1 Introduction

Islam in the Urban Context: Introducing the Medina

Medina, in Arabic, means city. But *medina* also encompasses community, familiarity, and people's sense of belonging. *Medina* even has religious connotations for Muslims, because the city of Yathrib changed its name to Medina when the Prophet Muhammad established his community there in 622 A.D. The "medina" in this book is Chicago, a city in the heartland of the United States where Muslims from all parts of the globe have settled. To these immigrants, Chicago is an American *medina.* In this city, they are creating a new home, combining habits of their homelands with an American way of life. In this city, they practice Islam and establish mosques, schools, and colleges. And in this city (and in the many other American medinas across the continent), they present Islam to their fellow citizens as a component of American life. Muslims have lived in the United States for more than a century, and, some argue, even longer than that.[1] Muslims are pupils at American schools, students and professors at American universities, doctors at American hospitals, reporters at American newspapers, police officers, and soldiers in the U.S. Army. Islam is part of the appearance of American cities, visible in finely designed mosques with minarets and domes; in small *halal* butcher shops with hand-painted signs in predominantly Middle Eastern neighborhoods; and in the long robes of women shopping in malls and grocery stores.

Islam in Urban America offers its readers a deeper understanding of the Muslim-American community and Islam as a faith in the American context by introducing the everyday lives of Muslim Americans. Islam has grown into one of the country's three largest religions. This book seeks to answer two questions important for American society in the twenty-first century: First,

can Islam be considered an "American" religion, as opposed to one so far removed from American realities that it is simply a temporary but eventually impermanent resident? Second, can Muslims be considered a unified community, considering that Islam in the United States comprises more than sixty ethnic groups from such differing contexts as Bosnia, China, Egypt, Malaysia, Nigeria, and Pakistan?[2] *Islam in Urban America* will answer these and other questions through intense scrutiny of the details of Muslim life in one city, Chicago, in the 1990s. By focusing on one city, we see details and aspects of Muslim life in America that otherwise are easily overlooked. And by looking at Chicago, we encounter one of the largest, most vibrant, and most influential Muslim communities in the United States.

The non-Muslim world needs to understand the Muslim-American community for various reasons. As several studies show, Islam is on its way to becoming the second-largest religion in the United States,[3] despite numerous misconceptions (about the religion, its content, its people) that present Islam as both alien and hostile to everything American. After the terrorist attacks against America on September 11, 2001, it is more critical than ever to lay these misconceptions to rest. To this end, *Islam in Urban America* presents detailed descriptions—based largely on the author's long-term encounters with the community—of a population whose diverse and often conflicting beliefs and aspirations need wider understanding within the shifting demographics of American society.

The Muslims of the United States

Before moving into the details of Muslim life in Chicago, some general facts about Muslims in North America will help set the scene. The community comprises a large number of ethnic groups, with significant consequences for both community organizing and religious interpretation. A survey by one of the country's largest Muslim lobbying organizations, the American Muslim Council, estimated in 1992 that the major groups are African Americans (42%), South Asians (24.4%), and Arabs (12.4%), with American whites representing 2 percent.[4] Other studies estimate

that South Asians count for 29.3 percent, Arabs for 32.7 percent, and African Americans for 29.9 percent of the Muslim American population.[5] Either way, Arabs, South Asians, and African Americans are the largest ethnic groups representing Islam in the United States.

As for size, the most recent studies estimate that Muslims make up 2 million to 7 million—or 0.7 to 2.4 percent—of the U.S. population.[6] The majority represents Sunni Islam, with a small number of Shiʿites and others belonging to different Muslim sects, some of which are indigenous to America. The schism between Sunnis and Shiʿites took place within the first years after the death of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, in A.D. 632. Whereas some followers believed that the leadership (*khilafa*) of the believers should be decided by the leading companions of the Prophet, others claimed that the leadership belonged to Ali (d. A.D. 661), the Prophet's son-in-law, because of his familial relationship to the Prophet. Throughout Islamic history, relations between the two groups have often been hostile and violent, fueling the schism. The two groups disagree on a number of issues, ranging from ways to pray to determining religious leadership. Although Shiʿites form the majority in countries such as Iran and Bahrain,[7] most of the world's Muslims are Sunnis, including those in the United States.

