

Transnational Muslim Americans: Four Women in Jordan

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Abstract:

This article examines the biographies of four Muslim American women who have lived in Amman, Jordan. It seeks to understand how residency in this Muslim-majority country in the Middle East has affected their religious attitudes and practices as well as their gender, ethnic, and national identities. In offering analysis of these women's own thinking about how their time in Jordan had or had not altered their Muslim and American identities and practices, this article contributes to larger scholarly conversations about religion and politics in transnational perspective. The travel and observations of these four women in Amman evidenced the often unpredictable nature of personal change when a human being moves, both physically and spiritually, from one place to another. Their stories confirm that the focus of much social scientific literature on transnationalism on how institutions—both formal and informal, state and non-state—delimit, constrain, and shape political identity is useful and necessary in understanding transnational ventures. But it also shows that such literature does not always account for the possible religious meanings of human movement. The transnational Muslim Americans in this study engage in ethical and cosmic, national and transnational practices all at once. Their stories show how an account sensitive to religious activity can helpfully account for the multiple meanings of transnational practice among Muslim Americans.

Transnational Muslim Americans: Four Women in Jordan

In the decade after 9/11 the specter of Muslim Americans abroad has attracted the attention and concern of the popular media and security establishment (Cainkar 2009). With the occasional exception of a Muslim American on hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, images of Muslim Americans in Pakistani madrasas, Yemeni mountain hideouts, and al-Qaeda training camps—Muslims on monkey bars—have dominated mainstream depictions of Muslims in film, television, news, political cartoons, and other media (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008). U.S. and other Western media images of the typical Muslim American transnational is also a gendered discourse focusing on men. When women do appear in transnational narratives, one of the dominant tropes is that of captivity such as that found in Betty Mahmoudy's *Not Without My Daughter*. Though anthropological, sociological, and religious studies scholarship about Muslim Americans abroad obviously challenges these more stereotypical images, this body of literature has its own blind spots. It has often emphasized the diasporic character of Muslim American transnationalism, charting the global communities that South Asians especially but also African and Arab immigrants sustain through the use of mass media, family ties, business connections, travel, and other means (Levitt 2007; McCloud 2006; Leonard 2003: 79-85). Far less scholarship has been devoted the long-standing

practice of American-born Muslims traveling abroad for pilgrimage, religious education, marriage, and trade, with the possible exception of the numerous discussions of Malcolm X's journeys abroad.

In the twenty-first century the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan has emerged as a significant site of Muslim American travel and migration. In my capacity as a student, tourist, study abroad leader, researcher, and visiting professor in Jordan since 1995, I have observed, met, and taught Muslim Americans who have sought language instruction and career-related training often under the auspices of U.S.-government-funded programs such as the Department of State's Critical Languages Program and Fulbright program. Others have interned for Amman-based *Islamica* magazine, studied the Qur'an and Islamic literature at al-Qasid Language Institute, or sought Sufi instruction with American-born shaykh Nuh Mim Keller, who directs a *zawiya*, or Sufi lodge, in Amman. Muslim Americans also move to Jordan to start businesses, and in the case of some American-born women, to marry or migrate with their Jordanian-born husbands. Even greater numbers visit their Palestinian or Jordanian relatives. Though no statistics exist to document the number of Muslim Americans who have spent time in Jordan in the last decade, one might speculate that of the 125,424 Americans who, according to the Jordan Tourism Board, visited Jordan in the first three quarters of 2010, tens of thousands were Muslim Americans.

This case study reveals the stories of four Muslim American women who have traveled to or taken up residence in Jordan in the last decade. It gives a sense of the diversity of American women in Jordan by depicting the lives one white convert and three Arab American women without claiming to represent such persons in any comprehensive way. My most immediate goal for the research was to ask my subjects to reflect on how their identities as both Muslims and Americans had or had not changed as a result of their residency in Jordan. The discussions that resulted create a counter-narrative that at least supplements if not challenges the popular biographies of media Muslims such as Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni American al-Qaeda operative and John Walker Lindh, the so-called American Taliban. Given the fact that Muslim Americans, including the hundreds of thousands Muslim Americans who travel abroad each year, commit so few acts of terror (Kurzman 2011a), it is safe to assume that these women's biographies reveal much more about the typical transnational Muslim American than al-Qaeda and Taliban associates do.

These stories challenge dominant U.S. discourses on Islam as constituted by centers of interpretations such as D.C. think-tanks, news media, and various governmental agencies, including Homeland Security, the FBI, and the CIA. The lives of these women, all of whom are given pseudonyms here, contradict many of the tropes and themes that seem to inform policy-making toward, coverage of, and thinking about transnational Islam. For instance, all these women's narratives demonstrate that when Muslim Americans go abroad, they do not necessarily become more religiously observant. One of the women's stories shows that it is possible to study the shari'a in a predominantly Muslim country without encountering anti-American, religiously exclusivistic, or misogynistic teachings. The most important religious goal for all four Muslim American women

whom I interviewed was to become a better, more ethically-minded human being, whether they were in a Muslim country or not. Muslim Americans may not travel to Muslim-majority countries for a specifically political reason either. In some cases, they are completely turned off of politics, and in other cases, they remain completely loyal to the United States while also insisting that U.S. foreign policy toward some Muslims populations is unjust.

