

MARK FATHI MASSOUD AND KATHLEEN M. MOORE

Rethinking *Shari'a*

Voices of Islam in California

“Really?” Khadija, an elderly Muslim woman in Los Angeles, looked up at us when she heard that California may have more Muslims than any other American state.¹ We were interviewing Khadija for a research project documenting American Muslims’ experiences of *shari'a*—roughly translated as “Islamic law.” Unconvinced, she probed, “Even more Muslims than in Michigan?” We nodded in reply. Khadija paused, her eyes relaxed, and her lips parted to reveal a smile.

Muslims are the world’s fastest growing religious group, and thousands of American Muslims have chosen to make California home.² But the Golden State is not always a welcoming place. After all, anti-mosque rally organizers in Temecula recently brought dozens of dogs to a Muslim prayer center—behavior considered insulting—and declared that California’s Muslims “are trained to kill” and will “impose *shari'a*” over a “Christian” state.³

But California is home to a growing number of Islamic faith-based groups. Both of America’s leading Muslim civil rights organizations have Californian roots. The Muslim Public Affairs Council is based in Los Angeles and the Council on American-Islamic Relations, while headquartered in the East, opened its first chapter in the San Francisco Bay Area. Another prominent organization is the Los Angeles-based Muslims for Progressive Values, which runs its own lecture series at the United Nations. Its Grammy award-winning cofounder, Ani Zonneveld, recently celebrated *iftar*—breaking the day’s fast during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan—at the White House. America’s first accredited Muslim liberal arts college, Zaytuna College, was founded in Berkeley.⁴ An Islamic graduate school, Bayan Claremont Islamic Graduate School, opened its doors outside of Los Angeles in 2011.

California also marks an important place in Islamic historical records. According to Karen Leonard, an anthropologist and historian of Muslims in America, Muslim

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immigration to the United States has early twentieth-century roots in California, when Muslim and non-Muslim Punjabi farmers moved to the state from South Asia.⁵ Bi-ethnic marriages generated descendants with names such as John Mohammed and Ricardo Khan.⁶ (Immigrant farmers in California were not the first Muslims in the North America. Muslim slaves were brought to the East Coast as early as the eighteenth century.⁷)

Today, California is arguably the epicenter of a revolution in Islamic political and legal thinking. What we might call a “California spring” flows not from *ulama*, Islamic scholars and intellectuals, nor from street protests, but from the collective lived experiences of Californian Muslims. California’s Muslims come from many political, racial, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and those who shared their stories with us are actively rethinking justice, unpacking identities, and navigating porous boundaries between culture, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation.

Californian Muslims are putting into action a remarkable fusion of diversity and optimism, both for California and for Islam. This diversity and optimism can be found in the same unlikely spaces where Californians have always innovated—at work, at school, at the beach, and in the car stuck

in traffic between work, school, and the beach, or simply at home in the living room or in the garage.

With a University of California–based research team, we have spent the last two years talking confidentially with Muslim women and men in at least ten counties across northern and southern California, including younger and older Californian Muslims, married couples (together and separately), divorced Californian Muslims (some with multiple divorces behind them), and Californian Muslims of African American, Arab, European, Latino, South Asian, Southeast Asian, and mixed ancestry, among many others. We have met those born into the faith and those who converted, those who lead Friday prayers at mosques, those who attend Friday prayers, and those whom scholars would label as the “unmosqued.”

We knew that the voices and experiences of California’s diverse Muslim communities were rarely considered in academic literature. So we began each of the more than one hundred interviews we conducted by asking people to tell us about how they faced moments of change in their lives and whether and how religion came up in the process of overcoming life’s challenges. Interviewees also discussed how they understood *shari’a* and their hopes for the future. The

interviews were semi-structured and lasted from forty-five minutes to three hours, with most about ninety minutes long.

What follows are three composite sketches of Californian Muslims who have used *shari'a* to inform their decisions about local politics, social justice, and daily life. These stories illustrate a contemporary Islam that is as diverse and hopeful as California is, and a contemporary California that is as diverse and hopeful as California's Muslim communities are.

The sketches are largely direct or paraphrased quotes from multiple interview transcripts, with transitions added for context and flow. They reflect a preliminary synthesis of several themes emerging from the interviews. For confidentiality, and because of the composite nature of the characters, names and other identifying characteristics have been changed.

The vignettes, below, cannot purport to represent the full panoply of individuals, experiences, and practices in California's Muslim communities, or even any permanent change in Islam that may be taking place.⁸ But change begins with everyday stories. These stories of Muslims in California give meaning to *shari'a* and an insight into the struggles of faith, powers of discernment, and small and large breakthroughs of innovation in Islam.