The two main immigrant ethnic groups representing Sunni Islam in America come from the Middle East and the South Asian peninsula. Many South Asians came after congressional legislation in 1965 abolished the national-origin quota system.[8] The South Asian population in the United States mushroomed from 32,000 in 1970–71 to almost 910,000 by 1990.[9]

South Asians are among the country's most educated and prosperous immigrant groups. In 1990, immigrants from India had the highest median household income, the highest percentage of bachelor's degrees, and the highest percentage of professional employment.[10] That South Asians have been taught English since childhood is a significant factor in their success in the United States.[11] Not surprisingly, South Asians are usually the more socially advantaged of the Muslim immigrants. They also tend to fare better than Middle Eastern Muslims in the media and

other forms of public representation, although discrimination against South Asian Americans continues—for example, in the job market.[12]

Arabs have lived for more than one hundred years in the United States. Before the Second World War, Arab immigrants to the United States were predominantly Christian, but after the war, both Christians and Muslims came from all over the Arab world. As with the South Asians, many Arabs who immigrated to the United States in the second half of the twentieth century were highly educated, with a firm understanding of the role of citizens in a democracy.[13] This understanding greatly affected the level of activism within the many organizations that the community later established.

After the 1967 war between Egypt and Israel, the community established organizations such as the Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee, and the Association of Arab-American University Graduates became a focal point for many Arab Americans. Despite the military defeat, ethnic pride grew, and efforts to change American attitudes toward the Middle East began.

In large part because of the political involvement of the United States in the Middle East, Arab Americans faced, and still face, many social obstacles related to their ethnicity. Negative stereotypes linking Arabs in the United States to terrorism and Islamism have, for example, motivated some presidential and senatorial nominees to refuse campaign money from Arab American donors.[14] Federal agencies have subjected Arab Americans to surveillance and generated plans for their internment during the late 1980s and the Gulf War.[15] In addition, the movie industry often depicts Arabs as villains, although more positive images have appeared in movies since the late 1990s (e.g., *The 13th Warrior,* starring Antonio Banderas).[16]

Although immigrants carry ethnicity and ethnic affiliation with them to their new homelands, the understanding of what such affiliations actually mean is very often created *within* these new settings. The same can be said for religion. Although Islam has a core component of rituals, practices, and texts, religious practices in China, Nigeria, and the United States, for example, differ greatly.

The most challenging aspect of Islam in the United States—and also one of the most important—is its ethnic diversity, an issue that *Islam in Urban America* will seek to deal with in detail. Is the community well coordinated or deeply fragmented? Why has Islam become such a powerful source of identification for some Muslim Americans?

There are undoubtedly numerous individual reasons for the strengthening of a Muslim identity. The immigration process in itself creates challenges that may spur a focus on religion. Some of my informants stressed that the experience of American democracy facilitated a stronger and more correct Islamic practice—a practice inhibited by more or less totalitarian regimes in their homelands. Others said that their strong focus on Islam was the only way that they could "survive" ethically and morally in what they regarded as a decadent society.

To many young Muslims born or raised in the United States, Islam has become an important source of identification. Islam to these young people provides a means of engaging in American societal processes. Although some are highly critical of, if not fully antagonistic toward, the norms of this country, they are aware of their identity as people who must relate to an American reality. Life in the United States, for them, is about reforming Islam. They believe that this reform will come about when Muslims from all over the world come together, set aside all emphasis on their native cultures, and work together to find a common understanding of Islam.[17]

The establishment of an Islamic community in the United States is highly influenced by thoughts and ideas from elsewhere in the world. Revivalist Islamic movements such as the Jamaʿat Islami and the Ikhwan al-Muslimun—established by the Pakistani Mawlana Abul Alʿa Mawdudi (d. 1979) and the Egyptian Hassan al-Banna (d. 1949)—have gained wide influence on both individual and community levels.[18] Much of this revivalism aims at eliminating the divisive effects of ethnicity and nationalism and focuses on the Muslim *umma* (community of believers) as one unbreakable entity. Such ideas are important to Muslim Americans trying to create common ground among several ethnic groups. Inspired by revivalist Islamic concepts, as well as

their own experiences, they are attempting to promote a trans-ethnic Islamic identity.