In offering analysis of these women's own thinking about how their time in Jordan had or had not altered their Muslim and American identities and practices, this article also contributes to larger scholarly conversations about religion and politics in transnational perspective. The travel and observations of these four women in Amman evidenced the often unpredictable nature of personal change as one's body and spirit moves from one place—and one state of consciousness—to another. Their stories confirm that much of the literature's focus on how institutions--both formal and informal, state and non-state--delimit, constrain, and shape political identity is useful and necessary in understanding transnational ventures. But such literature does not always account for the possible religious meanings of human movement. The transnational Muslim Americans in this study engage in ethical and cosmic, national and transnational practices all at once. Their stories show how an account sensitive to religious activity can helpfully account for the multiple meanings of transnational practice among Muslim Americans.

Ellen's Transnational Religious Hybridity

Ellen is perhaps the quintessential transnational Muslim. Her life story illuminates how Muslims growing up in on two continents in the midst of war-making and injustice, experiencing dislocation and prejudice from both Muslims and non-Muslims, can nevertheless endure, prosper, and contribute enormously to intercultural understanding and everyday peacemaking. Most of all, for the purposes of this work, Ellen's interview shows the impossibility of predicting of how transnational travel and migration will affect religious practice, and perhaps better, how the practices of transnational religious practitioners cannot be attributed in a one-dimensional way to the influence of any one social or geographical place. To say that Ellen's evolving practice of Islam, for example, is explicable largely as the accumulation of influences from the various places in which she has lived is to misunderstand fundamentally the ways that religious culture itself is on the move, traveling in the bodies and consciousness of religious practitioners rather than happening in one city or region.

Currently the director of a non-governmental organization in Jordan, Ellen spent several years working for United Nations and NGO efforts to aid Iraqi refugees in Jordan. She was born to a white American Roman Catholic mother and a Jordanian-Palestinian Muslim father in Iowa. Like the children of tens of thousands of Palestinians in the 1980s, however, she grew up in Kuwait, where her father was a professor at Kuwait University. She attended an American school there, learning both English and Arabic from the time she was little. Her mother, though Catholic, was in charge of Ellen's and her siblings' religious upbringing. "She was always asking us, have you

prayed? Have you fasted?," Ellen told me in our October, 12, 2009, interview at the Fulbright House in the Shemasani neighborhood of Amman. Because her mother had not yet learned to read Arabic yet, she used pictures of Muslim children praying in order to help her children learn the postures associated with *salat*, the prescribed prayers often understood to be one of the pillars of Islamic practice. "My father, I don't remember him praying when we were young so we really didn't have him as an example," Ellen said. Occasionally, Ellen would join her mother in a prayer to St. Anthony when something was lost around the house and needed to be found. In spite of her commitment to raising her children Muslim, Ellen's mother remained a practicing Catholic. Her husband and children celebrated both Christmas and Easter with her. "My mom," explained Ellen, "was always finding similarities between our two religions." Both her classmates and her father's family pressured Ellen's mother to convert to Islam—an example of a Muslim practice that contradicts the Islamic jurisprudential principle that Jewish, Christian, and other wives from "the people of the book" do not have to convert. Ellen's father would always intervene and try to put a stop to the outside pressure. Ellen's religious education included a formal class at her American *madrasa*, or school, in Kuwait. Contrary to the fearful images found in mainstream American media concerning Islamic religious education, Ellen remembers her male religion teacher as a kind, supportive man who introduced her to the stories of the prophets (*qisas al-anbiya*) and helped her memorize portions of the Qur'an.

In the summer of 1990, when Ellen was fifteen years-old, she was on a visit to the United States when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. Her family lost everything. They moved to Buffalo, New York, and Ellen attended a Roman Catholic High School where some of the nuns "were really hard on me," a reversal of what her more positive experiences with Catholic nuns in Kuwait. When her class watched a movie about the Crucifixion, for example, Ellen and many of her classmates cried. The teacher turned off the TV, called out Ellen, and demanded, "How could you not believe that?" Ellen experienced this religious bigotry as part of a larger Gulf War-era prejudice against both Arabs and Muslims. "No one has any clue who they were at war with," she said, recounting the comments such as "You're just all Arabs and you're all Muslims and we should bomb you all." Though Ellen's father advised her to lay low, Ellen "didn't take his advice very often." When one of her teachers said in class that people in the Middle East sell their daughters for camels, Ellen stood up in the middle of class and proclaimed, "you know I'm sitting right here and no one has ever offered camels for me and my father is not planning on selling me for camels." The teacher told her to sit down. She refused. "I said, 'no, I will not sit down.'" The teacher told her to sit down again. And still Ellen remained standing and asked the teacher whether she had ever been to the Middle East, or Arabia, as the teacher called it. The teacher told her that she had been to Israel. Ellen told me that she had nothing more to say after that, implying that the teacher's trip to Israel probably gave her a distorted view of Arabs.

A Buffalo mosque was a refuge during Desert Storm, the 1991 war to remove Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait. Ellen attended various mosque events, feeling welcomed by the sound of qur'anic recitation and the call to prayer. Still, Ellen's finding refuge in the mosque did not mean an

immediate increase in her piety. As important as the mosque was to her life at this point, “it wasn’t enough to make me want to pray [on a regular basis],” she said. Her father encouraged her to preserve the family’s cultural and religious heritage—sometimes intentionally speaking Arabic in front of Ellen’s English-speaking American friends—but she felt the need for to negotiate her cultural boundaries and religious practices for herself. While not committed to the daily prescribed prayers, Ellen did like praying occasionally.

