeners across epistemological rifts between seventh-century Arabia and contemporary United States. The structure of the dissertation reflects the two most prominent ways in which such translation work is carried out: in writing and in speaking. What follows are detailed previews to the chapters that address written and oral ways of making Qur'anic sense.

Translations in Writing and in Time

A colored spiral in a small ball of glass, this is how I see my own life.³

Modern time has a peculiar outline. In his 1951 autobiography, *Speak Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov narrated his life as a spiral marked by a series of coincidences. Each coincidence signaled a new twist in the spiral. He called this a “cosmic synchronization.” This gave the movement meaning. Yet, like many modern depictions of time, Nabokov’s spiral reflects a movement in time that leaves the past behind and progresses to an ever-open future. Coincidences with the past are very meaningful, yet the future is never a repetition of the past. There is a telling, strikingly modern, echo of such a perception of time in the writings of Fazlur Rahman. In the United States, Rahman is best known by his book *Major Themes of the Qur’an*, which was first published in 1980.

³ Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* (New York: Vintage International, 1989), 275.

He wrote it close to the end of his career. Its goal was to explain the Qur'an in "terms adequate for the needs of contemporary man."⁴ This, to him, necessitated an articulation of the Qur'anic perception of time as a meaningful category in human lives. Time, for Rahman, is a God-created sign that leads humans, as individuals and as societies, in a progressive mode towards the goal of fulfilling the Qur'anic vision of *taqwā*, which he defined as "a state of mind" and a state of society that is constantly mindful of God's commands.⁵

In Rahman's presentation, when it comes to humans as social beings, time exhibits its meaning in history. And, echoing Nabokov, he stresses that the Qur'anic perception of history "is like a spiral, not a cycle."⁶ Those who follow the "Qur'anic dicta" will come to "destroy belief in cyclic universes, for no matter how attractive the idea of cyclic universes may be to many..., cyclic motion is incomparable with any purposefulness; it belongs more to the world of merry-go-rounds."⁷

The projection of the Qur'anic time as a sign of human history that resembles a progressive, purposeful spiral is not as obvious as Rahman insisted it to be. It is not even clear whether or not the Qur'an speaks of history as a subject. For example, Fred Donner, a scholar of Muslim historiographical thought, sees the Qur'an as a basically ahistorical text. As he puts it, "the very concept of history is fundamentally irrelevant to the Qur'an's concerns."⁸ It is rather a text that calls towards piety in the present. The

⁴ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes in the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994, 2nd ed.), xii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

Qur'an urges its listeners to remember the past and see in it the same pattern that can be observed in their present and is sure to be repeated in the future. That pattern is due to the human characteristic of forgetfulness: they forget about their dependence on God and thus they fall. Whether as individuals or as societies, human beings go through cycles of remembrance and forgetting. They remember because of the prophets, who are sent to human collectives as the agents of divine mercy.⁹ For a while, they remember God and live accordingly to God's commands. For a while, they are safe. But, time and again, they forget and thus fall victim to the pattern created by God of accountability, where those who are heedless of God are punished. No community and no individual is automatically safe. All human beings must constantly practice remembrance of God and live in accordance with this awareness. Even the believers who followed the Prophet Muhammad are reminded of the necessity to be constantly vigilant and mindful. While the Qur'an exalts them as "the best community that has ever been brought forth for the human kind," they are reminded that they too can be replaced by another community if they fail to remember the revelation and live in accordance with it. This cyclical perception of time – humans are ever reminded and are constantly forgetting – is reflected in the famous saying of the Prophet: "The best people are those living in my generation, then those coming after them, and then those [of the generation] coming after."¹⁰

⁸ Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, Inc., 1998), 75.

⁹ See, for example, Qur'an 2:213. Qur'an 21:107 is the famous passage that tells Muhammad that he is sent as a "mercy to all creatures." Sura 21 delineates the pattern of human history as revolving around the prophets (Qur'an 21:07).

¹⁰ Hadith Bukhari, vol. 3, book 48, no. 819.

For Chase Robinson, another historian, there is certainly a sense of history in the Qur'an. Robinson looks beyond the pattern of repetition in the Qur'an and examines how it recalls for its audiences events of the past, such as the stories of Abraham, Joseph, Shu'ayb, Jesus and other prophets. Such events, for him, delineate a history. But it is a "different kind of history," as he puts it, because it projects a "history" told with the aim of establishing a tradition. The Qur'an's "history" is a collection of stories that rhetorically create a place for the new society of believers within the human movement through time. Those who follow Muhammad, appear in the Qur'an as the successors to the previous, mostly Semitic, communities. They are connected to both Jewish and Arabian prophets because of the familial lineage. But they are also inheritors of the lessons, positive and negative, that God has relayed through the experience of their predecessors in the story of the divine interaction with humanity. Viewed from this perspective, the Qur'an is a document that shapes a "tradition transmitted orally." And oral recollections that aim to establish a lineage tend "in particular towards an hourglass shape, with 'memories' clustering around formative (frequently legendary) origins and more recent generations (usually fathers and grandfathers.)"¹¹

Robinson's useful characterization of the Qur'anic "history" as that of an oral text that enacts memory resembles Paul Ricoeur's theoretical reflections on memory, which can be either written or orally told. Such modes of recalling the past, for Ricoeur, signify the difference between memory per se and "history" as a particular mode of remembrance. History, for him, is distinct because it is "writing from one end to another." All memory, whether oral or written, confronts the fundamental "aporia that is

¹¹ Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 10.

constituted by the present representation of an absent thing marked with a seal of anteriority, of temporal distance.”¹²

The difference between oral and written representations of the past is in the mode of recollecting the past as an image vis-à-vis “memory as action.”¹³ Writing history, in this approach, solidifies the distance between the past and the present: it creates an image of the past that an audience reads. Writing contributes to the distancing and alienation of the past in several ways. First, the writer of memory works separately from the audience. The readers consume such works in the privacy of their own spaces. The author and the reader are thus separated. They are not acting together as agents of remembering. Another step in writing history is chronology. A historian uses dates as references in the past. Yet, such dating highlights the distance between the audience and the past. On the other hand, telling the past is “memory in action.” A person telling the past is physically present for the audience. Her or his words become a part of the dialogue with the listeners. In oral telling both sides of the dialogical recollection participate in reanimating the past. In such a dialogue, which belongs in the present, the past becomes a part of the present. William Graham aptly summarizes Ricoeur’s thought when he states that, “where [oral] memory collapses time spans, writing tends to fix events temporarily and heightens the sense of their distinctiveness as well as their ‘pastness,’ or separation from the present and the individual person.”¹⁴

¹² Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, transl. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 494.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴ William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987) 16.

Because the Qur'an is an oral text intended to be recited, listened to and retold, Rahman's insistence that it teaches a vision of a "historical movement" presents a productive riddle. His additional emphasis on "the Qur'anic dicta" that point humanity towards a spiral-like historical progress -- as opposed to a repetition of the cycles of remembering and forgetting from creation to the Day of Judgment -- is a key piece of this puzzle. This is because Rahman's (and Nabokov's) spiral reflects a peculiarly modern way of perceiving time and human history.

Reinhart Koselleck's retrospective retelling of what moderns and pre-moderns meant by the term "history," felt, imagined, voiced and knew it to be, is instructive. His basic insight is straightforward: the ways in which human beings speak "about history, specifically historical time, derive their terminology from the nature of humans and their surroundings."¹⁵ When surroundings change, so does the perception of time. With modern technological disciplines of time perception and time management came modern disciplines of living, as well management and transformation of nature. Human engagement with nature has changed. And so have the humans. Except for the diminishing number of peasants, most of us no longer rely on the daylight as the primary way of telling time and scheduling our days. As we change our ways of perception, we change our ways of speaking about time and history.

According to Koselleck, pre-modern models of history can be viewed in two ways. These two are related. Their difference is in terms of emphases. And they are always dependent on references from nature, human and otherwise. The first way of recollecting the past and making sense of it was based on an organic model: pre-modern

¹⁵ Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 220.

humans perceived history as cycles of growth and decline, akin to the movement of agricultural cycles.¹⁶ The second model was the view of collective time as a process of an inevitable decline.¹⁷ If an improvement was noted in some element of human condition, it did not encompass much, and from a practical angle what mattered most was the overall inevitability of decline. As the generations of the hadith collectors recalled the Prophet's statement about his own and the next three generations, they spoke in ways that reflected this particular way of seeing collective human movement through time. After the Prophet, in this view, the task of the following generations was to resist the decline, which in the end was quite inevitable.¹⁸

Of course, as Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence point out, such a pre-modern projection of time as decline has often served as a powerful didactic tool. In their study of the bibliographical literature produced by the Chishti Sufis in South Asia, they note a constant theme of decline. In their argument against the Orientalist "buying into" such rhetoric of the past "golden age" and current decline, they propose that another theme was equally prominent - the theme of constant renewal. At the same time, what matters most to my analysis is their observation of the pedagogic value of the rhetoric of decline and remembrance of the "golden age."¹⁹

The first two chapters in this dissertation combine the approach to remembrance as pedagogy with Koselleck's insight on the distinctly modern perception of history. The

¹⁶ Ibid., 221 and 113.

¹⁷ Ibid., 223.

¹⁸ See Yohanan Friedmann, *Prophecy Continuous: Aspects of Ahmadi Religious Thought and Its Medieval Background* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

¹⁹ Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11-14.

material for my analysis includes interpretations of the Qur'an that translate it from a pre-modern oral text into a modern written one. My examples of such translation across time and modes of memory are the written works of Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud. The central questions of my analysis are: How do these authors teach their Muslim audiences to remember the Qur'an? And to what didactic end?

Because I examine written interpretations of the Qur'an that present it as a guide in modern times, the chapter will begin with the issue of translating "time." To zero in on a particularly modern concept that highlights the need for and methodologies of translating the Qur'an into a text in modern time, I will then proceed with the analysis of the American modern notions of "gender" into the Qur'an. After all, gender as a lens through which to approach sacred text, or as Wadud says a "category of thought," is a strikingly modern concept. Wadud's work is an explicit engagement with the issue of gender in light of modern time. As she explains, even though at the time of the Qur'an's revelation "gender was not a category of thought," now, in modern time, it has to be taken into account. "The absence of such a category of thought was not sexist at the time of revelation, but it is palpably so today."²⁰

The two chapters will unfold as a spiral, where each twist of the open cycle will echo something from the previous turn. And, just as in a spiral, there is no end to the story. Wadud's work will serve as the concluding twist in the spiral and the signal of its open movement.

My goal is to present an image of a section within American Muslim discourse that crosses boundaries across time and cultures. The two chapters are reflections of

²⁰ Amina Wadud, *Inside Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2006), 205.

dialogues. The first is an exploration in the Qur'anic exegesis of Fazlur Rahman in conversation with Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938), who remained a prominent influence in Rahman's work. I present Fazlur Rahman's interpretation of the Qur'an as a translation of Iqbal. In this way, I emphasize Rahman's role as a U.S.-based global figure. In American religious history, his role in the development of a local discourse echoes those of George Whitefield (1714-1769), an eighteenth century English itinerant minister who shaped American modern evangelical discourse, and Jacques Maritain, a French Catholic intellectual who became influential in American Catholic thinking of religion and state.²¹ It is impossible to characterize Whitefield or Maritain as American, English or French intellectuals only. And so it is impossible, as so many authors do, to characterize Rahman as a "Pakistani scholar" exclusively.²² As I listen to the echoes of Iqbal in Rahman's work, I highlight his place within the South Asian and global modernist Muslim discourse. His global voice, however, ensued from the United States.

The second chapter will further trace Rahman's influence as an American Muslim public intellectual. Here I will trace his influence on American Muslim feminist discourse, specifically through the writings of Amina Wadud, an African-American author and specialist in the Qur'an best known for her book *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*.²³ Wadud translates Rahman's

²¹ See Harry S. Stout, *The divine dramatist: George Whitefield and the rise of modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991) and David J. O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

²² Rahman is almost always presented as "the late Pakistani scholar." See, for example, any article that mentions him in the *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, such as Majid Fakhry, "Philosophy and the Qu'ran," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, vol. 4, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill: 2004), 68-90. One notable exception to this trend is the volume edited by his students: Earle H. Waugh and Frederick Mathewson Denny, eds., *The shaping of an American Islamic Discourse: a Memorial to Fazlur Rahman* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998).

work into a gender-based interpretation of the Qur'an. Without ever mentioning him by name, she also continues to move along Iqbal's spiral.

Partly, I have selected these two personalities because of their influence on Muslim discourse in the United States. For example, Wadud's book, which is based on Rahman's methodology, has consistently been a bestseller in the U.S.²⁴ Rahman, on the other hand, is most often credited with the influence on American academic study of Islam; the list of his students who teach at American universities is truly remarkable both in terms of their number as well as in terms of their reputation and contribution to the academic discipline.²⁵ Another reason is that both authors demonstrate an American Muslim discourse that is at once local and global. What is "American" cannot be restricted by its location. "American" is a global cultural brand. "American Muslim" is following this trend.²⁶

The two authors' biographies reflect the global-as-local aspect of American Muslim discourse. Fazlur Rahman had spent half of his life in the West. He was born in 1919 in pre-partition India to a family that had deep roots in Islamic scholarship. His father was a graduate of Dār al-`Ulum Deoband, who taught him the curriculum of the institution. After completing his M.A. in 1942 from Punjab University in Lahore, Rahman moved in 1946 to England, thus embarking on an academic career in the West. In 1949, he received his Doctorate in Philosophy from Oxford. From 1950 to 1958, he taught at

²³ Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁴ As of March 25, 2009, it was ranked 88th among Amazon's list of bestselling books on Islam.

²⁵ A good illustration of "who is who" among Rahman's students are the contributors to Earl H. Waugh and Frederick M. Denny's volume, *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse*.

²⁶ An example of this "American" brand of being, acting and speaking as global Muslims is the style of presentation and interaction presented at a Finland-based social network website muxlim.com.

Durham University in England, and from 1958 to 1961 he taught at the Institute of Islamic Studies at McGill University in Montreal. He left his homeland before the creation of the state of Pakistan. He returned there, after fifteen years abroad, in 1961 to serve as the Director of the newly formed Central Institute of Islamic Research. In this role, from 1961 to 1968, he was engaged in the articulation of the Islamic side of the reforms carried out by Pakistan's military ruler and President, General Ayyub Khan. He had to leave Pakistan and move to the United States as a result of the campaign directed against him by the opponents of General Ayyub Khan's government. Ironically, the translation into Urdu of one of Rahman's most influential books, *Islam*, published in London in 1966, marked the most intense point in the attacks against him personally. An academic who translated Islam for the western public, was now assailed by the critics who saw his vision of the religion as too controversial. The central charge against him revolved around his view on the Qur'an. He was accused of denying the uncreated and divine nature of the Qur'an. After his migration to the U.S., he taught and continued to write, first for a year at UCLA and then for nineteen years at the University of Chicago. Both opening chapters of this dissertation addresses specifically a book he published while in Chicago, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*.

Wadud, like Rahman, is both an American and global intellectual. Originally named Mary Teaseley, she was born in 1952 in a family of a Methodist minister. She is a single mother of five children (a fact that she insists all of her biographers must include).²⁷ Her work as a scholar, teacher and activist is inseparable from her life as an African-American Muslim woman. As a scholar, she is best known for her feminist interpretations of the Qur'an. As an activist, she is perhaps even more famous for serving

²⁷ Wadud, *Inside Gender Jihad*, 126.

as a prayer leader at a mixed-gender Friday service in New York City in 2005. Wadud grew up in Washington, DC and converted to Sunni Islam in 1972, while an undergraduate student at the University of Pennsylvania. After college, she married, had children, studied and taught in Libya, returned to the United States, divorced, lived on welfare, and had a short career as a school teacher in Philadelphia. Later on, as a doctoral student at the University of Michigan, she began her academic engagement with the Qur'an, and traveled to Egypt to learn Arabic. Between 1989 and 1992, Wadud taught at the International Islamic University in Malaysia. She joined Sisters in Islam, a fledgling study circle of Muslim women which became Malaysia's leading women's rights organization. Wadud helped formulate their Qur'an-based responses to *shari`a* courts. She came back to the US in 1992 to teach at Virginia Commonwealth University. In 2006, she became Visiting Scholar at Starr King School for the Ministry in Berkeley, CA. Currently, in the Spring of 2010, she teaches and works in Indonesia. The transnational character of her work as a global yet local Muslim intellectual is best reflected in her seminal book, *Qur'an and Woman*, which was originally published in English in Malaysia in 1992 and since then has been translated into Arabic, Dutch, Indonesian, Persian, Spanish, and Turkish. An exploration of this book, in dialogue with Rahman's *Major Themes*, will be the subject of the second chapter.

A Spoken Qur'an: American Voices

In the last two chapters of the dissertation, I make a shift towards examining more closely how the Qur'an speaks through its American Muslim preachers. My central examples are Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf. Both have been among the most widely recognized spokespeople in contemporary Muslim American circles.

Imam Mohammed is known as the person responsible for the largest mass conversion of Americans to Islam. Starting in 1975, he initiated the transformation of his father's Nation of Islam, the largest African-American nationalist organization, into a Sunni movement. Institutionally, his movement was at its peak in the 1980s. Today, approximately half of African-American Muslims affiliate themselves with W.D. Mohammed, which amounts to perhaps as much as twenty percent of the overall Muslim population in the U.S.²⁸ Throughout his life the absolute majority of his audience has remained African-American.

Shaykh Hamza, a white American convert, is perhaps the most downloaded and viewed American Muslim preacher on the internet. His audience is primarily young people in their 20s and 30s, who are second-generation American Muslims, both from immigrant and African-American backgrounds, as well as converts. His career as a

²⁸ On the unprecedented character and scale of the mass conversion to Sunni orthodoxy, see C. Eric Lincoln, "The Muslim Mission in the Context of American Social History," in *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays in History and Culture*, ed. Timothy E. Fulop and Albert J. Raboteau (New York: Routledge, 1997). For an overview of the estimates on the overall Muslim population in the U.S., as well as African-American affiliates of W.D. Mohammed's ministry, see Ihsan Bagby, "Isolate, Insulate, Assimilate: Attitudes of Mosque Leaders Toward America," in *A Nation of Religions: The Politics of Pluralism in Multireligious America*, ed. Stephen R. Prothero (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006) and Ihsan Bagby, "Imams and Mosque Organizations in the United States: A study of Mosque Leadership and Organizational Structure in American Mosques," in *Muslims in the United States: Identity, Influence, Innovation*, ed. Philippa Strum (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2006).

preacher began in California's Bay Area in the early 1990s. This has been his home for most of his life. He converted to Islam at the age of 17 in Santa Barbara, CA. After a decade a decade-long sojourn in the Middle East and West Africa, he returned to the Bay Area, which has become the home of Zaytuna Institute, the institution that aspires to implement his vision for the growth of Muslim traditionally-minded practice in the U.S. His training as a religious scholar educated in the Muslim heartlands has been a marker of his authority.

The two preachers belong to different generations and different streams of religious discourse. Their approaches to the concept of "tradition" illustrate their differences. Shaykh Hamza has designated his teaching and leadership as traditional in the sense of following the Sunni schools of jurisprudence or *madhāhib*. On this, for him, there is no compromise, because the orthodox *madhāhib* represent the chain of religious scholars and spiritual authorities that leads back, with no interruption, to the Prophet Muhammad. Any authentic and sound renewal, he stresses, has to be from within this tradition. This type of discourse is relatively new in the U.S. It gained momentum in the second half of the 1990s and especially after 9/11. Shaykh Hamza has been its most visible and audible spokesperson. Before him, most prominent American Muslim authorities spoke the language of reform that mostly ignored, and sometimes directly attacked, the *madhhab*-based representatives of orthodoxy. Isma'il Farouqi, a Palestinian-American academic and prominent Muslim organizer and spokesperson, is a telling example of that pre-Hamza Yusuf discourse. Farouqi's vision, summarized by one of his students, was "to raise this new [American Muslim] community in accordance with

the teachings of the Qur'an, the Sunna, and no particular legal school of thought."²⁹ W.D. Mohammed did not participate in such a strict rejection of the *madhhab*-based traditionalism. He mostly ignored it. For him, any type of tradition that would resonate with his constituency had to incorporate African-American past and current experience. In the early 1980s, he famously suggested that an African-American local school of legal thought may be in order. In the late 1980s, he phased out this terminology but continued to tell his students not to rush into choosing an affiliation with any *madhhab*.³⁰ Despite such differences, Imam W.D. Mohammed and Hamza Yusuf have labored in the same field of cultural work. They both have served as cultural translators of the Qur'an for American Muslim audiences.

Preachers immediately and intimately depend on their audience. Their communication takes place within a physical and rhetorical setting where their very safety -- in terms of pride, income or even life -- depends on how well their oral performance, always within the context of institutional and other power dynamics, can convince their audience to become persuaded. The act of persuasion depends on the audiences' willingness to submit to the preacher's language.³¹ The ultimate sign of such submission is in the subsequent speech of the listeners/speakers. Preachers' task is to

²⁹ Muhammad Shafiq, *The Growth of Islamic Thought in North America: Focus on Isma'il Raji Al Faruqi* (Brentwood, Md.: Amana Publications, 1994), 114-115.

³⁰ W.D. Mohammed proposed and advocated for an African-American school of jurisprudence in the first half of the 1980s. See, for example, Warith Deen Muhammad, *Imam W. Deen Muhammad Speaks From Harlem*, N.Y., Vol. 1 (Chicago: W.D. Muhammad Publications, 1984). He appointed Imam Vernon Fareed of Masjid William Salaam in Norfolk, VA as one of the people to lead the initiative. As Imam Fareed recalled in a personal interview, Imam Mohammed started to phase out the use of this terminology around 1987. (Imam Vernon Fareed, telephone interview by author, June 4, 2009.) While the terminology was largely abandoned, Imam Mohammed continued to advocate the development of locally-based African-American interpretations. For example, he defended the idea behind his earlier suggestion during a Q&A session at a Duke University symposium in the early 2000s. See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=31dS1Lv4jOs>.

³¹ See Talal Asad, "Response to Caton," in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and his Interlocutors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), 213.

bring the sacred text into a dialogue with their audience. This is what they do as they teach from the Qur'an and translate its words, phrases, stories and morals into their listeners' speech. In this process, they teach contemporary Muslims how to speak the Qur'an. When people speak it, it becomes theirs. The purpose of the third and fourth chapters in this dissertation is to demonstrate how preachers' work contributes to the Qur'an becoming an American sacred text, which can only happen when it becomes an American spoken sacred text.

The subject of my exploration is American *tafsir*. When interpretations are written, as in the works Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud, *tafsir* is often a challenging term. In the case of Imam Mohammed and Shaykh Hamza, this term is doubly problematic because their interpretation is oral. Broadly speaking, this should not be an issue. After all, simply put, *tafsir* is an art of explaining the Qur'an. This term, however, has been primarily reserved for written interpretations, which has become a genre with a particular set of rules and human guardians. An interpreter operating within this genre is expected to go through several steps: typically, they would have to provide evidence of the time and occasion in which a particular passage was revealed, they would have to note variant readings of the verses at hand, and, very importantly in some *tafsirs*, they would have to note if a passage they interpret has been abrogated. If such rules are not followed, the authorities are readily available to dismiss the offenders and point out their transgression. Thus, Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, a fifteenth century Egyptian interpreter, famously dismissed the philosophically oriented *tafsir* of Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, a

thirteenth century Persian, as having “everything [in it] except *tafsir*.”³² A contemporary academic example of a parallel censure is Jane Dammen McAuliffe’s article on “The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretations” in the *Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*. Dammen notes that those contemporary Muslims who try to read religious pluralism into sura 109 (*al-Kāfirūn*) - with the famous line ‘to you is your religion and to me is my religion’ – are not being “exegetically sensitive.” This, she explains, is because they overlook the classical interpretive tradition. They fail to quote and work through the insights of previous authorities and thus violate the rules of the genre. McAuliffe notes that “in the commentary tradition of this Sura... there is nothing that suggests an ‘acceptance’ or ‘religious pluralism’ or a desire to promote religious ‘toleration.’” There are limits to how one can interpret the text. The limits, McAuliffe suggests, are in the texts itself as, she believes, it was understood within the context of its initial recitation, as well as in the tradition of Muslim exegesis.³³ Well, rules are meant to be broken; or rather, they are indicators of ongoing contestations, which is why they tend to change. Because *tafsir*, as it is most often studied, is written, its rules are most blatantly trespassed when the Qur’an is interpreted orally.

I approach oral *tafsir* as vocalization of the Qur’an that goes beyond recitation. As such, it is a genre within the vast vernacular field of spoken Qur’an. The idea of approaching the Qur’an as a spoken text is not entirely new. William Graham's *Beyond the Written Word* is the most notable work in this area. There is, however, a telling discrepancy in his work. He emphasizes that religious scriptures often serve as “the

³² Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), 191, as quoted in Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its interpreters*, vol. 1 (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), 5.

³³ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "The Tasks and Traditions of Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 201-202.

sacred spoken word.” In his definition, scriptures become “spoken” when they are recited and retold in official and everyday speech, as in preaching. He illustrates this broad definition with examples from Protestant Christian preaching. Yet, when it comes to the Qur’an, he addresses it primarily as a “recited text.” He stops short of exploring it as a *spoken* - rather than *recited* - sacred word.³⁴ In this work, I analyze specifically the dialogue between preachers and their audiences. My material are the oral interpretations of the Qur'an by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed and Shaykh Hamza Yusuf and responses to them by their students and other listeners. By observing such dialogue, I intend to go a step further and demonstrate how the Qur’an becomes a spoken text not when it is recited, but when it is retold and paraphrased in vernacular speech.

My examples of oral tafsir are based in the U.S. The preachers who speak the Qur’an’s words, phrases and stories also translate it. In this way, the spoken Qur’an we encounter is rendered in translation. Yet, isn’t all interpretation a form of translation? Legally minded exegesis, for example, is a way of translating the Qur’an into a text of applicable legal logic.³⁵ In comparison, oral *tafsir* serves to facilitate the Qur’an’s participation in the everyday discourse of its audiences. The Qur’an speaks only when it comes into contact with other speakers.³⁶ The Qur'an's very text, which is marked by its orality, highlights its functions as a discourse. For example, its central stylistic feature is

³⁴ To be fair, he does look at examples of the usage of Qur’anic phrases in everyday languages. He also suggests that people who live in the language-environments saturated with Qur’anic phraseology and Qur’an-based discourse - in translated and recited forms – “absorb... more than a passing knowledge of scripture.” “Absorb” is an unfortunately one-dimensional expression that does not do justice to Graham’s otherwise nuanced analysis. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 114.

³⁵ See Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunni Usul al-Fiqh* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

³⁶ As Bakhtin put it, “The text lives only by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue.” Bakhtin, *Toward a Methodology*, 162..

polysemy, or an ability to convey multitudes of meanings through a single word or phrase. From the perspective of the Qur'an's formative history, this polysemy is informed by the rhetorical forms intended to convince an audience of its first listeners. I suggest that contemporary public speakers, who speak Qur'anic words and stories and relate them to the experiences of their audiences, engage the Qur'an's polysemy and lend new lives to its orality. In this process, the Qur'an -- through the speech of its human agents -- speaks a local language, addresses local concerns, and participates in local discourses. Oral *tafsir* is a mode of speaking the Qur'an. Only those who speak it truly possess it.

Chapter One:

Teaching Time:

Fazlur Rahman in Dialogue with Muhammad Iqbal

Infinitely more promising for us is the assertion that repeating is neither restoring after-the-fact nor re-actualizing: it is “realizing anew.” The creative power of repetition is contained entirely in this power of opening up the past again to the future.³⁷

View the world otherwise, and it will become other.³⁸

This chapter, which observes a twist in a spiral of modernist American hermeneutics of the Qur'an, is about a dialogue between Fazlur Rahman and Muhammad Iqbal. My approach here is limited. I will observe some parallels, continuities, and discontinuities in Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman's methodologies and concepts that inform their thought. The subject of my search is their pedagogy of Muslim collective memory.

³⁷ Ricoeur, *Memory*, 380.

³⁸ Muhammad Iqbal, *Javid Nama*, trans. by Arthur J. Arberry (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966).

Both Rahman and Iqbal aimed their work towards what they saw as the vital necessity of revival of the Qur'anic meanings for contemporary Muslims. There are many parallels in their life stories: both came from devout Muslim families, both were received thorough religious and secular education, both were enamored by Arabic because of the Qur'an, and both spent significant parts of their formative years abroad, in Iqbal's case during his studies as a lawyer and a scholar of Persian literature in England and Germany. There is, however, an important difference between the two authors: Rahman was an academic and wrote in scholarly prose; Iqbal was a poet. My exploration of the dialogue between Rahman and Iqbal has a purpose: I want to see how Rahman employed Iqbal to formulate his method of teaching Muslims how to remember the Qur'an.³⁹

My analysis of Rahman and Iqbal's pedagogies of remembrance is based on their roles as cultural translators. Both saw their mission as translating the Qur'an into a contemporary text, accessible for contemporary audiences. Their work with language is tied with collective memory, for, as Maurice Halbwachs had put it, "It is the language, and the whole system of social conventions attached to it, that allows us at every moment to reconstruct our past." After all, "people living in society use words that they find intelligible: this is the precondition of collective thought. But each word (that is understood) is accompanied by recollections. There are no recollections to which words

³⁹ For a concise and insightful review of Iqbal's engagement with the Qur'an, see Bruce Lawrence, *The Qur'an: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006). For more in-depth study on the same subject, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Gabriel's Wing: A Study into the Religious Ideas of Sir Muhammad Iqbal* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1963).

cannot be made to correspond. We speak of our recollections before calling them to mind.”⁴⁰

Halbwachs’ idea of collective memory resonates with the stress on Muslim collectivity that is equally prominent in the works of Rahman and Iqbal. For example, Iqbal stresses in *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, a collection of lectures that served as a translation of his poetry into prose, that collective prayer is the best form of prayer. This is because it is a form of collective remembrance. For him, “the spirit of all true prayer is social.... It is psychological truth that association multiplies the normal man’s power of perception, deepens his emotion, and dynamizes his will to a degree unknown to him in the privacy of his individuality.”⁴¹ This stress on collective action, understanding, and remembering is equally, though differently, prominent in Rahman’s works. In *Major Themes*, Rahman states that after the final revelation of the Qur’an through the Prophet, “an adequate understanding of divine guidance does not depend any more upon ‘chosen’ personalities but has become a collective function.”⁴²

It is worth noting that for all three, Halbwachs, Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman, human individuality is always, to an extent, social. This is at the core of one of the intellectual moves for which Rahman became famous – his constant insistence on the understanding of contexts to Muslim’s foundational texts, the Qur’an and the Hadith, and their subsequent employments. Specific historical and social contexts, he stresses in all of his

⁴⁰ Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and transl. by Lewis A. Coser (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 175.

⁴¹ Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1962), 92.

⁴² Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes*, 81.

works, are key to the fruitful engagement with the Muslim past. This is because, as contemporary Muslims study the work of their predecessors, they must take into account that their contexts shaped their thinking. What I want to explore is how Fazlur Rahman, in conversation with Iqbal, shaped the concepts with which he wanted his audiences, as Muslim collectives, to remember their past. Inspired by Iqbal's vision of the Qur'anic time, he translates it into a category of practical interpretation of the Qur'an aimed at facilitating Muslim creativity and progress in modern time.

I am focusing on memory that is a part of both writers' genre. My use of the term "memory," however, is problematic. On the one hand, I agree with much of the scholarship that projects a difference between memory-making and history. From a rhetorical point, recollection of the past is an effective tool. Done right, it makes the past a vital part of the present. Often, it helps the agents of memory, storytellers and historians, to project a common ground between themselves and their audiences, and thus to prompt their listeners and readers to pay attention. Memory serves to make the present comprehensible by rendering the past meaningful.⁴³ Both Fazlur Rahman and Iqbal use the past as a "pedagogic past" with the aim of reformulating the present.⁴⁴ For them, recalling the past in particular ways serves the role of setting directions for the movement of Muslim thought and action. The past, for both, demonstrates not merely what was

⁴³ See, Barry Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln and the Forge of National Memory* (University of Chicago Press, 2000), xi.

⁴⁴ On "pedagogic past," see David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge University Press, 1985), 371. While I use his phrase, I also disagree with his simplistic distinction between "traditional past" and "pedagogic past." By "traditional past," he means a past that is "used to validate the present" (369). "Pedagogic past," however, is corrective: it "gave insight into today's affairs by comparison with yesterday" (371). Such a difference, to Lowenthal, stems from a perception of tradition as a strictly preservationist enterprise. However, I think that, if taken more broadly and conceived as a possible mode of change, "traditional past" may be usefully viewed as encompassing "pedagogic past."

possible before, but what is possible, in very different ways, in the present and the future.⁴⁵

Their pedagogies consist of conveying to their audiences vital interpretive biases. They do so, because bias is “what makes events knowable in the first place.”⁴⁶ A central thread in Rahman’s work has been a search for the “normative” network of ideas in the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet.⁴⁷ His methodology of interpreting both the Qur’an and the Sunna through their “normative” principles is a particular pedagogy of remembering. It is a pedagogy of instilling a disposition towards the “normative” Islam, which allows to move beyond its current permutations.

Rahman teaches his audience what and how to select from the Qur’an by what and how to emphasize from its teaching. However, his is not a methodology of negation. Rather, it is a methodology of emphases. This he derives from Iqbal.⁴⁸ Through selective emphases both Iqbal and Rahman guide their audiences towards knowing and utilizing the past in new ways. To establish a common ground with their audiences, both continuously remind that the Islamic past - or in Iqbal’s words the past of the “Muslim culture” - is their shared past. It is their shared memory. It is who they were. And it is also, seen through the lenses of particular emphases, who Rahman and Iqbal call their audiences to become.

⁴⁵ I will address the issue of time further. In this footnote, I want to deposit an idea that I may choose to resurrect in a future paper: because of Iqbal and Ricoeur’s dependence on Bergson, both may be seeing the past and present as inseparable. I think it is possible to think of Iqbal’s time, in terms of Ricoeur’s “having-been.” See Ricoeur, *Memory*, 438.

⁴⁶ Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln*, x.

⁴⁷ See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

⁴⁸ Here Schwartz is useful again: “given the mind’s limitation, selective emphasis is a condition of, not an impediment to, knowing.” Schwartz, *Abraham Lincoln*, x.

Yet, there is a significant difference in their methodologies of pedagogic remembrance. This difference signals Rahman's stance as a translator of Iqbal who seeks to render the poet's insights meaningful within the genre of modern Qur'anic hermeneutics. Their selection of emphases is strikingly similar. However, *how* they emphasize similar ideas is often different. This is a major thread of my analysis, which I address as I read Rahman's translation of Iqbal, which helps him to formulate his own methodology of remembrance. My focus here is primarily on Rahman's *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, his American masterpiece, which I am comparing with Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*.⁴⁹ Because for both Iqbal and Rahman the Qur'an is inseparable from prophecy, I include in my analysis occasional reflections on Rahman's book published in Pakistan, *The Islamic Methodology in History*, which specifically addresses the subject of the Prophetic Sunna.⁵⁰

In both *Major Themes* and *The Islamic Methodology*, Iqbal's influence on Rahman is profound. For example, Rahman begins *The Islamic Methodology* by echoing the differentiation between the roles of mystics and prophets proposed by Iqbal in *The Reconstruction*. Rahman ends the book with a section that provides an overall defense of Iqbal's view on *ijtihad*, with some technical corrections. This is indicative of much of his approach. He is inspired by Iqbal. He borrows Iqbalian methods and insights. But throughout he provides technical corrections from the point of view of history and law, as he presents these terms. With such corrections, he de-emphasizes Iqbal in several key

⁴⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes*.

⁵⁰ This is a major difference between Rahman and many of his feminist and other modernist followers: Rahman is not a strict scripturalist. For more on this, see part two of this chapter, as well as Daniel Brown, "The Triumph of Textualism: The Doctrine of Naskh and Its Modern Critics," in Earle H. Waugh and Frederick M. Denny, eds., *The Shaping of An American Islamic Discourse*, 51.

instances. He silences, or half-silences, Iqbal's ideas. Rahman's translation imposes a limitation on Iqbal, either because he disagrees with him on a particular point, or in order to deliver his own message more clearly to his audiences.

This last point, Fazlur Rahman's audiences, is important. It explains, at least partially, why it is almost impossible to find Iqbal's influence in either of the two texts by simply looking in the index. In *Major Themes* Fazlur Rahman mentions Iqbal only once, while from the methodological perspective the book appears to be an elaboration on Iqbal's reading of the Qur'an in *Reconstruction*.⁵¹ Surely, Fazlur Rahman's audiences in *Major Themes* and *Islamic Methodology* are different. In *Islamic Methodology*, published in Karachi in 1965, he speaks primarily to the religiously inclined - though not necessarily professionally so - elite in Pakistan. The book is his attempt to explain to the Pakistani public his approach to the Sunna and its productiveness for the transformation of the country's society in the modern era. He writes the book specifically for "traditionally-minded Muslims" in Pakistan, who, he admits, "are not likely to accept the findings of this work easily." Still he calls on them to read the book and "study this important problem [of the evolution of 'Islamic Methodology' and its contemporary repercussions] with historical fair-mindedness and objectivity."⁵² *Major Themes* is a later text, published in 1980 in the U.S. and produced with the view of both non-Muslim and global English-reading Muslim audience. (Significantly, it does not at all talk about a local, American audience; it is a text written in the U.S. but designed to have a global impact.)

⁵¹ See Rahman, *Major Themes*, 22.

⁵² Rahman, *Islamic Methodology*, x.

In *Major Themes*, Fazlur Rahman does not need to do what he did in *Islamic Methodology*. He does not need to directly plead with a “traditionally-minded” audience because he is geographically and politically isolated from the local contestations in Pakistan. Yet, he still conceals Iqbal’s influence on his work. In both books and in both places, in Pakistan and the U.S., Rahman’s cautious concealment of his debt to Iqbal serves to silence the latter’s potentially problematic ideational heritage. For, if one directly acknowledges a debt to Iqbal, one also must acknowledge a debt to Freud and Nietzsche.

