

# Modern Pathways to Doubt in Islam

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## Introduction

This inaugural project of the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research elaborates the dynamics of doubt in the American Muslim community. More specifically, the current phase examines the reasons for Muslims in America losing their belief in Islam, while later stages in this multi-part endeavor will expound on and test these findings. Through this systematic assessment, Yaqeen aims to ultimately arrive at a set of interventions and adjustments to concretely address the threats to faith that American Muslims regularly encounter. Whether in part or as a whole, this project—the first of its kind—will provide a valuable resource to scholars and practitioners alike.

The novelty and ambition of this undertaking naturally carries with it myriad challenges. Anyone familiar with the increasingly varied American Muslim experience, for example, will recognize that arriving at well-grounded conclusions about this population is no easy task. This complexity coupled with a general lack of reliable data on the community (let alone on the particular phenomena we are interested in studying) makes building a comprehensive

understanding of American Muslim doubt all the more difficult. Thus, instead of offering an overly self-assured narrative (an all too common occurrence when Muslims are the subject of inquiry), we are forthright about our research aims, inferences, and limitations.

To that end, rather than seeking to be the final word, the objective of the following report is to offer a reference point for future discussions on doubt in the American Muslim community. It is meant to provide accessible information to both experts and novices. Those deeply engaged with the topic will find the issues we discuss familiar, but will likely come across new perspectives to enrich their understanding. For readers unacquainted with the subject matter, this report doubles as an introductory primer. In essence, then, what follows is an off-the-shelf framework for processing this dense and fragmented subject.

This initial offering tackles the larger project's motivating questions from the perspective of Muslim institutional leaders across America. In doing so, the study highlights the considerations that these imams, chaplains, and youth

mentors believe are most pertinent to understanding why Muslims in America have crises of faith. As with any methodology, there are certain limitations to the information gleaned from this approach, which we discuss below. These epistemological constraints notwithstanding, the rich insights gathered from these experts will no doubt pave the way for a far more informed conversation on this pressing topic.

The report is divided into four sections. The remainder of this introductory portion outlines the impetus and aims for this phase of the project and details the methodology we employed. Next, we elaborate precisely what we mean by “doubt” and consider the extent of this phenomenon in the

<sup>1</sup> As religious attendance and profession of faith have steadily decreased across many developed societies in the decades since World War II, American levels of religious practice and belief have more closely tracked those found in the developing world. Yet, since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there has been a stark shift in the American religious landscape. Most notable in this regard is the rapid growth of religious “nones” (i.e., the religiously unaffiliated) in recent years: expanding from

American Muslim community. From there we turn to potential avenues that can lead to disbelief, organizing our respondents’ observations around three core categories:

- Moral and social concerns
- Philosophical and scientific concerns
- Personal trauma.

Finally, we conclude by revisiting the report’s key contributions and previewing the next phase in the project.

## Impetus and Aims

The United States has always been an outlier among post-industrial countries in terms of religiosity.

16.1% of the American populace in 2007 to 22.8% in 2014.<sup>2</sup> Buoying this trend, in part, is the markedly lower religiosity of millennials (i.e., those born between 1981 and 1996), who are consistently less observant than any other generation across multiple measures of religious belief and practice.<sup>3</sup>

There are at least two reasons to believe that the effects of these coterminous trends may be especially impactful on American

Muslims. First, a clear majority of Muslims in the United States are either first or second generation immigrants.<sup>4</sup> The typical story of immigrant assimilation in America is one in which successive generations progressively incorporate themselves into American society in part by eschewing or otherwise dampening their cultural peculiarities—such as language, dress, and, indeed, religious identity. Although there is evidence that second-generation American Muslims (many of whom came of age in the immediate aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks) are in some ways more religious than their parents,<sup>5</sup> it is still too early to tell whether this general finding will hold in the long term and if it will continue on to the next generation.

Second, Muslims in America are a comparatively young community. This is true in terms of institutions, with a significant majority of mosques no more than two or three decades old and only a handful of Islamic higher education options available across the country.<sup>6</sup> More to the point, however, Muslims are the youngest religious group in demographic terms.<sup>7</sup> Thus, to the extent that millennials and younger Americans are exhibiting an aversion to organized religion,

Muslims are in a uniquely vulnerable position to succumb to these developments.