The “most amazing moment of my whole life,” Ellen told me, was when she prayed during a Muslim holiday in a football stadium in Buffalo. “Praying outdoors is the closest, I think the closest, I have ever felt to God,” she remembered. Ellen was cheered by the fact that “in this country you can pray outside.” This was surprising since she “had been so pushed down and. . . made to feel bad about who I was.” Ellen also remarked that the all-city gathering was significant because of the racial and ethnic diversity of Muslims present there. “We never knew there were black Muslims. I really felt like they were a step above because they were very religious and very cool.”

The experience of praying in the football stadium shows the various ways in which religion can foster different types of what Thomas Tweed (2006) dubs crossing. The football stadium prayers transported Ellen through a *cosmic crossing* as she traveled beyond normal human consciousness and felt near to God. In addition, these prayers enabled a *terrestrial crossing*, “as devotees traverse natural terrain and social space beyond the home” to discover, in this case, the multi-racial nature of both the global Islamic community and the Muslim American community in Buffalo (123). As Tweed points out, crossing important cosmological, social, and spatial boundaries is also a form of dwelling or homemaking, an apt description of the kinds of intimacies that Ellen describes in coming closer to God and discovering a fuller sense of Muslim humanity in meeting African American Muslims for the first time.

After Ellen graduated high school in 1992, she moved with her family to Zarqa, the industrial and relatively poor suburb of Amman. “I hated it here,” she recalled. She went to a women’s university in Amman and was still miserable after two years. “People didn’t want us here,” Ellen explained. “It was boring. There was nothing to do.” Then, in her third year of college, she got married—to her first cousin, a fact that she volunteered in our interview without any prompting. Though worried about what her mother’s family would think about the marriage back in the United States, she was in love. It was love at first sight. Her husband, who would later become an obstetrician-gynecologist in Amman, saw her one day when she was visiting her paternal aunt’s home. “He opened the door,” Ellen gushed, “and said ‘wow’ when he saw me. I said, ‘wow.’ I kind of lost it after that.” The couple soon married. They now have three children.

Ellen only began to pray on a regular basis after she gave birth to her first son and only began wearing a head scarf on a regular basis after she gave birth to her daughter. She told me that she didn’t know what she was missing, the feeling of being close to God, of being “one hundred percent

supported.” In addition to observing the formal prayers, Ellen reads the Qur’an on a regular basis and talks informally to God in her head throughout the day, “mostly about protecting my children.” Even though she now observes pietistic practices every day, she insists that being truly religious requires ethical behavior. She gets annoyed with Muslims who judge her for letting her children listen to popular music and with what she regards as “extreme” practices that seek to limit women’s mobility and styles of dress. To be “more religious” for Ellen means instead talking about religion with her family and applying various ethical lessons in making decisions about whether to change jobs or have another child.

Finally, Ellen insisted, “I have to tell you that my faith is very private... something between me and God and no one else needs to know about it.” In Jordan, unlike in the Buffalo football stadium, Ellen prays at home and alone. She does not pray at work and makes up missed prayers when she returns home. Her husband points out the belief of many Muslims that praying together is a blessing and he says that the idea of “private faith” is foreign to Islam, speculating that Ellen’s exposure to Christianity is the reason why she prefers to pray alone. But Ellen only began to pray alone after she had been living in Jordan for many years. She does not understand why she strongly prefers to pray in private though she tells her husband that she will not pray in groups. “He’s like, ‘that’s not the way it should be.’ And I’m like, ‘well with me, that’s the way it is.’”

All things being equal, it might be tempting to side with Ellen’s husband and explain her preference for private prayers as a latent expression of the Protestant-based American ideal that extols one’s personal relationship with God as a necessary peak experience of human faith. But with transnational Muslims such as Ellen, who was born in Iowa but grew up in Kuwait, New York, and Jordan, the attribution of a personal practice to one geographic location seems to ignore the ways in which religious practices travel, unattached at times to powerful institutions as they are adopted and adapted by human beings. Or perhaps the decision to pray alone was a reaction to her Jordanian environment rather than an expression of an American cultural practice.

In either case, the sanguine and even utopian views of transnationalism popular among theorists before 9/11 seem to explain better Ellen’s decision to pray alone than any one-dimensional explanation of her private faith as an expression of her partial American roots. In one sense, the old cliché image of the “global village” can be employed to indicate how the nearness of people, cultures, and economies to one another shapes religious behavior. Many cultural critics, especially in the 1990s, celebrated the bricolage, hybridity, and *mélange* of the age as generative of new artistic and literary imaginaries, just as political scientists, anthropologists, historians, religious studies scholars, and other scholars imagined the contemporary borderlands, metropolises, and various translocal scapes as forms of solidarity that undermine national loyalties in favor of new, more inclusive, more humanistic, and more pluralistic imagined communities (Mandaville 2004: 83-107). At the same time, it is clear that transnational movement, even in Ellen’s relatively happy case, can also involve great suffering. Contrary to utopian views of transnationalism, anthropologist

James Clifford has insisted that the political implications of translocal exchanges are unpredictable. “Transnational travels and contacts—of people, things, and media—do not point in a single historical direction,” he has argued (1997: 9).