It is also possible that Fazlur Rahman’s reluctance to directly acknowledge his dependence on Iqbal was influenced by his intellectual uneasiness about Iqbal himself. Sheila McDonough, Rahman’s student at McGill, recalls that he “wrestled intellectually with Iqbal all his life.”⁵³ On the one hand, he relied on Iqbal’s insights, especially his projections of the Qur’anic vision of progressive human history. On the other, while he loved Iqbal’s poetry, he was also cautious about its potential to “distract Muslims from the seriousness of moral purpose.” Poetry to Rahman always had a potential to energize and inspire; but it also could lead to people getting too “drunk” on energy, drunk enough to act without understanding.

McDonough also suggests that Fazlur Rahman was cautious about Nietzsche’s influence in Iqbal’s writings.⁵⁴ She does not develop it much further, but, as we will soon see, his careful approach to Iqbal’s elaboration on Nietzsche, as well as Bergson, Whitehead, and Freud, results in quite different emphases in *Major Themes* and *Islamic*

⁵³ Sheila McDonough, “Fazlur Rahman’s Response to Iqbal,” in Waugh and Denny, *The Shaping of an American Islamic Discourse*, 68.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 78-81.

Methodology. Both books are not just Fazlur Rahman's attempts to "complete what Iqbal had suggested was necessary."⁵⁵ Rather they are his attempts to translate Iqbal's ideas in a way that is focused for a specific purpose and specific audiences. It is possible, for example, that Fazlur Rahman's desire to convince his audiences, and may be himself, in the validity of his interpretation leads him to project *Major Themes* as a text with two co-authors, himself and the Qur'an. In this book, he says, "the Qur'an has been allowed to speak for itself; interpretation has been used only as necessary for joining together ideas."⁵⁶ Such a move was significant: through his retelling, he presents the Qur'an that is speaking and interpreting itself, not Fazlur Rahman, not Iqbal and certainly not Fazlur Rahman or Iqbal influenced by Nietzsche, Freud or Bergson.

Yet, what is at stake in evaluating Fazlur Rahman's echoing of Iqbal and their dialogic, actual, and potential, impact on Muslim memory and Muslim discourses? What guides my analysis is the search for the potentials in Rahman's pedagogy of the Muslim past. In other words, what becomes thinkable as a result of his work? I argue that Rahman introduced into the American Muslim discourse a new thinkable: a depiction of the Qur'anic sign of time that guides towards a modern progress. The second part of this chapter will be a case study of how the new thinkable has been utilized by American Muslim feminist authors, most notably Amina Wadud. My interest in Iqbal is in part motivated by seeing a trajectory of discourse that Rahman brings into the United States.

Of course, as I already noted, the major dilemma in Rahman's writings on the Qur'an is the issue of time, which is closely tied to the question of modern time and modern understanding of history. Time is important here. It is related to memory

⁵⁵ Ibid., 75.

⁵⁶ Rahman, *Major Themes*, xi.

because memory is in time, or, as Aristotle stated, of a particular time, which is the past.⁵⁷

But if memory is a process of embodying the past in the present, how does Fazlur Rahman teach it in and for the modern present? Here, Iqbal's influence on Rahman is profound. It is significant, for example, that both use "History" as a mode of knowledge. What do they mean by it and for to what end?

Further, if we believe Koselleck, pre-modern understanding of history followed two models: cyclical and that of continuous decline.⁵⁸ Modern understanding of history, on the other hand, is marked by the idea of progress, characterized by the Kantian vision of the world where "creation is never completed... it will never cease."⁵⁹ So, how does Rahman, in conversation with Iqbal, interpret the Qur'an, a pre-modern document of remembrance for and in modern time, for and in modern history, for and in modern Muslim memory?

According to Charles Taylor, modernity as a mode of living and understanding ourselves in the world is based on "modern individualism" and "secular time."⁶⁰ At the same time, as Talal Asad never tires to remind, many religious people do not aim to live by the secular, modern time of constant, never ceasing change. They continue, at least in their aspirations, to see "eternity [as] the place from which many religions speak, and in light of which their followers attempt to cultivate their bodies and souls."⁶¹ In Taylor's

⁵⁷ For an insightful, post-Bergsonian analysis of Aristotle's "memory is of the past" dictum, see Ricoeur, *Memory*. Ricoeur's work, in a way, is an account of him playing in Aristotle's sandbox, but with pre-modern, modern, and postmodern tools (all time-related terms, about which he is productively skeptical).

⁵⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. by Todd Samuel Presner and Other, foreword by Hayden White (Stanford University Press, 2002), 221-223.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁶⁰ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2004), 62 and 194.

terms, they continue to aspire to live their lives attuned to the time of eternity that is “not just endless profane time, but an ascent into the unchanging, or a kind of gathering of time into unity.”⁶²

So, how does Rahman address the dichotomy of secular/modern time and the time of eternity? What does he borrow from and what does he silence in Iqbal in order to construct his own pedagogy of the Qur’an as the guide to his modern audiences? How does he teach his audiences to re-member, to re-make sense of the Qur’an and, in process, understand and transform themselves in light of the revelation? One hint of what both Rahman and Iqbal do is reflected in the fact that they rarely use the word “eternity.” This word is too static for both authors. Rather they use the word “Infinite.” But they use this word differently and with different emphases. Such difference is telling.

What follows is my reflection on the pedagogy of the Qur’an in Rahman’s dialogue with and translation of Iqbal. My overall observation is that the difference in what Iqbal and Fazlur Rahman prescribe as methods and contents of Muslim remembering of the foundational texts of their traditions reflects an important difference in their intellectual enterprises. Iqbal teaches what to remember by engaging in poetic myth-making about the past designed to inspire creative action for the future. Fazlur Rahman’s enterprise is not poetic. It is legal and historical. His historical and textual research is designed to discover *rationes legis*, principles behind legal applications derived from the Qur’an. There is, of course, a significant difference between myth-making and the making/discovering of *rationes legis*.

⁶¹ Talal Asad, “Response to Connolly” in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern*, 223.

⁶² Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 97.

As we will see in chapter two, the difference between Iqbal and Rahman foreshadows some disagreements Amina Wadud develops with Rahman. While following Rahman's logic, she, like Iqbal, is engaged in ethically-guided action, which goes beyond the act of writing. She borrows from Rahman the Iqbalian emphasis on the Qur'anic ethics. But, unlike Rahman, her work is not directed at a reformulation of law, but rather at active establishment of precedents. In this view, the law follows practice. But, before we get to Wadud, let us turn our gaze to the Rahmanian twist in the movement of the spiral of the American Muslim modernist discourse.

Fazlur Rahman presents *Major Themes* as a book where the Qur'an is "allowed to speak for itself." (Of course, in his rendition, the Qur'an speaks with an Iqbalian accent.) The Qur'an, he insists, is a book about God and human beings, male and female. Its actors are God and humans. Its theaters of action are history and nature. The first sentence in the first chapter of the book is that "the Qur'an is a document that is squarely aimed at man."⁶³ As for God, we know only as much about Him/It/Her from the Qur'an as it is necessary to know in order to guide the humans through their life successfully and towards a successful end.⁶⁴

Rahman shapes the book as a series of reflections on the Qur'an's major themes. The theme of God is the first in this chain, followed by the reflections on human beings, nature, revelation, eschatology, the problem of evil, and eventually the communal life of

⁶³ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 1.

⁶⁴ See his elaboration on *falāh* and *khusran* (loss) in the chapter on eschatology in *Ibid.*, 108.

Muslims. This order reflects his overall thesis: the end-goal of the Qur'an is to instruct the human beings on how to fulfill their divinely-mandated mission – “to create a moral social order on earth.”⁶⁵ But to understand what that means, human beings must constantly be mindful of their relationship with God. That is why he presents the idea of *taqwā*, human beings' constant mindfulness of God, as central to the entire Qur'an. As Rahman puts it, human beings have a “unique position in the order of creation,” which they “can discharge only through *taqwā*.”⁶⁶

Much of what Fazlur Rahman actually says about God and God's interaction with humans parallels Iqbal's *Reconstruction*. Central in his engagement with Iqbal is the formulation of the “Qur'anic concept of God” as an “organic unity.”⁶⁷ The word “organic” illustrates both authors' engagement with the Qur'an and their formulation of it as guidance to humanity that transcends time.

“Organic” is key to their articulation of the Qur'anic message to the human beings as agents and architects of their own history. The movement of history here is tied to the movement of time, which, in turn, is a reflection of nature as God's arena of creative action. In light of Koselleck's insight on the relationship between our perception of time and our experience of nature, Rahman and Iqbal's thinking about nature is a part of their re-thinking of the meaning behind the human movement through time. Yet, when Rahman uses the word “organic,” he says something dramatically different from Iqbal. To understand what Rahman means by this, it is useful to examine his presentation of the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 18.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 14.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 1

human historical time, which he says is a Qur'anic theme, in conversation with Iqbal's *Reconstruction*, the source of Rahman's phraseology.

To Fazlur Rahman, the Qur'an presents God as an "organic unity" because such a formulation demonstrates an inseparable and on-going way of God's "orderly creativity, sustenance, guidance, justice, and mercy."⁶⁸ These features of God's work are organically related. They are "not only fully co-extensive but fully interpenetrating and fully identical."⁶⁹ These characteristics of God's on-going action reflect God's attitude and action in the world, in nature, in individual human beings, and in societies. Understanding such principles is the practical purpose of Rahman's work. Its importance reflects the Qur'an's role as a guide for humanity.

Rahman directly translates Iqbal's phraseology when he states that the major impetus of the Qur'an is "to shake him [the human being] into belief."⁷⁰ He repeats verbatim Iqbal's metaphor of "shaking" and "awaking," which runs throughout the *Reconstruction* and is linked to the word "organic." For Iqbal, "the immediate purpose of the Qur'an" is to force and inspire humans to recognize the signs of Divine work, which are all around them, as they are constantly revealed in natural life. "No doubt," Iqbal lectures in *The Reconstruction*, God aims through the Qur'an to "awaken in man the consciousness of that of which nature is regarded as symbol."⁷¹ The reason why nature and proper understanding of it lead toward knowledge of God is because nature

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁷¹ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 14.

reflects God. In nature, God actualizes divine creativity. Human creativity in knowledge - be it knowledge of nature or human action - reflects God's creativity in nature.

Or rather, the word "reflects" is wrong since it evokes duality. To problematize the perception of duality and boundary between the divine and the human actors, Iqbal stresses that "nature is to the Divine Self as character [is] to the human self."⁷² For him, what is key about nature is constant change, which is related to his specific use of the term "organic." "Organic" here means "alive," and therefore constantly changing. Significantly, he uses the word "organic" specifically in reference to knowledge. All knowledge to him is "organically determined," including the processes involved in knowing the Divine, or "mystic knowledge."⁷³

Behind this assertion stands the entire network of Iqbal's philosophy, which productively incorporates such European thinkers as Bergson, Whitehead, Nietzsche, and Freud. This network is tied into Iqbal's conception of movement, actualized both in time and nature. These European thinkers serve for him as inspirations for his rethinking of the Qur'an.

For example, Iqbal relies on Bergson to stress "change... without ceasing," "a constant mobility, an unceasing flux of states, a perpetual flow in which there is no halt or resting place." All of this is the condition of a human body, as well as human inner life, in which "there is nothing static."⁷⁴ As such, human condition is "organic." It is natural because it reflects the flow of nature and unfolds in nature. At the same time, he reads and teaches the Qur'an with the help of Whitehead. "According to Professor

⁷² Ibid., 56.

⁷³ Ibid., 23.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 47.

Whitehead,” Iqbal says, “nature is not a static fact situated in an a-dynamic void, but a structure of events possessing the character of a continuous creative flow which thought cuts up into isolated immobilities out of whose mutual relations arise the concepts of space and time.”⁷⁵ He calls on his listeners and readers to recognize in Whitehead’s insight a reflection of the Qur’anic method: doesn’t the revelation call on humans to see the signs of God in nature? Does not the Qur’an say, in Iqbal’s translation, “verily in the alternations of night and of day in all that God created in the Heavens and in the earth are signs to those who fear Him? (10:6)?”⁷⁶ To Iqbal, both the Qur’an and Whitehead point toward God, because God of the Qur’an is God in constant motion, constantly creating. This, in Iqbal’s interpretation, is the meaning of “every day doth some new work employ Him.”⁷⁷

Of course, God’s movement is of a different kind, impossible to represent through the limited, human perception of time. The time of ordinary human experience is finite. It is a limited perception of the constant, infinite flow of God’s creative activity. God’s activity is in nature, which humans perceive through finite lenses.

In human self, however, there is a creative “appreciative side of the self” that functions as a corrective to the limited, finite self, which Iqbal calls the “efficient self.”⁷⁸ He derives this term from the contemporary to him discourse of psychology. Using Bergson, he explains that one can arrive at an understanding of this side of the self by examining human “conscious experience,” especially “in the moments of profound

⁷⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Iqbal’s translation of Qur’an 55:29. This translation emphasizes the changing of the “state/حَالَة”.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 47.

meditation,” when “we sink deeper into our deeper self and reach the inner centre of experience”:

In the life-process of this deeper ego the states of consciousness melt into each other. The unity of the appreciative ego is like the unity in which every experience permeates the whole. There is no numerical distinctness of states in the totality of the ego, the multiplicity of whose elements is, unlike that of the efficient self, whole and qualitative. There is change and movement, but this change and movement are indivisible; their elements inter-penetrate and are wholly non-serial in character. It appears that the time of the appreciative self is a single “now,” which the efficient self, in its traffic with the world of space, pulverizes into a series of “nows” like pearl beads in a thread. Here is then, pure duration unadulterated by space.⁷⁹

This insight is central to Iqbal. It brings together the Muslim Sufi practices and twentieth century psychology. More than that, it helps him to develop the core of what he says about nature, God, human beings and the Qur’an. Iqbal, with the help of Bergson, Whitehead and the Qur’an, weaves a particular understanding of what is “organic.” For him this is a word meant to transform dualities. “Organic” in Iqbal is polysemous, meaning different *but interrelated* notions when applied to God and humans, as well as to human capacity to move in the direction of understanding God and acting in resonance with the divine. This, then, is the purpose of the Qur’an for Iqbal: he calls on humans to overcome the perception of their limitation and act in ways that constantly reshape their own nature and history. Such a movement, to him, is the meaning of human history, which is progressive and always open.

“Organic” in Iqbal is a word imbued with the potential to generate new understandings, which can help human beings to transform themselves in history. Rahman translates this insight into his own work, but only to an extent. Echoing Iqbal,

⁷⁹ Ibid., 47- 48.

he declares that “any partialization of reality ... is *shirk*.” Also, echoing Iqbal, he insists that “God and nature are not two different factors.”⁸⁰ He explains this in terms reminiscent of Iqbal’s. There are two types of causation - natural and a “more ultimate causation,” which bestows “upon natural processes in their entirety a significance and intelligibility that natural processes viewed in themselves do not yield.” “This higher causation is not a duplicate of, nor is it in addition to, natural causation. It works within it, or rather is identical with it – when viewed at a different level and invested with proper meaning.”⁸¹

Could it be that by “different level” and “invested by proper meaning” Rahman means something similar to what Iqbal referred to as knowledge derived “in the moment of profound meditation”? Fazlur Rahman moves almost to this point but is careful not to go too far. Like Iqbal he sees “inner perception” as key in attaining deeper knowledge.⁸² Yet, he stresses, there is a limit to that knowledge.

While Rahman echoes Iqbal, he is constantly struggling with a potential danger of pantheism, which might result from a misreading of Iqbal. To make sure that his readers “keep clear of pantheism and relativism, the most attractive and powerful of all spiritual drugs,” he is careful to avoid the term “organic” in one place where this word would appear to be most natural, when he talks about nature. Indeed, he calls on his readers to marvel at nature, which is “so well-knit and works with such regularity that it is a prime

⁸⁰ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 12 and 15.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 34.

miracle of God.” But, in a significant twist, he describes nature and the natural universe in a very modern way - as a “gigantic machine.”⁸³

This, seemingly strange choice of terminology, is related to his insistence on a fundamental principle of the Qur’an that relates to God and the creation:

The most fundamental disparity between God and His creation is that, where as God is infinite and absolute, every creature is finite. All things have potentialities, but *no amount of potentiality may allow what is finite to transcend its finitude and pass into infinity.*[TY emphasis]⁸⁴

In such a reformulation of Iqbal’s notion of “organic” God and “organic” creation Fazlur Rahman overcomes a number of key concepts behind Iqbal’s language that he found most problematic. The difference between the two on this point is profound. Rahman, like Iqbal, is often engaged with the kind of thinking that erases, or at least negotiates binaries. But the binary between Nature and God, and thus any creature, including human beings and God, is impenetrable.

This is very different from Iqbal’s insistence on the destiny of “man” as “a unity of life.”⁸⁵ Life to Iqbal is organic. Like nature, it is constantly evolving. What human beings have to overcome is precisely the mind-set produced by the body as “accumulated action or habit of the soul” accustomed to living in serial time, disciplined through the “mechanizing effects” of everyday life, “of sleep and business.”⁸⁶ For Iqbal, nature is not a machine because God is not a machine, and because “nature is to the Divine Self as

⁸³ Ibid., 68.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 67.

⁸⁵ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 96.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 109.

character to the human self.”⁸⁷ Both God and “man” are individualities/egos (as in ego and the Ultimate Ego).⁸⁸ Both are organic, in polysemous ways. Both are living, which to Iqbal means constantly in movement, constantly creating and constantly reshaping themselves. What connects the human ego with the Ultimate Ego is the capacity for creative thought. Indeed, what makes finite human thought possible is the Infinite Thought of the Ultimate Ego.⁸⁹ The promise of the Qur’an to humanity, its very purpose, is to awaken humans to their “essential” thinking, and therefore creative nature, which in turn would set them in the direction of overcoming their present finitude.

Such a proposition appears dangerous to Fazlur Rahman. He insists that when the Qur’an “is allowed to speak for itself” – rather than through the lenses of Bergson or Whitehead – it “expresses the most fundamental, *unbridgeable* difference between the nature of God and the nature of man.”⁹⁰ It is therefore, a “dangerous silliness” for humans to “equate and identify finite beings [as they are] with the Infinite one.”⁹¹

Yet, what is the aim of the Qur’an as God’s revelation to humanity? Rahman agrees with Iqbal that there is a historical mission in the Qur’an’s revelation. It is *historical* in terms of human history. Their differences, however, are in what they choose to emphasize. In Iqbal’s reading, “the Qur’an opens our eyes to the great fact of change, through the appreciation of which alone it is possible to build a durable civilization.”⁹²

⁸⁷ Ibid., 56.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 62.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 6.

⁹⁰ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 13 (emph. TY).

⁹¹ Ibid., 7.

⁹² Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 15.

For Fazlur Rahman, “there is no doubt that a central aim of the Qur’an is to establish a viable social order on earth that will be just and ethically based.”⁹³ Such phrases resonate, but only to an extent.

Both intellectuals see the role of the prophets as vital in the historical progress towards a God-conscious, and therefore just, society. Fazlur Rahman notes that “the prophets were extraordinary men who, through their sensitive and impregnable personalities and their reception and steadfastness and fearless preaching of the Divine Messages, shook men’s consciousness from a state of traditional placidity and hypomoral tension into one of alertness where they could clearly see God as God and Satan as Satan.”⁹⁴ Here, he somewhat echoes Iqbalian understanding of a prophet as a personality who has achieved a “unitary experience” with God, and returned to “insert himself into the sweep of time with a view to control the forces of history, and thereby to create a fresh world of ideas.”⁹⁵ Yet, the difference in what they stress goes to the heart of the way they convey about the historical purpose of the revelation. This is the key element of their different approaches to what their audiences must remember as *muslims*, as human beings who submit to God.

Fazlur Rahman’s treatment of the meaning behind the finality of the prophethood brought about by Muhammad as “the Seal of the Prophets” is strikingly counter-Iqbalian. This is where the difference between the two authors and what they teach their audiences to remember about the Qur’an is most crucial. Fazlur Rahman states that “several Muslim modernists have held passionately that with and through Islam and its revealed

⁹³Rahman, *Major Themes*, 37.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 80.

⁹⁵ See Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 124. A closer parallel is in Rahman’s *Islamic Methodology in History*, 10.

book, man has reached rational maturity and there is in no need for further Revelations.”⁹⁶ In an indirect way, this is a severe critique of Iqbal. This is the point where Rahman distances himself from his mentor. What he appears to comment on specifically is Iqbal’s insistence that, in terms of human historical progress, “the birth of Islam... is the birth of inductive intellect.” As Iqbal explains:

In Islam prophecy reaches its perfection in discovering the need for its own abolition. This involves the keen perception that life cannot for ever be kept in leading strings; that in order to achieve full-self-consciousness man must finally be thrown back on his resources.⁹⁷

Rahman does not mention Iqbal by name. The troubling thought is veiled here behind the phrase “several Muslim modernists.” One possible explanation to this is in Rahman’s thorough debt to other key Iqbalian insights. He does, in general, agree that with the revelation of the Qur’an and the prophet’s career there occurred a dramatic change in the overall historic movement of humanity. That change to him amounts to the fact that, after Muhammad and the Qur’an, “an adequate understanding of guidance does not depend any more on ‘chosen’ personalities but has become a collective function.”⁹⁸ And, to an extent, Rahman’s formulation agrees with Iqbal’s understanding of Muhammad as standing “between the ancient and the modern world.”⁹⁹ While not exactly expressed in terms of the dichotomy of “ancient” and “modern,” Fazlur Rahman presents the Qur’an as a revelation that teaches principles that are applicable, when properly

⁹⁶ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 81.

⁹⁷ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 126.

⁹⁸ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 81.

⁹⁹ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 126.

understood, in varying times and contexts. The basis for this agreement is Rahman's acceptance of Iqbal's characterization of the factors that make the Qur'an a flexible and "logical" guidance,¹⁰⁰ which are embodied in its "constant appeal to reason and experience, and the emphasis it lays on Nature and History as sources of human knowledge."¹⁰¹ And yet Rahman's reading of the post-revelation history is less optimistic than that of Iqbal. Or, rather, it is optimistic in a different, earth-bound, way. This different view of history is partly due to the disagreement between the two authors: while Iqbal insists that the goal of the collective human movement through time is the overcoming of the boundary between the divine and the human, Rahman insists on maintaining the distance between the two polarities, God and the human being.

This is key in how they see and understand the meaning of "history." Rahman presents history as human action in profane time. He observes "the fact that man is still plagued by moral confusion... and that his moral sense has not kept pace with his advance in knowledge."¹⁰² What matters here is his use of "knowledge" as profane. To Iqbal, however, knowledge is never profane. Or rather, it is never profane in its potentiality, which points to his particular mode of understanding and teaching "history."

Iqbal's "history" is not a mere discipline of reading historical facts, but a mode of knowledge directed towards overcoming "serial time."¹⁰³ His is a "history" in "pure time," it is a history of human potentialities. As he explains, "pure time... is not a string of separate, reversible instants; it is an organic whole in which the past is not left behind,

¹⁰⁰ Rahman uses the word "logical" quite a bit in *Major Themes*.

¹⁰¹ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 126.

¹⁰² Rahman, *Major Themes*, 81.

¹⁰³ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 131.

but is moving along with, and operating in the present.”¹⁰⁴ Read in this way, there is a *history* and there is a *History*; there is history of strings of facts, and there is a History of “pure time” where what really matters is the direction of the movement. Thus, Iqbal assures his audience that the “Muslim culture” is really not stagnant, if it is perceived from the perspective of potentialities. The direction has been set by the prophet, and by his insightful/inspired followers. Iqbal finds hope and deeper meaning in the string of profane facts that really reflect a deeper level in the correct direction of Muslim cultural thought. Such past Muslim thinkers as al-Biruni, Ibn Maskwaih, Iraqi, Khawaja Mohammad Parsa, Ibn Khaldun and many, many others demonstrate that “all the lines of Muslim thought converge” in the right direction, which is “a dynamic conception of the universe.”¹⁰⁵ This is the movement whose direction was set by the Qur’an that opened “our eyes to the great event of change.”¹⁰⁶ And this is the movement that, for Iqbal, is the real source of optimism: that by following the disciplines of knowing nature, history and self – all as they appear to the untrained eye and undisciplined soul in the guise of serial time and space – the human being will go through the training required to move toward living in tune with Nature, History and Self of the Ultimate Ego.

Fazlur Rahman chooses not to emphasize this point. Perceived from his lens of history in serial/profane time, Muslim past and present is indeed bleak. He cites the same facts as Iqbal and provides similar interpretations of Muslim failures. Muslims, for example, misunderstood the Qur’anic idea of pre-determination, *taqdīr*, in a way that stupefied their creativity. This was due to “the overwhelming success of the Ash’arite

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 49.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 138.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 15.

school of theology..., the broad spread... of the doctrines of pantheistic Sufism, and, above all, strong fatalistic doctrines in the world-views of certain highly sophisticated peoples, particularly the Iranians.”¹⁰⁷ Given the bleak outlook at the Muslim, specifically post-Shafi`i, past, what hope does Rahman offer? ¹⁰⁸ Particularly, how does it work if he rejects Iqbal’s optimism in the infinite potentialities of human beings? After all, in Rahman’s reading, “no measured creature – no matter how great its powers and potentialities (as in the case of man) – may literally share [in God’s] infinitude.”¹⁰⁹ Fazlur Rahman’s answer is God’s mercy. This he presents as the most important ontological principle of God in *Major Themes of the Qur’an*.¹¹⁰

The idea of God’s mercy, in Rahman’s reading, provides the inspiration to the human beings whose creativity is limited in the natural realm. This is where he translates Iqbal’s vision of progress towards the divine, which is always at work and therefore always changing, into a historical progress in profane time. Rahman presents the Qur’an as a document that discusses “evolution and discontinuity of civilizations.” In such a way, it may be read as text pointing towards a cyclical time. But, Rahman insists, such a reading is incorrect. He translates Iqbal’s thought directed at the negation of dualities into a human progress in historical terms, which he expresses through an interpretation of a Qur’anic phrase:

A word... must be said about the legacy of civilizations for their successors. Here again there is a tension between two opposite directions. On the one hand, the

¹⁰⁷ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 23. See the parallel, ‘blame the magians’ line in Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 96.

¹⁰⁸ See Rahman, *Islamic Methodology*, 24.

¹⁰⁹ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 13.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.

history of civilizations is cumulative and evolutionary because while the “foam on the top of a torrent disappears, that which is beneficial to mankind [the alluvium] settles down upon earth” (13:17). This means that while the negative side of men’s conduct departs, the constructive side does leave a positive legacy for mankind. On the other hand, the evil legacies of earlier peoples do affect the quality of performance of later ones. In a sense, every civilization is a forerunner of or an example for later ones; hence the tremendous responsibility of the future generations. It is not clear whether this influence is due to the fact that later civilizations actually learn of the earlier ones – and try to vie with their foolish deeds – or whether their legacy becomes embedded in the unconscious of the later ones and becomes, as it were, part of their moral genes – in which case it is cumulative and the entire historic movement is like a spiral, not a cycle.¹¹¹

Rahman’s statement on the progress as he presents taught by the Qur’an is a translation Iqbal’s ideas of Nature, History, and Self-knowledge. His translation is focused. These now become disciplines for the interpretation of the revelation in profane time for the finite beings.

The idea of *taqwā* emerges here as Rahman’s major theme in the Qur’an and interpretative principle for understanding the revelation in modern time. It is a kind of *taqwā* that gives balance to the human work in profane time. Unlike Iqbal, he stresses the difference between the human and nature’s *taqwā*. In both, the natural and human realms, *taqwā* its movement in accordance with God’s action. But, unlike the nature, human beings have the “unique position” to act in dissonance from God’s command. That difference makes them capable of making moral decisions. For humans, Rahman defines *taqwā* as “integrative moral action” in this world where a human being or a society is fully aware of God’s eventual judgment of their actions. “When a man or

¹¹¹ Ibid., 59.

society is fully conscious of this while conducting himself or itself, he or it has true *taqwā*.”¹¹²

Such a focused translation of Iqbal’s ideas by Rahman is by no means unproductive. As a legal thinker, he has offered a highly influential elaboration of the principle of history as a mode of knowledge. This was his double-movement theory of Qur’anic interpretation, which is recalled by academics as the center piece of his legacy.¹¹³ He presents it in *Major Themes*. His method of interpreting the Sunna ran a parallel course; it was the subject of his *Islamic Methodology*. Both of his approaches to the Qur’an and the Sunna operate in profane time, by the principle of double-movement between the profane, historical past of the context of Muhammad’s career and the profane present. In the case of the Qur’anic interpretation, Fazlur Rahman emphasizes historical and cultural contexts that limited Qur’an’s guiding principles in ways that made them understandable to the revelation’s initial audience. In the case of the Sunna, he stresses the evolution, the process of development of “the living Sunna” of Muhammad, the memory of his conduct and its continuous and diverse reinterpretations during the first three centuries of Muslim history. Context, as always, is the most significant factor. Just as in the case of the Qur’an, understanding of historical contexts of the “living Sunna” provides the promise of resuscitating it from the stifling effects of the canonization of the Hadith.¹¹⁴

What is key in both cases is that Fazlur Rahman creatively applies Iqbal’s principle of constant flux. But it is a flux limited to profane, human experience of time.

¹¹² Ibid., 29.

¹¹³ See Ebrahim Moosa, “An Introduction,” in Fazlur Rahman, *Revival and Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), 5 and 15, and Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories*, 241-253.

¹¹⁴ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology*, 75.

In profane time, the contexts in which the Qur'an was revealed and the contexts in which the Sunna was formulated are drastically different from the present, which is also profane.

Limited in such a way, Rahman's approach is an effective methodology for modern Muslim collective memory of the past. Particularly so if Charles Taylor is correct and "modernity is secular, not in the frequent, rather loose sense of the word, where it designates the absence of religion, but rather in the fact that religion occupies a different place, compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time."¹¹⁵ In this respect, Rahman's translation of Iqbal's understanding of Qur'anic concept of history as a mode of knowledge provides an opening for Muslim re-interpretations of pre-modern texts by re-membering them into documents that operated in a different, but still profane time, and therefore are translatable for the modern time. Rahman seems to describe just such an approach when he explains his method in *Islamic Methodology*. He calls it "re-treatment," with which "we can reduce the Hadith to Sunna – what it was as the beginning – and by situational interpretation can resurrect the norms which we can then apply to our situation today."¹¹⁶ This retreatment is his methodology of double-movement that establishes a way to reshape the *shari`a*. His engagement with Iqbal, then, is an attempt to translate his ideas into a legal and practical logic.

The double-movement is a method of pedagogic remembrance. This process, as it is applied to the Qur'an or the Sunna, calls for stabilization of essential principles. Rahman carries out such stabilization by referring to the essential consistency of God's

¹¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 194.

¹¹⁶ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology*, 80.

guiding ethical principles for the humanity. What changes, what is in flux, are humans. God's principles remain essentially the same. This, of course, is an especially useful mechanism for shaping memory because memory often projects stability to the past. Even more effective in this case is a projection to stable eternity.

In light of what I have just outlined, there is indeed a significant difference between Rahman and Iqbal. This difference leads me to disagree with one of his students, Sheila McDonough, who recollects that Rahman “did not criticize Iqbal for [his] ideas about science and history, and indeed his own thought assumed a similar perspective.” The only significant thing, she proposes, aside from Nietzsche (which is very significant), that “troubled him was the impact of Iqbal’s poetry on Muslim minds.”¹¹⁷ However, Rahman’s uneasiness about Iqbal’s poetry quite possibly indicated a much deeper discomfort with his methodology, which then prompted Rahman to translate it in practical terms of “serial time.” Rahman has said this much in his summary of Iqbal’s impact in Pakistan and beyond:

The result is that in so far as Iqbal’s teaching has been influential – and it has been so deeply and far-reaching influential that spiritually it has been the chief force behind the creation of Pakistan – it has thrown its overwhelming weight on the revivalist side and has been largely construed in an anti-rational direction. The doctrine of activism and dynamism advocated by Iqbal has found such a tremendous response that the very considerable intellectual effort of which it was the result has been made to commit suicide in process. Iqbal’s philosophical legacy has, therefore, not been followed, partly because of what he has said but largely because he has been both misunderstood and misused by his politics-mongering followers. His *Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* has remained a purely personal statement of Islamic Faith, and has not so far been able to function as a datum-line from which further developments could take place. In the event of such a real development taking place, the genuine insights of Iqbal into the nature of Islam will have to be carefully disentangled from the

¹¹⁷ McDonough, “Fazlur Rahman’s Response to Iqbal,” 75.

contemporary philosophical interpretations of science, especially the excessive assimilation of the natural to the spiritual.¹¹⁸

Following Rahman's characterization of his mentor's work, his own hermeneutics of the Qur'an emerges an attempt to translate Iqbal's insights into a "datum-line." In process, he de-naturalizes the *Reconstruction*, which is the mechanism of rendering Iqbal's understanding of time and turning his own work into a methodological guideline for applying the Qur'an and Sunna to the conditions where Muslim social action can meaningfully take place in secular time.

Such a focused approach by Rahman is partly what motivates Ebrahim Moosa's critique of his method. Moosa points out that a prominent lack in Rahman's thought was in the area of "systematic evaluation and critique of the present historical context, especially in the political, economic, and aesthetic dimensions of this historical phase with which he urged Muslims to make a historical tryst."¹¹⁹ Rahman's application of Iqbal's concepts is a case in point of, perhaps, insufficient understanding of the aesthetic, and therefore epistemological specificities of living in modern time. In no way do I mean to suggest that Rahman was leading his audiences to succumb to the time of modernity, as Asad would probably say. Throughout his works, Rahman continuously reminds his Muslim audiences about "empty Western forms" of living, which are not informed by deeper understandings of Reality. Yet his project goes no further in this direction. Once he makes such a reminder, he then proceeds to engage in a constructive discussion on how to enable Muslims to live in the modern secular time.

¹¹⁸ Rahman, *Islam* (University of Chicago Press, 1979, 2nd ed), 225-226.

¹¹⁹ Moosa, "An Introduction," 24.

In comparison to Iqbal, this may appear as a shortcoming. There is however a significant advantage to Rahman's methodology. We will encounter this in the next move along Rahmanian spiral, in the scholarship and activism of Amina Wadud. For now, it is also important to note that Rahman introduces an iteration of Iqbal into the American and global Muslim discourse. In Wadud's work, there may quite possibly be a reflection of the Iqbalian stress on ongoing, never ceasing action in changing times. What Iqbal is carrying out in the *Reconstruction* is a reformulation of Muslim counter-time from a pre-modern time of "an assent into the unchanging" to an ongoing assent to the constantly changing. This, in a way, is Iqbal's type of double-movement. He called on his audiences to reshape their loyalty to God into creative loyalty to their "own ideal nature," which like God is "constantly in eternal revolution."¹²⁰ This, to him, was a more profound answer to the dilemma of the rapidly changing profane time juxtaposed against stupefying tranquility of the calcified "eternity." "Beware," he echoes Nietzsche, "that you are not killed by a statue!" Do not see God as your escape from this world, see him as your "co-worker."¹²¹

¹²⁰ Iqbal, *Javid Nama*, 3508.

¹²¹ Iqbal, *Reconstruction*, 12.

Chapter Two:

Translating Gender:

Amina Wadud in Scholarship and Activism

The theology that will be pursued by Muslims in North America in the coming years will not be rationalistic and abstract as much as Qur'anic and focused on ethical concerns.¹²²

I owe my freedom to the God who made me and who stirred me to claim it against all other beings in God's universe.¹²³

Amina Wadud is an American interpreter of the Qur'an is known internationally as the woman who served as the leader of a ground-breaking mixed-gender congregational prayer in New York City on Friday, March 18, 2005. This was not the first time she stood in front of a Friday gathering of Muslim worshippers and delivered a

¹²² Frederick Mathewson Denny, "Islamic Theology in the New World: Some Issues and Prospects," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62:4 (Winter 1994), 1080.

¹²³ Rev. Jermain Wesley Loguen protesting the Fugitive Slave Law at the steps of Syracuse City Hall, 1851. Quoted in Carol George, "Widening the Circle: The Black Church and the Abolitionist Crusade, 1830-1860," in Fulop and Raboteau, *African-American Religion*, 156.

sermon. Her previous experience as a *khatibah*, a preacher who gives a Friday sermon, was in Cape Town, South Africa. While her action in South Africa remained somewhat less known, the New York incident gained her an unprecedented international fame. All of a sudden, news outlets all over the Muslim world reported on an action of a courageous woman who dared to break the taboo on women leading men in prayer. In her recollections of both occasions, Wadud has noted with sadness that few people paid attention to the substance of her sermons. Rather, both critics and admirers directed their attention at the act and symbolism of a woman who goes against tradition.¹²⁴ Here, I would like to pay attention to both Wadud's activism, encapsulated in her role as a preacher, and her intellectual struggle for Qur'an-inspired women's rights, reflected in her writings and her sermons.

This section will address Wadud's Qur'anic interpretation in tandem with her activism. In the movement from scholarship to activism, I will trace Wadud's engagement with Fazlur Rahman's methodology of Qur'anic interpretation that goes beyond the academy. Wadud translates Rahman's scholarship into activism. In this way, without ever mentioning Iqbal, she continues the trajectory of the Iqbalian spiral, which placed experience and action before law. My analysis will begin with an exploration of Wadud's utilization of Rahman's insights in *Qur'an and Woman*, the book that made her famous in the 1990s. I will conclude with a reflection of its practical enactment in New York.

Wadud is not the only American Muslim woman who has relied on Fazlur Rahman's methodology in her interpretation of the Qur'an. Other prominent authors who follow a similar path are Azizah al-Hibri, Nimat Hafez Barazangi, Asma Barlas and

¹²⁴ Wadud, *Inside Gender Jihad*.

others.¹²⁵ Al-Hibri's scholarship is particularly important here: in *Qur'an and Woman*, Wadud follows the outline of the Rahmanian analysis offered by Al-Hibri in a 1982 article.¹²⁶ In all such works Rahman's influence is profound. Most significant in all such works is Rahman's theory of double-movement, which allows contemporary authors to reformulate the Qur'an in ways that address contemporary epistemology, particularly in the area of gender. Of course, behind Rahman's theory of double-movement is the very modern notion of historical movement where our modern experience, and therefore our time, is dramatically and irreversibly different from that of our pre-modern ancestors.¹²⁷ What follows is my examination of Wadud's formulation of the interpretation of the Qur'an by and for contemporary Muslim women.