With this in mind, the broader project (and, to a degree, the present study) is organized around three guiding questions:

1. To what extent is the general trend away from organized religion in America operative in the Muslim community?
2. What are the most common causes spurring disbelief?
3. What viable remedies are available to potentially alleviate doubt at both an individual and communal level?

## Methodology

To probe for answers to our guiding questions, we turned first to institutional leaders throughout the American Muslim community. Specifically, we spoke to imams, chaplains, and youth coordinators across the country in order to better understand their interactions with Muslims whose belief in Islam had waned or altogether worn out. The interviews, which lasted about an hour on average, took place primarily over a four-month period beginning in February 2016.

In terms of our sample, the key criterion for inclusion was affiliation with an established institution<sup>8</sup> that affords face-to-face interaction with a local population. This limitation narrows the pool of interviewees to individuals that are 1) tasked specifically with attending to the spiritual well-being of Muslims in America and 2) physically accessible to a particular and consistent community. These constraints, we believe, allow us to have a much less nebulous conception of who would potentially populate our sample while assuring that the report includes those best positioned to address its central concerns.

Given these criteria, there are two notable sets of potential respondents excluded from the sample. First, the study excludes figures who are primarily or exclusively public speakers or academics, though they may be knowledgeable on this subject matter. Similarly excluded are individuals whose interactions are largely online or who are otherwise not based out of a regular location, although they may occasionally communicate with precisely the types of individuals that are the focus of this project.

Still, sampling even this more limited subset of the American Muslim community posed difficulties. Since there is no authoritative data on the population of interest (i.e., institutionally affiliated American Muslim leaders serving their co-religionists), the prospect of a representative sample is moot. We therefore turned to the best available data: Ihsan Bagby's 2011 report on mosques in America.<sup>9</sup> Using the regional proportions in Bagby's study as a guide, we stratified our sample geographically while also aiming for some measure of gender and racial/ethnic diversity. The final sample included 31 total respondents (27 males and 4 females), broken down geographically as follows: California (4), Texas (7), Midwest (6), New England (2), New York metro area (3), Mid-Atlantic (4), and the South (5).<sup>10</sup>

Although these in-depth elite interviews offered valuable insights from individuals that have both thought deeply about the questions that animate this study and interacted with individuals experiencing the crises of faith we wish to better understand, there remain two primary and interrelated limitations to this

research design. First, the experiences of those individuals who would speak to religious leaders about their deep doubt may be systematically different from others who silently transition out of the faith. Ironically, this precise case was related to us by one of our respondents, Abu Noor Abdul-Malik Ryan, when discussing his own mindset prior to converting to Islam: “I would have never thought about talking to a Catholic priest when I was a Catholic in college who had doubts.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, those who spoke with the leaders in our sample were likely either still somehow invested in their Muslim identity or were yet to settle on their beliefs. Conversely, those who no longer felt any attachment to Islam—whether as a belief system or identity—were less likely to turn to religious leaders for guidance and input. One mitigating factor to this limitation is that the informed assessments that emerge from our interviews are not solely gleaned from direct contact with individuals on the cusp of leaving the faith, but also from our respondents’ interactions with these individuals’ family and friends. While these second-hand accounts are not sufficient to remedy all design bias, they nonetheless help fill in many of the gaps that would

otherwise be present in our interviewees’ perspectives.

A second potential blind spot in our coverage stems from the possibility that institutional leaders themselves may be the impetus for an individual’s crisis of faith. In extreme cases, some form of abuse may ground this negative association. Doubt may also form through alienation with the ideas and manner of those in authority. In either circumstance, an individual is likely to be reluctant to talk to any religious leader. Such individuals may still have some representation in our data, however, via the same indirect channel of family and friends mentioned above. Ultimately though, how well aligned elite-level perceptions are with mass-level reality is an empirical question that we will tackle in our project’s next installment, which we outline in this report’s concluding section.