Kelly’s Transnational Muslim American Politics

The ambiguous and unpredictable political outcomes of transnational movement are easily observed in the life of Kelly. Kelly was born in California but went to high school in Oregon, where she also attended Oregon State University. Her parents raised her with what she later understood to be Islamic morals while also emphasizing that membership in a religious community was a deeply personal choice. Kelly met her husband at a 7/11 convenience store where she was working to make some money in her college years. She fondly remembers her husband asking her father for permission to take her out on a date. After a few months, he proposed marriage and the couple was married in Oklahoma where many of Kelly’s family members lived. They settled in Texas. While they had agreed that their children would be raised Muslim, Kelly’s decision to convert to Islam was one that took years. She told her husband that she would learn everything about it, and that if “God wants me to be a Muslim, I’ll be a Muslim.”

Over time, Kelly decided first to fast during the month of Ramadan and pray with her husband. They enrolled their children in a local Islamic school. Even though she was not a Muslim, she felt incredibly welcome at the school. She was especially impressed by the values that her daughter was being taught at school: “Everything that Islam teaches is the way that I was raised and the way I raised my kids. About being kind, giving to the poor, being open-minded and accepting of others.” At the same time, Kelly liked the moral standards, especially the emphasis on sexual modesty, being taught. One day, when she and her daughter were walking through Wal-Mart and they spotted an image of the singer Madonna wearing a bra, her daughter commented that such dress was shameful. Kelly was proud.

Her formal conversion to Islam came shortly after she prayed for a bank loan that came through. Looking back on the incident, Kelly reflected, “It’s funny how you play games with yourself or with God, [but it’s] because we’re human, we’re stupid, you know.” In any case, it led to Kelly joining a *halaqa*, or study circle, at a local mosque, observance of prohibitions against pork and liquor, and in a couple months after that, her formal taking of the *shahada*, or a profession of Islamic faith.

In the late 1990s, Kelly visited Jordan for the first time and fell in love with her husband’s Jordanian relatives and the deep traditions of hospitality she encountered. Kelly convinced her husband to move back to his native land in 1999. She then took jobs working for a school and the U.S. embassy before establishing her own business.

Kelly's journey from Christianity to Islam and from Texas to Jordan, while compelling in its own right, is not a story of how, to invoke Appadurai's idea (1996), human migration and movement leads to the instability of national identities and the legitimacy of the nation-state itself as a political idea. Instead, Kelly's case shows how such movement and migration can lead to a critique of a government's policies without questioning the marriage of nation and state. Doubting the veracity of claims both from governmental and non-governmental actors, Kelly instead seeks escape from formal politics.

After discussing her journey to Islam in our first interview on October 27, 2009, I asked Kelly about her political views during a follow-visit on November 2. Kelly describes herself as a proud and patriotic American who thinks that most Americans are honest in their personal and professional lives. But Kelly is also concerned about the encroachment of secularism in American public life and the U.S. government's policies toward Middle East. Kelly blames U.S. policy toward the Palestinians on media that are biased against Palestinians. She also sees past American policy toward the late Saddam Hussein as an expression of oil interests. She judges U.S. foreign policy hypocritical since the U.S. turns a blind eye toward Israel's possession of nuclear weapons but is strongly opposed to Iran's apparent attempt to develop them. "It's not fair," she told me. "let's be just and fair everywhere, with everybody." If the American people were better informed about their government's policies, Kelly said, they would insist on a change.

In theorizing about the reasons why the U.S. maintains its policies toward the region, Kelly identifies personal moral failure on the part of U.S. citizens as much as the media. For her, it is only through a deep lack of morality that a U.S. citizen could fail to identify with the Palestinian cause and force the government to change its policies. I asked Kelly about the source of this moral failure. "I think that's Satan," she said. Kelly went on to explain that Satan is a gnawing, internal voice of temptation. When one gossips, back bites, watches immoral television programs, and commits other small immoral acts, one eventually becomes numb to the difference between right and wrong, including the actions of one's own government. Focusing only one's own petty and selfish desires blinds one to the truth, which leads to bad citizenship.

Like many other religionists, Kelly sees governmental failure stemming from the failure of individuals. It might be tempting to analyze such critiques as a typically American religious behavior. American studies scholars and sociologists of religion have long identified the American jeremiad, the idea that stain of individual sin can ruin a whole nation, as a key mode of social critique and social activism in the United States (Bercovitch 1978; Emerson and Smith 2000: 76-77). But such American exceptionalism, as in the case of Ellen's decision to pray alone, once again ignores the truly global and mobile nature of modernity, one of whose contested characteristics is the notion that an individual's worldly duties are "the highest form" of human "moral activity" and religious commitment (Weber 1958: 80). Even if one is not willing to go that far, it is clear that dominant modes in modern Islamic thought, whether socially conservative or liberal, stress the role of individual moral responsibility and human will as important to social progress, as illustrated in

the thought of modern Muslim thinkers from nineteenth-century Muslim reformer Jamal ad-Din Al-Afghani to twentieth-century Muslim American leader W. D. Mohammed (Hourani 1962: 128; Curtis 2002: 122-123). A dominant modern interpretation of jihad, sometimes labeled as apologetic by its critics, is a case in point: whether one is in Jordan or Texas, one hears from Muslim preachers of many religious stripes the idea that true social change starts not by making war against non-Muslims but by conquering one's own demons.