In this section, I explore Wadud's utilization of Rahman's methodology, including his theory of double-movement, both in her written interpretations and her spoken addresses to Muslim audiences. Her example serves to answer a central question in the exploration of American Muslim discourse: What becomes *thinkable* in American Muslim interpretations of the Qur'an after Rahman? My use of the term "thinkable" echoes Mohammed Arkoun's notion of Islamic tradition as a "logosphere," which he

¹²⁵ On al-Hibri's Rahmanian methodology, see Tamara Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Feminism," in Waugh and Denny, *The Shaping of An American Islamic Discourse*. As a sample of Barazangi's reliance on Rahman, see Nimat Hafez Barazangi, *Woman's Identity and the Qur'an: A New Reading* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004) and Nimat Hafez Barazangi, "Muslim Women's Islamic Higher Learning as a Human Right," in Gisela Webb, ed, *Windows of Faith: Muslim Women Scholar-Activists in North America* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000). In the latter work, Barazangi states: "My claim that the basis of feminism lies in the Qur'an is not intended to read history backward..., nor to invoke an upheaval among Muslims who do not accept the use of 'feminism' to describe the Qur'an. I am merely reinterpreting what Rahman stated: The basic principle in the Qur'anic view of Islamic justice is the equality between sexes." (Ibid., 31.)

¹²⁶ See Azizah al-Hibri, "A Study of Islamic Herstory: Or How Did We Ever Get Into This Mess?" *Women's Studies International Forum* 5:2 (1982): 207-219.

¹²⁷ For an excellent analysis of modern, and specifically post-Vico, understanding of time, see Peter Wright, "Modern Qur'anic Hermeneutics," (Ph.D. diss., UNC-Chapel Hill, 2008), 37-43.

defines as the linguistic mental space shared by all those who use the same language with which to articulate their thoughts, their representations, their collective memory, and their knowledge according to the fundamental principles and values claimed as a unifying *weltanschauung*.¹²⁸ A logosphere, for Arkoun, is an authoritative living network made up of people whose agency and worldview depend on it. It represents a “tradition of thought,” which stabilizes meanings, silences alternative voices and prevents, or limits, introduction of new concepts, new ways of thinking or new “thinkables.” This, of course, lasts until conditions change. In new contexts new thinkables become possible.¹²⁹

Wadud's scholarship is an example of a drastic change, which occurs when Muslim memory becomes a part of local discourse. It is a sign of the dialogic merging of contemporary South-Asian thinking, exemplified by Rahman and Iqbal, with local African-American understandings of social justice. Of course, she translates this into a reading of the Qur'an that addresses directly her experience as an African-American woman.

In a 2006 public address, Wadud recalled that her life-long engagement with the Qur'an began with deeply experiential dilemma:

When I entered Islam and began to live among Muslims in other countries and participate in events in the United States, the most horrific things were being said and done in regard to women in the name of the religion and I found this to be incongruent with my notion of God. So I purposefully decided that I am going to find out what is the position of women in Islam and if it was in fact what I was

¹²⁸ Mohammed Arkoun, *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought* (London, UK: Saqi Books, 2002), 12.

¹²⁹ Arkoun explains: “When social, economic, and political conditions change and new possibilities of creative thought and action open up, a struggle begins between the defenders of the living sacred and sacralizing tradition and the supporters of reformist or revolutionary change. This dialectic tension is at work, with differing intensity, in all societies...” Ibid.

seeing - the marginalization, the silence, the abuse - then I just cannot be Muslim because I could not perform my love for God within those restrictions.¹³⁰

Wadud's book, *Qur'an and Woman*, was a result of her search for gender equality in the text of the Muslim revelation. Until today, it remains the best known written American interpretation of the Qur'an. She published the book originally in Malaysia in 1992. At the time, after receiving her PhD from the University of Michigan, she taught at the International Islamic University. She also became a member of *Sisters in Islam*, a fledgling study circle of Muslim women which became Malaysia's leading women's rights organization. Wadud helped formulate their Qur'an-based responses to *shari'a* courts. The book is based on her PhD dissertation and experience as an activist. Its goal is to encourage interpretive readings of the Qur'an by women and from the perspective of women. From this perspective, she argues, the Qur'an offers women an "undeniable liberation." The trajectory of the Qur'an's liberating message was true when it spoke to its original audience of Muhammad's contemporaries; it is more so in "the modern context."¹³¹

The book addresses varied audiences, which are mostly Muslim, American, Malay and global.¹³² For example, Wadud contrasts English and Malay to Arabic as an illustration of the impact of Arabic as a "gender-specific language" on traditional *tafsir*.¹³³ She brings up the "tropics of Malaysia" as an example of a context in which the

¹³⁰ "Amina Wadud," Online video clip, Nederlandse Moslim Omroep (NMO), Accessed on 03 February 2010. < http://www.nmo.nl/67-Amina_Wadud.html?aflevering=2696>

¹³¹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, xxii.

¹³² Wadud notes with pride that the book "reached number one on a best-seller list in al-Qalam, a Muslim newspaper" in South Africa. This was after her visit there in 1994. Ibid., xvi.

¹³³ Ibid., 6.

Qur'anic description of the paradise as a bountifully irrigated garden would not have resonated as much as it had with the text's first listeners.¹³⁴ At the same time, most of her examples from contemporary experience are either American or African-American. Some of these are explicit. One is the example of "the Black female" in "post-slavery America," which she brings up in her re-contextualizing and, therefore, reinterpreting of the dangerously ambiguous word *darajah* (a degree, implying hierarchy) in verse 2:228. Another is an illustration of the precarious polysemy embedded in the language of the American Declaration of Independence and its famous phrase "All men are created equal."¹³⁵ Other references to her own context are less explicit, but in light of her background even more poignant: throughout the book she constantly returns to the issue of slavery.¹³⁶

Beyond Malaysia and the U.S., Wadud addresses a global Muslim audience. This is reflected in an additional detail: throughout the book she refrains from using the term *ijtihad*. She does this while she at the same time explicitly exercising and calling for it. In a typical statement, she explains:

The existence of so many exegetical works (*tafasir*) indicates that, with regard to the Qur'an, the interpretation process has existed and will probably continue to exist, in a variety of forms. It is essential that the natural adaptive nature of interpretation, from individual to individual and from time and place to time and place, should continue unabated until the end of time – on the one hand, because it is natural, and, on the other hand, because only through continued interpretation can the wisdom of the Qur'an be effectively implemented. This implementation will be specific to the varying experiences of human civilization.¹³⁷

¹³⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹³⁶ See, for example, Ibid., 101.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 94.

In this quote, one can see a glimpse of the methodological approach Wadud takes in the book. It is modern. And yet it is also mindful of the audiences who think of themselves as traditional. Like Rahman in *Islamic Methodology*, she attempts to include the "traditionally-minded" among her readers. She places her work as a contribution and expansion of the discipline of *tafsir*, an "intellectual legacy that is more than fourteen centuries old."¹³⁸ This, of course, ties into the goal of establishing women's voices within the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis, or becoming agents of their own within this power structure.

Both her purpose and her audience are reflected in the Muslim authorities whose work she references, agrees with and argues against. She explicitly states that she works with the insights of such authors as Sayyid Qutb and Abul A'la Mawdudi. Invocations of both Qutb and Mawdudi are useful for her because they project a veneer of tradition, or at least the contemporary Muslim revival in the name of tradition. Evoking them is additionally productive because they share with Wadud key modern approaches to the Qur'an. They both follow the modern trajectory of thematic interpretations.¹³⁹ Qutb, for example, builds his interpretation of individual *suras* around their *miḥwār*, or central theses. This provides him a method for stabilizing meanings of individual verses and ambiguous words.¹⁴⁰ Mawdudi, also tellingly, rejects the classical application of *naskh*, or abrogation, to the interpretation of the Qur'an. Rather, she follows the modern

¹³⁸ Ibid., xvii.

¹³⁹ See for example, Rotraud Weielandt, "Exegesis of the Qur'an: Early Modern and Contemporary," in Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*.

¹⁴⁰ See Mustansir Mir, "The Sura as Unity: A Twentieth Century Development in Qur'an Exegesis," in G.R. Hawting and Abdul-Kader A. Shareef, eds., *Approaches to the Qur'an* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 213-214.

scripturalist tendency to emphasize an interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an itself, isolating it from other sources, most notably the Hadith.¹⁴¹

Significantly, Wadud treads here an ambiguous line, which indicates her modern grappling with tradition. On the one hand, she follows the method of interpreting the Qur'an by the Qur'an, which she most directly borrows from Rahman and his insistence on allowing the text to "speak for itself." Yet, she does not push the envelope too far. She envisions her book as a contribution to the Qur'anic exegesis, which in time must be combined with a contextually viable interpretation of the Hadith. When faced with a question "asked by many Muslims" - "what about the Sunna?" - Wadud states:

[This book] is about exactly what it says it is about – the Qur'an, and woman, as a concept. Although part of a larger concern about understanding Islam and women, it has a particular focus within a specific intellectual discipline of Islamic thought. Each specialty must be developed distinctly before they can be combined together to gain a fuller picture. Hence, the special focus on the Qur'an... is appropriately restricted for optimal efficacy of this consideration.¹⁴²

To validate her affinity with the tradition, she states: "I accept the role of the prophet both with regard to revelation, as understood in Islam, and to the development of Islamic law on the basis of his *Sunna* or normative practices."¹⁴³ But, reflecting a modern concern over the historical validity of many Hadith accounts, which lies behind her *Qur'an bi al-Qur'an* methodology, she clarifies: "I place greater significance on the Qur'an. This is

¹⁴¹ On Qutb, see Olivier Carré and Carol Artigues, *Mysticism and Politics: a Critical Reading of Fî Zilâl al-Qur'ân by Sayyid Qutb (1906-1966)* (Leiden: Brill, 2003) and Weiland "Exegesis of the Qur'an." On the modern reinterpretations of *naskh*, see Daniel Brown, "The Triumph of Textualism," in Waugh and Denny, *The Shaping*.

¹⁴² Wadud, , *Qur'an and Woman*, xvii.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

congruent with the orthodox understanding of the inerrancy of Qur'anic preservation versus historical contradictions within the hadith literature."¹⁴⁴ In such a move, she effectively denies the possibility of *naskh* based on the Sunna, which was an acceptable practice for most classical interpreters and became highly suspect in modern interpretations.¹⁴⁵ Further reflecting her ambiguous position, perhaps stemming from the desire to appeal to those who would disagree with Rahman, she states that her interpretative approach follows an "orthodox understanding." And yet, adding a typically Rahmanian twist, she pairs the concern over the historical validity of the Hadith with a concern for the Qur'anic ethics: "Furthermore, I would never concede that the equality between women and men demonstrated in the Qur'an could be removed by the prophet."¹⁴⁶

Wadud's ambiguity in respect to the hadith literature and pre-modern Muslim exegesis is a sign of Rahman's influence. Related to this is the stress that both authors place on the Qur'anic ethics. From Rahman Wadud inherits the vision that proposes the solution to contemporary dilemmas through the search for the ethical principles in the revelation. The ethics of the revelation for both is universal. What changes in different contexts are its understandings and implementations. This is central to Wadud and Rahman's methodology of interpreting the Qur'an as translation between pre-modern and modern contexts.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.

¹⁴⁵ See Brown, "The Triumph of Textualism," 55.

¹⁴⁶ Wadud, , *Qur'an and Woman*, xvii.

In Daniel Brown's analysis, Rahman "was both a critic and a product of [modern] scripturalist practices."¹⁴⁷ For example, in *Islamic Methodology*, Rahman searches for a way to preserve the authority of the Sunna. He agrees with the modern Muslim and non-Muslim critique of historically inaccurate or false hadith reports. However, he sees something more important behind the concept of Sunna: while some of its content may have been corrupted or falsified, it still reflects – in its "concept" – the ethical principles behind the prophet's actions and words. Further, even some of the perceived corruptions, can be looked at in a positive light, as manifestations of subsequent Muslim communities' attempts to make sense of the Sunna, to make them understandable, relevant, and applicable in their own contexts.¹⁴⁸ Yet, given the historical unreliability of the hadith literature, to really know what Sunna entails requires re-reading of the Qur'an. In respect to both, one would have to follow, what Rahman calls, "a double-movement" theory, which he articulates as his method of Qur'anic hermeneutics.¹⁴⁹

In Rahman's formulation, the double-movement is a way to derive contemporary relevant meanings from the Qur'an as a pre-modern text. In the first interpretative move an exegete must strive to understand the words of the Qur'an in their original context. Or, as Ebrahim Moosa explains it, an interpreter must understand both "the macro and micro cosmos in which the Qur'an was originally revealed."¹⁵⁰ In the general outlines, this idea is quite resonant with the standard pre-modern approach to interpreting the

¹⁴⁷ Brown, "The Triumph of Textualism," 51.

¹⁴⁸ Rahman, *Islamic Methodology*, 6.

¹⁴⁹ Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5-7.

¹⁵⁰ Moosa, "An Introduction," 15.

Qur'an by the Sunna and clarifying meanings of words through reports that are said to originate from the companions of the Prophet. The key, however, is in interpreting the Qur'an as a coherent whole (hence "micro and macro" contexts). This entails an understanding of the terms and concepts as the Qur'an explains them itself. Key here is that it does so in the language that was accessible to its initial audience, with all their contextually specific limitations, such as profoundly patriarchal worldview. Therefore, a contemporary interpreter must seek a historical understanding of the context of the Qur'an's initial audience. Here the traditional tools of occasions of revelations and *naskh* are useful, but also limited because they were formulated after the Qur'an's initial context (hadith literature, for Rahman, is a record of successive generations of Muslims remembering the past; for him as a historian memory is always suspect). The concept of *naskh*, however, is reinterpreted. It verifies the text's responsiveness to specific situations: since God revealed the guidance over time in response to specific situations, this must serve as a model for consequent reapplications of its principles. Yet, it does not mean that verses negate one another based on chronological reports according to the occasions of revelation. Thus, *naskh* based on chronology is disregarded. Rather, the search is carried out logically in light of discernable themes and interconnections between themes in the Qur'an itself.¹⁵¹ Rahman suggests that, once such themes emerge, one can discern the fundamental principles behind them. It is such principles that cross contexts, not their contextually situated expressions. This then allows for the Qur'an's subsequent audiences to understand it when it speaks "for itself."

Rahman approaches the Qur'an as both a transcendent word of God and a product of its environment, which is reflected in its language. Because it is transcendent, it has

¹⁵¹ More on this method, see Mir, "The Sura as Unity."

universal applications. But because it is a product of its environment, its meaning must be translated into new contexts. Interpretation for him is a work of translation between languages and times. And what should come in translation is not a blind replication of a past context, but practical application of Qur'anic principles that speak directly to contemporary settings. This, of course, has immediate consequences in terms of law, which, Rahman insists, must always be reshaped. He explains this in light of the contemporary issues of women's rights:

In understanding the Qur'an's social reforms, we will go fundamentally wrong unless we distinguish between legal enactments and moral injunctions. Only by so distinguishing can we not only understand the true orientation of the Qur'an but also solve certain knotty problems with regard, for example, to women's reform. This is where the Muslim legal tradition, which essentially regarded the Qur'an as a lawbook and not the religious source of law, went so palpably wrong.¹⁵²

Wadud's interpretation is an attempt at a practical application of Rahman's methodology in her own context. In her reading of the Qur'an, she determines the central principles of the Qur'anic view of women. She examines the contextually limited injunctions on women in light of those that correspond with the Qur'an's larger themes. Following Rahman, she identifies the principles of *taqwā* and social justice as the most pertinent themes of the Qur'anic guidance, which transgress and, she insists, must transform contexts.¹⁵³ Going beyond Rahman, she insists on the centrality of the interpreter. It matters *who* reads and teaches the Qur'an for Muslims. An interpretation

¹⁵² Rahman, *Major Themes*, 47.

¹⁵³ Wadud, , *Qur'an and Woman*, xxii and 36.

of the Qur'an for women must be carried out by women. Otherwise, the second movement in Rahman's theory rings hollow. Experience here is a key to interpretation.

Her analysis of the Qur'an follows the path charted by Rahman: she moves from the ethical principles to particulars. She calls this a "hermeneutics of *tawhid*," which "emphasizes how the unity of the Qur'an permeates all its parts."¹⁵⁴ She observes that the Qur'an establishes an essential equality of human beings in the hereafter, irrespective of gender or any other qualifier. This, she bases, on the concept of "equity of [God's ultimate] recompense" for each human being based on their *taqwā*, God-consciousness expressed in action. She echoes the Qur'an and Rahman as she insists that "the only distinction [between all human beings] is on the basis of *taqwā*."¹⁵⁵

For Wadud, the ultimate recompense based on *taqwā* is an expression of its interconnectedness with the concept of God's justice. She bases her view on Qur'an 40:39-40 and other similar verses that stress the equality of women and men when it comes to the heavenly rewards for their deeds on earth. Such an equality then is a principle of justice in the Qur'an that goes beyond its occasionally patriarchal formulations. Here, Wadud generally follows Rahman. Her next point, however, is a step outside of Rahman's playbook. Wadud observes that the Qur'an consistently speaks of God as creating everything in pairs, as in 51:49: "And of everything We have created pairs: That ye may receive instruction." Such a natural order of creation to her is yet another Qur'anic sign of the principle of equality between female and male human beings. Armed with these two themes - pairing within creation and essential equality women and men - she approaches the two Qur'anic verses that appear to be most

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., xii.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 48 and 63.

problematic from the position of Muslim legal formulations about women, Qur'an 2:228 and 4:34.

Qur'an 2:228 is troublesome to Wadud and many other interpreters concerned with gender equality because it states that "men have a *daraja* over" women. Yusuf Ali's translation gives a typical translation of the word "*daraja*" as "a degree of advantage." Wadud provides a counter-reading. She reads the Qur'an by the Qur'an and looks for the examples in the text where the same or similar terms (such as *faddala*) are used to assign hierarchy. What she finds is significant in light of her understanding of the concept of *taqwā*. She notes that "most often *daraja* is obtained through an unspecified category of doing 'good' deeds (20:75, 6:132, 46:19)."¹⁵⁶ And since such deeds, performed with *taqwā*, are equally valuable in the eyes of God, a misogynistic reading of 2:228 contradicts the principle of *taqwā* and justice. Based on this, *darajah* of men over women is not a universal principle. To further undermine negative readings of the verse, she examines it within its immediate textual context. The verse specifically addresses the issue of divorce and the rights of wives and husbands. She follows Rahman's methodology and argues from the perspective of both micro- and macro-contextualization of the text. She highlights that the verse explicitly uses the word "*ma`ruf*" ("what is known") to demonstrate that the conditions of the divorce procedure and the rights of men and women are mandated here within the context of "what is known" or "conventionally accepted" at the time of Muhammad. The implication, of course, is that once conditions change, so do the "known" norms.¹⁵⁷ Therefore, the legal and ethical

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 69.

enactment of this Qur'anic verse must be resonant with contemporary notions of women's rights.

Wadud carries out a similar analysis of 4:34. She uses Yusuf 'Ali's translation of the verse:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) than the other, and because they support them from their means. Therefore the righteous women are devoutly obedient, and guard in (the husband's) absence what Allah would have them guard. As to those women on whose part ye fear disloyalty and ill-conduct, admonish them (first), (next), refuse to share their beds (and last) beat them (lightly); but if they return to obedience, seek not against them means (of annoyance): for Allah is Most High, Great (above you all).

Most troublesome to her, and many other interpreters of the Qur'an who are mindful of the verse's impact on women, are the words *qawwamuna* (which 'Ali translates as men are "protectors" and "maintainers" of women) and *faddala* (which can be translated as "preferred" but also, in 'Ali's translation, as men are given "more [strength]" than women). Reflecting an already existent Rahmanian school of interpretation, she relies here on al-Hibri, who is also indebted in her methodology to Rahman.¹⁵⁸ But, connecting al-Hibri's analysis to her own tracing of the theme of pairs in creation, she observes an underlying principle of balance. This to her is important because the thorny issues of misogynist readings "cannot be resolved if we look narrowly at the verse 4:34."¹⁵⁹

Through such a broader lens, she carries out an interpretation of the verse based on her, and Rahman's, reading of the Qur'anic ethics. With Rahman's help, he performs an ethical *naskh*, or abrogation of the troublesome words. Wadud effectively declaws possible legal applications of the verse: irrespective of what the burdensome

¹⁵⁸ See Sonn, "Fazlur Rahman and Islamic Feminism."

¹⁵⁹ Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, 73.

“*adribhunna*” (which ‘Ali translates as “beat them [lightly]”) meant in the minds of the Qur’an’s first audience, it is not applicable in all contexts, because the Qur’an speaks here about maintaining a balance between spouses. Such balance, then, is at the core of the ethical reading of the Qur’an. And it should be equitably determined within specific contexts, which constantly change. Thus, following al-Hibri, she notes that *faddala* in this Qur’anic verse is conditional on financial and other support of the husband. She asks: what happens when a woman carries the financial burden? This question, of course, is based on her experience as an African-American woman. She observes that, in contemporary society, African-American women most often serve as heads of households, quite often as single mothers. The dichotomy between the context of the Prophet’s society and contemporary African-American reality leads her to formulate a broader answer, which transgresses and transforms contexts based on a reading of essential Qur’anic ethical lesson. Her solution is in putting aside any thought of “beating” and focusing on a transformation of “marriages of subjugation” into a marriage of equal partnerships. This, she believes, comes through the thematic analysis, which allows an exegete to see beyond context bound particulars and trace “trajectories of social, political, and moral possibilities,” implicit in the text.

Wadud conducts such tracing through something akin to the concept of abrogation. For her, with abrogation, the Qur’an introduces the imperative of progressive revelation that responds and is relevant within its immediate context. Once contexts change, law must be reviewed from the point of view of something that can be called a *thematic abrogation* (she does not use this term), where the theme or general principle provides the guiding principle of a new law, which is relevant to both the context and the

deeper intention of the original ruling. Behind her thematic abrogation lies the Rahmanian insight into the Qur'anic ethics.

Wadud supports her reading of the Qur'an through an ethically-based abrogation by a looking at the "linguaging" of the text.¹⁶⁰ Again she returns to the central example of Qur'an 40:39-40, which for her establishes the transcendent principle and a Qur'anic process of establishing gender-inclusive references in spite of customary and contextually-bound understandings. This, for her, comes across in the Qur'anic phrases and vocabulary, which often transgress the ordinary understandings of words as masculine only.¹⁶¹ In such instances, she argues, the text of the revelation is working against the cultural logosphere in which it was revealed. In Arkoun's term, it could be an example of a Qur'anic introduction of a new thinkable. Of course, such new understandings have to work within, and be limited by, everyday discourse. The very appearance of such a process, for Wadud, works as an example of a trajectory of thought which must be translated into different contexts. Thus, she appeals to the fellow inhabitants of the Islamic logosphere:

If the aim of Islamic society is to fulfill the intentions of the Qur'an with regard to the rights, responsibilities, potentialities, and capacities of all its earnest members, then those who truly believe in the Qur'an would eventually wish for the woman the opportunities for growth and productivity which they demand for the man.¹⁶²

Wadud's interpretation translates the Qur'an, as a printed text brought in translation to the United States, as a guidance to the ethically-based modern living,

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., xiii.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 49.

¹⁶² Ibid., 91

which includes women among its interpretative agents. Her interpretation of the Qur'an walks the path traced by Fazlur Rahman. Where she takes a different stand, and makes a significant further step, is in her activism. As he notes in the introduction to the 1999 American edition of the book, she wrote *Qur'an and Woman* as she was making a transition from being a student to an activist-scholar. Wadud's impact on American Muslim discussions and practices that revolve around gender is impossible to evaluate without paying attention to her activism. By moving into the practical struggle for the equality of women, she takes her own and Fazlur Rahman's interpretation out of the prison of texts and translates it into a text that inspires and guides practice.

Of course, in the area of activism, Wadud is most famous for her public breaking of the customary restriction of women from the role of a *khatib*, a preacher and leader of communal, mixed-gender, prayers. Her experience as an African-American woman is key here. Wadud recalls in a later text, *Inside the Gender Jihad*, an autobiographical reflection on her work as an activist-scholar,

I have never been a Muslim except as an African-American.... African-American Islam is unique especially because of the history of African-Americans. I am part of the awesome legacy of the soul and survival of African slaves brutalized by the dehumanization of the institution of slavery in its peculiarly cruel American racist form”¹⁶³

Throughout her life, she has reflected on the experience of her parents. Her mother, who “was the glue that kept our family together,” was an inspiration for considering the power dynamics within families. Her father, “a devoted man of God,”

¹⁶³ Wadud, *Inside Gender Jihad*, 102.

has served for her as an example of a preacher she would one day become herself.¹⁶⁴ As she recalls, “For me, the origin of three decades of work on Islam, justice, and gender was the awesome light of belief that I inherited from my father, a man of faith and a Methodist minister who was born and died poor, black, and oppressed in the context of racist America.”¹⁶⁵ Wadud’s own constant insistence on the ethically-based equality of human beings, women and men, is perhaps more indebted to her African-American experience and heritage than to Rahman’s formulations. In Rahman, she found an exegetical methodology. But, behind her scholarship and her activism, stands the legacy of African-American scriptural interpretations that state in the face of oppression: “I owe my freedom to the God who made me.” It is not surprising then that Wadud’s interpretation of the Qur’an has been constantly mindful of the liberating promise of human relationship with God. This has been the central theme of her two most famous sermons, the one she gave in Cape Town, South Africa, in August of 1994, and in New York City in March of 2005.

Wadud’s 1994 sermon is a crystallization of her exegesis in *Qur’an and Woman*. The central practical thrust of the talk is the theme of a proper Muslim marriage, where both partners are fully equal to each other. She bases this on Qur’an 30:21, which he translates as: “And among His signs is that He has created from your own selves mates. And He has made between the two of you love and mercy.” The “love and mercy” here is her translation of the Qur’anic word “*rahma*.” Similarly to her written interpretations, in this sermon, she carries out an oral exegesis of the Qur’an by the Qur’an. She calls on

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 257.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 4.

her audience to reflect that the word “rahma” is a reflection of mercy which must guide the relationship between marriage partners: “*Rahma* is supposed to be one of the characteristics of how we engage in surrender in our marital lives. We should not take the other person for granted. We should always extend loving care and mercy for him or her.”¹⁶⁶

Significantly, she presents the human ethics of mercy as a reflection of God’s work in nature, human and otherwise. Wadud urges her listeners to remember that God calls Himself in the Qur’an as “al-Rahman, al-Rahim.” Like many other Muslim interpreters, she connects the word *Rahma* with the “womb.”¹⁶⁷ Such a relationship between the divine reality of mercy and human experience leads her to formulate the ethical vision of Muslim living. To be “muslim” for Wadud is not to be just “surrendered” to God, as the ordinary translation of the word suggests, but rather to live one’s life as an ongoing process of “engaged surrender.” “Engaged” here stresses the agency of human beings, who are given freedom – equal to all, women and men – to work in accordance to God’s revelation or rebel against it. Wadud explain that God is “*Rahmah*. He is Mercy. He is the Ultimate mercy. Both His names of mercy, *rahman* and *rahim*, come from the same root word as *rahm*: the womb. Allah thus engages us continually to understand the nature of our surrender.”¹⁶⁸ Reflecting publicly on her own experience of pregnancy and child-birth, she explicitly states that women’s natural surrender in the process of creation of new human life is a sign of God’s mercy. And,

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 161.

¹⁶⁷ See, for example, how a Jordanian preacher used the same connection between the words “mercy” and “womb” in a sermon documented by Richard T. Antoun, *Muslim Preacher in the Modern World: a Jordanian Case Study in Comparative Perspective*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989), 67-106.

¹⁶⁸ Wadud, *Inside Gender Jihad*, 159.

here, based on her experience, she offers a novel interpretation of Sura 94. She translates it and then gives her interpretation:

In *Surah Inshirah* (chapter 94) Allah says: “Have we not opened up your heart and lifted/removed from you the burden which weighed so heavily on your back. And raised you high in dignity. And behold with every hardship comes ease. Indeed with every hardship comes ease. Hence, when you are freed from your distress; Remain steadfast and onto your Sustaining Lord turn in love.” Allah gives us the mother in pregnancy and childbirth as a living picture of this idea of engaged surrender.¹⁶⁹

This verse is ordinarily interpreted as relating to the Prophet. Wadud, however, takes the theme of God’s mercy and connects it to the divine sign in women’s lives, their “engaged surrender” during pregnancy and childbirth. As a woman interpreting the Qur’an, she lends it a new reading that renders it viscerally relevant to women’s experience. The Qur’an, through her translation, speaks directly to women and makes their experience a divine sign for all human beings, female and male.

In her 2005 sermon in New York City, Wadud carried out a similar interpretation of the Qur’an. Like in her Cape Town *khutba*, she reminds her audience of the need to live their lives in a ways that is centered on their relationship with God. In this relationship, she stresses, all humans are equal. She begins the sermon with a subtle alteration of the opening supplication. Ordinarily, Muslim preachers initiate their sermons by stating that they bear witness that there is no God but one God and Muhammad is his messenger and prophet. They ask God to praise Muhammad and his companions. Wadud continues this line, but adds a blessing on Muhammad’s wives, thus explicitly reminding her audience about women as agents of Muslim history. Another

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

significant move in the sermon is her explicit enactment of what she describes in *Qur'an and Woman* as the Qur'an's "linguaging," or its tendency to transform the meanings behind words in ways that move human beings to reconsider their understandings and their practices. Again, she centers her khutba on the relationship between God and human beings. As though echoing Iqbal's dictum - "View the world otherwise, and it will become other" – she speaks of God in terms that transgress the masculine perception of the word "Allah." Throughout the sermon, she calls God as "He," "She," and "It." She translates, in the very beginning, the verse that all Muslims know (or at least are supposed to remember), *ayat al-kursi*, the Verse of the Throne (Qur'an 2:255): "Allah, there is no god but the God, (and) He/She/It is the Ever Living, the Self-Subsistent Fount of All Being." She connects this verse immediately with Qur'an 33:35, a verse that explicitly names women and men "who surrender" as the people for whom "Allah has prepared... forgiveness and vast reward." This connection between God who is beyond the earthly notions of gender and human beings who are equal recipients of divine grace allows her to position herself as an agent of Muslim discourse: "I stand before you in all my imperfections and weaknesses confessing that I bear sincere love of Allah and love for all of Her *ayāt*/signs."¹⁷⁰ As an equal partner in Muslim engagement with God, she points out to the Qur'anic sign that, she emphasizes, is a sign of the Qur'anic ethical principle of equality between men and women. The Qur'an, she reminds, states in 4:1 that God "has created you from a single *nafs* [soul/self] and created from it, its mate: and spread the two, countless men and women." This memory of equality in human creation and in human standing before God is her basis for acting and calling on others to act as fully human beings, whose authority cannot, must not be limited by societal constraints:

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 249-250.

This unity of origin, I would say, reflects two important implications, both extensions of the fundamental principle, *tawhid*: 1) of course Allah is One, Allah is Unique, Allah is united and Allah unifies (all things in creation); 2) no human being is ever the same as Allah, able to know or understand all of Allah's intention for the creation of humans, or the entire cosmos. Yet all human beings have been granted the potential to experience at-one-ment with Allah for fleeting moments in the creation, and eternally *fi-l-akhira* (in the Ultimate and Permanent End).¹⁷¹

Wadud's influence as an activist-scholar is perceptible in both the institutional life of American Muslims and their discourse. For example, Wadud's *Qur'an and Woman* made famous her participation in the Malaysian *Sisters in Islam* organization. That group, in turn, inspired another African-American Muslim activist, Aisha al-Adawiyya, to establish the most prolific and long-running Muslim women's organization in New York City. After Wadud's 2005 sermon, *Women in Islam* developed a guide to "Women Friendly Mosques and Community Centers: Working Together to Reclaim Our Heritage." That guide has been adapted as a blue-print for the inclusion of women in mosques and other Muslim institutions by North America's largest Muslim association, Islamic Society of North America. The argument of this document is strikingly similar to Wadud's interpretations:

Muslims are answerable to Allah in every sphere of their life, including their personal and public relations. Human relations and gender relations in Islam are an *amanah*, a sacred trust that we must guard and make manifest in our interpersonal interactions and institutional arrangements. Islam demands that women and men be spiritual equals. It defines relations between women and men as mutually complementary, and indeed, this mutuality is itself a sign of the Divine (Qur'an 30:21). Both women and men have been entrusted with the charge of preserving the social order and establishing a just and moral society.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 251.

Both have been given the guidance to inspire goodness in each other, and thereby, the goodness in all society. The respect, compassion, and mutuality that Allah has placed between women and men must be visible in not only your family life, but also in how Muslims conduct public transactions. Women and men, girls and boys should have equal access to and must feel equally welcome to participate in schools, the *masjid*, and other civic and cultural institutions.¹⁷²

Significant here is the statement's echoing of Wadud's language and her pedagogic reminders of what is important in the Qur'an. Like Wadud, the writers of this statement base their argument on Qur'an 30:21. And, like her, they advocate for human equality in light of their relationship with God. The example of the *Women in Islam* guidelines highlights the practical impact of Wadud and Rahman. Here, we encounter an example of an on-going American dialogue about gender that incorporates the Qur'an and presents it as a text that speaks directly to a local audience and their concerns. Wadud's translation of the written interpretation into sermons also highlights the importance of oral interpretations, which will be the subject of the next two chapters.

¹⁷² See ISNA's website: <http://www.isna.net/Leadership/pages/Guidelines-Womens-Participation.aspx>. Women in Islam never endorsed Wadud's sermon. In fact, in my personal interactions with its members, I noticed a tendency to think that Wadud went too far in her act of leading a mixed prayer. The guidelines published on ISNA's website do not in any way acknowledge any relationship with Wadud's scholarship and activism. I also know that Aisha al-Adawiyya and her colleagues had been working on this document long before Wadud's prayer. However, the timing of this document's publication, a few months after Wadud's sermons, indicates that Wadud's action created a stir that needed to be addressed by Muslim organizations in the U.S. These guidelines were ISNA's response. Another example of Wadud's possible influence is found in Carolyn Rouse's anthropological account of African-American women's "everyday tafsir." Wadud's view of the Qur'anic idea of a balanced marriage is repeated in the study groups and imam's sermons. Such a resonance with Wadud's audience does not rest on an idealized vision of a far away society, or as Wadud would put it "a Qur'anic utopia." Rather, it resonates for practical reasons – women who are the financial heads of households demand plausible explanation to their questions, which do not disregard the authority of the tradition, but rather reformulate it in their own terms. See Carolyn Moxley Rouse, *Engaged Surrender: African American Women and Islam* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2004), 53-55.

Chapter Three:

Redemption in African-American Qur'anic Exegesis: *Oral Tafsir of Warith Deen Mohammed*

In all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives. Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield meaning.¹⁷³

We can't get the message. What good is knowledge if you can't hear it? The Bible says blessed is he that has an ear to hear. So what good is the body of knowledge we call religion if nobody can hear it?¹⁷⁴

I was freed by the revelation.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 8.

¹⁷⁴ Imam Warith Deen Mohammed, *As the Light Shineth from the East* (Chicago: WDM Publishing, 1980), 67.

¹⁷⁵ Anonymous who calls himself a “student of Imam W.D. Mohammed,” personal interview, August 11, 2009.

This chapter presents the language of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed. Its main focus is on the preacher's rhetoric and his oral interpretations of the Qur'an. I specifically examine his speeches from the period after the mid-1980s and until Imam Mohammed's passing in 2008. Although this period does not appear as significant in academic presentations, it has been central for the formation of an indigenous African-American tradition of oral Qur'anic exegesis. During this time, Imam Mohammed spoke to his community throughout regular trips around the country, radio addresses, and printed articles and transcripts of speeches in the *Muslim Journal*, his movement's central newspaper. His recorded speeches, as well as their further reiterations by his students, serve as the sources for my analysis.

Warith Deen Mohammed's given name was Wallace D. Muhammad. He was born in 1933 in Hamtramck, MI, near Detroit, in the family of African-American migrants from Georgia, Elijah and Clara Pool. Two years before his birth, his father encountered a mysterious stranger who presented himself to Detroit's African-Americans as a messenger of Islam, the original religion they had forgotten after being enslaved in the U.S. Its promise was a true liberation of Black Americans, a restoration of their status as the original human beings and true masters of God's creation. The stranger used a variety of names and titles - Professor Ford, Mr. Farrad Mohammad, F. Mohammad Ali, Mr. Wali Farrad, and W.D. Fard. He is most often remembered as Fard Muhammad (people who affiliate themselves with this history pronounce the first name as "Farad" while spelling it as "Fard"). Elijah Pool converted to the new religion, assumed a new name, first Elijah Kareem and then Elijah Muhammad, and soon became Fard

Muhammad's chief representative. In 1934, his teacher disappeared. The disciple became the leader of the organization, which came to be known as the Nation of Islam, the largest black nationalist movement in U.S. history. At the height of its influence from the 1950s to the mid- 1970s, the movement had a mosque in every major American city, owned a newspaper that boasted the largest distribution among any African-American publications, operated numerous businesses including banks, farms, restaurants and food distribution companies. Malcolm X was its most visible member. Martin Luther King Jr. used the Nation as a sort of a scarecrow: in his presentations the Nation was the alternative that awaited America had it not moved from its racist practices. Muslims, African-American and immigrant, who did not affiliate themselves with the Nation, repudiated its teachings, which denied the afterlife, called Fard Muhammad a God and Elijah Muhammad his messenger, assigned collective divinity to the black and other non-Caucasian human beings and collective devilish nature to the whites. The Black Power movement grew out of its ideology of racial uplift. And in 1975, upon the death of Elijah Muhammad, Wallace Muhammad took the reins of the Nation of Islam. His authority rested partly on the story of his birth: Fard Muhammad, it was told, assigned a special status to this child of his favorite student. Of course, there were complications. Elijah Muhammad excommunicated Wallace from the movement on several occasions because, in the late 1950s, he taught Sunni Muslim doctrines and practices while serving as a minister at the Nation's mosque in Philadelphia, and in the mid-1960s served as Malcolm X's confidant just as Malcolm had made a public split from the organization. The father reconciled with the son in 1974. This paved the way to Wallace's induction as the Supreme Minister to the Nation of Islam. Once he assumed control of the organization,

he led an effort to gradually convert its members to Sunni Islam. By the early 1980s, the transformation was complete. Most members of the Nation followed Elijah's son - who in the late 1970s adopted the name Warith Deen Muhammad (later to be changed to Warith Deen Mohammed) - and embraced the identity of orthodox Sunni Muslims. Several groups, however, split. Most famous of them is the reconstituted Nation of Islam led by Minister Louis Farrakhan.