A final note on attribution. In order to provide our interviewees with the liberty to speak on potentially sensitive topics, nearly all the quotes throughout this report are anonymized (unless otherwise indicated and coupled with the explicit consent of the author). The reader can therefore assume that

any unsourced quote is taken directly from one of the institutional leaders interviewed for this study. Aside from occasional and slight amendment for clarity, direct quotations are taken verbatim. Lastly, the statements we cite are rarely isolated (though are noted as such whenever they are) and, where applicable, we provide a sense of just how representative they are across our sample.

## The Question and the Context

The notion of “doubt” can seem intuitive on its face but quickly becomes ambiguous the more deeply it is considered. Is doubt a binary condition with belief as its inverse, or are these designations merely two ends along a continuum? Is questioning the historicity of certain accounts in the Islamic tradition tantamount to doubting the central tenets that undergird the faith? These questions, while certainly worthy of careful scrutiny, are largely foreclosed in our study in lieu of a more circumscribed conception of doubt (outlined below) that lends itself to the focused analysis we seek. Additionally, to further assist the reader in getting the most utility out of our findings, this section also

offers some objective and subjective considerations for the broader context surrounding this discussion.

### What do we Mean by “Doubt?”

Before proceeding to our findings, it is important to first delineate the study’s core concept. By “doubt,” we do not mean a curiosity to better understand the bases of beliefs and practices that are often taken for granted. Indeed, this quest for knowledge can, on the contrary, lead to a deepening of faith, even if it is occasioned by an initial uneasiness (as many of our respondents attested). Likewise, we are not concerned with instances in which individuals seek guidance on how to better (re)connect with their faith, troubled that they are not living up to the tenets of Islam. Clearly, this kind of “doubt” concerns one’s own perceived shortcomings and does not implicate the essential truth of Islam.

The kind of doubt that we prompted each of our respondents to exclusively consider during our interviews—and the kind that we reference throughout the remainder of this report—is one which brings

individuals to the cusp of leaving Islam or altogether abandoning their faith. This doubt may take the form of an explicit rebuke of particular doctrine, or it may manifest in individuals no longer seeing a need for Islam in their lives. These expressions, however, are not necessarily coupled with a desire to transition to another organized religion. In fact, in each of the interviews in which this occurrence came up, it was described as quite rare.

Moreover, “leaving Islam” is not even necessarily predicated on ceasing to believe in the core tenets of the religion, but can instead be conditioned by social forces that leads one to devalue religion as a key identifier. Indeed, it is this self-identification that is at the core of this initial study, as we are here concerned with the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as marginally or no longer Muslim. To emphasize, for the purposes of this study, we do not investigate whether or not certain beliefs may lead a person to be judged as theologically no longer within the fold of Islam. This is an important issue in its own right but one that requires in depth, comprehensive theological analysis that is beyond our present scope.

## The Context and Extent of Doubt

The current environment in which American Muslims find themselves presents unique challenges to the maintenance of faith. One may rightfully ask, “Have not all Muslim communities across all places for over a millennium faced a unique set of challenges to their faith?” That may very well be the case, yet there are reasons to nevertheless regard the present American Muslim condition as exceptional. First and foremost, the presence of Muslims in such large absolute numbers but as a relatively tiny minority is fairly unprecedented (save for some present-day European settings). Thus, rather than the inertial or supportive forces that encourage a maintenance of faith in a Muslim-majority environment, American Muslims must instead fight tailwinds leading them away from Islam. This struggle, in part, includes the need to constantly and deliberately affirm one’s beliefs to an increasingly secularized (and, at times, hostile) society.

Moreover, the unmatched interconnectedness of our time conditions both what we see in the world and how we interpret it. As



one respondent pointed out, in the age of social media and in the midst of a culture of instant gratification, the question is less about the Truth of God and religion, but rather its relevance and usefulness:

- Do I need God?
- What can I get from Islam that I cannot get elsewhere?
- Can Islam provide me a happy life?