This focus on the individual as the locus of social change may sometimes preclude more structurally-minded analysis that faults institutions, including the state, as a cause of social problems or oppression. Kelly's interpretation of U.S. foreign policy as a failure of human morality and good citizenship do not seem to challenge the basis of legitimation for the nation-state. She does not advocate the elimination of the American nation-state but is in favor of its reform. Kelly admires the honesty of the average American citizen and what she calls a respect for order and organization in the United States. She only wishes that the decency of the average American would guide its policies toward the Middle East.

When we discussed the events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Kelly became visibly upset and I decided to pause the interview so that she could catch her breath. Like many Muslims throughout the world, Kelly has trouble accepting the idea that Muslims could have actually committed the terrorist attacks of 9/11; as Gary Sick has suggested, such reactions might be seen as "healthy form of denial" that indicates the "discomfort of virtually all Muslims with the events of 9/11" (Kurzman 2011b: 48). Charles Kurzman offers evidence to support Sick's hypothesis, noting that in a 2006 Pew poll Muslims who questioned whether Arabs were responsible for 9/11 were *more likely* "to condemn suicide attacks on civilians in defense of Islam than respondents who didn't express doubts" (2011b: 49). Kelly is a perfect example of this trend. While doubting that Muslims committed these terrorist attacks, she also argues that under no circumstances could these attacks be understood as justified in Islam. Kelly's doubts about the veracity of the U.S. government's claims regarding 9/11 are also shaped by subsequent federal prosecution of Muslim American charities and the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Because the government went to extraordinary efforts to prosecute Muslim American charities that aided the Palestinian party Hamas and seemed to trump up charges that Saddam Hussein possessed WMD, Kelly wonders about the extent to which prejudice against Muslims and Arabs affects the government's policies and pronouncements regarding Muslims more generally.

But rather than become an activist against either U.S. foreign policy, Kelly expresses feelings of fear and uncertainty. She does not know who to believe and told me that she tries to stay out of politics. Kelly's exposure to multiple messages emanating from multiple political interests and centers of interpretations has resulted in a disconnection from geopolitics in general. Her movement from Christianity to Islam might have led her to question her government's policies, but it did not seem to "discomfort" the category of nation-state (Hannerz 1996). Kelly neither questions the right

of the nation-state to exist nor does she have less pride in her American ideals. Even if one insists that, beneath the surface, her distrust of the U.S. government somehow undermines its legitimacy, Kelly's own theorizing about the impact of these events is that it has turned her off of politics.

Bayan's Homeland of Islam

The case of Bayan suggests a different model of political engagement. When I interviewed her at the Fulbright House on October 5, 2009, in Amman, Bayan was a grantee of the Fulbright U.S. student program, which is designed for graduating college seniors, graduate students, artists, and young professionals. Her research was focused on how meaning of Arabic women's literature is affected by its translation into English. A resident of a suburb outside Minneapolis, Minnesota, Bayan attended first grade in Saudi Arabia, where her mother was employed as an English instructor. Like Ellen's mother, Bayan's mother was not Muslim, but married a Palestinian Muslim and wanted to raise her children to speak Arabic and practice Islam. Bayan also spent part of her childhood in the United Arab Emirates, where she completed the tenth grade. Skipping both eleventh and twelfth grades, she then enrolled in a special program at the University of Minnesota that allowed her to graduate with a bachelor's degree by the time she was 18 years old. She came to Jordan as a Fulbrighter at the age of 20.

Bayan is grateful that she was raised in a predominantly Arab Muslim environment where she learned to pray five times a day, read the Qur'an, speak Arabic, and praise God and the prophet. Whether in Jordan or the United States, she prays regularly and recites the Qur'an, both silently and out loud. She hopes one day to memorize its 114 chapters. At the University of Minnesota and in other places, Bayan has served as imam, or prayer leader, for groups of women and has also recited the Qur'an in various study circles, though she is quick to point out that many women perform these duties. They do not distinguish her as a religious leader.

Like both Ellen and Kelly, Bayan sees Islam as more than a set of ritual practices, even though such practices are central to her life. Islam is also a repository of ethical principles, which Bayan sometimes sees practiced more religiously in the United States than in the Middle East. Like many other Muslim Americans, Bayan understands many Islamic and American values to be complementary, not contradictory. First, she notes that she learned the Islamic value of critical thinking, the desire to question "everything" and to look at different sources of information before coming to a conclusion, at an American university. Secondly, she views the United States' embrace of racial and ethnic diversity as an expression of the Qur'anic teaching that God has made human beings into tribes and nations "so that you may get to know each other" [Bayan's translation] (46:13). Finally, she said that American self-reliance was an important Islamic value, though she also argued that it was essential to remember those in need around you.