Noura: Finding Tolerance in the Qur'an

What is *shari'a* to me? It is healthy living. It is caring for the environment and others. It is peace, justice, equality, and freedom. That is what *shari'a* stands for, and eventually people in California are going to see that.

But some people here do not yet understand Islam, let alone *shari'a*. Let me give you an example. I was with my father when he was in the hospital before he died. He had come to settle in Los Angeles thirty years earlier with my mother as immigrants from Iran. They started a business here together. It's now a decades-old family business not far from Griffith Park. So there I was with my father at the hospital and, at one point, I asked the hospital staff if they could lend me a copy of the Qur'an so that I may pray. They only had Christian books, they said. "No one has donated any copies of the Qur'an to our hospital." So I went back home and returned to the hospital with my personal copy so that I could pray at my father's bedside. After he died, I left

my copy of the Qur'an with the hospital staff. I hope to purchase and donate ten more copies to them.

My parents are actually secular Iranians and never wanted any of their daughters to wear the veil. But two years after I took my *shahada*, I began to wear the veil. At that time my mother asked me, "Can't you be Christian, Jewish, or something else?" She and my father had escaped the mullahs of Iran in search of freedom, she told me. To think, I used to be an atheist. She worried I would become like the mullah in their household. I wore the veil because Muslims are misrepresented in the media and I was motivated by my hope that Californians would perceive my niceness and not just my *hijab*.

In addition to my father's death, there's another moment that shaped how I came to understand the power of *shari'a*. Back in 2008, California voters were deciding whether or not to repeal the law that allowed same-sex marriage. It was called Proposition 8. I was planning to vote yes, which would have repealed that law and banned gay marriage. But I realized that, before I vote, I should educate myself on what my religion says I should do. So I looked more into *shari'a*. After much study, I realized that, no, "Islamically," voting yes is not the right thing to do.

I reread parts of the Qur'an and I listened to online sheikhs who spoke about justice. I prayed and thought about it in the car on my way to and from work. I had a lot of time, you know, sitting in traffic on the long commute on the 405 jammed with cars between Long Beach and Orange County. My imam, too, has spoken of the importance of living out principles of justice and equality that are central to *shari'a*. And I thought, hey, that's what *shari'a* is.

Back in 2008 I did not agree with gay marriage. But I still voted no on Prop. 8. It wasn't an easy decision for me. I felt like I was doing something that was too "liberal." But my views on gay marriage have changed because of my knowledge of *shari'a*.

Aisha: Super-Powered in a T-Shirt

I don't think that God hates me for choosing not to wear a *hijab*. But some people sure seem like they hate me for it. Last week I went to *masjid* wearing a T-shirt. A nice, modest, loosely fitting T-shirt. Then some girl, Mona—I don't know her—said to me, "Sister, you have to wear a *hijab* in the mosque or you are going to hell."



“Sister, I’m sorry,” I replied. “You can’t say shit about what I’m wearing. That’s between me and God.”

That’s not quite what I said. Actually, I stopped after the word “sorry.” But I wanted to say the rest.

I wanted to remind my sister Mona that I don’t look like a whore just because I wear a T-shirt. I dress modestly, just like every other girl in my huge, extended South Asian family. My clothing is not considered weird on the streets of Santa Monica, and people don’t sexualize me simply because I’m wearing short sleeves. But as soon as I cross that sidewalk or driveway into the *masjid*, I become hyper-aware of my clothing. Why? Because people in the *masjid* worry I might be sexualized.

But, guess what, sister? People sexualize me whether I’m wearing the *hijab* or not. I know what whistling sounds like and what it connotes. I know what those men are doing to women when they whistle at us on the street. So I understand the values of wearing the *hijab*. At the same time, I don’t wear the *hijab* because it, too, draws attention. It says, “Look at me. I’m wearing a *hijab*. Look at my body.” I don’t want attention like that on the streets, but that’s how I’d feel if I wore a *hijab*. So I wear T-shirts.

Maybe Mona is one of those girls who covers herself on Huntington Beach while her husband soaks in the sunshine in shorts and flip-flops. He doesn’t even have to wear a T-shirt. Does that make it a *shari’a*-compliant beach?

Why is it that some people tell me I’m going to hell for not wearing the *hijab*? In my heart of hearts, I know God would not do that to me. Muslims, especially young ones growing up here in California, need to stop thinking of Islam as all the things that we cannot do. Instead, we need to start thinking of all of the things that Islam encourages us to do.

How is our Islam going to inspire us to fight for economic and social justice, to fight for racial equality, to fight against the various forms of inequity we see in our society and our surrounding communities? I’m invested in helping young people like me to make that switch, to see *shari’a* as more than just words that we use like *ma’sha Allah*. I want us to see *shari’a* as a personal and collective fight against injustice. Islamic teachings themselves are my fuel in this process. *Shari’a* adds passion to my fight to help the underdog.