However, this revivalist process is not limited to Muslim Americans. Rather, it is a challenge that Islam faces on a global scale. As the world increasingly becomes a "single place,"[19] Islam and other world religions must seek ways to talk cohesively to increasingly diverse groups of followers.[20] To the early Islamic converts, the act of conversion marked "a passage from being only a member of a tribe to being also a member of a superior Community that has its justification in transcendence."[21] In today's world, tribal affiliation translates into divisions of nationality and ethnicity. Revivalist Islamic movements seek to activate Islam on societal and personal levels, furthering the conviction of a common identity and a common course among Muslims in all parts of the world.[22]

Although revivalist movements and ideas have greatly affected how Islam is interpreted in a modern and global world, the impact of ethnicity has not disappeared. Ethnicity marks people's faces. Regional affiliations are evident in the language spoken in the home and in the foods in home-cooked meals. Individuals may define themselves as being Pakistani *and* Muslim *and* American, with varying emphasis on each of these components according to context. In the Muslim students' associations, students define themselves predominantly as Muslim; with their families, they are predominantly, say, Pakistani; and with their basketball friends, they are predominantly American. These dynamics again and again show that Muslim identity is not entirely to be understood as "either–or" but, in most cases, as "both–and."

The 1990s: Years of Muslim-American Activism

This book presents the religious, cultural, and political aspects of a local Muslim-American community in the late 1990s, a time of important community consolidation for Muslims in America. Much of this work was done by Muslims who were increasingly experiencing themselves as a part of the American tapestry—as citizens living, working, and raising their children in this country—and therefore wanting influence. To most Muslim

Americans, exercising their rights and duties as American citizens involved showing the American public that Islam and Muslims are neither foreign nor hostile to American norms.

But the community often faced the obstacle of a United States that was involved politically and militarily as a superpower in countries and regions with large Muslim groups (e.g., the Persian Gulf, the Middle East, and Central Asia). Because of this involvement and the country's stand on, for example, the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories, the United States became the main target for disfranchised and radical Muslims worldwide. Reactions ranging from burning the American flag in the streets of Baghdad to violent attacks on American property in the Middle East often fueled stereotypes of Islam and Muslim, with grave consequences for Muslims living in the United States. Muslims became a group that was easily linked to violence and terrorism, even when its members had not committed such acts.

One example was the aftermath of the terrorist attack on the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995, killing 168 people and injuring more than 500. In spite of President Bill Clinton's and Attorney General Janet Reno's warnings against prejudging Arab Americans, the initial judgment took a toll on Muslim Americans, whom many assumed stood behind the incident. According to the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), 222 hate crimes against Muslims nationwide were reported in the days immediately following the bombing.[23] Moreover, Muslims of Middle Eastern descent have been prone to FBI surveillance and interrogation during, for example, armed encounters between America and Iraq.[24]

The Anti-Terrorist and Affective Death Penalty Act, enacted in 1996, also highlights the conflict between some extremist Muslim groups on the international scene and the American political and military establishment, as well as the complicated "in-between" positions of Muslim-American citizens.[25] The events of September 11, 2001, in which nineteen Muslim extremists highjacked four planes and crashed them into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, increased tensions between the Muslim minority and the non-Muslim majority. Although President George W. Bush assured the American public within days of the

attack that "the face of terror is not the true faith of Islam. . . . Islam is peace" and that "Muslims make an incredibly valuable contribution to our country,"[26] much harm had already been done. On university campuses, Muslim women were encouraged to keep a low profile and to invest in pepper spray to protect themselves.[27] CAIR reported that no fewer than 1,717 incidents took place immediately after September 11.[28] In its civil-rights report for 2002, CAIR concluded that "the status of Muslim civil rights has deteriorated sharply" and complained that "the sweeping actions of the government have disturbed the lives of individuals and ethnic and religious communities."[29]

In the wake of September 11, 2001, the importance of the successes achieved by Muslim-American immigrant communities in the 1990s may come into question. But I believe that these successes matter even more now to a community emerging from the ashes of its work to improve its image. Although the community faces a tremendous task in regaining trust and civil rights as American citizens, the achievements of the 1990s will prove valuable sources for that struggle.