Bayan identifies as both culturally Arab and culturally American, but first and foremost, she sees herself as Muslim. Having recently arrived in Jordan, she was sometimes frustrated by the fact that many Jordanians could not seem to understand how she could be American, Palestinian, and Muslim at the same time. The Jordanians' confusion stemmed in part from Bayan's linguistic abilities. When I first met her, I noted her Minnesotan accent, a fact that surprised her but which made her feel proud. Though she speaks perfectly-accented upper Midwestern English, she also communicates in what is perceived as an authentically-Palestinian *madani*, or urban, colloquial Palestinian Arabic. Many Jordanians, over half of whom trace their roots to pre-1948 Palestine, are surprised to find that "you speak the same way we do. You think the same way we do. But at the same time you're so connected to this American identity of yours." The fact that Bayan speaks both languages in ways that are understood to be indigenous seems to represent a form of pluralism unusual to her Jordanian friends. According to her, identity in Jordan is still largely determined by your (extended) family, your town, and your region. "I'm actually representing a face of American society that a lot of Jordanians don't get to see or don't even think about," Bayan told me. "I am a living example that American society is so very diverse."

This plural identity is sometimes a burden. Bayan explained that "people [in Jordan] do not understand how I do relate so much to my American identity. And the same goes for the United States. People don't understand how I relate to my Arab identity. It's very difficult not being from here, not being from there, not being from anywhere." She says that her feeling of not fitting in parallels the Palestinian diasporic experience more generally. "If you're a Palestinian refugee who has never been to Palestine, it's really difficult." Though Bayan is more mobile and has many privileges that some other Palestinians lack, she shares this feeling of being out of place. "I don't know where I'm going to go... Am I ever going to feel at home? I have no idea. Maybe I never will. I don't feel very at home in Minnesota."

When I asked Bayan whether being in Jordan made her question her views of the United States and particularly its policies toward Israel and the Palestinians, Bayan told me that she was already aware of how such policies affect people since her grandfather, her uncle, and her cousins deal with the problem of statelessness on a daily basis. She told me that this personal experience makes one realize that foreign policy "affects you on a very personal level in every way. When your uncle and grandfather are having problems, you're having problems too, because you are the one trying to think of ways to help them." As a college student, Bayan became active in the Palestinian movement. She was asked to speak at some rallies, but declined, noting that "it requires you to scream and yell and I'm just not that kind of person. . . . I prefer to write an article or walk in protest," she said.

How should we understand Bayan's identification with the Palestinian cause in the midst of her other forms of identity and allegiance? It might be interpreted as a form of diasporic consciousness, a feeling of attachment to a homeland or to a nation of people connected by lateral, de-centered relationships (Clifford 1997). But such categorizations, when used exclusively, ignore the ways in

which Bayan herself theorizes her identity. Since Bayan kept bringing up her Islamic faith in relation to other aspects of her life, I asked whether her faith was a source of comfort in coping with the feeling of being out of place. “It totally is,” she said. “Because Islam is who I am, it doesn’t matter which country I’m in or which society I’m a part of.” When Bayan moved to the United States to go to college, she explained, “I needed to find my niche, I needed to find people I could relate to, but most of all I need to find something that I could always identify with, that I could return to. . . . Islam has always been that to me.”

Bayan embodies this identity to which she returns—this Islamic home—through her religious practices such as prayer, study circles, and Qur’an recitation and also in her dress. Whether she is in Minnesota or in Jordan, Bayan’s one main criterion for her dress is whether it meets what she considers to be the Islamic requirement for modest dress, which includes covering the hair (but not the face). In public Bayan wears either an *‘abaya* or a *jilbab*, both of which are over-garments that extend from the neck to the ankles. She does not alter her dress depending on where she lives, but she does change it up depending on whether “there’s a new style that I particular like. . . . I wear whatever I want to wear here [in Jordan] and there [in America].”

The identification with Islam as a home does not conflict with Bayan’s pride in her simultaneously Arab and American identities. It does not, at least explicitly, question the legitimacy of the nation-state, which is one of the false claims sometimes made about Muslims who have loyalty to the *umma*, or global community of Muslims, *instead of* having loyalty to the nation-states of which they are members. Bayan insists instead that she is part of all these communities. She feels the greatest feeling of acceptance from God rather than from than humankind, from her cosmic rather than her terrestrial home, but does not challenge the nation-state’s legitimacy. Instead, she works in peaceful, constructive, and often quiet ways to challenge what she considers to be unjust U.S. policies, and through her very existence, she embodies the possibility of rapprochement between Arab and American cultures and peoples.

Khadija and the Gendered Nature of Transnational Exchange

Like Bayan, Khadija is an Arab American woman who embraces her American cultural and political identities while also possessing a profound sympathy for Arab political self-determination. Unlike Bayan, however, she expressed a greater sense of ambivalence toward her religious identity because of the way that Muslims deal with issues of gender. Khadija was born in the Los Angeles area and had only recently graduated from a small liberal arts college in California when we sat down once at the Fulbright House on October 1, 2009, and once at the University of Jordan on November 10 to reflect on her experiences. President of her student body, Khadija, like Bayan, had won a Fulbright scholarship. Her project focused on working with women and girls in Palestinian refugee camps around Amman, creating support networks focused on women’s mental health, teaching English, and documenting women’s oral histories and their folklore. Khadija’s mother, a Muslim American, was born in Saudi Arabia to a Palestinian family; Khadija’s father is from Libya.