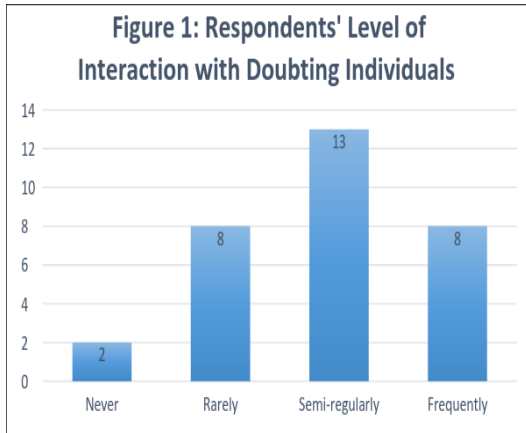
Another imam underscored in stark terms the threat to belief brought about from the daily bombardment of disturbing media reports: “There is no pride in being Muslim in the age of ISIS [...] There is no reason for a fifteen-year-old to want to be Muslim.” Although most of our respondents did not present the current situation in such a dire manner, they by and large acknowledged that being Muslim in America is far from an “easy” proposition.

We should be careful, however, not to let the magnitude of a phenomenon drive us to conclusions about its frequency. That is, we may all agree that a particular issue is deeply concerning when it arises, but that does not mean that it arises often or even often enough to command

our limited attention and resources. Thus, although any instance of an individual leaving Islam is troubling to those who remain in the faith, whether or not such occurrences are widespread in the American Muslim community requires deeper probing.

To give us some rough intuition on the frequency of these crises of faith, we asked our respondents to indicate how often they interact with individuals (or their intermediaries) expressing doubt in Islam, as well as their general sense of the problem beyond their particular experiences (i.e., based on conversations with other leaders and travel to other communities around the country). Given the limitations discussed in the previous section, the expectation may be that such personal interactions are rare. What emerged from our conversations, instead, is a fairly wide distribution of experience. At one end of the spectrum, about one-third of our respondents reported almost never or very rarely interacting with doubting individuals. At the other end, one imam bluntly stated that “doubting faith is the norm, not the exception,” while another said it was not uncommon to have three to four such encounters in a week. The average across our sample

(based on our respondents' aggregate rough estimates and sense of regularity) was on the order of one to three interactions per month with doubting individuals (see Figure 1).



NOTE: "Rarely" = less than once a month; "Semi-regularly" = once or twice a month; and "Frequently" = once a week or more

Whether or not these tallies represent an uptick from recent years is difficult to determine given the absence of a prior baseline for comparison. For what it is worth, however, many of our respondents who reported at least semi-regular encounters with individuals expressing deep doubt also attested that these incidents have increased in frequency since they first took up their role as a religious leader. An even more robust consensus formed around the perspective that across the American Muslim

community (that is, beyond the respondent's specific locality) crises of faith and individuals leaving Islam altogether are on the rise. One respondent used particularly strong language in regards to other leaders who downplay or are otherwise unaware of the situation:

*"These imams who say they've never had anyone come to them [...] if he hasn't had someone come to him with these issues, he's disconnected, he's oblivious. This is part of the problem of our community."*

Thus, there was a strong sense throughout our interviews that this is far more than an isolated problem. A handful of respondents even went as far as to use variants of "epidemic" to describe the current state of doubt among American Muslims. Although perception and reality are not always aligned, the frequency with which we heard this concern from those best positioned to recognize this phenomenon is certainly enough to warrant deeper investigation. Moreover, although we do not claim that the tallies provided above are statistically representative, there is a case to be made that, if anything, these figures

underestimate the true scale of this phenomenon given that marginal and former Muslims are less likely to substantively interact with imams, chaplains, and community leaders and, therefore, are not fully captured in the above assessment.

## Pathways to a Crisis of Faith

We now turn to our findings on the ways in which doubt commonly manifests among American Muslims. Naturally, the particular circumstances that lead individuals to doubt the validity of their faith are going to be just that: particular. Moreover, given the sparsity of any systematic data on this topic, a number of respondents were hesitant to even comment on which situations they consider to be “common.” Add to these challenges the racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity of American Muslims, and the complexity of this topic can become overwhelming. In reflecting on these challenges, one respondent put it this way: “It’s complex. It’s not an easy thing. Our community has so many layers.” What comments like these underscore is that there is no singular cause nor archetypal experience that leads one from faith to unfaith.