This is the story of Imam Mohammed as it is most often told. When he passed away on September 9, 2008, almost every newspaper retold a variation of this narrative and stressed that his major achievement was in turning the "fiery" Nation of Islam into a religiously mainstream movement.¹⁷⁶ Most academic reflections on his life follow a similar outline. The period of his career that has attracted most attention is precisely the transition period from 1975 to the early 1980s.

Academic and journalistic attention to the time of transformation is quite understandable. Imam Mohammed's accomplishment of converting most of the Nation's followers was monumental. No less a charismatic figure than Malcolm X had tried his hand at such a task and failed. (Faced with the overwhelmingly negative reaction from his former co-religionists, Malcolm bitterly exclaimed: "I had known... that Negroes would not rush to follow me into the orthodox Islam."¹⁷⁷) Imam Mohammed's strategy of reinterpretation of the Nation's beliefs and practices to fall in line with his vision of the Sunni orthodoxy was ingenious. As he explained in a later speech, "What I have done is

¹⁷⁶ See, for example, Margaret Ramirez and Manya A. Brachear, "Imam's Views Created Rift With Black Nationalists," *Los Angeles Times*, September 10, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/sep/10/local/me-mohammed10>.

¹⁷⁷ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1992), 364. Interesting in this quote is Malcolm's use of the word "Negro," which was a term Nation of Islam members used for people who had not yet embraced the religion of Fard and Elijah Muhammad. W.D. Mohammed turned the Nation's language into a rhetorical rebuke of its members who stubbornly continued to follow Elijah.

simply talk on the double meaning of Elijah Muhammad's teaching."¹⁷⁸ One example of such a rhetorical reform was his use of the Book of Revelation, which had been an important source for his father's interpretations of both the Qur'an and the Bible. Throughout the late 1970s, Imam Mohammed presented his reform as a culmination of the development initiated by his father and Fard Muhammad. The period of their leadership, he proposed, was akin to the "First Coming of Christ." It was the "First Resurrection" of African-Americans to their natural and original faith, which was Islam. The reform then was the "Second Resurrection":

In the First Resurrection God began to raise us out of the graves by beginning to unveil the Truth. In the Second Resurrection the Truth is not just unveiled in a sense of scriptural interpretation, but we come to a kind of a natural interpretation.... We have been taught many things in the teachings of the Great Master W.F. Muhammad [Fard Muhammad] and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad that prepared us for this time.¹⁷⁹

What happened to Imam Mohammed and his movement after this dramatic reform? If we are to pay attention to the way the story is ordinarily told, he continued to teach a "mainstream religion." As a *New York Times* obituary summarizes,

Imam Mohammed moved decisively toward the religious mainstream. In 1992, he became the first Muslim to deliver the invocation for the United States Senate. He led prayers at both inaugurals of President Bill Clinton. He addressed a conference of Muslims and Reform Jews in 1995, and participated in several major interfaith dialogues with Roman Catholic cardinals. He met with the pope in 1996 and 1999.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁸ *Muslim Journal*, November 12, 1993.

¹⁷⁹ *Muhammad Speaks*, April 11, 1975, quoted in Martha Lee, *The Nation of Islam as a Millenarian Movement* (Lampeter, UK and New York, NY: Mellen House, 1989), 83.

¹⁸⁰ Douglas Martin, "W. Deen Mohammed, 74, Top U.S. Imam, Dies," *New York Times*, September 9, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/10/us/10mohammed.html>.

Well, what is more mainstream than meeting with the President and the Pope? Such a depiction creates an impression of a leader who had spent the last 28 years of his life in a semi-retirement mode. The academic reflections do not go much further. Most stop with the description of the institutional life of the movement during the 1980s and cover the changes in the movement's name, the gradual and dramatic decentralization, continuing rivalry (though most often a cold peace) with Louis Farrakhan.¹⁸¹ Some authors, most notably Edward E. Curtis IV, pay attention to Imam Mohammed's rhetoric.¹⁸² Curtis' analysis is unique because it addresses the Muslim angle of W.D. Mohammed's rhetoric: he examines Imam Mohammed's rhetoric from the 1980s, most notably his attempts to formulate a program for the development of an African-American school of jurisprudence and formulations of Islam as an American public religion. Yet, because Curtis' analysis stops with the 1980s, even his work creates the impression that the Muslim leader's work continued as though on an auto-pilot.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹See, for example, Mattias Gardell, *In the Name of Elijah Muhammad: Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996).

¹⁸² Edward E. Curtis IV, *Islam In Black America: Identity, Liberation, and Difference in African-American Islamic Thought* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002).

¹⁸³ Another benefit of Curtis' analysis is the attention he pays to the Muslim aspects of W.D. Mohammed's activities, including rhetoric. He explores, though very briefly, how W.D. Mohammed engaged with the memory of Bilal Ibn-Rabah and Prophet Muhammad's sira (life stories). His more recent work has offered an insight into the interactions between African-American Muslims and their co-religionists abroad and immigrants in the U.S. (See: Edward E. Curtis IV, "African-American Islamization Reconsidered: Black History Narratives and Muslim Identity," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 73, No. 3 (2005): 659-684.) Before Curtis, most scholars interested in the movement's history were specialists in American Religion, which led to a neglect of the Muslim aspects of Imam Mohammed and his followers' language and practices. A somewhat humorous evidence of the missing Islamic Studies element is C. Eric Lincoln's statement that Islam was a "religion founded by the Prophet Muhammad in the sixth century." (See: C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 3rd ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994], 256.) More complicated repercussions stem from his continual insistence that Imam Mohammed led the movement to "full orthodoxy," as though such a concept is a historical constant for all the ages. Such a blanket statement offered a convenient summary and an impression of a process that has

This is not an impression one would get by listening to Imam Mohammed's audience. For many of the people who affiliate themselves with his leadership, most important is Imam Mohammed's legacy as a preacher who formulated an indigenous American tradition of engagement with the Qur'an. To learn how this legacy plays out, I suggest a more detailed exploration of what many of Imam Mohammed's followers call the "*tafsir* of Warith Deen Mohammed." That *tafsir* was an ongoing rhetorical production of the time after the transition from the Nation of Islam was accomplished, which why the period after the mid-1980s is so important.

To complicate the matter further, there is productive confusion of terms in the way Imam Muhammad and his audience have spoken about his *tafsir*. They have often conflated *tafsir* with translation. For example, during the 2003 Ramadan teach-in, a young lady in the audience asked Imam Mohammed, "when will you translate the Qur'an?" He responded:

I am doing it all alone but I hope to one day call together a team at least to meet once a month. And I'm working on it all of the time so that we can actually start collecting my commentary.... We can do it, *in sha' allāh*, one day soon. But I think it is Allah's - *subhanahu wa-ta'ala* - will that I just do it as I work with you. And you are taking notes and we can pull it together one day soon, *in sha' allāh*.¹⁸⁴

Imam Mohammed spoke here about a nascent effort to produce an audio recording of his translation and *tafsir* of the Qur'an, which, it was hoped, would eventually be reproduced in a printed format. This effort came to be spearheaded in 2006

successfully ended. My analysis suggests that orthodoxy is a discipline and discourse always in need of continuous enforcement, both rhetorical and institutional.

¹⁸⁴" 2003 Ramadan Session Transcript," November 23, 2003, p. 13 (np.). Courtesy of Imam Oliver Muhammad, Raleigh, NC. The transcripts of such sessions are available for purchase at major gatherings in the community.

by two of his close associates, Imam Darnell Karim and Imam Vernon Fareed, who by the Fall of 2009 have published 5 sets of CDs under the title of "Tafseer of Imam W. Deen Mohammed." The CDs contain an Arabic recitation by Imam Darnell Karim, a reading of an English translation by Imam Vernon Fareed, and interviews with Imam Mohammed that solicit commentary on specific Qur'anic verses, expressions and ideas.¹⁸⁵ Interestingly, Imam Fareed reads a modified version of Yusuf Ali's translation. The shift to the use of Yusuf Ali's translations was one of the first steps undertaken by Warith Deen Mohammed upon his appointment at the Supreme Minster to the Nation of Islam in 1975. Elijah Muhammad worked with Muhammad Ali's translation. As Imam Fareed explained in a personal interview, the shift to Yusuf Ali's translation was a part of the transition away from Elijah Muhammad's interpretations of the Qur'an.¹⁸⁶ For example, Elijah Muhammad used Muhammad Ali's translation of Qur'an 20:102 - "On that day [of resurrection] when the trumpet shall be blown, and We will gather the guilty, blue-eyed, on that day" - as the scriptural proof of his presentation of the whites as the inherently evil "blue-eyed devils."¹⁸⁷ W.D. Mohammed's shift to Yusuf Ali's translation was also convenient because it established a shared textual basis with immigrant Muslims: this was the translation most often distributed by immigrant and international Muslim groups, most notably the Muslim World League.

¹⁸⁵ The CD sets are available for purchase on Imam Darnel's website: <http://islamicstudiesmaterials.com>. The first CD set became available in the Fall of 2007. W.D. Mohammed announced its publication during a Ramadan lecture in October 2007.

¹⁸⁶ Imam Vernon Fareed, telephone interview by author, August 6, 2009.

¹⁸⁷ See Maulana Muhammad Ali, *Translation of the Holy Quran* (Lahore, Pakistan: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Ishaat-i-Islam, 1951). This was among the editions used in the Nation of Islam. It is available online at http://aaiil.org/text/hq/trans/ma_list.shtml.

While promoting and largely relying on Yusuf Ali's translation, W.D. Mohammed emphasized the need for indigenous African-American engagement with the Arabic Qur'an and its independent translation. His sermons and lectures were the rhetorical spaces where he would perform, in front of his audiences, how to translate and interpret the Qur'an.

Vernon Fareed's modifications of Yusuf Ali's translation present some of his teacher's interpretations. Most notable among them is Imam Mohammed's rendition of the *basmala*, a Qur'anic invocation Muslims repeat at the beginning of every important act.¹⁸⁸ Yusuf Ali translated this Arabic phrase - *bismillāhi ar-raḥmāni ar-raḥīm* - as "In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful." This has become the common-place translation in the American Muslim vernacular; its wide usage is an indication of the influence of Yusuf's Ali's translation and the institutions that have facilitated its local use. Imam Mohammed's version is "With G-d's Name, The Merciful Benefactor, the Merciful Redeemer." This has been his standard translation, with some variations, from the early 1980s.

Two details stand out here: one reflects his engagement with a printed Qur'an, and another, his lifelong work of translating the printed Qur'an into African-American Muslim vernacular speech. First, on the immediate level, his translation of the Arabic "*allāh*" into the word that is pronounced as "God" provided an obvious shared ground between his audience's cultural background as former Christians and their everyday life among Christian neighbors, family and friend. On a more subtle level, the spelling of

¹⁸⁸ Another important translation by W.D. Muhammad is his rendition of al-Fatiha, the Qur'an's first sura. See a detailed analysis of this in Bruce B. Lawrence, *The Qur'an: A Biography* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2006), 167-171.

"G-d" that omits the vowel "o" is reminiscent of the Arabic writing and print. In such a move, Imam Mohammed provided a visual bridge between English and Qur'anic Arabic.

The second detail of Imam Mohammed's *basmala* is perhaps more far-reaching. His translation assigns to God the quality of being a redeemer. Redemption has been the central theme in Imam Mohammed's engagement with the Qur'an. His articulations of redemption as a Qur'anic theme have remained key throughout his career. Of course, his use of this theme has shifted with time. His sermons and lectures always related the Qur'an to practical issue of the day. And, as practical concerns changed, so did his particular interpretations. In the 1970s and early 1980s, his task was to transform his father's movement into a Sunni group. Later on, and until his passing in 2008, his task increasingly became to facilitate a confident, independent though not isolated, outlook on the part of his community.

W.D. Mohammed's articulations of the theme of redemption stand in contrast to most Sunni Muslim engagements with the Qur'an outside of the African-American community.¹⁸⁹ After all, the African-American use of this term stems from the Christian vocabulary, where redemption is tied to the concept of the original sin. The Qur'anic view of human history, as interpreted by most Sunni speakers and writers, does not include a notion of the original sin and therefore has no articulation of the Qur'anic revelation as a redemptive act parallel to the Christian meta-narrative. Fazlur Rahman, one of the Qur'an's modern interlocutors we have already encountered, states emphatically that "for Islam, there is no particular [idea of] 'salvation': there is only

¹⁸⁹ There are parallels to African-American stress on redemption in Muslim history, particularly in Shi'ism. See Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam: A Study of the Devotional Aspects of 'Ashura' in Twelver Shi'ism* (The Hague, The Netherlands: Morton Publishers, 1978).

success [*falāḥ*] or failure [*khursān*] in the task of building the world."¹⁹⁰ Interestingly, this passage comes as a commentary to what Rahman sees a dominant trend in inter-religious dialogue where non-Christian participants are forced to communicate in Christian terms. Without such an engagement with the Christians, at least for Rahman, there is no reason to talk of the idea of "salvation" or redemption. This subject of conversation becomes thinkable only through the engagements with Christians.

In contrast, in African-American discourse, Muslim and otherwise, the idea of redemption is inescapable. Since the nineteenth century, African-American preachers and writers have developed a tradition of Biblical interpretation that articulated redemption as the vital answer to the large-scale suffering in a viscerally unjust world. James H. Cone reflects on this tradition when he states that African-American exegesis posited suffering as the "badge of true discipleship," which has enabled African-American interpreters of the scripture to make sense of their collective suffering through the stories of the Biblical Israelites, particularly the story of Exodus, and the idea of Jesus as a fellow suffering servant. Of central importance here has been the identification of African-Americans *as a people*, rather than just individuals, with Jesus as a suffering servant and the Biblical Israelites as a people whose suffering made them chosen.¹⁹¹ Another unique feature of the African-American interpretations of redemption is its articulation as an on-going or future *this-worldly* event (the constant comparisons between African-Americans and the Biblical story of Exodus illustrates this best). Elijah

¹⁹⁰ Rahman, *Major Themes*, 63.

¹⁹¹ See Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986); and Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham : Duke University Press, 1990).

Muhammad spoke this type of the language of redemption when he taught that "Islam is our salvation" and stressed that it is taking place within the physical realm and does not include any notion of the afterlife. While his son dramatically rejected the Nation's dismissal of the afterlife, he continued to speak of redemption in a mode of this-worldly uplift that included social, economic, and spiritual aspects of Muslim lives. For him the promise of the African-American this-worldly redemption was in the Qur'an. As he declared in a speech from the late 1980s, it is "Allah's will... that this religion of al-Islam and the Book of Qur'an are destined to be our Savior."¹⁹²

From the very first speech Imam Mohammed gave upon inheriting his father's position at the age of 41 in 1975, he presented himself as an agent of a Qur'an-based transformation. On that occasion he declared that his father's main achievement was that he had "unlocked the Bible and by unlocking the Bible he made us unlock our minds." He explained that, before Elijah Muhammad, they "have only read the scripture in print"; anybody who can read can read it, "but the scripture says, blessed is he who *hears* the word!"¹⁹³ The new stage in the movement's history, he hinted, would be based on hearing and understanding the Qur'an. From that moment on, his authority was inextricably linked to the Qur'an. He relied on this connection, for example, in the early 1980s, when he was introducing the idea of an African-American school of Muslim jurisprudence. At that point, in a speech delivered Masjid Malcolm Shabazz in Harlem, he offered his own interpretation of the controversial Qur'anic passage, from sura 5 verse

¹⁹² W.D. Muhammad, *Al-Islam: Unity and Leadership* (Chicago: The Sense Maker, 1991), 110. For more in depth analysis of the concept of redemption in Elijah Muhammad and W.D. Mohammed's interpretations, see: Timur R. Yuskaev, "Redeeming the Nation: Redemption Theology in African-American Islam," *Studies in Contemporary Islam*, 1 (1999), 29-61.

¹⁹³ Wallace Muhammad, "Savior's Day Address, 1975", video, available at: <http://www.ummah.com/video/video/show?id=2048973%3AVideo%3A105601&xgs=1> (accessed: July 28, 2009).

51, which Yusuf Ali translates as “O ye who believe! take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: they are but friends and protectors to each other.” For Imam Mohammed this passage spoke not about Christians and Jews as a timeless entity, but as specific Jewish and Christian factions in Arabia at the time of the Prophet Muhammad who represented interests antagonistic to the nascent Muslim community. From this analogy, he argued that African-Americans should also be wary of taking as friends and protectors those Muslim immigrants who “represent foreign concerns.”¹⁹⁴ And, as he said this, he immediately responded to potential criticisms from both those who criticized him as not being sufficiently “orthodox,” like Brooklyn’s famous Sunni leader Imam Siraj Wahhaj, and those who portrayed him as betraying the legacy of his father, like Minister Louis Farrakhan. His response was typical: when the critics attack him they attack the Qur’an, which they misunderstand: “there are those who want to charge me with something because they don’t want to follow the Qur’an. They don’t want to be real Muslims. It isn’t me. None of those people have anything against me personally.”¹⁹⁵ A later example of his projection of his own authority upon the Qur’an comes from one of his last speeches in 2008, when he clarified for his students that “when I am talking, I am speaking from Scripture. Don’t think that I am giving you my words; I don’t have any words. All of my words come from Scripture or from somewhere else.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁹⁴ W.D. Mohammed, *Challenges that Face the Man Today*, vol. 2 (Chicago: W.D. Muhammad Productions, 1985), 86-87.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 55.

¹⁹⁶ Warith Deen Muhammad, "Life: The Final Battlefield," *Muslim Journal*, April 18, 2008. Both the audio and transcript of the speech are available on <http://www.newafricaradio.com>.

So, how did W.D. Mohammed speak from the Qur'an? How did he make its words his own? And, how did he teach his audiences to speak a Qur'anic language? Central in this string of questions is the pedagogic character of his Qur'an-based rhetoric. As he retold the Qur'anic stories, recited its verses in Arabic, and translated and explained its "signs" in the colloquial English of his African-American audiences, he demonstrated how to speak the Qur'an. From such efforts, there emerged a particular tradition of vernacular African-American Qur'anic exegesis. This tradition is best heard when we listen to how it is repeated and taught by the people who affiliate themselves with Imam Mohammed's leadership.

What follows is an experiment in comparative hearing. I will work primarily with a lecture Imam Mohammed gave in Cleveland, OH in November 1987 during a National Imams' Meeting. I will juxtapose it with his other speeches from the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. At the end of the chapter, I will also give an example of a Friday sermon by one of W.D. Mohammed's students, Imam Faheem Shuaib of Oakland, CA.

I choose Imam Mohammed's 1987 sermon because of two reasons. First, it is firmly grounded in its context. Imam Mohammed delivered the speech at the time that marked a conclusion of a serious and prolonged internal crisis. In 1987, his organization lost a legal case over Elijah Muhammad's estate, which had begun in 1979. As W.D. Mohammed recollected in a 2003 speech, this was a serious financial blow to the

institutional life of the movement. The most significant outcome of this decision was the closing of many of its schools.¹⁹⁷ This element of crisis, however, is particularly important because it contributes to the echoes I will observe in Imam Faheem's speech. He too delivered his Friday sermon at a Raleigh, NC, mosque at a stressful time in the community: less than a year ago Imam W.D. Mohammed passed away and Imam Faheem advised local communities how to move forward. Key here is how both preachers address their movement's crises by searching the answers in the Qur'an and finding such answers in what they hear as the Qur'an's redemptive message. In such a way, the particular in the 1987 sermon is linked to the more typical elements of Imam Mohammed's language, both as in his own and his students' reiterations.

The Cleveland speech is unique and typical in at least two other ways. Imam Mohammed specifically addressed the congregational leaders in his movement who travelled to hear him from across the country. On such occasions, he would ordinarily carry out explicit oral interpretations of the Qur'an, with many Arabic quotes and his own translations. The other speeches that I will bring up in the course of this analysis were directed at the general audience of the people in his movement, as well as other African-American and non-African-American and non-Muslim listeners. This second type of addresses normally included very few direct references to the Qur'an, although the ideas he expressed on both occasions were very much related and, as he insisted, grounded in the revelation. Another particular aspect of this speech is that it is representative of his

¹⁹⁷ Imam W. Deen Mohammed, "Live in Harlem, NY. New Africa: A New Mind, A New Life, A New Beginning for Black People in America" (W.D.M. Productions, June 21, 2003). Another effect was a reduced number of publications, especially books, produced by W.D. Mohammed's ministry. This particular change has reinforced Imam Mohammed's profile of being a primarily oral commentator. Before this point, many of his speeches were edited and published as books. After 1987, his speeches were distributed mostly as audio cassettes and CDs. The only exceptions were the transcripts of his lectures and sermons published in the *Muslim Journal*, as well as transcripts of his lectures from the annual Ramadan gatherings.

post-transformation speeches. By 1987, he no longer argued against the ideas presented by Elijah Muhammad. By that point, all who could leave his movement already did and the new post-Nation of Islam Sunni identity had become a given among those who chose to follow him. So, unlike his speeches from the late 1970s and the early 1980s, in these later talks Imam Mohammed engaged the memory of his father and the time of transition not as an explicit ground for rhetorical contestation, but rather as a shared story whose outcome is well established and whose experience united him and his audience.

At the same time, the style of his delivery is characteristic of his overall manner of public address throughout his career. In the audio recording one can hear, for example, that Imam Mohammed speaks from a very rough outline and mostly improvises. In this way, he followed the rhetorical tradition of his father who, like the son, tended to deliver long and winding speeches, mostly improvised and based on very basic outlines. Of course, this style of delivery highlights both preachers' reliance on African-American Christian homiletic tradition. They were "spiritual" rather than "manuscript" preachers.¹⁹⁸ W.D. Mohammed himself has acknowledged time and again the influence of Elijah Muhammad on his style of preaching. This surely was a way to shore up his authority. Behind this, however, was W.D. Mohammed's upbringing. Like his audiences, he went through the discipline of listening to and then speaking the language of his father and other Nation of Islam ministers. He recalled this often for his audiences, especially after the late 1980s; almost every speech he gave in the last decade of his life is peppered with the recollections of his and his movements' history.

¹⁹⁸ See Bruce A. Rosenberg, *The Art of the American Folk Preacher* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970).

Even Imam Mohammed's demeanor would remind his audiences about the father. After all, Elijah Muhammad commanded to his followers, "Don't act proud. Be humble and yet commanding."¹⁹⁹ This was certainly his son's public persona. And those who had heard Elijah Muhammad speak certainly heard the father's echoes in his son's speeches. In the 1987 speech, for example, W.D. Mohammed refers to himself in passing as a "donkey who has had a metamorphosis." This line occurs in the part of the sermon where he positions himself, an African-American, as a Muslim authority to whom - all of a sudden and despite themselves - immigrant Muslims listen. Imam Mohammed did not need to explain to his audience that the "donkey" he referred to was the donkey of the Balaam story from the Old Testament. They had heard already this story from Christian preachers before joining the Nation of Islam. And they had heard Elijah Muhammad's rendition of it, where the donkey was a symbol for the black people who were treated like the beast of burden and whom God made to speak the truth to those who abuse them.²⁰⁰ In this example, the African-American Christian influence is obvious. Imam Mohammed used it productively. On numerous occasions, he would start or interject into his lectures an anecdote: he would say that on the way to the meeting he had been listening to the radio and heard a preacher say something resonant to today's particular subject. This was surely a nod towards Christian African-American preachers. In the 2009 speech, his student, Imam Shuaibe, did something very similar when he jokingly advised his audience that they need to "go back to the church sometime... to get back that spirit."²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Elijah Muhammad, *Supreme Wisdom* (Atlanta: Messenger Elijah Muhammad Propagation Society, 199-?). 283.

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 297.

²⁰¹ Imam Faheem Shuaibe, "Fear Not For Allah Is With Us," Raleigh, NC, May 22, 2009. CD available for purchase at <http://aclearunderstanding.net/order.htm>. A copy provided by Faheem Shuaibe.

The 1987 speech at Masjid Bilal in Cleveland, OH was a part of the events tied to the 10th Annual Awards Dinner. The dinner became a local tradition where the members of the African-American Muslim community invited local government, business and non-profit leaders to both highlight their own contribution to the City's life and recognize prominent non-Muslim representatives. It was organized to coincide with the national meeting of the imams affiliated with W.D. Mohammed's leadership. Imam Mohammed's keynote speech was tailored for this internal audience. Its excerpts were soon published in the Muslim Journal. And, in the late 2000s, its recording was again distributed by his office as a part of its "History Speaks" series of audio and video recordings.²⁰²

Imam Mohammed organized his 1987 speech around two Qur'anic passages. The first half, over an hour long, is a commentary on the Qur'an 3:110, which Yusuf Ali translates as "Ye are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah. If only the People of the Book had faith it were best for them; among them are some who have faith, but most of them are perverted transgressors." The second half of the lecture is his commentary on Sura Joseph. As he moves through the sermon, he weaves his Qur'anic commentary into a series of reflections on the African-American community, the United States and the larger Muslim world. And, as he speaks, he returns to the themes that characterized much of his preaching throughout his career: religion, nature and the African-American history's place in the Qur'anic meta-history.

²⁰² W.D. Mohammed, "National Imams Meeting: Yusuf Analogy," CD available for purchase at http://www.wdmpublications.com/online_store/history_speaks_cd/index.htm

The first half of verse 110 in sura 3 is among most recited Qur'anic passages; if there is such a thing as a Muslim collective memory, then this phrase – “you are the best community” – certainly occupies in it a central position. Many Muslim preachers use this quotation. It often serves as compliment to an audience, which wins them over and establishes a shared conceptual space. But then it also prepares them for the next step - a corrective message of a sermon. In fact, the passage itself reflects one of the peculiar features of the Qur'anic text: like many other passages, it presents a conditional status of being a Muslim. Qur'an 3:110 communicated to the audience of the Prophet Muhammad's contemporaries that to be believers within the Prophet's community was surely an elevated status, but it needed to be continuously reasserted by its members through their actions, such as “enjoining what is right” and “forbidding what is wrong.”²⁰³ This feature reflects the Qur'anic text's function and, indeed its very formation, as a text of didactic discourse. It was formulated in debates as a text to be used to persuade often hostile audiences to dramatically change their lives. And it functioned throughout Muslim history as the central tool of the preachers' art of persuasion directed at influencing Muslims' everyday lives. Imam Mohammed took a cue from this feature of the Qur'an as he attempted to demonstrate that this particular passage is indicative of how God's revelation speaks directly to them.

He began the lecture by reciting the passage in Arabic and came back to it some twenty minutes into the speech. He used the time in-between to remind his listeners of an observation he had made repeatedly in many of his speeches after 1976, when during an annual Savior's Day celebration, he lifted the American flag over his head and announced

²⁰³ On the use of this passage in preaching, see Antoun, *Muslim Preacher*. Michael Cook provides a history of Muslim use of this passage. See Michael Cook, *Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

that his organization would from now on strive to incorporate fully into the civic life of the United States. In 1976, that move came as a shock to many within and outside of the movement. The Savior's Day was the Nation of Islam's central event celebrating the legacy of Fard Muhammad and an occasion for Elijah Muhammad to elaborate on the idea of the segregation from the "devilish" American society, which necessitated that they abstain from participating in political life.²⁰⁴ W.D. Mohammed used that occasion to announce a new direction in the public stance of his movement. He did this by referring to the Qur'an and proposing an inherent correspondence between its language and the language of the American Constitution. By 1987, this declaration had become a staple of his speeches. In the Cleveland lecture he gestured towards it as he made his way to Qur'an 3:110. You see, he told his audience, "our religion gives the concept of our personal and community life." That concept of community life, he declared, is reflected in the Qur'anic phrase *ummatun wāhidatun* or "one community:"

One community under God. Isn't that what we are? *Ummatun wāhidatun* under God, responsible to Allah. Ah? You've heard that same language, haven't you. One nation under God. Now that language from the Constitution of the United States, or its introduction, or preamble to the constitution of the United States - one nation under God - is not new. Fourteen hundred years ago, that's more than 1000 years before that language was formed – same language. One community, responsible to Allah. And we may say one nation under God, because *umma* can be translated as "nation" sometimes. Ah? *Ummatun wāhidah* – one united people, responsible to Allah, responsible to God.²⁰⁵

At this point in the lecture, Imam Mohammed does not specify the particular Qur'anic verse with which he works. There are eight verses that could possibly serve as the source

²⁰⁴ On the practical level this was not always the case. The Nation tacitly supported some politicians, like Adam Clayton Powell.

²⁰⁵ W.D. Mohammed, "National Imams' Meeting."

of his quote (all eight are placed in grammatical constructions where the phrase is pronounced as Imam Mohammad quotes it, with the “an” ending for both words). All but two verses use this phrase as a form of a lament: that humanity was once one community, fearing and serving God, but with time, most have forgotten about the purpose of their creation as servants of God and have thus become dispersed into many groups wondering aimlessly through life.²⁰⁶

The note of the Qur’anic lamentation was important to Imam Mohammed: often in his speeches he would comment that most people – African-American, Muslim, and otherwise – have led themselves astray and become disconnected from God-consciousness. But, for him, this Qur’anic lament indicated a conditional promise of success. It promises that, based on the Qur’anic meta-history, human beings can unite in their struggle to create a better society. At the same time, it establishes a condition: this is only possible if they are mindful of their dependence on God and act in accordance with the divine plan for humanity. The promise, he never tired to repeat, has been materialized in human history, including African-American history, time after time. The most recent such example is the success of the Civil Rights movement and the legal recognition of African-Americans as equal citizens of the United States. In that case, and as he emphasized in the Qur’anic history as well, the success was not attained by a majority. No, the history’s promise – both as it has been experienced by his audience and as it has been told in the Qur’an - is in the pattern of societies being saved by the few human beings who have retained and cultivated their God-consciousness through action. Thus, in a late 1980s speech, he challenged his audience: “Do you think people are saved

²⁰⁶ The verses with the tone of lamentation are 2:213, 5:48, 10:19, 11:118, 16:93, 42:8. The exceptions are Qur’an 21:92 and 23:52.

by a majority? Study history. Societies are always saved by a minority, a select few.”²⁰⁷

In a 2003 speech, he repeated the same idea, all along echoing the Qur’anic lamentation and promise of redemption. And, as was typical of his rhetoric, he used these notes to incorporate the experience and memory of the African-American community into the Qur’anic story of divine guidance to humanity:

I’m convinced also that leaders in the history of African-American people who are Christian, and that is a great majority, they got help from God and God has been in that work and God has been with us as long as we were with God and until we went after the dollar ... He is still with us, few of us, and that's too bad, but don't feel discouraged because never in the history of a people there were many leading them, always a few, always a few.²⁰⁸

Typically, he would weave this idea into his Qur’an-backed commentary on African-American place in the U.S. society, which he emphasized is the divinely prepared ground for their communal uplift. Here, the correspondences between the Qur’an and the Constitution are important. For example, in a speech from the late 1970s, which had been edited and included in a book, W.D. Mohammed repeated the same point on the correspondences between the Qur’an and the language of the American founding documents and asked his audience: “How many nations have such beautiful, Divine language in their constitution?” Closer to the end of his career, in 2003, he repeated the same point and reminded his audience of the correspondence between the Qur’anic language and “the great plan of [America’s] founding fathers.”

An evidence of how his audience has incorporated this explicit call to participate in the country’s public life with the backing of the Qur’an can be found in the examples of American Muslim elected politicians, almost all of whom today are African-American.

²⁰⁷ W.D. Mohammed, *Al-Islam*, 102.

²⁰⁸ W. D. Mohammed, “Live in Harlem.”

As I write this chapter, another example is developing in one of the listservs set up by the people who call themselves “students of Imam Mohammed:” There is a new initiative that aims to “inform the entire world to the logic that the American Constitution is not in conflict with the Muslim Life or Al-Islam. The position of The Students Forum is that we believe that this logic, which is based upon the tafsir of Imam W. Deen Mohammed, will do a great deal to improve the dialogue between Muslim Americans and the American citizenry.”²⁰⁹

The 1987 speech was most probably an elaboration on Qur’an 21:92 or 23:52. These two passages celebrate the emerging community of the believers guided by the Qur’an as “one community.” Imam Mohammed connected this note of celebration as he returned to Qur’an 3:110 and now offered his own interpretation and translation. He stressed that the correspondence between the Qur’anic “*ummatun wāhidatun*” and the American “one nation under God” is not coincidental. He explained that this was how “God identified us”: this is the divine hint that indicates African-Americans’ place in both American and Qur’anic story. And so he continued, now moving to Qur’an 3:110,

He also said that you’re a community. That you’re the best community brought out, *ukhrijat*. *Ukhrijat* means “brought out,” *ukhrijat*. Exodus means brought out. So no wonder that Muslims recognize that we also have Exodus. In order to join the Muslim life, the Muslim community, you also have to come out. Come out of Egypt, come out of the world, to enter the community of al-Islam. The best community brought out. For what, God asks us? For the good of all people. For the good of all people.²¹⁰

²⁰⁹ See <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/The-Students-of-Imam-W-Deen-Mohammed>, this particular discussion trail starts on December 13, 2009.

²¹⁰ W.D. Mohammed, “National Imams' Meeting.”

The transcribed rendition of Imam Mohammed's uttering loses some of its key characteristics. In the audio version of the speech, the transition that he makes at this point - from the commentary on "*ummatun wāhidatun*" to the "best community" and to the idea of Exodus - is very fluid. There is no pause before "Exodus." He delivers his point as most natural and obvious: to him, in the Qur'an there is an indication of the Exodus reminiscent of the African-American Christian interpretations that drew vital parallels between their collective suffering and that of the biblical Hebrews. To the potential critics who might say that the Qur'an is not speaking of the Israelites in this passage, he would respond that it may be so, but the Qur'anic "*ukhrijat*" is a sign for the idea of Exodus. The Exodus of the Israelites is but one example of such a God-ordained process. Another example is African-American. But, of course, speaking to the Imams in his movement, he did not need to articulate such a defense.

Lost in the fluidity of his oral translation is the novelty of such a take on this one Qur'anic word, a passive verb. For example, the only other prominent Muslim exegete who commented on the word "*ukhrijat*" is Sayyid Qutb, the Egyptian activist scholar. The correspondence between W.D. Mohammed and Qutb may not be coincidental. Both engaged in a particular modern form of *tafsir* that emphasized the Qur'an's themes. We have already seen how this search for themes has enabled Fazlur Rahman and his American Muslim feminist interlocutors to find in the Qur'an the message of gender liberation. In a similar vein, Qutb and Mohammed find in the Qur'anic word "*ukhrijat*" the theme of God-ordained movement and societal progress towards God-consciousness. For Qutb, this particular word and passage presented an occasion to comment on the political message of the Qur'an and its relevance for contemporary Muslim activism. In

this case, he followed the logic of the person who influenced both him and W.D. Mohammed, the Pakistani scholar Syed Abul A'ala Mawdudi. It is quite possible that W.D. Mohammed's understanding of the Qur'anic message as inspiring a social movement in accord with the growth of God-conscious society had been influenced by Mawdudi.

Imam Mohammed's attention to the theme of exodus is not unique to this sermon. Time and again, in the 1980s and beyond, he drew for his listeners the parallels between Moses and the biblical Israelites and African-Americans. In an early 1980s speech, for example, he declared, "We're like Israelites... [and like African-Americans in the United States] Moses was like an adopted son in the house of the Pharaoh."²¹¹

His attention to the word "*ukhrijat*" is also an element repeated in many other speeches. In the 1987 speech, he uses it to formulate his own understanding of the contemporary lessons of the story of Exodus. You see, he tells his students, the real meaning of Exodus is not as much in leaving a place as in moving *to* the condition promised by God. And this, he says, African-Americans have not yet done – they have not yet "accepted that we are a legitimate part of this country entitled to a share of it like everyone else." He illustrates the African-Americans failure to become full participants in the American public by reminding his audience of their shared history:

After I became a leader I lifted the flag in respect, the American flag. And my picture was taken. [But the reaction was] 'hey there is a crazy man!' Most of my own people didn't like it. I hadn't had a single political leader or church leader come and say we're proud of what you did. [audience murmur] Why? Because

²¹¹ W.D. Mohammed, *Challenge*, 36. He uses a similar line in consequent speeches. See, for example, "Imam W. Deen Mohammed's Address at 'Savior Day' - Feb. 26, 2002, in Charleston, SC," <http://www.newafricaradio.com/articles/05-03-02.html> (accessed June 21, 2009).

most of them feel like they are on the outside too. [approving whispers from the audience]²¹²

As he offered this recollection, the audience softly voiced their approval. The phrase “most of them feel like they are on the outside” stirred the most enthusiastic wave of whispers. And on that wave, Imam Mohammed elucidated his Qur’an-inspired interpretation of African-American and Muslim (African-American and immigrant) role in American society:

We’re a minority in this country with a double job of establishing ourselves.... As a minority in America we have to start with a double concern: ... one to establish ourselves, and one to complement America, to be a beautifying addition, a healthy addition... in this plural society we call America.²¹³

Imam Mohammed’s interpretation of Qur’an 3:110 as a guidance for the African-American involvement in American public life is characteristic of his 1980s rhetoric. During that decade he incessantly spoke about the need for African-American Muslims to become fully engaged in politics. He even mused at one point, before Jesse Jackson’s first presidential campaign of 1984, that he himself may one day run for president. In a 1988 radio interview directed at a broad audience, he remembered that unofficial musing. By 1988, he no longer held that ambition, but he did emphasize the validity of the motives behind it:

Our religion promotes democratic process... In fact, our religion is a democracy... May be I’ll never be a president of the United States, but I don’t think the country should overlook the fact that we have some unique kinds of mentality and

²¹² W.D. Mohammed, “National Imams' Meeting.”