Khadija was raised in the United States and did not travel outside the country until 2008. Her command of the Arabic language, while fluent, is an example of the cultural *mélange* that many transnational theorists have described when people cross various borders and combine their various cultural traditions. When Khadija speaks in colloquial Arabic, she combines words and syntax from Palestinian and Libyan dialects with idioms she has learned watching Syrian soap operas and other Arab media. Though this linguistic bricolage confuses her interlocutors in the Arab world, it is also an expression of Khadija's identification not only with her Palestinian and Libyan heritages but with a transnational Arab world in which persons, goods, and ideas come together to form a common, if always contested culture. This transnational Arab culture finds parallels with an old-fashioned vision of Arab nationalism to which Khadija claims stake: "My dad raised us with an awareness that these lines [national borders] are totally arbitrary and that really the Arab world is far more united through language, culture, food, political beliefs, and ideology much more so than people would like us to think," she explained.

When I asked Khadija whether her Muslim identity or Islamic practice was changing in Jordan, she indicated that she no longer attended the mosque every week. Mosques in the United States were more like community centers, Khadija said, and she would often go not to pray but to attend a fundraiser for an Islamic charity or the Muslim American Society, a socially conservative national Muslim organization. In Amman, where mosques are generally used only for prayer, Khadija faced disappointment when she tried to visit a prominent mosque and the security was so tight that she felt intimidated. She also noted that not many women in Jordan went to mosques. This was disappointing since, unlike Ellen, Khadija loves performing congregational prayer: "It's not the same to pray by yourself and to pray beside people, with someone touching your shoulder. It's like a different experience," she told me. She thought that women in Jordan were discouraged from doing so, and made a point that "we all have agency here. We have a choice to make. We could all insist on going. . . but it feels like a hard fight."

Khadija's critique of the absence of women in mosques extends to her views of Islam more generally. "There are times when I feel like I have doubts about Islam. . . and my frustration often times stems from women's issues." Like Muslim American and other Muslim women who make a separation between Islam the religion, which might be feminist or womanist in theory, and Islam the culture, which is patriarchal in practice, Khadija said that the problem was with how "Islam is practiced or misapplied as opposed to the Islamic teachings themselves, which I have less issues with." The dissonance between how Islam should be practiced and how it is practiced sometimes leads Khadija away from Islam, and this "moving away from Islam often leaves me depressed and lonely and a little hopeless about the world." Khadija also attributed her own sense of religious liminality as a pushing and pulling between American societal expectations of individualism and Arab societal expectations of communalism, both of which she finds oppressive.

Wearing a hijab, tennis shoes, and baggy pants or sometimes an *'abaya*, Khadija comes close to questioning why the burden of modesty sometimes seems to fall more on female than male bodies. "I should be able to walk in the street comfortably at all hours, feeling safe," she explained. "But at the same time I feel like I can't live those ideals [where gender does not matter]. I can't say, 'I feel like going out now and who cares if I go out alone or whatever' because there are social constraints." In the end, she feels most comfortable with wearing her hijab, carrying herself "in a certain way" to increase her "mobility". It was a habit of her upbringing, she said. Her parents let Khadija and her sister "do things that most Muslim parents didn't let their daughters do. A lot of our family friends were shocked that our parents let us live on campus. . . and our parents were like, 'we know them and we trust them.'"

But while Khadija continues to both critique and embrace various Islamic norms and practices with which she was raised, she sees her personal levels of religiosity decreasing, not so much because of her presence in Jordan but because of the different life she discovered in college. Making a distinction between religion and spirituality--like many college students and other Americans--Khadija said that she still feels "very much spiritually aware and inquisitive and frustrated. [My] spirituality had not weakened at college." One of the reasons that she is teaching writing in the refugee camps is because she has found writing so fulfilling: "Writing has been liberating, and it has been, really honestly, it has been more cathartic than prayer," she confessed.

Khadija's presence in Jordan seemed to reflect the changing sense of Muslim identity that she began to develop in college. By November, she had enrolled in a course at the University of Jordan's College of Shari'a about *i'jaz al-qur'an*, or the inimitability of the Qur'an. "I'm staying in this class less because of the content," she told me, "and [more] because of the professor." Analyzing the "fine threads" of the Qur'an's vocabulary was "OK," she said, but her attachment to the Qur'an was less cerebral and more experiential: for her the inimitability of the Qur'an was mainly realized in "reading the Qur'an [itself]. That's when I'm struck by the power and magnificence of it." The real reason that she liked the class, as she said, was the professor: "I see him as a positive role model of a religious, practicing Muslim who is active in the workplace and who is passionate about human rights and who is multi-faceted."

Khadija contrasted this professor of shari'a with some of the female missionaries who had been recruiting her to an Islamic studies group in Amman. Hanging out with various members of the group whom she met through a mutual friend, "I could tell they had a sort of a cheerful aggressiveness about their recruitment," Khadija recalled. But when she attended one of the lectures sponsored by the group, she was "disappointed. I felt like my *iman* [faith] decreased after going to that, which was a little ironic." The speaker tackled the subject of religion and science, arguing that cloning was a scientific impossibility and that Darwin's theory of evolution was incorrect. "Islam turned out looking bad and a little ignorant" in this preacher's hands, Khadija thought. At this point in the interview, Khadija further contrasted what she believed was the parochial approach to Islam of the missionaries with her professor, whom she said was "cosmopolitan." She liked the fact that

“he doesn’t see the West through a prism of otherness.” She explained that whereas she felt like the missionaries were unwelcoming of her and her points of view, the College of Shari‘a at the University of Jordan had given her a warm reception. She appreciated their “taking you by the hand, the ‘we’ll do that for you and we’ll do this for you.’” For Khadija, that kindness evidenced of the heart of Islamic practice, which rests in ethical behavior. This is “how I want religion to be. I actually look at the end and what matters most is how I treat people. So if something makes me treat people well, I really respect that.”