In the 1990s, Muslim civil-rights organizations grew strong, developed effective tools for agitating against religious discrimination and harassment, and mastered communications technology (TV, radio, the Internet) and the arts of politicking and political lobbying.[30] The sophistication of organizations such as CAIR demonstrated Muslim Americans' increasing knowledge of "the system," as well as their desire to challenge negative images of Islam and prove their worth as American citizens.[31] This agenda gained support from a number of non-Muslim people and institutions, including academics and academic institutions,[32] religious denominations and organizations,[33] and the press.[34] All of these will be important allies in the early 2000s, as the community slowly regains it footing and works hard to regain the confidence and social position it achieved in the late 1990s.

Political statements and actions during the 1990s underscored the federal government's increased sensitivity to Muslims as a group within American society.[35] In 1991, Imam Siraj Wahaj became the first Muslim ever to offer prayer before the U.S. House of Representatives; in 1992, the leader of the American Muslim

Mission, Imam Warith Deen Mohammad, gave an invocation before the U.S. Senate.[36] President Clinton annually addressed the global community of Muslims, including Muslim Americans, in a statement during Ramadan, the Islamic fasting month. *Iftar* dinners (meals eaten to break the fast) have been celebrated at the White House since 1996.[37] During the 1996 presidential election, candidates Bill Clinton and Bob Dole addressed the views of Muslim voters.[38] In 1998, a resolution submitted to the House of Representatives and the Committee of the Judiciary explicitly supported religious tolerance toward Muslims, stating: "Congress recognizes the contribution of Muslim Americans, who are followers of one of the three major monotheistic religions of the world and one of the fastest growing faiths in the United States."[39]

During the 1990s, America became aware of a vigorous and growing community of Muslims in its midst. What happened in the 1990s—the actions taken by Muslim organizations and the signs of acceptance and inclusion by the American political establishment—undoubtedly played a role in the Bush administration's handling of the community in the days and months immediately following September 11, 2001.

The Sunni Muslim Immigrants of Chicago

Islam in Urban America offers an in-depth view of immigrant Sunni Muslims who were living in Chicago by the late 1990s, an important period of activism and community consolidation for Muslim Americans. But why choose Sunni Muslim immigrants in Chicago for a study of the Muslim community in the United States? First, focusing on Muslim Americans in one locality yields details of daily life that broader studies cannot offer. Second, such a concentrated study allows a close-up look at the inner workings of Muslim institutions in this country—of the activities and the people involved, as well as their motives, ideas, and life histories. Such a study gives a sharper impression of how these institutions work with and against one another, how they relate to American society, how Islam is practiced in an American context, and how Muslim Americans combine heritages of faith and ethnicity with the norms and values of the country in which they

now live. An investigation of Islam in one local context, but within a broad variety of institutions, results in a microcosmic impression of the implications of this faith and its institutions nationwide. The end result is a clear impression of Islam in urban America.

Chicago is an excellent starting point for such a study because of the large variety of institutions that Muslims have established there.[40] The following chapters will include descriptions of Sunday schools, after-school projects, Qur'anic schools, student organizations, colleges, grassroots organizations, and mosques—all established and run by Muslims. The focus on institutions and organizations is important, because they are focal points for community activity. Although faith can be practiced at home, institutions are the key when it comes to describing how people practice faith together and how faith becomes a visible element in society.

One dimension of intra-community relationships that *Islam in Urban America* does not cover is that between African-American Muslims and immigrant Muslims (although Chapter 2 will give an overview). Given that about 40 percent of Chicago's estimated 285,000 Muslims are African Americans,[41] contacts and alliances between immigrant and indigenous Muslims theoretically ought to be numerous. But they are not.