²¹³ Ibid.

personality and sensitivities in people here in America who used to be cut off from the American privileges, but now have grown with this country and have now become sensitive to the needs of the American people – and we are also Muslims.²¹⁴

In later years, he further developed his interpretation of the word “*ukhrijat*” in Qur’an 3:110. In one of his last speeches, he translated this word not as “brought out” but as “evolved.” In such a way, he emphasized the organic implication of the word and the connection it signals between the Qur’an as God’s revelation and nature as the ongoing theater of God’s actions that, like the Qur’an, contains the signs for the God-conscious. He explained that “evolved means He [God] raised it up naturally... He brought you out of nature. You are evolved upon the excellence of your nature.”²¹⁵

In such later developments of his ongoing interpretations, he again connected “*ukhrijat*” with the “*ummatun wāhidatun*.” Without abandoning his attention to public life, he came to stress broader implications of the “one community.” Thus, in a 2007 address to students of the Sister Clara Muhammad School in Washington, DC, he explained that public life is dictated by the logic of human movement through life. It is based on the logic of nature, exemplified in the Qur’anic illustration of the social life of the bees and other animals. The connection between the revelation and nature, he stressed, is vital to meaningful life. There is a God-ordained logic in the movement of nature, as there is a parallel logic in “the movement of Scripture.”

Eventually, there is the public life. Streets to connect the smaller communities and businesses form great transportation and transportation systems. All of this

²¹⁴ W.D. Mohammed and Ayesha K. Mustafa, *Focus on Al-Islam: A Series of Interviews with Imam W. Deen Mohammed in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: Zakat Publications, 1988), 4.

²¹⁵ W.D. Mohammed, "Life: The Final Battlefield, Part 2," *The Muslim Journal*, May 9 2008.

evolves from human life. The needs that God has clocked into human life produce all that we see in man's life. If you lose those sacred bonds, you give yourself into slavery. We have come now to the unity of the family of man. That we all are the same creation. In science, if you want to study the human species, you have to accept, firstly, that the human species is one life or one creation.²¹⁶

In that particular speech, Imam Mohammed was commenting – without directly quoting – on another Qur’anic verse that talks about community, Qur’an 16:120, "*inna ibrahīma kāna ummatan qānitan lil-lāhi hanīfan*," which Yusuf Ali translates as “Abraham was indeed a model devoutly obedient to Allah, (and) true in faith.” Ali’s translation skips over the difficult phrase “*ibrahīma kāna ummatan*” or “Ibrahim was a community.” Imam Mohammed, on the other hand, finds in this Qur’anic phrase the deeper meaning that must not be avoided in translation. That deeper meaning highlights Ibrahim’s role as a model for the hearers of the Qur’an, and it stresses that it is particularly a model for them *as a community*. For Imam Mohammed, Ibrahim surely was a community: like all scriptural characters, he was a symbol that the communities of the Qur’an’s listeners must follow.

Through such presentation of Ibrahim, Imam Mohammed weaved together the themes of nature, redemption, and the Qur’an’s direct communication to the African-American community. These were the four movements from which he kept arranging his oral commentary on the Qur’an. In the 1987 speech, he did this in the second half of the sermon, which was an over an hour long commentary on the Qur’anic story of Yusuf from sura 12.

²¹⁶ W.D. Mohammed, “The Day of Religion: Address at the Educational Weekend presented by Clara Muhammad School and Masjid Muhammad of Washington, D.C., on Sun., Jan. 14, 2007,” <http://www.newafricanradio.com/articles/41307.htm> (accessed on June 23, 2009). The transcript is a reprint from *The Muslim Journal*, March 23 and April 13, 2007.

Whenever Imam Mohammed spoke about nature, he linked it to revelation and his community's redemption. As he explained in a 2008 speech, "one of the meanings of redeem is 'to get back to one's true nature,' which means submission to God."²¹⁷ In the 1987 sermon, he demonstrated the role nature and redemption come to play in the Qur'an and the experience of his listeners by drawing parallels between African-Americans and the Qur'anic Joseph.

As many good preachers, he retold a story of a scriptural character through a theatrical performance. He acted out whole scenes from the Qur'an's narrative. His voice became tender as he repeated Joseph's father's concerns for his son, who was tricked by the devious brothers and left abandoned in a well, only to become eventually sold into slavery. His audience responded with roars of laughter when he mimicked the voices of the maidens enamored by Joseph, a man of unsurpassed natural beauty, to the point of fainting. Before such moments of comic relief, he set up the story by reciting in Arabic, and then translating, the Qur'an's insistence that Joseph and his brothers are signs for those who seek answers. Imam Mohammed declared that he retold the story and interpreted its signs "for the interest of the leadership... and the future of Muslims in America."²¹⁸ Both serious and humorous features of his sermon were meant to connect Sura Yusuf to the experiences, memories and the very language of his audience.

Joseph's experience of being sold into slavery provides an obvious connection to the collective memory of his audience. To bring it closer to home, he reminds his listeners that Joseph, a prisoner and slave, stood accused of the crime of "wanting what the big man wanted;" he was accused of a sexual transgression against his master's wife.

²¹⁷ W.D. Mohammed, "Life: The Final Battlefield."

²¹⁸ W.D. Mohammed, "National Imams' Meeting."

The key moment in this retelling occurs when Imam Mohammed highlights the redemptive meanings in the Arabic Qur'an. He does this by interpreting the word "*ghayāba*" in the first part of verse 15, which depicts Yusuf being thrown by his brothers into a well (and, if my readers could listen – as opposed to read – this quote, I would advise them to pay as much attention to *how* he says what he says):

But before his imprisonment in Egypt, they had put him in the hole, right? And according to the words of God, the hole was without water. And empty. And they put him in the lowest depths of the hole. And the term that's used in the Qur'an is *ghayābati al-jubb*, *ghayābati al-jubb*. And the word *ghayāba* is from also *ghaib*, which means "unseen." Unseen, not manifest, not existing presently. So they put him in something that wasn't seen. They put him to a test when he could not see what was there, um? What was there was absence: the bottomless pit. The bottomless pit. Now, if you ain't got no bottom, you can't see no bottom, you can't see the foundation, ah? So they put him in the hole and the depth to which they put him is called *ghayāba*, *ghayāba*, *ghayāba*, meaning, where, that it was at that point where things are so mystified, things are so indefinite that nothing can be visualized, nothing can be defined. Nothing is really present. The foundation is in the future. Ah?²¹⁹

As in all printed renditions, what is missing here is the sound dimension of the oral text's production of meaning. Imam Mohammed pronounced the Arabic phrase *ghayābati al-jubb* with the emphasis on the double "b" at the end. In this way, he followed the standard rules of Arabic pronunciation. But then, to provide an acoustic correlation between Arabic and English, he pronounces his translation - "the bottomless pit" – with a playful double "t" at the end. In his rendition, Joseph is thrown into a "bottomless *piTT!*" Sound is an important dimension of meaning in Imam Mohammed's exegesis and cultural translation of the Qur'an. It is a key element of his spoken Qur'an. (Further, we will see

²¹⁹ Ibid.

how Imam Shuaibe has transformed this rhetorical trait of Imam Mohammed's speech into something more elaborate.)

What does come across in print is that Imam Mohammed keeps interjecting his delivery with "right?," and "ah?," and "um?" Such interjections have peppered all his speeches. In this way, he both emphasized what is important and challenged his audience to engage in dialogue with the Qur'an.

In the rest of the sermon, Imam Mohammed builds on his definition of the word *ghayāba*. By bringing up the image of the bottomless pit, he addresses the collective memory of his audience as the people who had been denied freedom. At the same time, he attends to their immediate unease over the most recent crisis faced by his community, the court decision that rejected their claim on Elijah Muhammad's estate. With both movements, he pulls their memory and their language into a dialogue with the Qur'an.

As he retells the rest of Joseph's story, he connects this sign, this aya of "the bottomless pit" with verse 21 from the same sura. Again, sound is important here. Or rather, in this particular quote, key are Imam Mohammed's pauses and silences:

And also God says of him, he says, "*wa li-nu'allimahu min ta'wīl al-ahādīth*. And that we may teach him [a long pause] the mystery [a long pause], the mysterious interpretation of some of the great reports, *ahādīth*." Praise be to Allah. Now I was talking on the interpretation of the Qur'an once and some of my, eh, learned elder, he said, "you're reading the Qur'an wrong, brother imam, no one knows the *ta'wīl* except Allah." Well God says that he taught Yusuf some of the *ta'wīl al-ahādīth*! We know that only Allah knows it but he doesn't keep it to himself, he gives it to whomsoever he wills.²²⁰

The pause in this passage is before and after the word "mystery." It serves to acoustically highlight the profound and transformative realm of the God-ordained unknown. Through

²²⁰ Ibid.

this emphasis, Imam Mohammed highlighted that this quote marked a central point in the sermon. This is the place too where the threads of redemption and nature intersect. Both are the ways of God's work: one in history, another in creation. These are the ideas behind Joseph as a Qur'anic sign. And these ideas are the Qur'an's way of making the meaning of Joseph known to the attentive African-American listeners who seek knowledge.

Here, Imam Mohammed explained to his audience that the Qur'an speaks directly to them and tells them that their story has a God-ordained meaning, which can be understood if they pay attention to Joseph's experience of being rejected and thrown into the abyss. African-American collective suffering, he insists, has a parallel in the Qur'an. Like Joseph, they were once "cast off, considered to be worthless." And, just as God worked to lift up Joseph, God has also been working to lift up his uprooted people in the United States. The suffering in both cases is a sign of being chosen. And, in continuation of the African-American tradition of oral exegesis, it is a sign of being chosen *as a people*. In Joseph, Imam Mohammed says there is a sign for the community. Of course, as we have already seen, this emphasis on community will later become his solution for the Qur'an's phrase "*inna ibrāhīma kāna ummatan* / Ibrahim was indeed a community." That phrase baffled Yusuf Ali. To him it was too awkward and so he translated the word "*umma*/community" as "model." For Imam Mohammed, the meaning of Joseph and Ibrahim and any other Qur'anic personality is precisely in them representing a community.²²¹

²²¹ The disagreement between the two translators, W.D. Mohammed and Yusuf Ali, is not unique to this context. Both authors had previous Muslim authorities to rely on. See Frederick Mathewson Denny, "The Meaning of 'Ummah' in the Qur'ān," *History of Religions* 15, no. 1 (1975): 34-70.

For the Qur'an to become an African-American spoken text, it has to speak the language of collective redemption, which in Imam Mohammed's *tafsir* is always linked to nature. While Joseph's ability to interpret the mysterious signs is unique, the foundation for understanding and living according to the divine command is in every human being. Joseph survived the trials because no one could take away from him what was in him by nature.

Interestingly, it is at this point in the sermon that Imam Mohammed weaves humor and colloquial speech into the profound meaning he wants his listeners to hear in the Qur'an. It is here that he impersonates the voices of the beautiful maidens lusting after Joseph and relates the meaning of this test:

And he was tested, wasn't he? Beautiful women, beautiful women! The kind that would make an average Negro sell his mama, throw his baby in the fire! But they couldn't take him away from his home. They couldn't take Joseph away from his home.²²²

Joseph's home, he explains, is his God-created human nature. It is a spiritual, rather than physical home. As his audience surely remembers, people can be stolen away from their family's home and sold into slavery. But as long as they remain mindful of God, and as long as they follow the logic of God's creation as it is revealed in the Qur'an and nature, they will be ultimately saved. And remember, Imam Mohammed tells, that Joseph "*had* to go through trials and tribulations before his value was recognized. And once it was recognized, everybody turned their eyes to Joseph." In Joseph's trials and eventual success is the redemptive promise of creation in the Qur'an.

²²² W.D. Mohammed, "National Imams' Meeting."

There is, of course, another quite obvious lesson in Imam Mohammed's retelling of Joseph's story. One can hear it in the hypothetical – but surely based on facts – exchange between Imam Mohammed and his “eh, learned elder.” Here, Imam Mohammed assures his audience of his status as an interpreter of the Qur'an. For many years by that point, he had been criticized by some Muslims abroad and at home, who had questioned his exegetical qualifications and methodology. What does not come across in transcription is the comedic style of Imam Mohammed delivery. He presents it as a snippet of a conversation with an elder person who has a very strong Egyptian accent. This parody is his response to those in his audience who may waver in their commitment to his Qur'an-based authority. He does not argue about his own qualifications. Rather, through sound, he displaces the imagined authority of the learned Muslims. Here, he speaks fluently the language of the Qur'an and translates it, again fluently, into the English language of his audience. All of a sudden through such a parody, an African-American interpreter comes to occupy the center of the learned space. And the Egyptian scholar becomes marginalized by virtue of his heavy accent. On top of that, the “learned elder” is portrayed as not getting the plain meaning of the Qur'an, which leads him to misunderstand Imam Mohammed's authority to interpret it.

Interestingly here, Imam Mohammed does not state that he does *ta'wil*. The reason for this is obvious. By 1987, he had already retracted at least three of his initiatives because of the criticism from some immigrant and foreign Muslim authorities. In the late 1970s, he explained that he was a *mujaddid*, a term that means a “renewer of faith.” Because of criticisms, he phased out this term from the use by the mid-1980s. He did the same with the designation of his movement as Bilalian, an identity based on the

memory of one of the companions of the Prophet Muhammad, an Abyssinian slave named Bilal. And, by 1987, he also started to move away from the insistence on the creation of a distinct African-American school of jurisprudence.²²³ The transition away from these ideas was never complete. Until his very last sermon, he continued to insist that African-American Muslims have their own identity and ways of being Muslim (like Bilalians, but without the official use of the word), that Imam Mohammed was indeed a renewer of the Muslim practice and faith in the United States (again, like a *mujaddid*, but without the use of the term), and that African-American Muslims need to develop their own ways of thinking through the issues of *fiqh* (again, without calling such ways a *madhhab*).

In a similar way, the response to the Egyptian “elder” is his way of communicating an idea while avoiding controversy. The Egyptian character in the sermon is an accurate representation of a widespread view that the Qur’an, in sura 3 verse 7, limits the mystical interpretations to either God himself *or* to God and a very select group of chosen individuals. The boundary of the “or” often serves as a battle line between competing factions of Muslim interpreters. Those who favor mystical interpretations stress the authority of the select few human beings. Those who argue against this view limit the realm of what human spirit, heart and mind can understand. Yes, the Qur’an has mysterious meanings, they admit, but human beings cannot attain them. Based on Joseph’s example, Imam Mohammed’s answer is that *ta’wil* happens. This inspired type of interpretation is a Qur’anic reality. The obvious allusion here is that it is also a historical fact that is unfolding in our time and in our midst. Divine intervention is taking place in America. His audience members are the actors in this

²²³ Imam Vernon Fareed, interview with the author, June 4, 2009.

story. The Qur'an is speaking directly to them. So why be surprised if a black man is inspired to understand and interpret the language of God?

Imam Mohammed would often make similar allusions to his ability to understand the Qur'an *and* the revelation contained in the Bible of the Christians and Jews. Echoing his interpretation of Joseph's story, he presented his ability to understand the scripture as unique and yet very much natural. Key here was the theme of innocence.

In W.D. Mohammed's *tafsir* the words "innocence" and "innocent" were often related to the state of being uncorrupted by the oppressive environment and remaining connected to one's *fitra*, God's naturally ordained human disposition towards following the path of service to God and humanity.²²⁴ In the 1987 sermon, this innocence was Joseph's strength. Despite being thrown in the "bottomless pit," sold into slavery, and forced into a jail, Joseph survived and retained the ability to understand God's signs. In a 2003 speech in Harlem's Apollo Theater, Imam Mohammed explained that this natural innocence was also the reason for his own understanding of the scripture. At that occasion, he addressed an audience of both Christian and Muslim African-Americans and, to include non-Muslims, engaged in a prolonged Biblical exegesis, which he tied to his interpretation of the Qur'an. Using a peculiar trait of oral communication, which is prominent in the Qur'an, he referred to himself in the third person and said:

Don't forget that this man is an excellent student of the Bible [audience reacts: applause from Christians and *allāhu akbar* from Muslims] and in the discussion of the Bible and its wisdom, et cetera, are bar none. [laughter, applause] I am not intimidated by the Pope of Rome, or the President or the Bishop of the Baptist Conference, or what you call it? - the Baptist National Convention. None of them make me feel uncomfortable. In fact, I can go to sleep and they wake me up and I will continue the conversation! [laughter] Yeh. Not bragging! Not

²²⁴ Qur'an 32:30.

bragging! But I've studied diligently and for a long many years and I thank God – God preserved my innocence, my truthfulness. And I was not selfish. I was not reading the Bible to prove something for myself or to disprove something against somebody else. I read it just to know. I didn't have any prejudices or anything. And God has blessed me with more than most Christian leaders have. I assure you of that. And why shouldn't He bless me? I do believe in divine intervention! And Mister Fard was divine intervention. Elijah Muhammad – his able spokesperson – divine intervention. Malcolm X – my old friend and the father of this wonderful girl over there [one of Malcolm X's daughters was in the audience] – divine intervention. Yes. The Civil Rights Movement, Rosa Parks, Dr. King taking up the cause – divine intervention. So I believe in divine intervention. Yes. Wallace D. Mohammed, breaking the lifeline of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad and Mister Fard, cutting you off, cutting the umbilical cord so that you can live again [applause] – divine intervention! Yes! So I believe in the divine intervention. So why shouldn't God then – if I believe that Wallace Deen Mohammed is the divine intervention and he has prepared me to teach you Islam, the Qur'an and the way of our Prophet, prayers and peace be upon him, I live in a predominantly Christian society, my neighbors are Christian and it's a Christian public listening, or they will hear it later, and whatever we do in this society, we do it amidst the Christians, on their block, in their neighborhood, so you think God wouldn't prepare me to also understand and speak with Christians and help you to live better with your Christian neighbors? Yes, so God had to educate me both in Christianity and Islam in order for me to serve his cause here in America. [applause] And I will never be big headed! If I come swollen-headed, if I get an ego, it's a curse of God on me. It ain't my nature. Ain't nothing in me want that. Nothing in me wanna be big shot. Nothing in me wants to be seen. I don't want to be seen. I want you to see what you need to see to help you life! Not me as a person. Not me. I'm happy not to be seen! ... And because of that, I think that's why God has made me the leader of these people that's going to change the world. [applause] I shouldn't have said finish changing the world. Because from the moment that they picked us up and singled us out for abuses, I think we were already being an influence for changing the world. Yes, for changing all the world!²²⁵

In this explanation, as was typical in his speeches, Imam Mohammed linked together the ideas of nature, redemption, and the revelation speaking to the African-American community.

While introducing Imam Mohammed's 1987 speech, I mentioned that it took place at a time of a crisis. In the end of the sermon, after he demonstrated his own

²²⁵ W.D. Mohammed, "Live in Harlem."

authority as an interpreter through a humorous parody of a critic and commentary on Joseph's God-inspired *ta'wil*, he sums up how the Qur'an addresses the situation of his community. What should they think and do when they are faced with a crisis? His answer is: listen to the Qur'an. The Qur'an says that it tells the story of Joseph for those who "seek answers." Joseph's story is then the model for a community in crisis, a community who, like Joseph, faces trials and tribulations. And so, Imam Mohammed summarizes:

Now looking at Joseph's situation, God says he taught him the mysterious interpretation of some of the great reports. And God behind that, he says that God takes charge over his command. He will not leave his orders and commands to others! What does he mean by that? God will not leave the circumstances and commands that he himself has charge over, has given himself to, he has pledged himself to. He has pledged himself to looking over those things. He will not leave those things to men of the world. That's telling the wile, that's telling the imperialist, that's telling dictators, that's telling the world powers that God will not accept that you suppress the urges that he put in his creature to put him in his full life and his full existence. Those that are inclined to be in accord with God's will, he himself will look after them. And if you try to imprison them, he will break that situation, if you try to imprison their mind, he will break that situation. If you try to deceive their instincts, he will break that situation! No matter how much knowledge you get of science and the manipulation of human life, the science and psychology – no you can't come up with nothing that God has not already devised a scheme that will overcome it. Yeh, that's what Allah is telling!²²⁶

This was the high note of the sermon, which Imam Mohammed ended abruptly with reminder - a recitation and his translation of Qur'an 3:110: "*kuntum khayra ummatin ukhrijat lil-nāsi ta'murūna bi'l-ma'rufi wa-tanhawna `ani 'l-munkar*" *wa-tu'minūna bi'llāh*" - you are the best community brought out for the good of all people,

²²⁶ W.D. Mohammed, "Imams' National Meeting."

commanding by the highest standards and prohibiting all that is offensive and believing in God.”²²⁷

In his rendition, Joseph’s story is his community’s story, and it is an African-American story. Like other African-American Christian preachers Imam Mohammed weaves the story of his people into a scriptural narrative. In this process, Christian preachers have been articulating the rhapsody of the African-American spoken Bible. Cleophus A. LaRue has assembled a collection of such sermons in his *The Heart of Black Preaching*. One can see there telling parallels with Imam Mohammed’s technique of enabling scriptural stories to speak in an African-American idiom. For example, a contemporary of W.D. Mohammed, Chicago’s Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., did something very similar in his early 1990s sermon, “What Makes You So Strong?” Rev. Wright’s example of a biblical personality who illustrates African-American experience is Samson. African-American strength is inspired by God. It is shaped through suffering, which, if properly endured, is a badge of discipleship and a condition for redemption. For Rev. Wright, the sign of that redemption is in the experience of African-American community and their prominent individuals, whose stories he recounts in the first half of the sermon.²²⁸ Imam Mohammed carries out a parallel retelling and draws parallel conclusions.

Of course, unique to W.D. Mohammed is the creation of an American Qur’an-based narrative. His oral *tafsir* engages the Arabic Qur’an and makes use of its polysemy. Thus, he finds in the Qur’an that Ibrahim was indeed an “umma” and, like Ibrahim,

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Cleophus J. LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 72-82.

Joseph and other Qur'anic Prophets are the signs for his community. In his *speaking Qur'an* Imam Mohammed reanimates the Qur'anic text as a participant in the dialogic communication with human beings and communities in their ever changing and very specific circumstances.

W.D. Mohammed's students, men and women, continue to speak and work from his interpretations. Shortly before Imam Mohammed's passing, for example, the educators in the school network affiliated with his leadership have developed a K-12 curriculum that organizes all subjects in each year of education under the model of a Qur'anic Prophet.²²⁹ The example I want to bring up now is from my summer 2009 fieldwork in North Carolina. I spent that summer travelling at least once a week to the Raleigh and Durham mosques affiliated with Imam W.D. Mohammed. I talked with the people in the community and listened to sermons. My aim was to hear how people speak the language of their preacher.

Friday, May 22, 2009 was unusual. The quiet parking lot in front of the As-Salaam Islamic Center in Raleigh became a mini-bazaar; the typical gathering of some forty people now swelled to almost a hundred. The reason for the change was a visiting *khatīb* (preacher), Imam Faheem Shuaibe. Imam Oliver Muhammad, the congregational leader of the Center, introduced Imam Faheem as the "person who needs no

²²⁹ See <http://claramuhammadschools.org/welcome-to-scms.html> (accessed July 07, 2009) and Mubaashir Uqdah, "On Imam W. Deen Mohammed – Past, Present and Future (The Next Evolution)," <http://www.newafricanradio.com/speakers/mubaashir/next.htm> (accessed July 09, 2009).

introduction." To me, Imam Oliver later explained that Imam Faheem is known as one of the "first-row students of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed." In May 2009, Imam Faheem was doing a speaking tour around the country. The mosques, such as the one in Raleigh, invited him to speak at a critical juncture in the history of their movement: their leader had passed away less than a year ago; the community throughout the country was (and still is) struggling with the questions of authority, including interpretive authority. There was, of course, an additional element of crisis - the United States was in the middle of an economic depression. And, as happens all too often, African-Americans carried the disproportionate burden. The people in Imam Oliver Muhammad's congregation were losing, or afraid of losing, jobs and homes.

Imam Faheem's mission during the tour was connected to his status as a "first-row" student of Imam Mohammed. For at least thirty years, he has served as one of the premier exponents of his leader's teachings. For example, in the 1990s, he published a series of brochures that defended Imam Mohammed's teachings, and particularly his interpretation of the Qur'an, against attacks by some African-American, immigrant, and foreign-based critics whom Imam Faheem has described as "Salafi."²³⁰ I have heard about these brochures both in my research in North Carolina and California's Bay Area, where I interviewed students of Hamza Yusuf, some of whom spoke highly of Imam Faheem as a prominent local leader. In the more recent years, his presence has been prolific on the websites affiliated with W.D. Mohammed's leadership, such as www.newafricaradio.com. His home base is in Oakland, CA where he serves as the imam

²³⁰ See Faheem Shuaibe, *A Response to "Government Agent: The Truth Regarding Warith Deen Mohammed"*, nd; and *A Message to Those Who Condemn Imam Mohammed's Position on Christianity, The Trinity and Islam in America*, (n.p.. n.d.) (copies courtesy of Oliver Muhammad and Faheem Shuaibe).

of Masjid Waritheen and director of the Mohammed Schools of Oakland (primary, elementary, middle, and high school).

At least two other details distinguish Imam Faheem. The first, and as my conversation partners have stressed, minor detail is that his predecessor at the Oakland Mosque was Mr. Muhammad Abdullah who many, including Imam Faheem, believe was the same person who went by the name of Fard Muhammad, the teacher of Elijah Muhammad. Apparently Imam Mohammed never confirmed publically Mr. Abdullah's identity. Imam Faheem recalled in one of our conversations that Imam Mohammed introduced this man once in the 1990s to large gathering in Los Angeles, CA. He invited him on stage and said, "*this* man is not *that* man."²³¹ Imam Faheem's take on this phrase is indicative of the discipline of interpretation W.D. Mohammed had tried to instill in his listeners. For Imam Faheem, it meant that W.D. Mohammed did not deny the "material reality" of Mr. Abdullah being the same person as Fard Muhammad. Yet, he emphasized that his mind was different from the mind of Fard Muhammad who established the Nation of Islam. Like the people who followed his initial teachings, Mr. Abdullah/Professor Fard has changed. Like their minds, his way of thinking was not the same as at the time of Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam.

The second detail is more important. People inside and outside of W.D. Mohammed's movement, those who know about Imam Faheem and speak highly of him, emphasize his reputation as a Muslim scholar: as a student of Imam Mohammed he has

²³¹ Imam Faheem, telephone interview with the author, August 24, 2009. Imam Faheem's emphasis of "*this*" and "*that*."

been actively involved in dialogue and learning with Muslim scholars outside of the movement.²³²

During the *khutba* at the Raleigh mosque, Imam Faheem relied on this reputation. As several people in the audience told me after the sermon: “he is one of our scholars,” “he teaches well,” and “if you want to learn about Imam Mohammed, listen to Imam Faheem.” Some specifically stressed that the future of the movement is in the work of people like Imam Faheem who “carry on the tradition.” One key aspect in the continuation of this tradition is how its adherents negotiate their religious articulations within the space of competing authoritative American and international Muslim discourses. The connection to the Qur’an and the discipline of its independent interpretation is at the center of such negotiation.

Imam Faheem began the sermon with a Qur’anic passage, verse 40 from sura 9, *al-Tawba*/Repentance. The sermon was his meditation on the passage, which, as he attempted to demonstrate, speaks directly to African-Americans in any situation, including the time after the passing of W.D. Mohammed. His choice of *Al-Tawba* is significant. It is regarded by many to be the last revealed sura of the Qur’an. Verse 40 is particularly interesting because it engaged the memory of Prophet Muhammad’s community, the Qur’an’s initial audience. It reminded them of an episode in their short history: the story of the Prophet and his companion, Abu Bakr, fleeing Mecca and miraculously escaping capture by hiding in a cave. By choosing to speak from this passage, Imam Faheem attempted to interweave the Qur’anic memory – as it was projected for its first audience – and the memory of the “associates of Imam W.D.

²³² For example, in 1987, Imam Faheem set up the First United Ta’leem, a teach-in for immigrant and African-American Muslims. See, Nuri Muhammad Simon, “Interview with Imam Fahim Shuaib,” *Muslim Journal*, April 10, 1987.

Mohammed.” Imam Faheem recited this passage in Arabic and then provided his own translation, or rather, in the style of W.D. Mohammed, an interpretative rendition of Yusuf Ali:

Just a general translation. If you don’t help, surely Allah helped him when he was driven out by the unbelievers being one among the two, being the second of two, when they two were in the cave, when he said to his companion, “don’t fear,” or actually, “don’t grieve, surely Allah is with us.” And Allah sent down upon him tranquility and security and strengthened him by forces you did not see. And Allah made the word of those who reject *al-sufila* - he humbled it, he lowered it.²³³

Imam Faheem’s correction, in affect surpassing, of Yusuf Ali’s translation set the tone for the rest of the sermon. He used Ali’s translation as a basis: his audience, following W.D. Mohammed’s instructions, have been reading that particular translation of the Qur’an since the late 1970s. The use of Yusuf Ali’s words was convenient. But Imam Faheem, like his teacher, immediately signaled to his listeners that he is now speaking directly from the Arabic Qur’an. The Qur’an emerges here as the text of his community, not the text of the foreign Muslims, either contemporary or historical.

To highlight this, Imam Faheem immediately demonstrated that his translation is a part of the ritual and speaking practice of the people in this African-American congregation. “You can make this connection right away,” he told them, “*thumma raddadnāhu asfala sāfilīn*. Diminished it, right? And the word of Allah is the highest.” In such a move, without translation, Imam Faheem connected his interpretation of the word

²³³ Imam Faheem Shuaibe, “Fear Not.” Yusuf Ali’s translation of the same passage is “If ye help not (your Leader) (it is no matter): for Allah did indeed help him; when the unbelievers drove him out: he had no more than one companion: they two were in the cave, and he said to his companion “Have no Fear, for Allah is with us”: then Allah sent down His peace upon him, and strengthened him with forces which ye saw not, and humbled to the depths the word of the Unbelievers. But the word of Allah is exalted to the heights: for Allah is Exalted in might, Wise.”

“*as-sufla*” in Qur’an 9:40 to a passage most Muslims know. That other passage was from one of the Qur’an’s short suras, sura 95, that is often recited in prayer and meditation. Because it is a part of the memory of his audience, which is reinforced by day-to-day ritual practice, it requires no translation.

An additional significance here is that this particular sura has been central in Imam W.D. Mohammed’s oral *tafsir*. For example, the second verse of this sura is God’s oath by “*al-balad al-amīn*,” which W.D. Mohammed translated on numerous occasions as “by this city made safe, secure.”²³⁴ W.D. Mohammed’s interpretation of this Qur’anic oath was that it was God’s sign that public life has been made safe to the believers by the divine command, if they engage in it while being conscious of God’s authority and God-ordained purpose of human social life.²³⁵ The third verse in the sura speaks of God creating human beings “in the best of forms,” which has been the Qur’anic basis for Imam Mohammed’s interpretation of Joseph and other Prophets as models for other human beings and communities. All human beings, including Joseph, were created in the best of forms. Unless, as the fourth and fifth verses in the sura say, they have been abused by God to the lowest of the low, except those who believe and do good deeds. Imam Mohammed’s method of reading the Qur’an’s meanings from other Qur’anic passages was part of his methodological toolkit. Of course, as we have seen in our exploration of Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud’s written exegeses, it is also a very modern way of interpreting the Qur’an by the Qur’an, or *tafsir Qur’an bi’l-Qur’an*.

²³⁴ See, for example, W.D. Mohammed, “How Islam Promotes Healthy Citizenship,” <http://www.newafricaradio.com/articles/050903.html> (reprinted from the *Muslim Journal*, May 5 and 16, 2003; accessed July 24, 2009).

²³⁵ W.D. Mohammed offered an extensive commentary on this in his Ramadan lecture in 2007, see: Imam W. Deen Mohammed, “Ramadan Session 2007, October 5-7, 2007.” Transcript made available by Imam Oliver Muhammad, As-Salaam Islamic Center, Raleigh, NC.

More subtle was Imam Faheem's attempt to follow his teacher's example of relating the sound of the Arabic Qur'an to the everyday words of the African-American audiences. In the Raleigh sermon, soon after he offers his translation of the word "*al-sufila*," Imam Faheem brings up an example from the everyday experience of his audience, especially, he says, "the sisters." (About 60% of the people in his audience that day were women.) Do you hear, he asks them, "what does the word *sufila* sound like? Soufflé!" God made the "the word of those who reject [the revelation and the Prophet] *al-sufila* - he humbled it, he lowered it." Their word, he explained, had become like soufflé. And, "when you prepare soufflé, what is one thing you fear? Falling! One breath – puff, it's gone!" Later in the sermon, Imam Faheem, reminded his listeners of what Imam Mohammed and the Qur'an say: "Adam was made from sounding clay. It wasn't just clay, it was sounding clay. Meaning that part of the nature of Adam is how he relates to sound. Ah?"²³⁶

In this process of working through the meanings and sounds of words, Imam Faheem followed an African-American, and specifically Nation of Islam, homiletical tradition.²³⁷ Like Imam Mohammed, he often relies in his sermons on interpretation through etymology of words. A classic example in the Nation of Islam was Malcolm X's explanation of the word "negro" as coming from the Greek word "nekros" or "a dead body."²³⁸ So, when we hear W.D. Mohammed use this word in the 1987 speech, he is

²³⁶ See Qur'an 15:26 and W.D. Mohammed, "Ramadan Session 2007."

²³⁷ Cleophus J. LaRue presents a parallel example of a sermon by Mozella Mitchell, pastor of Mount Sinai A.M.E. Zion Church in Tampa, FL, who builds one of her sermons around a contextually specific re-definition of the word "providence." LaRue, *The Heart of Black Preaching*, 93-97.

²³⁸ Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. I was reminded of Malcolm X's use of "nekros" by an anonymous interviewee, a long-time friend of Imam W. D. Mohammed and former member of the Nation. Anonymous, interview with the author, April 30, 2009.

speaking the language of the Nation of Islam, where “negro” was a person who had not yet discovered his or her true nature. Another example that some of my conversation partners in Imam W.D. Mohamed’s community brought up was his play with the sound of the name of the Qur’anic Adam. What does “Adam” sound like?, Imam Mohammed would ask, and answer: it sounds like “atom.” And like the atom in nature is the basic building block for everything else, containing the potential for everything else, Adam in the Qur’an is the symbol for the human potential inherent in every human being.²³⁹

In the Raleigh sermon, Imam Faheem worked his way to the punch line through a series of translations of the Qur’anic words, which he would intertwine with the references – both explicit and otherwise – to the experiences and memory of his audiences. Central here was the story of Muhammad and Abu Bakr’s miraculous escape from the Meccan posse.

After reciting and translating Qur’an 9:40, he noted that “you all surely know this story.” He explained that while preparing the sermon he had consulted some sources: *The Life of Muhammad* by the Egyptian writer Muhammad Husayn Haykal; Mawdudi’s *tafsir*, and ibn Ishaq’s classic biography of the Prophet. What comes from such sources, he said, is that the moment of the Prophet and his companion fleeing Mecca and hiding in

²³⁹ Another interesting feature of both Imam Faheem and W.D. Mohammed’s sermons is their use of the popular songs their audiences immediately recognize. Such references – either implied or explicit – serve to connect the language of the Qur’an, as the speakers present it, to the everyday language of their audiences. In one 2006 speech, for example, Imam W .D. Mohammed discussed the Qur’anic idea of human nature while illustrating it by referencing songs by Nat King Cole and Bill Withers. Imam Faheem does a similar move in a recent speech that promotes diversity of Qur’anic interpretations and defends, through a wide selection of Qur’anic references and examples from the hadith, the practice of indigenous, African-American exegesis. The title of that sermon is “Different Strokes for Different Folks: The Universal and the Particular in Qur’anic Translation and Interpretation.” For his audience, it is an obvious reference the song by Sly & The Family Stone.

the cave was “the turning point, the key moment” in the history of the Muslim community. Had they not succeeded and escaped, had they been captured and killed, the history would certainly been different. Of course, Imam Faheem said, “Allah wouldn’t allow this.” But at that moment, the danger seemed very real. The Meccan trackers pursuing Muhammad and Abu Bakr were “professionals, these guys don’t miss!” And so they tracked the trail left by the Messenger of God and the person who would become the first caliph to the entrance of a cave where the two were hiding.

This, Imam Shuaibe notes, is where Yusuf Ali’s translation fails. Ali translates the conciliation that the Prophet offers to Abu Bakr as “don’t fear.” And yet, the Qur’anic phrase is “*la tahzan*,” which Imam Faheem stressed, has to be translated as “don’t grieve!” You see, he told his audience, the situation was so drastic that Abu Bakr “was like ‘it’s over now!’ It wasn’t just like fear, it was like – ‘oh, man, it’s over now!’” What the Qur’anic word means is that in Abu Bakr’s mind, the situation was already resolved, they were already caught, there was no way for them to be rescued. “And [that is] when the Prophet said, ‘*la tahzan inna Allāha ma`ana!*’, ‘don’t grieve surely Allah is with us!’”

The outcome, of course, is well known: God protected the two refugees by inspiring a bird to build a nest at the entrance, and a spider to weave a net over it. The trackers decided that surely such things cannot happen overnight and left. For Imam Faheem’s audience, he said, the Qur’an speaks through this story and tells them that, no matter how difficult their circumstances, they will be saved as long as God is with them. Alluding to the crisis in the movement and explicitly commenting on the ensuing economic crisis in the country that has caused many African-Americans in Raleigh to

lose their jobs and their homes, Imam Faheem summarized: “That has to become your regular equipment in life! Whenever you think, ‘oh, it’s over now! They’re gonna take away my house!’ – *La tahzan!* Don’t fear! Surely God is with you.” And, he paused, “Now, you gotta be innocent now.”