Khadija paints a completely different picture of shari‘a education than the one constantly exploited in both liberal and conservative U.S. media. This young American woman who speaks funny colloquial Arabic was embraced by the professors and students of a shari‘a college. The open-minded nature of her male professor, her model of what a religious, practicing Muslim should be makes the school a social space in which Khadija can explore her Muslim identity without feeling condemned for her free thinking ways. Even as she continues to question what for her is problematic nature of women in Islam, she is also able experience a positive connection with a mainstream institution of Islamic higher learning, a relationship that seems at least to reassure her that it is possible to practice the kind of ethically-focused Islam to which she is devoted.

Toward/Against a Theory of Transnational Islamic Religion

Khadija’s theorizing about her Muslim identity and the ways in which her residency in Jordan was or was not changing her views is, like all of the case studies here, evidence that travel does not necessarily lead to a change in one’s identity. Though Khadija values the ways in which travel can produce cosmopolitan Muslims, Euben reminds us that travel may or may not produce more tolerant human beings. Travel, Euben argues, can inspire “critical distance,” “sharp closure,” and a “hardening of prejudices” (16).

Religion can also function in a variety of unpredictable ways to shape the meaning of human movement across national and other borders. Not all of these meanings are terrestrial. It may be tempting, especially in a post 9/11 scholarly world, to focus mainly on the lateral Islamic diaspora, a global community of Muslim discourse that Bowen (2004) has referred to as a “public space of reference and debate” that “creates an imagination of an Islamic community transcending specific boundaries and borders” (882). Clearly, that is a vital aspect of the story, since Islam can be fruitfully understood as a networked civilization or a series of lateral networks (Lawrence and cooke 2005). But the experience of Ellen and Bayan show the need to be alert to a more three-dimensional view of transnational Islam and religion more generally. Their experiences require attention to the cosmic as much as to the terrestrial. For Ellen, the cosmic encounter with the Divine was found in the United States during prayers in a Buffalo football stadium and in Jordan during her solitary prayers in the quiet of her home. For Bayan, the homeland of Islam is the place to which she returns when she prostrates herself in prayer, regardless of the national ground on which she does it.

Such cosmic experiences demonstrate that spiritual travel can be more transformative than physical travel. Eickelman and Piscatori go so far to suggest that travel is “principally a journey of the mind” rather than of the body (1995: xii). But for Euben, it is dislocation (whether imaginary or real) that is necessary to the theorizing that travelers do about themselves and others (23). It is through dislocation, that which “disturbs, provokes,” (196) or “puts certainties at risk” (197), that an opening occurs; dislocation produces “the capacity for wonder about those who do live differently makes it possible to conceive of oneself living differently” (197).

A more three-dimensional view of transnational Islam that regards spiritual as well as physical dislocation does not necessarily prioritize the religious meanings of dislocation over the political. One might argue instead that such attending to the spiritual aspects of travel makes it possible to understand better Muslim attitudes toward national boundaries, state disciplinary mechanisms, and various patriotisms. None of the four women expressed gnawing doubts about the nation-state’s legitimacy. For instance, Kelly’s explanation of U.S. foreign policy as the moral failure of individuals and the triumph of Satan shows how this woman who traveled from Texas to Jordan does not question the legitimacy of the nation-state as a political form. Her Islamic identity is adapted, refracted, and coopted within a number of other contradictory and sometimes downright conflicting local, regional, organizational, and national identities. Bayan may have harsh criticisms of U.S. foreign policy, but she does not seek the destruction of the nation.

Becoming sensitive to the numerous religious meanings of the transnational consciousness and experience of these four Muslim American women in Jordan does not, at least in this rendering, produce any grand theory of transnational Islam. Instead, the evidence and analysis presented suggests the utility of combining religious studies approaches with popular theories of transnational movement from anthropology, political science, cultural studies, and other allied fields to understand, in a more humanistic fashion, the lives of Muslim Americans abroad. Such humanistic views are needed to counter dominant public discourses on Muslims. In the post 9/11 era, the transnational Muslim is too often synonymous with terrorism. Scholars have also focused disproportionately at times on terrorism, examining it either as the inevitable expression of Islamic religious doctrine, practice, myth, and scripture—what William T. Cavanaugh (2009) calls the “myth of religious violence”—or as the understandable reaction of Muslims to U.S. imperialism or both.

The stories of Ellen, Kelly, Bayan, and Khadija demand that members of the public and scholars expand the set of images conjured by the notion of the transnational Muslim American. Think refugee, student, spouse, scholar, entrepreneur, mother, aid worker, and writer. Think women praying in football stadiums or going on first dates. Think women talking about having additional children, quietly protesting U.S. foreign policy, attending shari‘a classes, resisting prejudice, being loved and cared for by their fathers and brothers. These should become our new transnational Muslim types.

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