My primary reason for centering on the Muslim immigrant community is that it still behaves very much as a separate (yet diverse) community. Although statistics show that the largest ethnic group representing Islam in the city is African-American, such numbers did not translate into everyday experience within the institutions that I studied. Instead, the participation of African Americans was small. During my fieldwork, I carried out interviews with some prominent spokespeople for the African-American Muslim community in the city, at one point visiting Minister Louis Farrakhan in his home in Hyde Park. But the differences between the two communities seemed too great to be encompassed in a single volume. Other researchers make similar distinctions (see Chapter 2).[42] For similar reasons I have not described the Shi'ite community. My visits to Shi'ite mosques and interviews with representatives of the Shi'ite community

revealed minimal contacts with the Sunni community. The complicated relations between Sunni immigrants and other groups of Muslims further exemplify the complex dynamics of identity—ethnic, social, and religious—that are so prominent in American Islam.[43]

A brief history of Muslims in Chicago (in Chapter 2) will help frame the discussion necessary to understanding the community as it had developed by the late 1990s. The empirical data is organized into three large chapters, each presenting Chicago's Muslim institutions, the activities that take place within them, and the people who come there. The description is broken down and arranged according to the age group to which the institution is directed, because the roles of individuals within various Muslim institutions change according to their age. For young children in the Muslim Sunday school, Islam is part of their upbringing; they are taught by others and do not define faith for themselves. For young people in college, the issue of personal definition (or rejection) of religion becomes stronger; it has to do with the life they want, with style, with activism, with independence. For adults, religion may have to do with leadership, authority, and organized community representation. Focusing on age groups reveals the complexity of "lived Islam" on both individual and institutional levels.

Two distinctions become critical at this point. For processes of learning or representing Islam both within and outside of Muslim institutions, the key concept is knowledge. But for the issue of who, for example, takes the roles of teacher or student, the key concept is authority. Knowledge includes not only understanding complex philosophical concepts but also the simplest rules for conduct: how people interact, how they arrange spaces between themselves and others, how they decide what is socially acceptable. Although *Islam in Urban America* mainly covers the implications of Islamic religious knowledge, such knowledge is not an isolated entity. Religious knowledge and the practices that it entails always relate to something cultural or social, supported by the events, needs, and thoughts of particular phases of human history and the regions in which humans choose to settle. Therefore, religious knowledge and practices depend on complex

intertwinings of community, conviction, and heritage; on the establishment and perspective of religious institutions; and on the people who take charge and authority within them.

How a Muslim American gains authority within and outside an institution varies. Access may be granted or limited on the basis of education, gender, moral character, and age.[44] In addition, beyond the qualification of having accumulated a certain level of Islamic knowledge, a leader's next important strengths are class and economic capability. Not surprisingly, the majority of the community leaders described in this book are from middle-class or upper-middle-class backgrounds. These are the people who can establish and maintain expensive institutions and who have the necessary educational background and self-assurance to take on the role of voicing their understanding of Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims alike. These are the people the community trusts.

However, claims to authority also depend on an individual's ability to gain an audience's permission and trust. Authority grants individuals, groups, and institutions the right to teach and speak on behalf of a community but not to do so freely.[45] In the United States, the level of authority of Muslim institutions and their staffs depends on their ability to manifest authority to both Muslims and non-Muslims. They have to be able to skillfully handle persuasive elements of speech and cultural norms within these audiences, and to speak convincingly within both. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 cover issues of authority and leadership across the spectrum of age, gender, education, and ethnicity.

A Danish Woman in Chicago

But what made me, a Danish woman, move to Chicago to do fieldwork among Muslims for a year and a half of my life? Why did I not stay at home and study Muslims in Denmark, a community that faces similar challenges? The answer lies in a combination of coincidence and interest. In the summer of 1994, I visited the United States for the first time. At that point, my academic life centered mainly on Islamic subjects of the past, and I had an undeveloped ambition to study the relationship between

Muslims and Manicheans (a now vanished Gnostic sect) in eighth-century Baghdad. I had been corresponding for some time with a researcher in New York and was pleased when he invited me to visit. What I had not expected was that my interest in Muslims living more than a thousand years ago would suddenly refocus on Muslims living in the United States today.