For the listeners disciplined in the practice of listening and speaking the language of W.D. Mohammed, the word “innocence” is a powerful mnemonic key, which signals that here once again is a moment of a preacher bringing together the ideas of redemption and nature, revelation and African-American community life. Imam Faheem continued to speak in this tradition as he went on with the sermon. So, if people in the community of W.D. Mohammed are to remain true to God, they should heed the words of the Prophet reiterated in the Qur’an: like Abu Bakr they should neither grieve nor have fear. Not even when their teacher has passed away. Not even as their homes are in danger of being foreclosed. “If you’re in Allah’s plan,” Imam Faheem preached, “you’re in Allah’s hands.”

How do you know if you are in “Allah’s hands?” Imam Faheem formulated the answer through yet another Qur’anic citation aided by Yusuf Ali’s translation: “Allah has a project, an assignment for us -- *wa-l-takun minkum ummatun* -- Let there arise out of you a band of people inviting to all that is good.”²⁴⁰

Our job is to build an *umma* and *jumu`a* [congregation gathered for the Friday prayer] is not *umma*... until you look like the Chinese or Koreans look in Chinatown or Korea town, until you look like the Hispanics look in their location, until we as Muslims look like they look, we don’t have *umma*. Ah? Until I walk out of my house and I don’t have to go to no other school but my school, and when I leave school, when I go into a corporation, I go into a business, I go into a business with the support of my community. Ah? When I go to get my clothes

²⁴⁰ Qur’an 3:104

clean, I hear the person at the register say “*as-salāmu `alaykum*” [audience reacts with *allāhu akbar!*] When I go to the gas station, when I go to the theater, the movies that I see, when I go to a bookstore, the books that I open up, when I hear the songs on my radio station, and I see the programs on my television station – Now we’re talking *umma*! Until then, we’re just renters in this situation... But that’s Allah’s project, Allah wants Muslims to have that. He don’t need that. We need that! *wal-takun minkum ummatun* – you and I be an *umma*!

It may not come across in transcription, but this was one of the high moments in Imam Faheem’s sermon. This is when the tempo of his delivery became rapid and his voice rose over the men sitting on the floor in the front of the prayer space and the women sitting on the chairs in the back. The strength of his delivery was fueled by the long tradition of African-American Christian and Muslim stress on community uplift. And then, just a moment later, he lowered his voice and switched to a very slow and methodical speech.

This rhythm of preaching reflected Imam Faheem’s training in the rhetorical school of W.D. Mohammed. His teacher would do something very similar in many of his speeches: he would start his lectures by speaking slow, with his voice low. He would raise the tempo of his delivery several times in the sermon, each high note corresponding with a key point in his commentary on the scripture or the African-American life. And then, abruptly, he would make sure to slow down again, and make sure to conclude on a quiet, contemplative note. In addition to the obvious echoes of an African-American Christian preaching style, at play here was a particular Nation of Islam tradition of speaking. Both Elijah Muhammad and W.D. Mohammed tried to speak more like teachers than preachers. In a way, they rhetorically enacted the image of Professor Fard Muhammad. Fiery preaching was Christian. The style of deliberate, lecture-like speaking

was a way to move away from Christianity. (Just like the dietary changes in the Nation of Islam, prohibiting not only pork and alcohol but beans and cornbread, were a way to convert people's everyday lives away from Christianity). And so they sounded somewhat professorial. Imam Faheem, once again, followed this line of his community's homiletic tradition. At this point in the sermon he slowed down and started to speak like a teacher: he opened up his copy of the Qur'an and took out a book, which turned out to be a dictionary, and started reading. Acoustically this was a quiet point in the sermon. It was the precursor to the punch line.

Imam Faheem returned to Qur'an 9:40, reciting and translating its opening line: "*illa tansurūhu faqad nasarahu allāhu idh akhrajahu alladhīna kafarū thānia ithnayn idh humā fi-l-ghāri* - when the two of them were in *al-ghāri*." He stopped short of translating the last word. And, after a pause and a look over the audience, he continued making sure to speak slowly:

Now, that's the key word here, for this subject. It's translated as "cave." That's how you translate it. It's translated as "cave". But you know the name of the sura, sura 18, you know the name of that sura? *Al-Kahf*. *Al-Kahf*. Translated as "cave." Well, this is God speaking. So how come [in 9:40] He didn't say they were both in the *kahf*? Let's see.

Here, Imam Faheem took out the other book. He pointed to it and explained, "It's a dictionary of the Qur'an." Signaling to his audience W.D. Mohammed's method of reading the Qur'an by the Qur'an, he added immediately that, of course, "the Qur'an is the best dictionary. But this is very good. ... It's recommended by the Imam [W.D.

Mohammed], *rahīm allāhu `alayhi*. May be that will help you.”²⁴¹ With this introduction, he continued by saying that he just wanted to see what the dictionary says about the word “*ghār*.” But then, he sighed and interjected in the midsentence:

This “*ghār*.” I just want to look at, look at. Ah. Imam Muhammad, *rahim allahu `alayhi*, he, there is, well, I’m not capable of measuring of what he’s done for us. Because what he’s done for us hasn’t come to the end yet. So how do you measure? You can’t measure. Don’t think that his life ended with his physical life on this earth. That was Allah’s mercy to him and to us. [long pause] Because we aren’t easy people to hang around too long. [wave of laughter]

This humorous, self-deprecating note of a family member nodding towards all the memories of his and his community’s moments of human failings was his way to transition to the central point of his sermon. This was a teaching moment. Once this intimate connection to the audience was sealed through their sharing of a hearty laughter, he was ready to deliver the line that at once criticized them and promised to them a way to overcome their crises.

You see, he explained, ordinarily, this word “*ghār*” is translated as a “cave.” But this dictionary, recommended by Imam Mohammed, says that it is incorrect. The other authors misread the root of the word.²⁴² They do not notice that the actual root of “*ghār*” are the three Arabic consonants: *ghayr*, *ya*, and *ra*, which indicate a condition of and for change. From that root - *ghayr*, *ya*, and *ra* – come the Arabic nouns for “change” and “transformation” and the verbs that correspond to them.

²⁴¹ The book was Abdul Mannan Omar’s *Dictionary of the Holy Qur’an* (Hockessin, DE: Noor Foundation, 2005). W.D. Mohammed recommended that his students use it during his 2007 Ramadan lectures.

²⁴² See, for example, John Penrice, *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Kor-ân* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969) and by Elsaid M. Badawi and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Arabic-English Dictionary of Qur’anic Usage* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).

Now why is it important? It's important, that is so important, because as I introduced this idea, I mentioned Imam Mohammed. And I say that because - the fact that Imam Mohammed, what he brought us, has not been thoroughly appreciated - because we haven't yet learned how to read the Qur'an in the original language. That's really, that's a large part of why you don't get this proximity of energy and language and life between most of the community associated with Imam Mohammed. And, if I'm wrong I stand to be corrected, but ... we are not yet readers of the Qur'an and understanding it in the original language and therefore unable to make a connection between the thought that Imam Mohammed has given us, which is borne out of the Qur'an, and the Qur'an itself.

Imam Faheem has repeated such criticism of his own community often. His reputation among the people affiliated with W.D. Mohammed's community is that of a Muslim scholar. And, as such, he has participated in an effort to educate the young people in the movement. He is the head of a K-12 Muslim school in Oakland, CA. And he has spearheaded the effort to facilitate the overseas training of the college age people in his community: on his visit to Raleigh he was accompanied by a young man who just recently had returned from studying in Syria.

But there is more to this criticism. He linked here, once again, the authority of W.D. Mohammed to the Qur'an. The future of the African-American Muslims who follow W.D. Mohammed, he stressed, is in the ability to read and understand – and then speak – the Qur'an on their own. The implication was that they must overcome their reliance on immigrant and foreign intermediaries. Imam Faheem reiterated his teacher's message from the time after he had transformed the Nation of Islam: now that they think of themselves as Sunni Muslims, they must cultivate an independent and confident – though not isolated – way of living and thinking as Muslims. Key here, both preachers have insisted, is the ability to “read the Qur'an on your own.” And to do that, Imam Faheem now explained, his listeners must attempt to follow the “methodology of Imam

Mohammed: he “didn’t live long enough to tell us everything that we need to understand about the Qur’an. He worked hard, *alhamdulillah*, and long to give us insights, tools that you can have in your own little tool belt, ah?”

So with this “tool belt,” how can the people in the community understand the Qur’an? The word “*ghār*,” Imam Faheem stressed, is a sign through which the Qur’an speaks to them:

So if Allah, *subhānahu wa-ta’āla*, chose to use this word, *ghār* as opposed to *kahf*, it means something! Allah don’t talk like us. [laughter] Allah means exactly, precisely, scientifically what he meant to say. And when you look deeper you find a broader connection. So what’s the connection, brother?

The answer, following W.D. Mohammed’s method of reading the Qur’an by the Qur’an, is to be found in another Qur’anic passage. Quite usefully for Imam Faheem, it is yet another Qur’anic passage, Qur’an 8:53, that Muslim preachers all over the world often use and audiences often hear. Imam Faheem recited it right away, providing only a partial translation: “*dhālika bi'anna allāha lam yaku mughayyiran ni`matan an`amahā`ala qawmin hatta yughayyirū ma bi'anfusihim*” - “Allah will never change the condition of the people until they change it themselves with their own, with what’s going on in their own self.” And with the support from this shared, memorized and often repeated Qur’anic phrase, Imam Faheem moved on to the central point of the sermon, highlighted by the fast tempo of delivery and raised voice:

So the same thing that you get change from, same word, the same three radicals give us that word “cave.” So Abu Bakr and Muhammad, they were in the middle of the biggest transition ever! The biggest change that was about to take place in the history of man! What was going on in that moment in that cave?! The whole world was about to change! The whole world was about to change! And it all

hinged upon whether the Meccans listened to the trackers. Ah? Or whether Abu Bakr was going to say “I give up.” Ah? He wasn’t gonna do that. But he was grieving. So that was an important *ghār*. That was an important moment of transition. That was an important situation. That was an important change. That was a change that had the tendency to provoke fear and grief.

Imam Faheem again paused and sighed. He looked over the audience. I was the only non-African-American Muslim in that space; most probably the only person not a part of the larger W.D. Mohammed community. Imam Faheem noted this, looked at me, and continued:

Listen associates of Imam Warith Deen Mohammed – forgive me if I’m being too parochial for some of you, but I’m here now and I’m gonna have to talk to folks – you’re in the cave! You’re in an important moment of transition. You’re going through changes. You have doubts. You don’t know who to listen to. You don’t know who’s right, who’s wrong. They’re coming at us this way, they’re coming at us that way: “Oh look at so and so! they’re doing that!” Well it says, *"la tahzan inna allāha ma`ana!"* Don’t grieve! Allah was in charge before, Allah is in charge now and Allah is always in charge! You have nothing to fear if you’re in touch with the plan and the project of Allah. Now if you’re not sure if you’re in Allah’s plans, I understand. [quiet laughter] But those who are in the plan, you know what I’m saying.

And so, he drove the point, you see how God helped the Prophet and his companion at the moment of change? When things seemed to hang by a thread, “that’s when Allah helped them.” It was then, Imam Faheem reminded, that the Qur’an says that God “sent down *sākina*, Allah sent down the *sākina* [tranquility and God-inspired calmness].”

The rest of this 72 minute sermon was a further elaboration on the theme of salvation at the time of tribulation and further reminder that the condition for such salvation is in the hands of the believers – they must persevere while always keeping

themselves “in Allah’s plan. To emphasize his point, Imam Faheem recited surat *al-Tawba* as he led the congregation in their Friday prayer.

Imam Faheem’s sermon is a reflection of how W.D. Mohammed’s language has been received by his immediate audience, his closest students, and how it has informed the authoritative discourse in the community. As I mentioned before, a peculiar perception emerges in the literature on Imam W.D. Mohammed: his reform of the Nation of Islam attracts the most attention; his post-mid-1980s career as a preacher comes across as a period of relative calm and therefore uninteresting. One of the possible reasons for this impression may actually be in his style of preaching. He did repeat himself a lot. Speech after speech, from the 1980s until his passing in 2008, he returned to the same ideas, key among them are community, nature, revelation, and redemption. He even used the same phrases. To those outside of his movement, the people not absorbed in listening to and speaking his language, the post-transformation W.D. Mohammed speeches may come across as a tedious blur. (One author even went as far as to offer me his private and deeply felt sympathy when I told him that I am spending hundreds of hours listening and transcribing Imam Mohammed’s speeches.) Yet, to the people inside the movement, the repetitive nature of his rhetoric presented not a difficulty, but an advantage: Imam Mohammed spoke from the revelation.

When I asked Imam Mohammed's listeners about the impression that their teacher kept repeating the same ideas, many were quite surprised and said that they did not think of this at all. Imam Faheem Shuaibe's response was that, yes, surely Imam Mohammed repeated the same notes. He was "like a trumpet": trumpet has three plungers, the music flows from it based on which of them are held down and which are held up, "and that's how he played his tune to the world."²⁴³ Or, as Walter Ong might have responded, Imam Mohammed was doing what the authors of oral texts so often do – he rhapsodized, he "stitched songs together."²⁴⁴ On another note, a similar complaint about repetitiveness has been prominent among some scholars and critics of the Arabic Quran.

Imam Mohammed's work, indeed his accomplishment over the last three decades of his career, was precisely in such incessant repetition. This repetition, however, was never the same. Yes, he kept reiterating his stories and phrases, his and his community's recollections, and his translations of the Qur'an. Yet, in every moment, the reiteration was done differently. It addressed an audience that faced yet another situation, an audience moving through life and in need of understanding what Imam Mohammed called "the movement in Scripture." It is that movement, in his interpretation, that allows the Qur'an to keep speaking to humanity in their ever changing circumstances. Every year, he traversed the country dozens of times, spoke in front of live audiences, via radio and published transcripts, all along teaching his listeners how to be and speak as Muslims.

²⁴³ Faheem Shuaibe, personal interview with the author, August 5, 2009.

²⁴⁴ Ong, *Orality*, 13.

To him, *speaking Muslim* was a way of being one. Several of the people I interviewed have recalled his dictum the late 1970s: “Words Make People.” He modeled his delivery for different audiences. And, yet, as he told his students, and as they told me, he always taught from the Qur’an. And so, in his last public speech delivered two days before his passing, Imam Mohammed reminded: “When I’m talking to an audience, I’m really concerned for my students. I want them to be present and take notes. Because I’ve always given information to my students at the same time as speaking to a public audience.”²⁴⁵ His lifework then was in participating along with his audiences in the discipline of hearing and speaking a Qur’anic-based language. In that language, he heard the salvation for his community. After all, as he once said, “human beings are formed by language.” And, “if you can create a new language environment for a people, you can give that people a new lease on life.”²⁴⁶

Of course, from what we have already seen, Imam Mohammed’s declared method of reading the Qur’an by the Qur’an is not unique. Fazlur Rahman and Amina Wadud carry out a similar type of reading. In that way, these American Qur’an interpreters follow the wide-spread modern trend in *tafsir*, exemplified by such figures as Mawdudi and Qutb. W.D. Mohammed’s methodology is a part of a global development. The influence of transnational discourse is obvious in his and Imam Faheem’s speeches. They both, for example, refer to Mawdudi. Imam Faheem’s reference to Haykal is an indication of a similar sort.

²⁴⁵ W.D. Mohammed, “Our Shared Freedom Space: First Sunday Lecture recorded September 7th 2008,” http://www.newafricaradio.com/audio/wdm/october2008_5.ram (downloaded June 15, 2009).

²⁴⁶ W.D. Mohammed, *As the Light Shineth*, 67.

But what is African-American in their speaking of the Qur'an? The answer is in Imam Faheem's rhetorical hunt for redemption in the Qur'anic "cave"/"ghār." It echoes his teacher's search for the promise of salvation after tribulation, which he finds in another Qur'anic sign - Joseph's "bottomless pit." Such echoing is an illustration of a contemporary tradition of African-American *tafsir*. A sign of this tradition is the search for redemption in the Arabic Qur'an.

What the Qur'an means and says depends on how humans speak it. An African-American spoken Qur'an cannot but speak the language of redemption.

Chapter Four:

Toward an American Qur'an:

Collective Remembrance in Hamza Yusuf's Pedagogy of an American Muslim Counterpublic

Memory... is like a crossroads. What we see at this juncture depends on the direction in which we are traveling.²⁴⁷

Together with Malcolm X, Muhammad Ali, and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf is the most recognizable American convert to Islam. Like the other three personalities, he is a celebrity to millions of Muslims. Unlike them, he is a preacher. His life is a story of transformation. Born Mark Hanson in 1960 in Walla Walla, Washington, he was raised in the area close to Berkeley, California. His father was Catholic and a university professor. His mother was Greek orthodox. He was raised in

²⁴⁷ Patrick H. Hutton, *History as an Art of Memory* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993), 26.

her faith and, as he later recalled, “was a serious Orthodox.”²⁴⁸ At the age of seventeen, after a near-fatal car accident, he converted to Islam in Santa Barbara, CA. At first, he was attracted to a Traditionalist Muslim group, *al-Murabitūn*, led by the Scottish Shaykh Abdulqadir as-Sufi (Ian Dallas).²⁴⁹ (He now rarely talks about this early affiliation.) He moved to the United Kingdom, and soon after went to study for close to ten years in the Middle East and West Africa, spending much of his time and receiving his credentials as a Maliki scholar and Sufi teacher in Mauritania.²⁵⁰ His training in the Muslim heartlands has served as an important reference to his authority as a Muslim scholar. He came back to the U.S. in 1988 and settled back in the Bay Area. In the early 1990s, he became known locally as an imam at a local Islamic center, Muslim Community Association (MCA), in Santa Clara, CA. At the same time, he completed a nursing degree from Imperial Valley College (which partially explains his frequent use of medical analogies in his speeches), worked at a local hospital and completed a BA degree in Religious Studies from San Jose State University. In the mid-1990s has also become an institution builder. In 1996, he co-founded Zaytuna Institute, a singularly successful Muslim seminary in the Bay Area. He has consistently highlighted the connection between what he preaches and

²⁴⁸ Hamza Yusuf, “Zaytuna Monthly Videocase: Episode 3 – Broadening the Scope of the Pope,” [Online video] available http://www.zikrcast.com/podcast/VidStream/ZVCast_Ep3Strm.mov, accessed June 11, 2007. For his detailed, although unofficial, biography see <http://sheikhhamza.com/biography.aspx> (the website is authored by Hamza Yusuf’s fan who assembled the material based on the transcripts of his public speeches.)

²⁴⁹ On Western Muslim traditionalism, specifically Seyyed Hussein Nasr’s Maryamiyya Sufi order, see Mark Sedgewick, *Against the Modern World: Traditionalism and the Secret Intellectual History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004). Hamza Yusuf has never been affiliated with Nasr. Yet, as-Sufi shares much with Nasr in his anti-modernist views. See, for example, Abdulqadir as-Sufi, *The Technique of the Coup de Banque* (Kutubia Mayurqa, 2000) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Traditional Islam in the Modern World* (London, UK: KPI Limited, 1987) and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *A Young Muslim’s Guide to the Modern World* (Chicago, IL: Kazi Publications, 1993). Yusuf himself has continued throughout his career to critique modernity as a godless worldview and system of living.

²⁵⁰ See Hamza Yusuf, “True Spirit of Islam,” [Online video] Available http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l0cj0g_9frc, accessed June 6, 2007

the role of Zaytuna as a vehicle for his project of the introduction of traditional Muslim education and scholarship in the United States.²⁵¹ In Zaytuna's curriculum, traditional approach implies the necessity to follow one of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, which is always paired with the study and practice of Sufi teachings transmitted through classical Sufi orders.

What is traditional in Hamza Yusuf's teachings and practice has been stable yet flexible. This is evident in the way Hamza Yusuf has been shaping Zaytuna as an institution. He named his educational center after the famed Jami`a al-Zaytūna in Tunisia. Through this name, he emphasized that he was now a part of the movement to establish the institutional and spiritual links to the classical Muslim heritage of scholarship. The attempt to specifically emulate the example of the Tunisian Zaytuna also highlighted the importance of one scholar, Shaykh Ahmad Zarruq (1442- 1493), who has served as the model for Hamza Yusuf's approach to being a traditional Muslim. Like Zarruq, Yusuf aims to teach an Islam that includes and balances Sufi spirituality and juridical scholarship.²⁵² At first, Zaytuna has been presented as a traditional Muslim institution of learning in the West, with one-on-one training of the future American 'ulama at the feet of their teachers educated in Muslim educational centers overseas. Within a few years, by the late 1990s, Zaytuna came to be presented as a Muslim seminary, with the word "seminary" signaling its place within American landscape of religious education. In 2009, Shaykh Hamza and his colleagues at Zaytuna announced a

²⁵¹ See: "Knowledge-based approach of Zaytuna Institute," [Online Video] Available <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bizFB3inY1E>, accessed 06/05/2007

²⁵² For a detailed examination of Ahmad Zarruq's biography and Hamza Yusuf's attempt to emulate him, see Scott Kugle, *Rebel Between Spirit and Law: Ahmad Zarruq, Sainthood, and Authority in Islam* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

new plan. Now, it will transform into Zaytuna College, which is advertised as “America’s first Muslim college,” and is fashioned after the models of American Catholic and Jewish universities, which combine secular training and religious scholarship. This move is explicitly presented as a part of the movement to “indigenize” traditional Islam in the West.²⁵³ In all these models, the traditional alignment has served as the stabilizing factor, while at the same time there has been a continuing effort to translate traditional Islam into an American practice.

Yusuf has consistently presented tradition in ways that mirror Daniel W. Brown’s definition of “a tradition in an old-fashioned sense: a deposit of knowledge or truth, originating with a past authority, and handed down within a religious community.”²⁵⁴ Reflecting this, from the moment he returned to the U.S., Shaykh Hamza has stressed the importance of the community of scholars who are trained to live and speak as human representatives of the revelation and the tradition of interpreting it. As his colleague at Zaytuna, Shaykh Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, noted in a personal interview, one of the main accomplishments of Shaykh Hamza Yusuf is that “he was able to communicate to the Muslims the position and status of a Muslim scholar.”²⁵⁵ In his speeches, Yusuf stresses the status of the scholars by continuously telling stories of his teachers in Mauritania and elsewhere. Such people, he stresses, are the models for proper Muslim life. He has presented himself as a person who follows in the footsteps of his teachers and calls on his audiences to do something similar.

²⁵³ See <http://www.zaytunacollege.org/about/>

²⁵⁴ Daniel W. Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

²⁵⁵ Personal Interview, Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, 07/26/08, Zaytuna Institute, Berkeley, CA

Key in his reminiscences about his teachers has been a call on his listeners to use their time in this life to prepare for the next. In a characteristic example, while delivering a speech to young Muslims at the 2000 convention of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), he recalled his Mauritanian teacher, Murabit al-Hajj bin Fahfu. Shaykh Murabit al-Hajj, Shaykh Hamza said, rises “four hours before *fajr* [morning prayer] and recites *tahajjud* [voluntary night prayer]... and as he reads the Qur’an he weeps from the fear of Allah, *subhānahu wa-ta’āla*,” and then he goes to the masjid – “he’s 92 years old and he walks like a young man!” – and he “teaches from *fajr* to *dhuhr* [midday prayer]... and keeps teaching in between prayers... and this has been his life for over 70 years and thousands of Muslims have studied with him from all over North Africa and West Africa.” Such a way of living, for Shaykh Hamza, is a “true embodiment of the spirit of Islam.” His audience, in turn, see him as somebody who has brought this spirit to the West. Shaykh Murabit al-Hajj, in Hamza Yusuf’s constant remembrances of his teacher, represents a distinct orientation in human beings’ lives. Hamza Yusuf presents in his pedagogy a dichotomy that is designed to create an insecurity in his listeners, which in turn is intended to prompt them to change their lives. In this didactic dichotomy, contemporary human beings, Muslim and otherwise, are caught up in the modern ways of living, which pulls them away from religion. Shaykh Murabit al-Hajj, on the other hand, is an example of a person who lives his life fully conscious of his dependence on God. Likewise, Shaykh Hamza attempts to teach his students, through his actions and his speech, how to reorient themselves back to Islam as a way of life where human beings live every minute of their lives in the state of awareness of God.

Of course, Yusuf is not alone; the group of scholars and institutions that promote Sunni traditionalism in the U.S. is growing. Closest to Zaytuna in its vision is the Chicago-based Nawawi Foundation, headed by one of Shaykh Hamza's colleagues – whom Yusuf sees as a teacher – Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah. Dr. Abd-Allah is a white American convert to Islam, who studied with Fazlur Rahman at the University of Chicago and later went on to study and teach Islamic Studies in Saudi Arabia.²⁵⁶ Other names that most often come up in conversations with Shaykh Hamza's audiences are Shaykh Zaid Shakir (an African-American scholar who received his religious education in Syria and is now directing the day to day educational operations at Zaytuna), Dr. Abdal Hakim Murad (a white British scholar educated at Cambridge and al-Azhar), Dr. Khalid Yahya Blankinship (a white American Muslim scholar who teaches Islamic Studies at Temple University), Dr. Abd al-Hakim (Sherman) Jackson (an African-American professor of Near Eastern and African-American Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor), Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller (a white American convert educated at University of Chicago and al-Azhar), Shaykh Suhaib Webb (a white American convert who is currently studying at al-Azhar and is among most recognized young Muslim preachers in the U.S.), and many others. On the internet, the major sources for English-speaking Muslims to access the teachings of such scholars are www.sunniforum.com and www.sunnipath.com. The latter is a “online Islamic academy” that offers classes in Arabic and “Islamic Sciences,” and which includes among its faculty graduates from Zaytuna Institute, including Ustadha Noura Shamma, whose “unique story-telling style of

²⁵⁶ See: <http://www.nawawi.org>

teaching” echoes the preaching methodology of Hamza Yusuf. In her own characterization, it “brings the past alive and connects it with the present.”²⁵⁷

In the words of one of Shaykh Hamza’s colleagues at Zaytuna, Shaykh Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, this group of Western scholars see themselves as responding to a global trend of “protestantization of Islam” that has been going on, in their view, since at least the 19th century. The sign of this “protestantization” is the declining respect toward, and therefore authority of, the Muslim scholars. The people responsible for such a decline are some Muslim modernists who have attempted to reformulate Islam, turn it into “an ideology,” and in process usurp the authority of the traditional class of the *‘ulamā’*.

In contrast, Shaykh Hamza stresses tradition as a revelation-centered discourse and practice that is continuously authorized and embodied by Muslim scholars through uninterrupted chains of transmission that lead, in the words of one of his students, “straight to the prophet.”²⁵⁸ It is an approach of continuation and cultivation of the four Sunni schools of jurisprudence, which to him is inherently tied to an acceptance and practice of Sufi teachings. To explain what it means, he often refers to the famous hadith that tells of the angel Gabriel quizzing the Prophet Muhammad on the nature of Muslim religion. Gabriel asked three questions: the first about submission (*islām*), the second about faith (*īmān*), and the third about “what is beautiful” (*iḥsān*). In this tripartite depiction, the religion that Muslims are instructed to follow consists of outward practice

²⁵⁷ <http://www.sunnipath.com/about/ustadhanourashamma.aspx>

²⁵⁸ This phrase comes from a Zaytuna student. See: “Knowledge-based approach of Zaytuna Institute,” [Online Video] Available <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bizFB3inY1E>, accessed 06/05/2007

(*islām*), inward faith (*īmān*), and “what is beautiful” (*iḥsān*).²⁵⁹ That beautiful and indispensable component of religious practice, Hamza Yusuf always stresses, is spirituality. In the words of the Prophet Muhammad, on the practical level of a believer’s everyday life, it means “that you should worship God as if you see God, and if you do not see God, God sees you.”²⁶⁰ Shaykh Hamza teaches that it means the cultivation of the awareness of one’s absolute dependence on God, which is the discipline of Sufism. To reject Sufism, in such a formulation, is to reject *iḥsān* of Islam as a religion. It means to reject “one third of Islam.”²⁶¹

Yusuf’s approach to what is “traditional” in “traditional Islam” is best illustrated through his approach to the Qur’an. Shaykh Hamza teaches a traditional Sunni approach to the Qur’an, which represents a classical consensus, where the revelation of the Qur’an comes across as inseparable from the sunna, the words and the actions, of the Prophet Muhammad. In such a view, developed first by Muhammad b. Idrīs al-Shafī’ī (d.820), both the Qur’an and the sunna are God’s revelation to humanity. The Qur’an is inseparable from the sunna because the Prophet’s actions and words were revealed as a guide to believers that enables them to understand how to translate the revealed book into their daily lives. The difference is that the Qur’an is the recited revelation (*wahy matlū*) that has been preserved verbatim by the Prophet, his companions and their successors. The sunna, on the other hand, is a revelation that is not recited (*ghayr matlū*). In other

²⁵⁹ For an example of Shaykh Hamza’s use of this hadith, see Kugle, 10-12.

²⁶⁰ The translation of the hadith comes from Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (New York: Paragon House, 1994), xxvi, quoted in Kugle, 11-12.

²⁶¹ Kugle documents Yusuf’s argument for Sufism as “one-third” of Islam in a 1997 speech. (Kugle, 11) Shaykh Hamza has continued to repeat this formula. A recent example is found in Hamza Yusuf, Zaid Shakir, and Yahya Rhodus, “The Way Ahead: Effective Muslim Responses to Contemporary Challenges,” 6-CD set (Berkeley: Zaytuna Institute, 2008).

words, the record of this revelation has been preserved in its meaning by the companions who recollected and instructed their students to remember the teachings and actions of the Prophet, which are seen as being inspired by God. The post-Shafi‘ī classical Sunni consensus emphasized the equality of the status of both forms of the revelation. The modern turn, as we have already seen in Fazlur Rahman’s work, has been to elevate the status of the Qur’an over that of the sunna. Shaykh Hamza’s task, as he presents it, is to reverse this trend. For example, in a 2007 recorded oral commentary on surat *al-Hujurat* (Qur’an 49), he explained to his students at Zaytuna and people in the affiliated community that the “sunna... is the Prophet manifesting the book of Allah in action. The sunna is the Qur’an, they are not separate. The sunna is the practical application of the Qur’an in the world. And that’s how you learn how to interpret the Qur’an by following the actions of the prophet, *sallalāhu `alayhi wa-sallam*.”²⁶² Through such an emphasis, Shaykh Hamza makes a clear delineation between his own position as a scholar and interpreter of the Qur’an and that of many modernist Muslims, who have come to increasingly rely on interpreting the Qur’an by the Qur’an. In this dissertation, all of the American Muslim intellectuals presented so far are a part of this modern trend. Shaykh Hamza’s teachings and his interpretation of the Qur’an represent a distinct stream in both local and global Muslim discourses.

Shaykh Hamza’s fame is partly based on how well he represented the religious transformation he has taught. One of the signs of his transformation that his admirers often note is his fluency in Arabic, the language of the Qur’an and Muslim scholarship. One of his close friends and early followers told me in a personal interview that he first

²⁶² Hamza Yusuf, “Reflections on al-Hujurat, the 49th Chapter of the Sacred Qur’an,” 3-CD set (Sandala Productions Inc, 2008).

heard about Hamza Yusuf in 1992. Shaykh Hamza at the time was an imam in Santa Clara and my interviewee, a young Afghan immigrant raised partly back home and partly in the U.S., was “mosque-hopping” in search of a community and a teacher. He heard about Shaykh Hamza from his cousin, who asked him: “have you heard this white man! His name is Hamza Yusuf. You have to check him out. You’ve got to listen to him!” And so, he went to the MCA for a Friday prayer expecting to hear this “white man.” Instead, “we had this Arabic guy come in, in his turban and the Arabic *thawb*.” The “Arabic man” gave a sermon “and used so many Arabic words” that it was barely comprehensible to the young seeker. The follower-to-be very disappointed. He had come “to see an American guy named Hamza Yusuf and instead heard an Arabic guy using Arabic words.” When his cousin asked him what he thought about the sermon, he said that he really had no opinion because “the guy wasn’t there.” The cousin laughed: “That was him! That was Hamza Yusuf!”

This chapter is about the developments that happened a few years after the Afghan-American seeker first encountered Shaykh Hamza. I present here the rhetorical side of Shaykh Hamza’s second transformation, which occurred after September 11th, 2001. Before 9/11, Shaykh Hamza acquired wide recognition in the American Muslim circles. Within a few years after his encounter with the Afghan-American disciple, he became the main attraction at American Muslim conferences. His recorded speeches were bestsellers in American Muslim stores and on the internet. Yet, he became even more famous after 9/11. The occasion for his new renown came on October 11, 2001, when he was invited to join a group of Christian and Jewish religious leaders at a meeting with President George Bush, Jr. On the lawn outside the White House, he famously

declared: “Islam was hijacked on that September 11, 2001, on that plane as an innocent victim.”²⁶³ His words had been repeated since then countless times, by the authorities, who justified the policies taken against some Muslims and some countries populated by them, as well as Muslim advocates who tried to intercede with the authorities. This declaration marked Shaykh Hamza’s entry into the discourse on Islam as an American public religion. Once he entered this discourse, he began to address both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences, which attracted the attention of the journalists who all of a sudden noticed his popularity among Western Muslims and from now on frequently referred to him as a “Muslim rock star.”²⁶⁴ His rhetoric of public Islam, and transition to it, is the subject of this chapter.

As with other characters of this dissertation, I examine Hamza Yusuf’s articulation of the human side of the Qur’anic discourse. Like other preaches, he is keen on reciting and translating the Qur’an in his speeches. Such translations are, of course, cultural. He weaves both the Arabic and English renditions of the Qur’an into his speeches, which demonstrate for his listeners how to transform their speech and everyday practices into speech and practices that echo the Qur’an. His speeches are rhetorical appeals to his listeners to start living a life that reflects their mindfulness of God and the revelation. A reflection of this transformation is the audiences’ ability to speak a Qur’an-based language. The rhetorical field created by his sermons reanimates the Qur’an as a dialogic discourse between God and human actors. In any dialogue both speakers and listeners matter, because listeners are a mere sound away from becoming speakers. To

²⁶³ Quoted in Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: the State of Research* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003), 23.

²⁶⁴ See for example, “Muslim 'Rock Star' on Terrorism: A leading American Islamic cleric is Visiting Wales to Examine the Fight Against Terrorism,” http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/wales/south_east/3659683.stm, April 26 2004.

highlight how the listeners take part in Hamza Yusuf's discourse, I will begin with a reflection on his audiences. The rest of the chapter will focus specifically on his authoritative discourse.

Sadaf Khan came to Zaytuna before Shaykh Hamza was a recognized as a "Muslim rock star" in the Western press. When she was nineteen, she asked her parents if she could leave their home in Pennsylvania to study at Zaytuna Institute, a Muslim seminary and educational center in California's Bay Area. "That was in 1999." This decision came to her naturally. A year before, she went on hajj and a realization came to her: "I want to study Islam." At first, her plan was to study overseas. "Of course," she recollected, father would not allow that. But he did allow her to move to California and enroll in a local college with the understanding that she would also take classes at Zaytuna. And, "of course, the reason for choosing Zaytuna was because of Shaykh Hamza." "Why Shaykh Hamza?," I asked. "Well, he resonated to me. He made Islam make sense, especially to me as an American teenager."²⁶⁵

My conversation with Sadaf took place in the summer of 2008, when I made my own, albeit academic, pilgrimage to Zaytuna, the institutional base of Shaykh Hamza Yusuf. I spent close to a month there talking to the people who have been influenced by this most famous American Muslim convert, who is also the most prolific English-

²⁶⁵ Sadaf Khan, interview by author, Berkeley, CA, July 31, 2008.

speaking Muslim preacher on the internet.²⁶⁶ My conversation partners were the people who chose to work with Shaykh Hamza, the faculty, staff and volunteers at Zaytuna institute. Sadaf, for example, is the coordinator of Zaytuna's *Minara Program*, an "extension program" that brings Zaytuna's faculty to local Muslim communities in the U.S. to lead educational workshops. I interviewed her at Zaytuna's library, surrounded by books in Arabic and English that the faculty and students use in their studies. By the time of my visit, Zaytuna moved from Hayward, its original home, to Berkeley. The move was initiated as a part of Zaytuna's transformation from a Muslim seminary to a Muslim college envisioned to develop along the model of American Catholic or Jewish colleges. My visit to Zaytuna coincided with its first summer Arabic intensive. Some twenty students from across the US and three young Bosnian women from Sweden spent eight weeks studying the same Arabic curriculum offered in most American colleges. The option of taking Arabic closer to home did not appeal to them. Like many other people in Zaytuna's orbit, they chose to be there because of Shaykh Hamza. Of course, Zaytuna's orbit extends well beyond the Bay Area. Like Sadaf, the young people in the Arabic class first learned about Zaytuna because they had listened to Hamza Yusuf's lectures, either as CDs and DVDs, or on the internet.²⁶⁷ Almost every person I interviewed at some point would share that they were drawn to Shaykh Hamza because of his ability to "make Islam make sense."

²⁶⁶ As of February 12, 2010, Hamza Yusuf's speech "Changing the Tide" had 140,739 views. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfEIGw8NtNA>). This was the highest viewed lecture by any American preacher. In comparison, the most popular speech by another prolific American Muslim preacher, Imam Siraj Wahhaj, had 99,920 views as of the same date. (Siraj Wahhaj, "Muslim Women in Hijab," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wRXm5ttFC_s).

²⁶⁷ Many of the young people who attended the Arabic intensive were under the age of 18. Because of this, I chose not to interview them officially. Rather, I sat with them in the classes and we chatted in the breaks. My official interviews were limited to the people over the age of 18 and included the people in the local Bay Area community who affiliate themselves with Shaykh Hamza's teachings.