You know, I’ve spent the last year educating myself about my faith. Actually, I’ve been super-powering my Islamic self. I’ve also been exploring what Islam says about women, from the perspective of women scholars. My friends ask me

how I've learned so much about Islam. I have read books, watched videos on YouTube, and done a lot of internal studying and reflecting. I have been looking—like, digging and digging—and trying to find spiritual realities to this tradition. It moves my soul to learn about Islam from learned scholars and sheikhs, or simply listening to *Surat Baqara* on my sound system at home or in the car. I even tweet Hadith, prophetic teachings, to my followers.

One day, I want to have a husband who also has a strong Islamic sense of being, and I want to be able to pass that message of faith on to my kids. And one day in a perfect California, I want to be part of an Islamic enlightenment. This Islamic enlightenment is long overdue.

Ali: Open Source Shari'a

Shari'a is different. It's like open source coding, where each engineer adds line after line, layer after layer, of code. Each person makes the code stronger and more integrated. We strengthen *shari'a* in California by being better people to our loved ones, to our coworkers, and to our neighbors, one person at a time.

Shari'a is also finding a smooth flow between the layers of my religious values and the various aspects of my identity, as an Arab Muslim, a father to an adopted child, a professional engineer, and a civic activist speaking in school classrooms about Islamic faith.

Islam is a religion I love. But it's being hijacked, even here in California. If I don't stand up and define myself and my religion, then somebody else will do it for me. When the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him, practiced the *shari'a*, you know, it was not the excessively legalistic codes and punishment laws that you hear about in the media. Ninety-nine percent of the *shari'a* was about personal kindness, generosity, and caring for people. Politically, *shari'a* was about how to make peace and limit war between adversaries.

Shari'a is about how to do business ethically, how to raise your family morally, how to treat your family with love, and how to treat your neighbors with kindness. That is the example of *shari'a* that I share with Californians. It's like a legal system, but it's so much more personal. It's an ethical code for living.

Shari'a is not just the five pillars and eating *halal* meat and refraining from alcohol and going to *masjid* on Fridays.

Shari'a is also not just reeducating my neighbor who once said to me, "I know you and your wife and your kids are nice people. But are you the exceptions in Islam? Are you Americanized Muslims? Has California tamed you?" *Shari'a* is more than all that.

My advocacy work on behalf of Islam and the example I set in my life urges people—even decent people who are either misinformed or uninformed—to rethink what is *shari'a*. Islamic values of contributing to society and caring for others help to shape the American system. At the same time, I'm learning about myself. As an American, I do not have to lose my Muslim identity. To be an American, for me, is to be Muslim. **B**

Notes

Photographs from *The Most Beautiful Names* by Shireen Alihaji, which examines the transition of Muslim names across immigration and socio-political events within the U.S.

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- ¹ All names have been changed to preserve confidentiality. In 2000, the Association of Religion Data Archives listed approximately 260,000 Muslims in California, more than in any other US state. In 2014, the Pew Research Center on Religion and Public Life estimated that California and New York each had approximately 400,000 Muslims (1% of Californians and 2% of New Yorkers). See Association of Religion Data Archives, "ARDA State Membership Report-California," (http://www.thearda.com/mapsReports/reports/state/06_2000.asp) and Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," (<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>).
- ² Pew Research Center, "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth, Projections, 2010–2050 – Why Muslims are Rising Fastest and the Unaffiliated are Shrinking as a Share of the World's Population," 2 April 2015.
- ³ Phil Whillon, "California: Facing Off Over Temecula Mosque," *Los Angeles Times*. 31 July 2010, A3.
- ⁴ Zaytuna College received accreditation from the Western Association of Schools and Colleges in 2015. See Jack Jenkins,



“America Just Got Its First Accredited Muslim College,” available at <http://thinkprogress.org/education/2015/03/10/3632189/america-just-got-first-accredited-muslim-college/>. See also Scott Korb, *Light Without Fire: The Making of America’s First Muslim College* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2013). American Islamic College opened its doors in Chicago in 1983 but suspended its accreditation candidacy in 1989 and its operations soon thereafter; it reopened earlier this decade. See also Mary Beth Marklein, “Muslim College Carves Niche in USA,” available at: <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2013/06/01/muslim-college-usa/2379261/>.

⁵ Karen I. Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁷ Edward E. Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014). According to historian Michael Gomez, “Of the estimated 481,000 Africans imported into British North America during the slave trade, nearly 255,000 came from areas influenced by Islam. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that Muslims arrived in North America by the thousands, if not tens of thousands.” See Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: the Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 166.

⁸ While many people agreed to share their experiences with us, some declined to participate. In one case, a South Asian man known to be socially conservative in his mosque claimed his perspective would not be suitable for academic study, despite our requests to hear from him.