As the researcher and I sat in his kitchen, looking out at Harlem, we discussed not only the ancient conflict between Manicheans and Muslims but also living conditions among Muslims in the United States. Trained in the history of religions and Islamic studies and acquainted with anthropology and sociology, I knew that Islam in America was a topic that few researchers had yet investigated. The implications of such a study were fascinating. The United States was a superpower known to clash frequently with Middle Eastern countries and radical Islamic groups. What would it feel like to be a Muslim in this country? What role did Muslims play the United States, given that Islam was on its way to becoming one of the country's largest religious communities? And how, in turn, did the United States affect Islam? How was Islam interpreted, put into practice, and lived within this country? When I left New York three days later, my focus had deeply shifted. I returned to the United States a year later—this time, traveling to Chicago—to begin a study that ultimately took up several years of my life.

Did my being Danish have any impact on my decision or my research? On the one hand, for getting around the city, the answer is no. My appearance in no way signaled that I came from another country. On the other hand, to those informants who got to know me, my foreign heritage became an advantage. We shared the identity of not being entirely American, of having accents, and of having larger parts of our families living elsewhere in the world. In addition, my foreign identity increased my position as a safe person to talk to and be around. My informants were also less likely to view me as a possible agent of the U.S. government.

The one personal factor that may have affected my fieldwork more than my Danish nationality was my being female, because Muslim communities are segregated by gender. My being female influenced what spaces I entered and what spaces never became

"mine," a dividing line that runs as a thread throughout the book. Whenever I entered the Muslim community, I followed its rules for interaction, not only because I believed this to be methodologically wise and culturally respectful, but also because it was impossible to do otherwise. Because I shared the space of the community's women, women made up a majority of my informants. They were the people with whom I chatted before *jumʿa* (congregational prayers) in the prayer halls and whom I joined in study groups. Much of *Islam in Urban America,* therefore, comes from a woman's viewpoint, although I balance that perspective with taped interviews. Further, for every five women I interviewed, I also interviewed three men.[46]

Women's perspectives and lives therefore play a major role in *Islam in Urban America.* I might have told the story differently had I been identified according to other social roles—had I at that point been married, had I had children at the time, or had I been a man. But the conditions governing my role in no way invalidate the book's findings. Rather, the impact of gender underlines the complexity of the Muslim community. Because certain spaces and roles are assigned to men and others to women, positions and perspectives on religion are highly affected by gender, even when voiced inside a communal whole.

An essential element of my fieldwork was the cooperation of those people who are the subjects of this book. After all, I came as a stranger and a foreigner, and though I promised to use statements and observations solely for research, they had no guarantee that I would keep my word. As I mentioned earlier, Muslims in Chicago have been exposed considerably to federal investigations. Although people often spoke about these negative experiences, they seemed remarkably willing to grant me interviews and let me participate in meetings and study sessions. Only in two instances was I told politely that I could not participate in sessions—in one case because the meeting was for Muslims only, and, in the other, because the meeting was for men only.

People reacted positively to my presence, I believe, because of two factors. First, Chicago Muslims practice a traditionally high level of religiously dictated hospitality. And second, during the second half of the 1990s, negative images in the press (spurred by

national and international political events) made the community want to be heard on its own terms. My informants undoubtedly understood that getting the chance to tell their story and have it recognizably retold was valuable to the community and its vision of a continued and peaceful existence in Chicago.

To protect privacy, I use pseudonyms for the people I quote and describe. Only in cases in which informants are known as the authors of books or booklets of significance in the community—and useful as references—did I find it necessary to use real names. I also use the names of prominent leaders of organizations and institutions because they are public figures whose identity is almost impossible to conceal. Finally, the choice to use pseudonyms is mine alone, based on my beliefs about the value of privacy. In no case did any of my informants ask for this privilege.

Now is the time to enter the American Medina, and encounter the many faces and voices of Muslims in Chicago. It is time to encounter the coolness of the mosque's prayer hall, the heat of theological discussions, the silence of those turned inward in prayer. It is time to encounter a part of America that frequently appears closed, even when it exists right next door. In the history that follows, it is my intention not to throw the door wide open but to offer a focused view of some vital aspects of Muslim-American life, such as institutions, practices, and formulations of Islam as they appear within one locality. These aspects are relevant both for further research of the subject and for a general understanding of a religious community that, in years to come, will be in the spotlight of public attention.