For Sadaf, the need for Islam “to make sense” came in the mid-1990s. “Well, I remember,” she recalled, “when I first heard Shaykh Hamza, I was fifteen or sixteen years old.” To understand his impact, she explained, “you have to also understand” her situation at the time. She was born and raised in the United States. Her parents are South Asian immigrants. “You see,” Sadaf explained, “we were cultural Muslims, kind of like everyday Muslims.” Her father went to the mosque for the Friday prayer, they celebrated Muslim holidays. Her parents taught her “how to read the Qur’an,” but “that’s it.” She did not remember having a deeper connection between her family’s daily lives and their religion. Things changed, however, when her parents divorced. Sadaf stayed with her mother. And all of a sudden, they found out that “her Pakistani so-called close friends didn’t want to do anything to do with her because she was a divorced woman.” Instead of her ethnic community, her mother found the needed support in the Muslim community at large. “She became very active. Every weekend we travelled to a [Muslim] conference or event in New York, Philadelphia or DC – anywhere where she could experience community.” It was during one such trips that Sadaf first heard Shaykh Hamza.

She came to hear him because of her mother. As is quite typical in my conversations with Shaykh Hamza’s listeners, she heard about him from a friend who insisted that she listen to him: “Hear this man. He is amazing!” (I heard Shaykh Hamza speak for the first time because of the same insistence. A friend in New York City would not stop pestering me to go and hear him speak. That was in 1999.) The chance to hear him came in 1995, at the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) conference in Bloomsburg, PA. Sadaf, being an independent minded teenager, decided not to attend

the lecture. She was at the conference, but chose to “hang out at a bazaar or something like that.” Her mother meanwhile was very impressed: “my mom was just like – ‘this man tells it like it is! And he makes sense!’” So Sadaf made sure to attend Shaykh Hamza’s session at the next ICNA conference in Valley Forge, PA in 1996.

And I had heard him and he was just like - he was the first scholar that I had heard that I wanted to listen to, you know? I didn't want to leave, or I wasn't day dreaming. I was actually *listening* to what he had to say. And what he said made sense to me. Because here he is and he's not just talking about what the Prophet, *ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa-sallam*, said and what's in the Qur'an. Like you know most speakers when you hear them, they are just rattling off *ayas* in the Qur'an to you and you know you have no clue what they are saying. But he's bringing it home to you. He's telling you what Malcolm X said, he's quoting Thoreau. He is, you know, he is talking about Shakespeare and he's talking about things that you yourself, that I myself growing up in America am more familiar with. You know, I grew up reading Shakespeare in high school so I know, I understand where he's coming from. He's coming from a very Western idea. Not from back home. And so it made sense to me, you know?... It resonated with me. So that's just what I remember: here is the first Islamic scholar that I'd heard that doesn't bore me to death!

After this, Sadaf’s path led her “naturally” to Zaytuna. But first, she started to collect the recordings of Shaykh Hamza’s lectures. She “bought all of his tapes,” and was “obviously a big supporter and... a long distance student.” She sees him as unique because, when he talks about the Qur’an, the prophet and Muslim history, “he makes it not so foreign.”

It doesn't seem foreign to you when you hear it from Shaykh Hamza. It doesn't seem like it's just a religion of my parents when it comes from Shaykh Hamza. I'll tell you exactly what I mean: growing up [as a daughter of immigrants] Islam was about rules - pray, fast, [parents telling that] “girls don't wear shorts after they get their period,” and [that] I can't have a boyfriend,” and things I can't do and all about rules. To me that's what Islam was! But what Shaykh Hamza did, he didn't make it sound like rules, you know. He made it sound like - this is a beautiful tradition. We have such a

beautiful tradition. We should be proud of our tradition. He made it beautiful whereas our parents made it something that, I don't want to say ugly, but they didn't make it beautiful.

Shaykh Hamza made it possible for Sadaf to overcome a crisis: her parents' religion, as she heard and experienced it from them, did not fit with her experience as an American teenager.

Sadaf's story echoes many I have heard from Shaykh Hamza's listeners. His audience is mostly college-educated - or college-bound - young adults, children of Muslim immigrants, converts or second and third-generation African-American Muslims. Judging by fieldwork experience with the people drawn to Zaytuna and those who attend *Minara* programs in the United States, over half of the people who listen to Hamza Yusuf are from the South Asian background. Like Sadaf, many have found in his teachings a solution to an identity crisis, where the identity based on Islam has come to overshadow the identity based on ethnicity. The religious "American Muslim" identity has come to represent for many second-generation Muslim immigrants a way to negotiate what it means to be a Muslim in the U.S. in terms independent from their parents.²⁶⁸

Shaykh Hamza transformed Islam for Sadaf into both an American and global religion, which resonates with her life of growing up as a daughter of immigrant Muslim parents. He demonstrated for her, through his own example and through his rhetoric, that the Islamic past, most importantly the past of the revelation and the prophet Muhammad, is a part of her own past and present. He transformed the memory of Islam, the religion of the foreign lands of her parents, into her own memory. This came along

²⁶⁸ See, for example, Katharine Pratt Ewing and Marguerite Hoyler, "Being Muslim and American: South Asian Muslim Youth and the War on Terror," in Katharine Pratt Ewing, *Being and Belonging: Muslims in the United States Since 9/11* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2008), 80-104.

with her beginning to speak a Muslim language based on a local Muslim memory that incorporates the Qur'an, the prophet, and the subsequent Muslim history into American Muslim memory.

Shaykh Hamza made Islam for Sadaf “natural” and “beautiful.” Her choice of words resonates with both Shaykh Hamza and the Qur'an. Both the Qur'an and its speakers, like Shaykh Hamza, never cease to remind that the true expression of beauty is with God and those of his servants who are willing to submit to what is truly beautiful. Muslims remind themselves about this whenever they look at the calligraphy, write down or recite the “most beautiful names” in creation, which belong to God. Their righteous life is a “beautiful loan” to God, which God will multiply in the hereafter.²⁶⁹ This is the “natural” way of humanity reflected in the Qur'an's command for the human beings to turn to their natural faith, their *fiṭra*, according to which they were created.²⁷⁰ The practical question that confronts every human being caught in their very specific circumstances is how to turn one's life into “a beautiful loan.” Sadaf has found the answer in Hamza Yusuf's lectures and personal example. To her, like for many of his admirers, Shaykh Hamza follows the Qur'anic advice to preachers: invite people to the way of the Lord “with wisdom and beautiful preaching.”²⁷¹

At the center of this process is a dialogue between the preacher and the listener. This dialogue, judging by Sadaf's and many other similar stories, is initiated by the listeners who seek out the preachers that can “make sense” of their lives. They come to

²⁶⁹ Qur'an 2:245 and 7:180.

²⁷⁰ Qur'an 30:29. For a translation that emphasizes the “natural” in *fiṭra*, see T.B. Irving's translation, which is available at <http://www.isgkc.org/translat.htm>. For the background on the concept of *fiṭra*, see D. B. MacDonald, “Fiṭra,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: Brill, 2010).

²⁷¹ Qur'an 16:125.

hear Hamza Yusuf in person or from a distance (via CD, DVD and online recordings) already willing to transform. They initiate the dialogical exchange with the speaker by their willingness to hear and submit to the authority of the speaker, if – and that is a very big “if” – the speaker resonates with their memory and experience.

My experience with the audiences of Shaykh Hamza (as well as with the audiences of other Muslim preachers in the U.S., like Warith Deen Mohammed) leads me to almost agree with Charles Hirschkind. Hirschkind is the author of a groundbreaking study of the popular practice of listening to recorded sermons in contemporary Egypt. He borrows from Walter Benjamin and stipulates that “effective audition, an act that enables the integration of the narrative into the listener’s own experience, requires a subordination to the authority of the storyteller.”²⁷² I almost agree because a preacher has to continuously reciprocate the listeners’ willingness to submit by partly submitting to their language. Without such dialogical exchange, there is no resonance between the language of the preacher and his listeners. Moreover, to be effective, such an exchange must always change according to the circumstances shared by the preacher and their audiences. .

In Sadaf’s recollection of the first time she heard Shaykh Hamza, he was the first Muslim preacher she had heard that she “wanted to listen to.” Her previous experiences of such auditions made her either want to leave to a “bazaar or something like that” or to daydream. Certainly, her mother provided that initial impetus: she urged her to listen to this “amazing man.” But it was fully in Sadaf’s power to tune Shaykh Hamza out.

²⁷² Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons And Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 27.

Perhaps more telling is an example of one of Sadaf's friends at Zaytuna, Muhammad Abdul Latif Finch. He converted to Islam at the age of twenty in 1995 and knew about Shaykh Hamza "since about 1996."²⁷³ In his first years as a Muslim, his religious community was a South Asian mosque. His "uncles" and "aunts," the people who took him in as their religious protégé, were first generation South Asian immigrants. And then 9/11 happened. He talked to the people at the mosque and heard what he considered nonsense. Much of their explanation to the tragedy was wrapped up in conspiracy theories and absolute denial of any Muslim involvement. For many, it was absolutely inconceivable that Muslims could ever perpetrate such an act.²⁷⁴ Some volunteered a view that partially justified the death of American civilians. "Suddenly," Abdul Latif remembers, "I was like – what kind of company am I keeping?" This was the point when Abdul Latif "started to pay more attention to [Shaykh Hamza] personally." While he listened to him before 9/11, this was the time when Shaykh Hamza all of a sudden "provided common sense" to him. Until that point, Abdul Latif was willing to hear the message of a "black and white" world, where there is a clear "dichotomy between those who believe and don't believe." And yet, after 9/11, he searched for the message that would respond to his profound sorrow for his non-Muslim fellow Americans who were killed by a group of Muslim extremists. A complete denial of any involvement by human beings that call themselves Muslims was not enough for him. And now, he heard Hamza Yusuf talk about "the world that is more Technicolor

²⁷³ Muhammad Abdul Latif Finch, personal interview by author, Berkeley, CA, July 24, 2008.

²⁷⁴ Denial via conspiracy theories was a fairly widespread response to 9/11 among Muslims in the U.S. and abroad. This certainly does not imply agreement with the act. Rather, the practice of continuous dissociation from the very idea of such an act has often served as a preventive discipline that countered potential radicalization in communities. See Charles Kurzman, David Schanzer and Ebrahim Moosa, *Anti-Terror Lessons of Muslim-Americans*, Report for the National Institute of Justice, January 6, 2010 (http://www.sanford.duke.edu/news/Schanzer_Kurzman_Moosa_Anti-Terror_Lessons.pdf)

than anything else,” a contemporary world full of nuances. Shaykh Hamza, Abdul Latif remembers, “was the first person I’ve heard addressing this reality that we live in a time when things are vague, the world as I see it, not as I hear about black and white.” “And he had a Qur’anic reference for what I was hearing! That’s the example of when things kind of lined up.”

Both stories of Sadaf and Abdul Latif highlight the transformation they cultivated within their lives with the help of Hamza Yusuf’s rhetoric. Their transformation parallels the process of conversion. Susan Harding’s ethnography of the American evangelical, born-again movement provides a useful illustration to the roles preachers and their audiences play in conversion. For Harding, conversion is “a process of acquiring a specific religious language or dialect.”²⁷⁵ Preachers play the role of teachers who respond to the religiously-inclined seekers’ willingness to listen and submit to a transformative message. Yet, the conversion - a process that is ongoing, lifelong and embodied in practice – takes place only when the listeners begin to speak a new language that informs and accompanies their new way of living.

This chapter then is about transformation that parallels conversion. I present the rhetoric of Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, America’s most famous Muslim convert as pedagogy of an American Islamic revival. What follows is partly an exploration in what he has meant by the term “revival” throughout his public career. It is a study of one preacher’s attempt to transform the Qur’an into an American sacred text. This, for him, is a practical concern that involves transformation of America Muslim and, to an extent, non-Muslim lives. His goal is to teach through his words and inspire through his personal

²⁷⁵ Susan Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 34.

example a transformation of Muslims into the people of whose lives are informed by the revelation, whose actions and language constantly bear the signs of the Qur'an.

I specifically focus on Shaykh Hamza's articulations of Muslim participation in American public life for two reasons. On the one hand, I want to investigate how this particular preacher has reciprocated some of his listeners' desire to hear a message that resonates with their changing experiences. In Hamza Yusuf's case, the temporal mark of that change was September 11, 2001. Over the past nine years, Hamza Yusuf has consistently presented himself as a person who was deeply transformed by the experience of 9/11. After 9/11, he has emerged as a prolific advocate for Muslim involvement in American public life. He has called on Muslims to become active participants in national and local politics, and to contribute to debates and movements designed to change internal or external American policies. This, as he himself has alluded on numerous occasions, is quite different from his pre-9/11 stance of deliberate cultivation of studied distance between Muslims and American society. American public life, in his pre-9/11 formulations, was too secular. Too much involvement in it was too dangerous for the Muslims whose lives have to be oriented towards the eternal divine, as opposed to the modern secular sensibilities that are completely immersed in the ephemeral. Following the recollections of Abdul Latif, I examine Shaykh Hamza's transformation after 9/11 as an instance of a preacher responding to his audience's need for change. Shaykh Hamza renewed his relevance after 9/11. (Of course, as we will see, he has gained some listeners while losing others.) This chapter is about his story of renewal.

At the same time, I choose to zero in on Shaykh Hamza's rhetoric of American Muslim public life because it provides a salient example of the local aspects of his oral

interpretations of the Qur'an. Hamza Yusuf is as both a local and global Muslim public figure.²⁷⁶ His international reach extends well beyond the United States, and is manifested primarily in countries where English has become a language of Muslim discourse, such as Great Britain, the Scandinavian countries, and Pakistan and India.²⁷⁷ He travels incessantly. Within the same month, he could be found giving a talk "in front of an audience of several hundred..., including Lords and Ladies" at the University of Bristol in the U.K, and filming a television special in Arabic for the Dubai-based Arabic satellite channel MBC, "*Al-Rihla Ma'a Hamza Yusuf* (Travels with Hamza Yusuf)."²⁷⁸ Wherever he goes, he "packs the house."²⁷⁹ On all such occasions, he tailors his speech to the local audiences. When he speaks to South Asians, for example, he is prone to recite or reference the poetry of Muhammad Iqbal. And when he is in the U.K., he may recall an incident involving a local Muslim who told him about an anecdote about Muslims and English skinheads. Yet, when it comes to his formulations of American Muslim public life, he speaks a language that is very specific to the local way of discussing political principles. On such occasions, he often speaks simultaneously from – and translates between – the Qur'an and the American Constitution. Such examples

²⁷⁶ For example, as of February 2010, the website of institutional base, Zaytuna Institute, has attracted the monthly traffic of over three hundred thousand visitors from the United States, close to two hundred thousand from Turkey, over ninety thousand from Canada, close to sixty thousand from Singapore, and almost forty thousand from Pakistan. Some thirty percent of the visitors searched the website specifically for materials related to Hamza Yusuf. (<http://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/zaytuna.org#trafficstats>, viewed on February 13, 2010.)

²⁷⁷ For examples of his European audiences, see Garbi Schmidt. "The Transnational Umma— Myth or Reality? Examples from the Western Diasporas." *Muslim World* 95, no. 4 (2005): 575–586.

²⁷⁸ The snippet on "Lords and Ladies" is from the back cover of one of Shaykh Hamza's CDs (Hamza Yusuf, "Thinking Anew" [Danville, CA: Alhambra Production, 2002]). The recording is of a speech he gave at Briston University in Bristol, UK a year after 9/11. The speech addressed Muslim and Western "war on terror."

²⁷⁹ I have heard this phrase many times, as in my interview with Shaykh Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, a faculty member at Zaytuna Institute. Abdullah bin Hamid Ali, interview by author, Zaytuna Institute, Berkeley, CA, July 26, 2008.

provide me with a way to locate the transnational Hamza Yusuf as a local oral interpreter of the Qur'an who responds to local concerns of his audiences. For American Muslims, 9/11 was an occasion for deep reflection and reevaluation of their position in the broader society.

Shaykh Hamza's post 9/11 change was dramatic. He testified that it was in a speech after speech. He told his audiences that he had changed. And he called on them to change as well. In one of his first major post-9/11 speeches disseminated on-line, the key note address to the 40th annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) in August 2003, he proposed a model for a new, post-9/11, type of American Muslim engagement in American public life: "Give and Take, for God's Sake."²⁸⁰ This became an important theme, which he has traced through many subsequent speeches – Muslim engagement within American public sphere in accordance with Islamic ethical principles. Later, in a 2006 address to ICNA New Jersey convention, he elaborated that this is a process best viewed through the Qur'anic metaphor of fair trade: "let your trade be of

²⁸⁰ Hamza Yusuf, "Give and Take for God's Sake," [Online video] available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1hACtSI56DQ> and http://www.aswatalislam.net/DisplayFilesP.aspx?TitleID=50096&TitleName=Hamza_Yusuf, downloaded 04/25/2008.

mutual agreement.”²⁸¹ This, to him, is at the core of the responsible God-conscious approach to public engagement – a vision of America as a society where religious actors have the liberty to participate in public sphere on their own terms. After 9/11, Hamza Yusuf teaches, reminds, and pleads with his audiences that it is time to be engaged in the public sphere, “for God’s sake.”

My analysis of Shaykh Hamza’s transformation into the preacher of public Islam revolves around two speeches. Both have been among the most viewed of Yusuf’s speeches available on the internet. Their popularity reflects a particular style of delivery Shaykh Hamza has developed when he addresses the general Muslim public. This group, as one of Shaykh Hamza’s observers has noted, are the “lukewarm” Muslims. They are not learning to become scholars. Rather, they are ordinary people who are sincere in their desire to be faithful practicing Muslims. To reach this audience, Shaykh Hamza does not dwell on Sufism, but does stress spirituality. And, he does not argue for the primacy of sunna, but rather includes it seamlessly into his presentation of the Qur’an.

To see what is new in what he says, I will compare his “Give and Take” speech with a sermon he delivered in the late 1990s, which illustrates his pre-9/11 rhetoric. That previous sermon was called “Making Sense of Our Past.” He delivered it at a Muslim youth conference in Toronto.²⁸² Of course, for a dissertation that has the word “American” in its title Toronto is an inconvenient location. I chose this particular sermon

²⁸¹ He draws here, among other, on Qur’an 4:29. Hamza Yusuf, “Changing the Tide” (Keynote address at ICNA New Jersey symposium) [Online Video] Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfEIGw8NtNA>, accessed 06/05/2007. March 18, 2006.

²⁸² Hamza Yusuf, “Making Sense of Our Past,” [Online video] available: http://www.aswatalislam.net/DisplayFilesP.aspx?TitleID=50096&TitleName=Hamza_Yusuf, downloaded 04/25/2008. Until recently the video was available at YouTube, but was flagged as inappropriate. The event was connected to the group of people who later on, starting 2003, organized *Reviving The Islamic Spirit* conference, which is held annually in Toronto and where Hamza Yusuf often serves as a keynote speaker.

because I found in it a representative example of his pre-9/11 tafsir, *on which he builds after 9/11*. In its main points, the speech is similar to many he has given in the U.S. venues as well. One of the aspects of his pre-9/11 speeches, for example, is that he addressed his audiences as Muslims in the West, never as American Muslims, or Canadian Muslims for that matter. His examples of “the West,” especially in its contemporary appearance, were most often American, which reflects his personal experiences, but which he also explained by saying that today’s modern world is a “Pax Americana.”²⁸³ In this way, the speech reflects his own personality as an American preacher. Of course, its audience was at least partially American as well, both among the people who travelled to Toronto to attend the conference and, even more so, among the people who have continued to view this sermon on the internet.

This sermon is addressed to an English-speaking audience in Canada, the United States and beyond. It is an example of Shaykh Hamza’s transnational discourse. It is telling that what he says in Toronto is almost identical with what he has said in American venues as well. It is very similar, for example, to a lecture he gave in 2000 at the Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA) workshop, a part of the ISNA convention in 2000.²⁸⁴ On both occasions, he did not address American, or for that matter Canadian, Muslims as a separate audience. Rather, he spoke about Muslims in the West.

In North America, such discourse reflects the history of large immigrant Muslim organizations in the U.S. and Canada: since the immigration wave of the 1960s,

²⁸³ Hamza Yusuf, “Message to Humanity, Part 3,” available on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXTWlQZwJZs&mode=related&search=>, accessed December 9, 2007

²⁸⁴ See Hamza Yusuf, “On Muslim Youth,” [online video] available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xl6d2bC6lc0>, accessed 06/05/2007.

immigrant Muslims in both countries have built joint institutions and have often talked about themselves as sharing the same experience and facing the same challenges. Things shifted after 9/11. Both ISNA and ICNA are now more keen to emphasize American concerns and their American identity.²⁸⁵ By shifting his emphases, Shaykh Hamza reflected the changing language of the institutions that invite him to address their constituents. Of course, another factor is that his audience has become older. The people who attended the young Muslims workshops at ISNA and ICNA in the late 1990s are now in their late 20s and early 30s. Shaykh Hamza's change reflects their transformation into Muslim professionals working within America's institutions.

In what ways is Hamza Yusuf's rhetoric effective in a new post-9/11 context? I answer this question with the help of some of the theoretical discussions relating to collective memory and public sphere. I am engaging with the issue of collective memory because of Hamza Yusuf's style of preaching through reminder, and his particular use of the Qur'an as a mnemonic device that facilitates his listeners' subordination to his authority as an agent of Muslim collective memory.²⁸⁶ I propose that the answer lies in his ability to articulate a model of American Muslim participation in this society in terms that buttress local Muslims' religious identity and articulate ways in which specifically Muslim concerns can be translated into the language of American public life.

Because I examine a preacher's language, which is always a process, I follow the notion of "collective memory" as process.²⁸⁷ I share some the insistence of some theorists

²⁸⁵ A similar development has been taking place in Canada.

²⁸⁶ I am reminded here of Charles Hirschkind stipulation, borrowed from Walter Benjamin, that "effective audition, an act that enables the integration of the narrative into the listener's own experience, requires a subordination to the authority of the storyteller." Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 27.

²⁸⁷ See, Barbie Zelizer, "Reading the Past Against the Grain: The Shape of Memory Studies," *Review and Criticism* (June 1995).

of collective memory on privileging processes of remembrance, which means “to insist on specifying agency, on answering the question who remembers, when, where, and how?”²⁸⁸ In this particular case study, I deal with situations where a preacher is engaged in a dialogue with his audiences (and there are a variety of audiences to each of his sermons, which become even more complicated when the sermons become on-line videos). What I study is how Shaykh Hamza talks with his audiences, what he assumes – or tells them that he assumes – about them, and what and how he teaches them to be. Key here is that when he reminds, he attempts to transform what people in the audience remember by engaging what they are already supposed to remember. Hamza Yusuf, as any effective preacher, leads his audience in their collective remembrance. He participates, in dialogue with his audience, in a continuous re-shaping of their collective memory.

Yusuf’s method of reminding, of leading his audience in the process of collective remembrance, is a productive way of discussing why his sermons may be effective in delivering his message, in its pre- and post-9/11 variations. The question of his methodology is also tied with the question of the content of his sermons. In both cases, I consider both his content and his method through the lens of the theoretical considerations of counterpublics.

I take the idea of counterpublic from Nancy Fraser, Michael Warner, and Charles Hirschkind.²⁸⁹ Because Hamza Yusuf is an agent of discourse, Fraser and Warner’s

²⁸⁸ Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (Yale University Press, 2006), 3.

²⁸⁹ See, Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992),

theorization of public and counterpublic as pertaining to discourse serves to frame my analysis. Both Fraser and Warner work from Jürgen Habermas' idea of the public sphere as "an institutionalized arena of discursive interaction."²⁹⁰ Fraser's idea of counterpublics comes from revisionist historiographies that documented the emergence of alternative public spheres and public discourses. Fraser's central example is the 19th century American "counter civil society of alternative, woman-only, voluntary associations... that creatively used the heretofore quintessentially 'private' idioms of domesticity and motherhood precisely as springboards for public activity."²⁹¹ Her key observation, which leads her to theorize about counterpublics, is that "official public sphere... was, and indeed is, the prime institutional site for the construction of consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination."²⁹² And, if discourse is the formative marker of the public sphere, language here is an instrument of domination. Habermas, for example, has been criticized by such theorists of religious diversity as Jose Casanova and Talal Asad, for imposing a strict limit to religious actors' participation in the public sphere.²⁹³ Public participation, for him, is based on the ability to communicate in the public sphere in the language shared with other public actors. This necessarily requires a secularized public

Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2005), and Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*..

²⁹⁰ Fraser's paraphrase, based on Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Berger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), see Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 110.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 117.

²⁹³ Specifically for Habermas' theorizing of participation in the public sphere by religious actors, see Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," *European Journal of Philosophy* 14, no. 1 (2006): 1-25. For Casanova's critique, see, for example, Jose Casanova, "Civil Society and Religion: Retrospective Reflections of Catholicism and Prospective Reflections on Islam," *Social Research* 68:4 (Winter 2001). And for Asad's critique of Casanova, see Talal Asad, "Response to Casanova," in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern*, 207-210.

language. Fraser and Warner's counterargument is that, in such conditions, groups that deem themselves - or are deemed - as outside of the public sphere almost necessarily must project counter languages in order to secure their own discursive space as separate from that of the dominant public. This separate language is the marker of a counterpublic.

Hamza Yusuf's rhetoric is an example of Muslim American counterpublic discourse. My argument is that Hamza Yusuf engages in a translation through remembrance. After 9/11, his project is aimed at enabling American Muslim participation in the public sphere without compromising Islamic principles. This implies reformulation or translation of what he projects as important ideas, which begins, first of all, with a differentiation, through reminder, of what is and is not important in the tradition. Even in the process of defining – or in Hamza Yusuf's case, reminding – of what is at the core, such concepts are translated into the language of the intended audiences, as well as into the language which they can use in their engagement with non-Muslims. Reminder, here, functions as translation, and translation as reformulation that prompts his audience to adopt to new circumstances on their own terms, as long as that translation is harmonious with the already similar terms of expressing traditional ideas.

Harmonious, of course, does not mean identical, but rather resonant. There is, however, yet another step that a translator and interpreter must take in order to be effective. It is at this point that the theoretical discussions on collective memory and counterpublics meet. I specifically refer here to a canny similarity between Halbwachs' and Hirschkind's understanding of language. For Halbwachs, collective memory is tied to language, as he puts it:

People living in society use words that they find intelligible: this is the precondition of collective thought. But each word (that is understood) is accompanied by recollections. There are no recollections to which words cannot be made to correspond. We speak of our recollections before calling them to mind. *It is the language, and the whole system of social conventions attached to it, that allows us at every moment to reconstruct our past.* [emph.- TY]²⁹⁴

For Hirschkind, the problem of effectiveness of speaker lies not in the eloquence of words per se, and not even in their capacity to resonate with the experiences of the audience. But rather, in order for a resonance to be effective, a speaker must facilitate their listeners' willful submission to their authority.²⁹⁵ My analysis suggests that Yusuf is able to accomplish this through the practice of fashioning his sermons into a performance of a collective remembrance, which reminds about the Qur'an and incorporates the Qur'anic memory, as he formulates it, into a local Muslim collective memory.

Significant here is his ability to elicit the Qur'an's opinion on the rapidly transforming circumstances of his audience. What follows is an account of Shaykh Hamza's articulation of the Qur'an as speaking directly to American Muslim audiences, before and after 9/11. I begin with his speech in Toronto. Let's give it, or rather my retelling of it, a listen.

Shaykh Hamza dedicated his pre-9/11 speech in Toronto to elucidating the lessons to remembering the prophetic past from the Qur'an for the benefit of contemporary Muslims

²⁹⁴ Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 175.

²⁹⁵ See Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape*, 27.

residing in the U.S. and Canada. From the first minute, he presents his sermon as a mere reminder. After the prerequisite opening prayer, he begins the sermon on a humble note:

I was thinking on the way to the airport actually that I really in a sense don't have anything to add to this discourse that's original because this condition which we find ourselves in which is in a sense exacerbated in the present times for a number of reasons is nonetheless a condition that this *umma* has been in for quite some time. And some who are more scholarly and more intelligent people than myself or others have looked at it and considered it quite deeply, written several books, and many many talks given, many lectures. And yet, the process goes on and continues and as I thinking that an *ayat* in the Qur'an came to me....: "*wa-dhakkir fainna al-dhikrā' tanfa`u al-mu'minīn,*" remind people because it reminds the people of the *imān* [faith].²⁹⁶

Here, Shaykh Hamza performs his typical move of weaving the Qur'anic phrases and stories into his speech. He first recites a verse and then translates/paraphrases it in English. Quite often he goes immediately into interpretation of the meaning of the verse as he teaches it to be relevant to his audience. In this case, he prepares his audience to receive him as a preacher who came to deliver a message in a way that is at once humble and empowering: "and so, in a sense, we have nothing to offer anymore in terms of discourse of people speaking in this age, other than reminders in a hope that ourselves and the others will heed the reminders. And it's the purpose of *dhikr* [remembrance], that we remember."

The rest of the sermon follows as a way of reminder, or *dhikr*, which, Shaykh Hamza reminded, is a healing quality of the revelation:

Allah, *subhānahu wa ta'āla*, says in the Qur'an, "*qad jā'ktum maw'izātun min rabbikum,*" this Qur'an has come as a *maw'izātun*, an exhortation. And Allah says, that it is *rahmah*, it is mercy and it's a *shifā'*, it's a healing. It is a *shifā' li-*

²⁹⁶ Qur'an 51:55. Until the next section, unless otherwise noted, all quotes are from Hamza Yusuf, "Making Sense of Our Past."

ma fi al-suḍūr, for what's in the breast of diseases and illnesses. And so the language of medicine is the language of the Qur'an and the prophets.²⁹⁷

But, Shaykh Hamza explains, it is not the medicine as it is understood in the West. It is not a medicine of looking into “superficial causes,” like the medicine of “this culture.”

This culture is brilliant at articulating signs and symptoms and yet they have not a clue as to the cause, the underlying deceases that are affecting humanity that are afflicting humanity in any time and place. They have no understanding whatsoever because they know the outward of this world. "*ya `alamūna zāhiran min al-hayāti wa-hum `an al-akhirati hum ghāfilūn*"— They know the outer of this world. They can elicit the signs. But they do not know the inward. They don't know the cause. And the greatest cause of all things is Allah, *subhānahu wa ta'āla*, and they are the furthest from knowing that Allah, *subhānahu wa ta'āla*, is ultimately the only cause, that everything else in fact is means.²⁹⁸

So, unlike “them,” “we” the Muslims “have to look at the cause.”

From this point on, Shaykh Hamza develops the sermon in terms of “we” and “them.” The guiding theme of the sermon is that if “we” understand “our past,” then we can survive the present dominated by “them.” He projects a constantly growing danger of “us” becoming just like “them.” The solution to this condition, the way to survive the onslaught of the modern Western world is to remember the Qur'an, pay attention to the prognosis it gives to societal ills.

And, “how does it tell us the prognosis? By looking at the ancients.” This is because what is taking place now is not essentially different from what took place in “our past,” as it is related in the revelation:

²⁹⁷ Refers to Qur'an 10:57

²⁹⁸ Refers to Qur'an 30:7

And this is again and again, in the Qur’anic narrative, we see the same affliction, they don’t come with anything new. I guarantee you, read the Qur’an, look at the people that Allah *subhānahu wa ta’āla* destroyed, they come with nothing new. The same old game. The people playing today, they are the same players. They change the names, but they are the same players.

But the important thing, the Shaykh reminds, is to understand the past properly. The key to the proper understanding is the Qur’an:

You can understand history at an archetypal level. You can really do without history, if you have a deep and profound understanding of the Qur’an.... Because the Qur’an is history at its archetypal level. It is history that is constantly repeating itself. I really mean it idiosyncratically... it is explaining to us human phenomena, so we can see the pattern repeated again and again. We can see *Mūsa* [Moses] and *Far’ūn* [the Pharaoh] and see that struggle with all of the prophets and the oppressors. We can see that struggle again and again and that is why it is repeated so many times in the Qur’an.

The difference between this Qur’an-centered understanding of the past and the understanding of the past as taught in the West is that “they” only pay attention to the material; they miss that there is a second, and more essential, component to humanity, and that is its spiritual history.

This is a point where Shaykh Hamza makes another, typical for him, move. After exalting the Muslims as the recipients of the true revelation that provides a perfect guidance in matters both spiritual and material, he switches to critique. He observes that many Muslims think “that Muslims are in trouble now because of technology.” The problem with this kind of thinking is that it buys into the Western logic of materiality.

What follows next is a really heavy, and pedagogically productive, criticism of Muslims. But first, Shaykh Hamza reminds his audience about the Qur’anic story of Iblis, the Satan, whose illness was that he “was arrogant.” Throughout the sermon, Shaykh

Hamza keeps repeating that the Satan’s “fundamental disease is envy” and that his two primary qualities are “ingratitude and envy.” This is important, because what he observes now happening among Muslims – in the West and in the East – is a spread of the disease of envy. “This is important,” Shaykh Hamza emphasizes, “in understanding the present condition of Muslims.”

This condition is especially dire because of the spread of materialistic culture of the denial of God, or *kufṛ*. Here, the important thing to remember is what the Prophet said: “*kufṛ millatun wāḥidatun* – kufṛ is one system.” And if any in the audience do not understand, he adds:

All of *kufṛ* is one *millah* [makes a circling motion]. You have the Marxists, the atheists, the communists, the socialists, the national socialists, international socialists, the capitalists, the free-market capitalists, the American anti-NAFTA... - all ultimately one phenomenon called *kufṛ*. It’s all *kufṛ*! It goes under the rubric of *kufṛ*. But it has different permutations. And you can see syphilis: [it is a] very interesting disease... because syphilis is called the great mimicker. Syphilis can look like a lot of different diseases. And this is a syphilitic culture, right?

The “right” here is Hamza Yusuf’s simultaneous question, validation and appeal. He directs his audience to examine their own context and validate his observation that they are living within the materialistic culture that rots their spiritual self. It is also an appeal to change their ways of thinking, speaking and acting. Of course, this is a vulnerable position for his listeners. This is where he rhetorically prompts them to examine their vulnerability and find a source of strength.

And that is where the Qur’an is so important. In Shaykh Hamza’s reminder, it is the revelation that promises to heal the human condition, whether in the past or in the “syphilitic” modern present. It is the guide for understanding both our past and our

present, “because much of the Qur’an is in the explaining of *kuf*r, so we understand it.”

The Qu’ran, in Shaykh Hamza’s translation and reminder, becomes immediately relevant to the present.

Yet, to properly understand the Qur’an’s guidance in contemporary world, he calls on his audience to pay attention to what is specific in their tribulations. To understand the modern *kuf*r, he stresses, “we” have to understand that “European *kuf*r is very different from other *kuf*rs.” The reason for it is because “they had partial truths mixed with a lot of pseudo truths, things that appear to be truth; their religion was tainted from very early on.” From very early, “they” unlike “us” had a fundamental deficiency. But their real fall from grace came when “they” tried to borrow Islamic rational sciences. “They took this teaching, which was the intellectual and natural sciences of the Muslims, and it began to go diametrically in opposition to their own religion.” Because of the initial deficiency, they could not absorb Muslim rational sciences. Instead they went into the direction of complete materialism and “they abandoned their religion.” “And that is the crisis of the modern world.”

Throughout the sermon, Shaykh Hamza notes examples of the symptoms of this modern disease, this modern permutation of *kuf*r. One key example here is of the “bitter fruit of their abandonment of their religion” is that “the center doesn’t hold in this society anymore.”

And this is where you got the leveling of their nihilistic tendencies. It has become a world of the most base aspects of the human nature. The bestial nature is exalted, the angelic nature is denied. It is denied. Completely. Greed is good. Get what you can. Stab them in the back before they stab you.

Shaykh Hamza's central example of the nihilistic culture of modernity is the United States. There is something deeply wrong with this society, he says, if one of their best selling books is *Swim with the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive*.²⁹⁹ What this book and this society teaches is "in other words how to become a shark.... [how to] market oneself, the human being, as a commodity. This is the game of this culture. And this is a type of *kufr*."

The teaching and transformative message of this survey is in the further observation, which is that Muslims are not immune to this culture. Both in the Muslim countries and in the West, Muslim individuals and communities are now interpreting their religion as though it is a guidance toward nationalism, a Western import into the Muslim world. As a result, "we no longer see ourselves as within the fold of Islam, the brotherhood that Allah subhānahu wa ta'āla has given us... we now see ourselves – I am an American Muslim, he's a Pakistani Muslim, ... and on and on and on, false designations that Islam rejects completely." Shaykh Hamza's didactic rejection of ethnic and national Muslim identities stands in sharp contrast with his post-9/11 rhetoric, where he now highlights his own identity as an American Muslim. Yet, before we proceed to his post 9/11 discourse, there is one more detail of Shaykh Hamza's speech that is important to us, and which he stressed was important to his audience to hear. That detail is in his weaving of a Qur'anic story that, in his vocalization, speaks directly to the "condition we find ourselves in."

Shaykh Hamza introduces that story as the Qur'an's way to diagnose and offer the solution to the most serious symptom of the modern illness of the global Muslim

²⁹⁹ Harvey Mackay, *Swim With the Sharks Without Being Eaten Alive: Outsell, Outmanage, Outmotivate, & Outnegotiate Your Competition* (New York: Morrow, 1988).

community, which includes Muslims in the West. That symptom is that “Muslims have become deeply envious of the West.” In this way, he notes, they are repeating the Qur’anic history of the Satan’s fall. But, an even more telling parallel between the Qur’anic archetypal history and the present, is the Qur’anic story of Qārūn (Biblical Korah). Qārūn, Shaykh Hamza reminds, was a man at the time of Moses who, as a test from God, acquired enormous wealth. As many wealthy people he became arrogant and forgetful of the blessing he received. As his punishment, and as a lesson to others, God caused his destruction by causing the very ground upon which he was standing to swallow him alive.