Although we recognize that the faith journeys of Muslims in America are each distinctive in their own way, a number of recurrent themes emerged from our interviews. To more clearly present these insights, we group the findings under three broad headings: Doubts stemming from either 1) *moral and social concerns*, 2) *philosophical and scientific concerns*, or 3) *personal trauma*. Within each of these groupings, we elaborate the most salient issue areas, highlighting representative or illuminating quotes and the occasional case study. As will become evident, rarely is an occurrence of doubt wholly contained within just one of these categories. Yet, taken together, these accounts paint a detailed, if still necessarily incomplete picture of American Muslim doubt.

### Moral and Social Concerns

A natural starting point for our discussion is the role that morality and the norms of American society at large play in altering Muslims’ relationship with their faith. Like any other religion, Islam forwards a set of moral and ethical prescriptions. The American cultural milieu, in its own ways,

also comes with certain normative expectations and values that constitute an ethical vision. Given these two separate systems with vastly different origins and contexts of development, it is only natural that there will be areas of overlap as well as areas of tension and outright conflict. For American Muslims, these tensions and conflicts can become an impetus for doubt. This subsection expounds on these anxieties with a focus on two interrelated areas: gender roles and sexuality, and specific events in Islamic history.

### Gender roles and sexuality

Gender roles in Islam are a perennial hot-button topic. There are numerous questions around which this discourse pivots: Can women lead mixed-gender salat? Is the hijab obligatory? Is there such a thing as a man or woman's "role"? One respondent described how a mother's preferential treatment of boys over girls became a source of doubt:

*"[Her mother] treated boys differently than girls...kind of like the older brother does anything he wants and the mom won't say anything, but the sister has a lot more limitations, reprimanding,*

*and discipline. That led her to [question] the overall way that women are treated in the Muslim community. Eventually, she began blaming the religion and its 'culture of oppression.' [This eventually led to her] doubting why we can't drink or eat certain things. Now, I would characterize her as agnostic in faith."*

Another respondent bemoaned how constructive conversations around women in Islam and the Muslim community are often preemptively foreclosed due to "aggressive" tactics:

*"Some scholars are picking fights with feminism—trying to win an argument when they should be trying to win people over [...] [These feminists] are not trying to attack, they are merely saying 'Hey, I don't think this is fair, give me something to allay my concerns and show me that you respect me.'"*

Yet, it may also be that one party does not even wish to interact with the other, as one imam noted:

*“I have personally not had that many conversations with women [about their doubts]. The reason is simply that a lot of our sisters who are wanting to leave the faith are already so dismissive of the male clergy [...] and that really goes to this hardcore strand of feminism, one of the stepping stones to losing faith. There is this anti-male clergy syndrome.”*

As these excerpts indicate, there is an interplay of perception and reality when gender norms are at the core of one’s doubt. On the one hand, female Muslims may believe that the differentiation between men and women in mainstream understandings of Islam does not accord with their personal views on gender equality. On the other hand, they may misperceive the depth and breadth of this disconnect due to cultural accretions that, over time, become intertwined with Muslim practice. Relatedly, it may be that a negative lived experience trumps any consideration of Islam’s normative prescriptions on these issues. A possibly self-perpetuating divide between male faith leaders and female lay Muslims (no doubt conditioned on the leader’s

positionality) may pre-empt dialogue on these matters and further complicate this pathway to doubt. With all the potential moving parts in this dynamic, it is certainly worthy of deeper examination in its own right.

Another related and similarly enduring topic is that of sexuality. The culture around dating and casual sexual encounters can lead some Muslims to become frustrated with Islam’s prohibition on pre-marital relations. Doubt, then, can come about through a desire to alleviate mental anguish: “[Those that] have dated [...] [that] have been sexually active [...] it’s not in their benefit to make Islam out to be the truth. They want it to not be the truth so they don’t feel so guilty about doing those things.”

While contemporary American religious leaders have addressed the challenges of attraction to the opposite sex, recent shifts in public opinion and policy have forced them to tackle a topic they have been far less accustomed to holistically dealing with: homosexuality. Certainly, the mainstream position that homosexual acts are prohibited in Islam may lead those Muslims with same-sex urges to question their place in the faith. Yet, the ways in

which religious leaders address the issue of homosexuality have consequences that go beyond those directly affected.