This is a particularly interesting part of the sermon. Yusuf goes here into a fully-developed mode of reminder-translation-interpretation. Here, he does an oral *tafsir* of sura 28, where translation, exegesis, and reminder are all woven into one narrative. Here, he weaves Arabic words from the Qur’an together with his own translation and interpretation. In such a rendition, the Qur’an speaks, through its contemporary agent, the language of a contemporary audience. And, it speaks directly about their circumstances. This comes across most vividly in Shaykh Hamza’s articulation of Qārūn’s response to his Israelite brethren, who attempted to restrain his arrogance by reminding him of the ultimate source of his wealth:

But what did he say? He says, "*qāla innamā 'ūtītuḥu `ala `ilmin `indī*" - no! this wealth is from me! I have a knowledge. I have a PhD from Harvard, that’s how I got this wealth. I’m more clever than you are. Really, I’ve invented this machine, and I got the patent. That’s how I got it. Allah didn’t give me this. That’s what they think! "*Aw lam ya`lam*" [*“or doesn’t he understand?”*] he does not translate this last part - TY].³⁰⁰

³⁰⁰ Here, he specifically interprets Qur’an 28:78.

In his rendition, there is no pause between the Arabic, its translation -- “No this wealth is from me! I have a knowledge!” -- and his own addition to the Qur’anic narrative. Of course, the Qur’an does not mention “a PhD from Harvard.” But this is Shaykh Hamza’s way to draw its language into a dialogue with a contemporary audience, in whose mental frameworks a PhD from an Ivy League school can productively be made to correspond to an attitude of the arrogant and wealthy elite. Shaykh Hamza immediately makes clear a contemporary parallel to this story. “Who is Qārūn?,” his audience may wonder. And the preacher answers, “Bill Gates is a modern Qārūn.” Look at the modern Western Qārūn, Shaykh Hamza entreats, he does what the Israelite Qārūn did: he is arrogant and he is heedless of God. (Qārūn in some commentaries was an expert in alchemy, he also invented things, like Bill Gates.)

This, however, is not the point. The point comes through a reminder. Remember, Shaykh Hamza says, that Qārūn was from the people of Israel. And, “Bani Israil were Muslims of that time, let us not forget.” This is the rhetorical and the pedagogical peak of the sermon. Here, Shaykh Hamza conflates the negative Western “them” with those among the Muslim “us” who have become just like “them.”

The application for all Muslims, in the West and the Muslim world is that “we have many, many Qārūns in the Muslim world, many of them.” Among Qārūn’s contemporaries, he reminds, there were many who envied his wealth, even though he came to be cursed by God. The parallel sickness of envy transpires among Muslims today. Now, he declares, “the Muslims want what America has; they want what Europe has.”

Through such a move, Shaykh Hamza works to provoke an anxiety among his listeners that would prompt them to search for a point of stability. Having highlighted the instability of their own – projected by him – way of being Muslim within a profoundly non-Muslim world, he is now rhetorically inviting them to submit to his authority as a scholar who speaks on behalf of the Qur'an and offers a Qur'anic solution. At the core of this move is a particular kind of conflation and differentiation. Throughout the sermon, Shaykh Hamza projects and then uses the boundary between “us” and “them.” In this point of the sermon, the “us” and “them” are no longer Muslims and the non-Muslim Westerners. Rather, “we” are the ones who continue to remember the revelation and live according to the divine command. And, “they” are all those who forget, including the forgetful Muslims. And so, Shaykh Hamza, illustrates, “you see now [that] the Muslims want what Americans have. And they are getting it. They are getting the corruption, the television, the destruction of the families. It's all happening.”

The conclusion of the sermon comes soon after. Shaykh Hamza suggests that the only way to survive amidst this global and American “syphilitic culture” is to work towards an “intellectual renaissance” among Muslims. This means removal “from the heart of the Muslims the love of *dunya* [this materialistic world].” The promise of Islam and its revelation is that “it is powerful.” Islam, with the Qur'an as its central text, “is transformative and it can transform every single one of us if we are open to it.” Significantly, the solution he offers at this stage of his career is along the lines of individual Muslim lives. “At an individual level,” he concludes, “all of us have to make an absolute commitment to studying our *deen* [religion], to studying it in its most comprehensive and broad based orthopraxic tradition.”

In light of Shaykh Hamza's subsequent entry into the discourse of public religion, this conclusion is somewhat paradoxical. Ironically, to resist Muslims' total submission to a secular modern culture, he calls for the very modern way of practicing a private religion. Yet, at the same time, this conclusion is one of the reasons why he was able to make the transformation to the rhetoric of public engagement after 9/11.

Throughout this talk of "us" vs. "them," there is a strong emphasis on an individual, private struggle for the betterment of one's spiritual condition. This is certainly a characteristically modern response to the challenge of the hegemonic modern forces, which includes the discipline of participation in public life. Yet, what transpires in this speech is also a pedagogical approach to Muslims in the West not merely as religious individuals, but as a religious counterpublic.

Shaykh Hamza develops here a vision, indeed the language, of a Muslim counterpublic that is capable to articulate its own language in response to the "shaytanic" encroachment of the secular Western disciplines. As Michael Warner notes, "a public subaltern is only a counterpublic when its participants are addressed in a counterpublic way."³⁰¹ This is precisely what Hamza Yusuf is doing in this sermon. He is teaching his audience a language of their own, which works counter to the assumptions of the Western public secularity as he portrays it. To be effective, this language needs memory. Which is precisely the strength of his rhetorical invitation to his audience to participate in collective remembering of the past, including the Qur'anic past, in order to better understand and engage in the present. While the appeal to individual, privatized struggle is central in this speech, the sign of a Muslim counterpublic at this stage is in his constant

³⁰¹ Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 121.

insistence on Muslims as a community, which exists physically in the Western space, but spiritually outside of it.

Nancy Fraser's analysis of the American counterpublics is useful here. In her theoretical approach, counterpublics function in two ways and in two phases. On one level and at one time, they may serve "as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment." At another time, however, they can also emerge "as bases and training grounds for agitational activities directed toward wider publics."³⁰² Applied to Shaykh Hamza's pre-9/11 rhetoric, it is possible to discern his pedagogy as that of "withdrawal and regroupment," which had the potential to prepare the way for the another, post-9/11 development in his pedagogical approach to an American Muslim counterpublic active in broader American public life.

After 9/11, Shaykh Hamza added a new emphasis on participation in American politics and public life. To teach how to participate in public life, which is always contextually specific (the language of U.S. public life is, for example, quite different from that in Canada), Hamza Yusuf had to address specifically American concerns and teach specifically American ways of communicating with the public from the position of American Muslim counterpublic. For this to happen, he could not afford to abandon the first aspect: after 9/11, Shaykh Hamza continues to call on American Muslims to act and speak in their own language. Yet, to enable their engagement in public discourse, he now has to teach them how to translate their own terms (as he, in turn defines them) into the language of American democracy. This is what he did at the 40th anniversary of ISNA.

³⁰² Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere, 124.

His begins this next speech, at 2003 ISNA convention in Chicago, with the already familiar note of remembrance. First he reminds about two of the attributes of God, reflected in God's names: "*al-mu'ī*, the Giver" and "*al-wahhab*, the Bestower." He continues with a characteristic to him reminder-translation-exegesis:

We, human kind, are recipients of divine grace. The Qur'an reminds us of the bounties of your Lord, "We bestow freely on all, these as well as those."³⁰³ Meaning people that are in obedience and people who are in disobedience. This verse of God refers to the gifts of God that are given freely to the righteous and to transgressors. We are then reminded that this preference of some over others in this world will be replicated to a lesser or a greater degree in the next world. "Look how we preferred some over others. And in the next life greater degree of difference and more exalted preference."³⁰⁴ The Qur'an also reminds us that Allah *subhānahu wa ta'āla* is self-committed to grace, to mercy. "*Kataba 'ala nafsihī al-rahma*,"³⁰⁵ that God is self-committed to grace towards his creation. Our Lord is a giving Lord, one committed to showering his servants, the good and the bad, the acceptors and the rejecters, the believers and the skeptics, with divine grace. To those who believe, Allah *subhānahu wa ta'āla* reminds them immediately in the Qur'an, "*alladhīna yu'minūna bi'l-ghayb*" - "those who believe in the unseen," "*wa-mimmā razaqnāhum yunfiqūn*", "and from what we have given them, they give out."³⁰⁶

Interestingly, he uses here a mixture of translations: some of it is his own, and some is by Yusuf Ali. However, the further he goes into the sermon, his translation becomes more prominent, fused with his own emphases, interpretations, and contextually specific reminders.

The sermon develops from this point around the theme of generosity: God is generous, and so should be Muslims. He backs this up by a saying from the prophet,

³⁰³ Qur'an 17:20.

³⁰⁴ Qur'an 17:21.

³⁰⁵ Qur'an 6:12.

³⁰⁶ Qur'an 2:3. From now, until otherwise noted, quotes are from Hamza Yusuf, "Give and Take."

which is also, quite importantly, a reminder: “The Prophet Muhammad, *ṣall allāhu `alayhi wa-sallam*, reminded us ‘*kullukum `iyāl allāh wa-khayrukum `anfa`ukum` iyālihi*’ - all of you are the dependents of Allah and the best of you are the best and the most beneficial to Allah’s dependence.” The Arabic quote here is directly followed by his translation, which he immediately follows with an explanation:

And *`iyāl* is also a name for children, and it is those who are dependent, in complete dependence to Allah *subhānahu wa ta’āla*. This is the nature of a believer – he gives or she gives out of sense of gratitude for what they’ve been given, they desire to give back to Allah through the service to Allah’s creation.

The theme of generosity harkens back to his previous critique of modernity and materialistic heedlessness toward God. Here too, he projects an “us” vs. “them” dichotomy. True generosity, he reminds, is a sign of “otherworldly people.” (Those in his audience who have heard his sermons before, “otherworldly people” is a sure reminder of his teacher, Shaykh Murabit al-Hajj.) Such people, he stresses are not like the worldly people that “cling to their stuff and deem themselves independent of Allah and the needs of others.”

Reminiscent of his pre-9/11 sermon, the boundary between “us” and “them” is again very thin; at any point “we” may become forgetful of our essential “otherworldly” orientation. At any point “we” may become “them.” Like in the previous sermon, the solution to forgetfulness, to becoming one among “them,” are the reminders from the Qur’an:

The Qur’an warns us from being like those, who when it is said to them, ‘spend from the bounties of Allah that He has provided, they say should we feed who

would Allah willed he would have fed them? You're in nothing but manifest error!³⁰⁷

What is different here is that Shaykh Hamza is now speaking, and teaching by his own example, in a way that demonstrates for his audience how to speak about their religion with outsiders. He does not overload his speech with Arabic terms. Even “Allah” is now translated as “God.”³⁰⁸ And, echoing the language of the not-so-traditional Muslims, at one point, he even omits the pious phrase “*subhanahu wa ta'ala*.” Even his pronunciation is now slightly, but significantly, different. Before 9/11, whenever he mentioned the word “Mauritania,” he would pronounce it in an Arabic way, with a longish emphasis on “Moor.” More telling is his current occasional slip in pronouncing the word “Islam,” with an American stress on the first vowel, “EEslam.” This transformation gives sound to his post-9/11 task of “indigenizing” Islam and transforming English, with American pronunciations, into a Muslim tongue.

In a rhetorical continuity with his pre-9/11 speeches, Yusuf proceeds in this speech with, at first, praising Muslims, and then following up with a severe critique. At the end of the speech, he translates such didactic criticism into practical suggestions for Muslims on how to become active participants in the public life of this country. Similarly to the previous sermon, however, his praise of the Muslims is the praise of the Muslims in the past: “If we objectively examine the past it’s clear that this *umma*, this

³⁰⁷Qur’an 36:47.

³⁰⁸ It is possible that this newly fluent transition between the words “God” and “Allah” is influenced by Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, who has called on Muslims to reconcile their language with that of the English-speaking broader public. The use of the word “God” is his central example of the needed transition. See, Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, “One God, Many Names,” available at http://www.nawawi.org/courses/index_reading_room.html.

community of the Prophet has been one of the greatest contributors to human civilization, if not the greatest. And I would contend that it is the greatest.”

The praise is tied here with the theme of generosity. Both praise and the stress on Muslim God-inspired generosity are rhetorical devices that prepare the audience for the next stage. That stage is didactic critique. At first, it is a critique directed at the non-Muslim, Western others. Yet it is promptly followed by a critique of “ourselves.” He responds specifically to Bernard Lewis’ book, *What Went Wrong*³⁰⁹, and says:

What I would like to say to Bernard Lewis is that the Muslims can ask the same question of the Western hemisphere... We now on this planet are living in two complete dysfunctional hemispheres, the northern and the southern. The vast majority of wealth in the northern hemisphere is accumulated through two industries, the arms industry and the industry of drugs, the intoxicants. These are the two primary money making industries in the northern hemisphere, armaments and drugs, weapons of *destruction* and weapons of *distraction*.

Significant here is yet another subtle shift in his language. He now speaks about the West’s failure in very secular terms. Of course, for his audience, he also incorporates the familiar theme of the Western “weapons of mass distraction” from the time of eternity. But, in a simultaneous break and continuity with his past rhetoric, he conflates the “us” in his sermon in a particular way. Here, the “we” are human beings. Here, the “we” is not limited to Muslims.

Muslims come across in this passage as citizens of the world. Later in the sermon, he will further extend this formulation to their status as American citizens as well. But before he gets there, he must exercise his teaching moment, he must

³⁰⁹ Bernard Lewis. *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

productively turn this critique of the other into a self-critique. He does so immediately after this, now seemingly traditional to him, declaration of the Western failure:

Many things have gone wrong in the Muslim *umma*. And we must recognize that if we are to move on. And we, in the United States, have a unique historical position. Our unique historical position is that we are neither of the East nor of the West. We are people living in a space that Allah subhānahu wa ta'āla has described as the space of the strangers. [We are] *al-ghuraba'* – people who neither feel they are of this or of that. Because we are seeking to live a life committed to a spiritual path – “*wa-inna ilā' rabbika al-muntahā*,” to your Lord is your end, in the midst of the cornucopia of nihilistic materialism.³¹⁰ We are struggling to maintain our souls.

This is the point in the sermon where the new, post-9/11 development in Yusuf's discourse is most pronounced. Before 9/11, he never spoke of a “historical position” of American Muslims. Remember that in “Making Sense,” he said that “American Muslim” or “Pakistani Muslims” are “false designations that Islam rejects completely.”

At the same time, he explicitly preserves here his projection of Muslims in the U.S. as a counterpublic, as strangers who are neither of the West nor of the East. Yet, in further separation from his previous rhetoric, he makes sure to extend the notion of “strangers” to non-Muslims. He immediately adds: “We are not the only ones. There are many people in this society who are having the same struggle. And we have to recognize that.”

The rest of the sermon is a development of a familiar theme of the Western failure and Muslims' precarious position both as American citizens and the citizens of the world. Continuing his rhetorical play of “give and take” of the new and old emphases, he is also careful to stress that there are positive elements to America and the West: “In the

³¹⁰Qur'an 53:42. Note here how his translation is interwoven with his interpretation. There is no such phrase as “cornucopia of materialistic nihilism” in the Arabic Qur'an.

Muslim community in this country we have very serious questions we have to ask. One of the questions that we have to ask is why is it that so many Muslims have learned the worst of the Western civilization and failed to learn the best.” In this formulation, the United States, and the West in general, have created a public space that is characterized by a relative absence of corruption in government and people’s individual ethics. (Of course, this is somewhat contrary to the previous descriptions of the U.S. as an entity with shark-like humanoids).

His major criticism of the West, however, continues to stand: “Unfortunately the West has mastered form, but what the West so deeply lacks in content.” What is different is the solution Shaykh Hamza now offers. Before, his recommendation was for Muslims to exercise a studied isolation from the surrounding them Western culture. Now, he calls on them to engage with the some aspects of the Western culture. He now says that Muslims must also learn the “form” from the West, “but that form needs to be infused with the truth of what we know to be true, the principles that we live with.”

The next step in this pedagogical approach to Muslims’ engagement is a conflation of the best, true principles of the United States with Muslim principles. His task as an interpreter is to define Muslim and American principles in resonant ways. This is the basis for the shared language of public participation. Significantly, to render this new language meaningful, he infuses it with remembrance. The potential of the American Muslim community, according to him, is in its affiliation with the best of the counterpublic action that has transpired here and has produced change:

This Muslim community is young, vibrant and filled with a potential, and a core of people that can literally change the landscape of this society. We are inheritors

of the struggle in this country to keep this country in course with its founding principles. We are the inheritors of that struggle. Most of the people that preceded us suffered much more than we have ever suffered as a community. They suffered loss of life, including the Hispanic peoples, the Chinese peoples, the Mexican peoples, the Native American people, the African-American people, the Japanese-Americans, they have all suffered greatly. And their suffering enabled so many of us [points to the audience] to come into this country and be treated with respect, be treated with equality, because people put their lives on the line.

In a possible “give and take” with his audience, he equates Muslim Americans’ position in the U.S. to that of ethnic and racial groups. There is a process taking place here of racialization of the category “American Muslims.” Yusuf’s language reflects here his audiences’ new, post-9/11 emphasis on a religious identity that parallels that of other characteristically American racial identity constructs, such as Latino-American, Asian-American, African-American, etc.³¹¹ According to Shaykh Hamza’s articulation of the American collective memory, as he teaches it to his audience, the other ethnic and racial groups are akin to American Muslims because they have played the roles that American Muslims, as a new counterpublic, must now assume. He further develops this when he reminds his audience about the significance of the day of their gatherings

³¹¹ See Nadine Naber. “Muslim First, Arab Second: A Strategic Politics of Race and Gender,” *Muslim World* 95, no. 4 (2005): 479–495. Naber’s article is based on fieldwork with the second-generation Arab-American Muslim youth in San Francisco. She observes a trend of “racialization” of Muslim identity after 9/11 that now trumps ethnic self-identification for many people in her sample. Naber’s thesis speaks to how Yusuf’s speech comes into dialogue with his audience: “Throughout the period of my field research, second-generation Arab American youths grappled with multiple, competing, and often racist representations of ‘Arabs,’ Middle Easterners,’ and ‘Muslims’ and with the gendered imperatives of their immigrant parents’ generation. They mobilized new categories to claim their identities on their own terms. ‘Muslim First, Arab Second’ emerged as one among other vehicles for self-reinvention and public action, particularly among those who participated in Muslim student activism on college campuses. ‘Muslim First’ contests the hegemonic discourse casting everything that is ‘Muslim’ in opposition to everything that is ‘American.’ ... ‘Muslim First’ emerges as a counter discourse through which a politics of race, gender, and identity is imagined and performed.” (493-494)

(undoubtedly noted by the convention's organizers), and weaves quotes from American civic tradition together with the quotes from Muslim discourses:

We are not only celebrating the 40th anniversary of the ISNA, we are celebrating the 40th anniversary of the march on Washington of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And I do not believe that those two dates are fortuitous. I believe that there is a connection between these two great events. Because we are now in the position in this country to challenge once again the very thing that Dr. King challenged this country in Washington, DC to ask the question are you willing to live up to the truths of your formative declarations [applause] that all people are created equal, that they are endowed with their creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness? Are you willing to live up to the words of Thomas Jefferson when he said that freedom of religion is an essential right in this country and it is equal to the Christian and the Jew and the Mohammadan. And he mentioned the Mohammadan because that is providence because that is the hand of providence that moved his hand to put Mohammadan in that great text, the Virginia act of the religious freedom [applause].

This joint commemoration and remembering of American and Muslim collective memory leads to a declaration:

Muslims are part and parcel of the tapestry of this country. We have been here from the beginning and we are here to stay. And this is the message. And we have to be willing to sacrifice and to struggle just as who went before us sacrificed and struggled to improve this society. We can change this society. And if you don't believe it, you do not recognize your historical purpose. The people in this auditorium can change the fabric of this society.

Once he has reminded his audience of their historical mission, both as Muslims and Americans, he continues into the practical application for what American Muslims must strive to accomplish. Again, he does so by reminding what their American Muslim collective memory should be and what kind of action it should inspire:

Both Abraham Lincoln and Senator Clay both proved during the Mexican war that not only dissent against the policies of the president during the time of war a constitutional right, it was a moral obligation. And to call people who speak against misguided policies of this country anti-American is essentially anti-American! It can be nothing other than Stalinist.... We are not anti-American. We are adhering to the finest principles of this country. And if we don't recognize those principles and recognize that they are Islamic principles and stand by them, then we have failed to live up to the historical task of this community. And that is the truth. And the truth is sometimes bitter. But our prophet may Allah's blessings and peace be upon him said, "*qul al-haqq wa-law al-murra*," speak the truth even if it's bitter. Speak the truth even if it's bitter. We must speak the truth. This is our right and our obligation.

From the point of view of the audience's reaction, this was the high point of the sermon.

The audience exploded in a simultaneous applause, a kind of too Western reaction he might have made fun of before, and *takbīr*, or salutations of *allāhu akbar*, God is Great.

In the concluding remarks, the Shaykh ascertained the stability of their newly expressed truth. Most important for him is that, as Muslims, his listeners must continue to stand by the truth. Before and after 9/11 it has been *essentially* the same. That is why he declares, quite possibly in response to another audience, that of his critics:

I want to say that we cannot spin our religion. Our religion is not amenable to spin. And by spin I mean that we cannot change our rhetoric because now the media is watching. We have to change because of principle. We have to recognize that we have made mistakes in the past and the sign of the people of God are those who repent from their mistakes and who change. This is the sign of the people of growth.... We are biological creatures must adapt to those things that are outside of us that are affecting us. This is the nature of life. If you don't respond, you're dead.

Shaykh Hamza concludes with a final, this time very personal, demonstration of the way counterpublic speech should sound in order to effectively agitate the wider public:

This is where the struggle is – it's stopping the proliferation of weapons, it's stopping the proliferation of drugs, condemning racism, it's condemning the fact that in Rwanda 800,000 human beings can be massacred in our life time and the world stood by and watched it happen. And then everyone sheds tears for a few white people that die. We have to recognize that every life on this planet is sacred. And I will end this by saying this one thing. I reject President Bush's statement that you are either with us or against us as much as I reject Usama bin Laden's statement you're either with us or against us. We cannot turn this world into an insane dichotomy of those who support state terrorism and those who support vigilante terrorism. All terrorism is wrong. And bombing civilian populations is inflicting terror on those people. And I shake for the children's hearts – they were petrified as the bombs dropped on Baghdad [cries as he says this] And I feel ashamed when I am in this country when things like this can happen in our life time. And we reject it. We reject it. And we will speak the truth. And we are Americans and we are Muslims.

The difference in content between this sermon and “Making Sense” is quite obvious. Hamza Yusuf has transformed his teaching models of American Muslims' engagement with the wider publics. Before 9/11, Yusuf prescribed to his audiences a position of transformative isolation. Given the spiritually destructive conditions of modernity, as he defined it, Muslims who lived in the United States needed to place themselves into a studied quarantine from the secular world. Such isolation would be transformative for them, it would allow them to develop their religious sensitivities and disciplines even in the midst of “the cornucopia of nihilistic materialism,” even if there is nothing they can do to change the societies around them.³¹² After 9/11, his message has shifted toward transformative allegiance to the United States. He now urges his listeners “to recognize that this country has great ideals” and that “these ideals are rooted in

³¹² This phrase comes from his post-9/11 speech: Hamza Yusuf, “Advice to Muslims” [Online Video] Available http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WPD7jY6B_f8&mode=related&search=, accessed 06/05/2007

Islamic ideals.”³¹³ He promises that, if American Muslims engage in the American public life according to such shared principles, they will be able to positively transform both themselves and the larger society.

Yet, a comparison between Shaykh Hamza’s pre- and post-9/11 speeches reveals many rhetorical continuities. His seamless incorporation of the words of the Prophet into his presentation of the Qur’an, which now appears to speak in terms resonant with the founding fathers, signals his orientation as a traditional scholar. His articulations of the Qur’an offer different models of being Muslim in America. Yet, both models to him have been “traditional.” They have been traditional because of his methodology. Shaykh Hamza presents his teaching as one in a continuous chain of Muslim scholarship. He interprets the Qur’an right in front of his audiences through a well-rehearsed legal framework, with careful references to the Qur’an, hadith and classical commentaries. This framework provides stability to his approach. One striking impression from my conversations with Shaykh Hamza’s students is that many of them stress stability in his teachings. Before and after 9/11, Shaykh Hamza spoke the truth. For example, Muhammad Abdul Latif Finch, one of Yusuf’s students whose story we encountered in the beginning of this chapter, told me that indeed he has heard other people say that Shaykh Hamza has changed. He even heard it from Shaykh Hamza’s own declarations. Yet, he explained, “the only difference that I hear is that his tone changed.” Now, he is “coming from a wise place.” He is more aware of the possibility of being misunderstood and misquoted. But, essentially, Abdul Latif thinks, Shaykh Hamza “hasn’t changed at

³¹³ Yusuf, “Give and Take.” For parallel pronouncements, see also “A Message To Humanity: Address to 2004 ISNA Convention,” [online video] available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQpzIogfx7U>, accessed 06/05/2007 and Yusuf, “Changing the Tide” (Keynote address at the Islamic Circle of North America New Jersey symposium) [Online Video] Available: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WfEIGw8NtNA>, accessed 06/05/2007.

all.” And that is because he has served as a faithful and sincere translator to the Qur’an’s eternal truths. As Abdul Latif puts it:

Something that always struck me about him is that he has this uncanny ability to break down the language. He takes you into the world of symbols, and extracts meanings out of it for you... Because the same tests and trials that were affecting those people [TY- Arabs at the time of the Prophet and various characters in the Qur’an] are affecting us now. Nothing has changed. It’s just that modalities and manifestations of those trials took on different forms. But human condition hasn’t changed.

Shaykh Hamza, in Abdul Latif’s reflection, presents the Qur’an as “talking about the human condition.” So he looks into the Qur’an “and sees in it a pattern,” he recognizes the “essence of the matter.”

And he looks at our condition. And he’s able to make a bridge, [create a] balance. He does not deal with irrelevancies. He cuts right to the chase: what does it mean to me, now? He’s able to strike that balance between fourteen hundred years ago and 2008 because the human condition hasn’t changed, it’s just that the forms changed.³¹⁴

Such stability of the Qur’anic patterns and the traditional Muslim approaches of interpreting them for the present provide stability necessary for a successful transformation. The details of Shaykh Hamza’s interpretations may change. But the essential truths remain as the anchor to his listeners orientation.

At the same time, the genre of oral interpretation makes it possible for Shaykh Hamza to project stability while exercising flexibility. It is in this mode of oral tafsir that he speaks - and corrects - the language of his audiences. He echoes, for example, the anti-modernist rhetoric of other influential discourses, such as the criticism of the moral

³¹⁴Muhammad Abdul Latif Finch, personal interview by author, Berkeley, CA, July 24, 2008

decay of the West that had been quite widespread among American Muslim modernists, such as Isma'il Farouqi. When he speaks and corrects their language, he places himself as an authority in the midst of it. Implicit in this is his lifelong work of elevating the authority of traditional scholars. With his move into the public discourse, he signals that they have the authority in that area as well.

In the two speeches, stability and flexibility, which become possible because of the oral delivery of his interpretation, come across both in terms of the content of his teaching as well, and may be more importantly, in terms of his style. In terms of content, for example, he continues to speak of the nihilistic modern Western culture. But now, he decouples the idea of “America” from the idea of “modernity.” In this move, he echoes some Catholic intellectuals’ post-World War II move towards inclusion into the American public discourse. Hamza Yusuf’s rephrasing of American Catholic public intellectuals was most pronounced in a declaration he made a year later, during the next ISNA convention. Similarly to his speech in 2003, in 2004, he continued to call on Muslims to recognize the essentially compatibility of their Qur’anic principles, such as that all humans are created equal, with the values of American democracy. And, demonstrating how such a recognition empowers them to be audible speakers and influential actors in American public life, he issued a challenge to America. “The question,” he said to the potential detractors of Islam as an American public religion, “is not whether Islam can embrace democracy; the question is can democracy embrace Islam.” Such a formula is an almost exact replica of a challenge John Courtney Murray (1904-1967), an American Jesuit priest and theologian, declared in the 1950s as he was responding to the anti-Catholic rhetoric that projected Catholics as perennial foreigners,

who are never quite able to become fully American because of their religiosity and because of their allegiance to the network of clergy centered around Rome.³¹⁵ In R. Scott Appleby's analysis, Murray's was one of the voices that rhetorically buttressed Catholic participation in American public life after World War II. He was a key voice in the generation of American Catholic intellectuals who reformulated the previous Catholic rhetoric that illustrated the modern scourge of secularism by the United States as its central example. In the new formulation, "the basic convictions and tendencies associated with Americanism were acquitted of charges of guilt by association with modernism."³¹⁶

Continuing the didactic purpose of his preaching, Shaykh Hamza's approach is pedagogically counterfactual. He teaches what his audience must strive to be, as American and as Muslim, in terms of their past. America as ideal was America as it was expressed by Jefferson, Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr. When he reminds of the current examples, the ideal America, America as it should be according to its "founding principles" is represented by people who protest. As he stresses in "Give and Take:"

And I must emphasize this point: we must stop personifying America. America is not a person. This is called in logic the fallacy of personification. When we say America is our enemy, when we say down with America, are we saying down with Rachel Corrie who put her life on the line in Palestine? [applause] Are we saying down with the 63 year old woman in Florida who went to Iraq to act as a human shield [his voice crackles]? Are we saying down with America when we speaking about my 83 year old mother who marched in S. Francisco in a march

³¹⁵ See David J. O'Brien, *Public Catholicism*. For the Catholic perspective on the history of Anti-Catholicism in the U.S. and its influence on Catholic and non-Catholic imagination and practice of public life, see Mark S. Massa, S.J., *Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice* (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Company, 2003).

³¹⁶R. Scott Appleby, "The Triumph of Americanism: Common Ground for U.S. Catholics in the Twentieth Century," in Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby, eds., *Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 40.

that was entitled Not in Our Name.... There are millions of people in this country who are deeply disappointed with the action and misguided policies of our government in the Middle East and in other regions of the world [applause]. And we have not only our right to speak against those policies, we have a responsibility and a duty before God, before our fellow Muslims and our fellow human beings in other parts of the country that are suffering because of those misguided policies.

He extends here the limits of who his audience must see as their allies. He also acknowledges what the people in his audience must already be doing, and that is engaging in overlapping languages of multiple publics and counterpublics. Undoubtedly, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf acts here as an agent of the authoritative discourse of an American Muslim counterpublic as it should be, but obviously still is not. He consistently portrays it, before and after 9/11, as one community, which it has never been. Yet, the promise of this discourse for his audiences is that they may be able to communicate with other counterpublics and publics. The promise for their “power to be heard”³¹⁷ is in the apparent overlapping of diverse counterpublic and public discourses.

It is interesting, for example, that the first applause in “Give and Take” came nineteen minutes into the speech when he specifically talked about the failure of American Muslims to build Muslim hospitals. This is the kind of a reflection that is quite common in the community, especially among Muslims who happen to be medical professionals. Is it possible that, at this point, he was tapping into a middle-class public of American Muslim medical professionals and their collective memories and associated words? Aside from this observation, what he does seem to do quite purposefully is to make a double move. On the one hand, he continues to articulate the uniqueness of his vision of a Muslim counterpublic and its essentially antagonistic position toward the

³¹⁷ This is a Talal Asad's phrase, see See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 184.

godless modernity. On the other hand, he also reshapes the vocabulary of his Muslim audience's engagement with the non-Muslim publics. His dramatic dictum of separating the sins of modernity from America is probably the strongest case in point.

The continuity in his style, however, is more significant in terms of potential effectiveness of his message. Key here are the rhetorical continuities between his pre- and post-9/11 speeches. Before and after 9/11, he has constructed his sermons as reminders, and always with the help of the Qur'an. He has used the Qur'an in at least three, always simultaneous and interrelated, ways. He evoked it as a symbol for what his audience must remember about themselves as Muslims. He used it as the source for ethical guidance, with his own selective highlighting, translating and interpreting of the Qur'anic teachings aimed at allowing the text to speak directly to his audience's experience. Significantly, it has also been the inspiration for his rhetoric of remembrance and, as he would never tire to remind, for his audience's practice of remembering. After all, the Qur'an speaks of itself as "that which contains or embodies remembrance" and as that which is revealed by God as a "reminder to all beings."³¹⁸ A combination of these three uses of the Qur'an are a sign of Shaykh Hamza's skill as a preacher. He reminds through the Qur'an. He emphasizes that his audience must remember, with remembering serving as an act of worship, *dhikr*, prescribed by the Qur'an and taught to Muslims by their families and religious authorities. This is the discipline of remembering that his audience does – or at least agree that they should – share. This is the answer to the dilemma of an audience's willing obedience faced by any preacher or teacher. To be effective, a preacher must somehow meet an audience that is willing to listen, willing to

³¹⁸ Qur'an 31:1 ("*dhi l-dhikri*"), 38:87 and 81:27 ("*al-dhikrun lil' alamin*"), Michael Sells' translation. See Michael A. Sells, "Memory," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*.

exercise their own power to submit to the preacher. As Talal Asad never tires to remind, an audience's willing obedience cannot be explained by language alone. But it can be explained by "language as rooted in a somatic complex (hearing-feeling-seeing-remembering) and as involved in people's making/remaking themselves of others over time."³¹⁹ When Hamza Yusuf reminds, he does not just remind about concepts and ideas. Rather, his rhetoric of remembrance works as an invitation to his audience to submit to what they have already submitted, to do what they already do. And that is to remember.

As Yusuf weaves the Qur'an into his sermons, he aims to shape the words his audiences speak and recollections that frame their words in accordance to Qur'anic frameworks of remembrance, as they are translated and interpreted by him. What is taking place is a translation of a different sort – it is a translation of the Qur'an into an everyday referent of American Muslim collective memory. As Shaykh Hamza attempts to bring his audience closer to the Qur'an, he also inevitably moves its text - in his spoken rendition - in the direction of it becoming an American Qur'an, the central formative framework for American Muslim everyday life, speech and memory. It is, of course, a discursive movement that aims to provide deeper and corrective meaning to an ever changing present . It is an ongoing, never ceasing process. It is always a movement *toward* an American Qur'an.

³¹⁹ See Talal Asad, "Response to Caton," in David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern*, 213.

Conclusion

In the summer of 2008, Zaytuna Institute held its first intensive Arabic course. About a week into the course, the students attended an extracurricular lecture by Dr. Sulayman Nyang, a Howard University professor of African and Islamic studies. He spoke on the Arabic language in Africa. Always a cultural translator, Nyang used the opportunity to connect his audience to the subject. He asked: what is the significance of Arabic? His answer: it is the language of the Qur'an, a revelation that became for Muslims "a way to look at the world." In Africa, he explained, there developed great traditions of Muslim Arabic scholarship. To instruct their audiences, local scholars provided "oral translations" of the Qur'an. Before any formal translations, Muslims learned the meanings of the Qur'an through such informal interpretations, "oral *tafsir*." Most people continued to speak their native tongues, but their speech and culture have been enriched by the language of the Qur'an. With the help of such translations, now it is the "Qur'anic consciousness that guides them." Such process of cultural translation, he added, is well under way in the US: "only in America you have a halal hot dog!" And,

“once we are Muslims – you know the Qur’an, I know the Qur’an, we have a mental highway among us...”³²⁰

This dissertation has been about the people who play central roles in building the American Muslim "mental highway," writers and preachers who interpret the Qur'an for American audiences. How does the Qur'an come to be an American sacred text? My answer is that it does so when it becomes an American *spoken* sacred text.

To illustrate this, let me highlight one commonality shared by three out of the four characters of this dissertation. With the exception of Rahman, all of them have been often coming back to the example and words of America's founding documents. Wadud illustrates that meanings in texts are determined through contexts by referring to both the Qur'an and the Declaration of Independence. W.D. Mohammed and Hamza Yusuf talk about a basic compatibility of American and Islamic ideals because they recognize and present to their listeners similarities between the Qur'an and the Constitution. It is of course significant that Wadud, Mohammed and Yusuf are addressing explicitly American audiences and also speak from their experience as Americans. To explain themselves they return to what is familiar to them and their readers and listeners. In process, they weave the Qur'an into such American-based collective memory.

There is a telling difference and an additional agreement between the emphases placed by Wadud, on the one hand, and Mohammed and Yusuf on the other. In her writings, Wadud stresses the distance she and her audiences have travelled through time as modern human beings, Muslim, American and otherwise. Racial equality was an

³²⁰ Field notes, Zaytuna Institute, Berkeley, CA, July /22, 2008. Funding for the fieldwork was provided by Social Science Research Council, Muslim Modernities Pre-Dissertation Research Fellowship, 2008. An excerpt from this lecture is available online, see “Clip 2: Zaytuna Arabic Enrichment Lecture, Dr. Sulayman Nyang,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VN102LQelHk> (accessed 3/15/2009).

unlikely concept at the dawn of the American republic; and gender equality was just as unthinkable at the time the Qur'an was revealed. Both concepts are now taken for granted. Even proponents of misogyny and racism are now compelled to transform their language in order to be heard. Times have changed, and with times meanings have also changed. This is where Rahman is so important for Wadud. He makes it possible for her to face the gulf of time and then make a bridge between meanings. The two preachers, Mohammed and Yusuf, glide over that point. What matters for them most is an invocation and actualization of the memory of the revelation that inspires transformation in people's lives. In speaking memory they connect the past with the present. This is the difference between Wadud, as a writer, and the two preachers.

And yet, they also share an agreement. After all, Wadud is also a preacher. What matters to her is that texts can speak across time. They do so through people. It is the human agents of Qur'anic and other discourses that overcome the chasm of time. In all of our examples, they bring the Qur'an to America. They articulate the Qur'an as a text of local collective memory. Here, spoken interpretations work most fluently. Unlike the written interpretations, spoken renditions enact the Qur'an not as a document of the past, but as the text of the past-present. It is done through words and memories shared by speakers and listeners (who are always just a sound away from becoming speakers). "The text lives only by coming into contact with another text (with context). Only at the point of this contact between texts does a light flash, illuminating both the posterior and anterior, joining a given text to a dialogue."³²¹

The Qur'an is an American sacred text, when Muslims speak it.

³²¹ Bakhtin, *Toward a Methodology*, 162.

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