**Case Study—Moral incongruence:**

*One imam recounted a conversation he had over dinner with a young woman in her early thirties who considered herself Muslim but had major reservations about Islam. For her, she could not make sense of the Islamic understanding of homosexuality and reconcile it with her innate sense of justice and morality. How could God, who is the Creator of all things, condemn people who were “born differently” either to live lives of celibacy, or to leave Islam? This was her understanding of the issue, which the imam tried to clarify and correct (without success). She herself did not identify as homosexual, but the question went to the core of faith and theology for her because it implicates God’s justice. Indeed, this uneasiness with a particular construction of theodicy and divine justice informs a number of pathways to doubt.*

**Historical events**

In addition to bumping up against doctrinal tenets, social norms can also render certain episodes in

Islamic history problematic in the minds of American Muslims. The marriage of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to Aisha is a case in point. A favorite target of Islamophobes, this key moment in the prophetic history can provide an opening for doubt if not properly contextualized. Similarly, the issue of slavery in Islam has become a recurring topic of concern, particularly as younger American Muslims are now more sensitive to the issues of social injustice around them. As one scholar who gave an in-depth lecture on this topic put it, “The ‘Islam came to abolish slavery’ response is simply insufficient.”

Some historical content, however, has more direct bearing on contemporary world events. While any honest assessment of the roots of terrorism acknowledges the political and social causes, the religious component is often brought to the fore whenever “Radical Islam” is the primary culprit. The heinous nature of terrorist acts supposedly carried out in the name of Islam can lead Muslims to question whether their faith is inherently intolerant, particularly when set against the backdrop of liberalism and universal rights. A “humanist critique,” as one respondent

dubbed it, may emerge from this line of thought wherein an individual “associates ISIS with Islam [and] believes there is a problem with a religion that gives birth to such brutality.” References to certain historical events and battles in the early history of Islam figure into these associations and simple reassurances that “Islam means peace” do little to curb the resultant doubts.

## Philosophical and Scientific Concerns

Critiques of Islam on a more philosophical or scientific basis also feature prominently in the discussions our respondents have with doubting Muslims. By far, the topic of evolution is most commonly brought up in these conversations and so, first, we address it in its own right. Subsequently, we highlight the perception that Islam is generally at odds with science and rationality and the attendant disillusionment this negative association creates.

### The theory of evolution

Just as charges of intolerance may be leveled at those espousing conservative views on homosexuality, so too do

individuals who do not subscribe to the entirety of the theory of evolution risk being labelled “unscientific,” “unenlightened,” and “irrational.” Thus, while addressing this theory's spiritual implications, religious leaders in America must also navigate around the broader social stigma associated with espousing anything less than an unqualified endorsement of evolutionary theory. One respondent opined that framing this issue as a zero-sum proposal—namely, “You either believe in evolution, or you believe in Islam”—can itself prove harmful to one’s faith beyond any of the intellectual challenges that arise from evolutionary theory itself:

*“There has been a disservice on both extremes. You have people coming out on the minbar saying [believing in evolution] is kufr—that’s just simply inaccurate. Evolution is very wide and most of it has no contradiction with any of our revealed sources. On the other hand, you have this inferiority complex [...] unquestioned deference to science and an eagerness to accept anything and everything from that domain.”*

Although no one in our sample was dismissive of the apprehension that some Muslims feel when they learn about Darwinism, respondents differed in their assessment of how difficult it is to adequately address the theological challenges this theory poses. One scholar who has thought deeply about this matter from multiple angles spoke candidly about his struggle to come up with convincing responses to the pointed inquiries he receives:

*“I’m very frank in saying that the theory of evolution is one of the biggest problems we’ve ever had in our intellectual tradition... Many imams say it’s just a theory, not a fact—that’s ridiculous [...] That’s not to say I have a solution to Darwinism. That’s one of the things I say in lectures: I don’t know, I really don’t know [...] But the theory of evolution can be modified and it can be made to [...] fit within an Islamic worldview, and that’s the only way I can believe in it for the time being.”*

One leader, however, was confident that clarifying the means and limits of scientific knowledge

sufficed to momentarily assuage the concerns voiced by a member of his congregation. Another imam seemed even more sanguine about the issue: “If [someone] has a doubt about evolution, you bring him to the shaykh and the shaykh clarifies it. Case closed.” What these varied responses point to is a lack of consensus around not just the best way to tackle this issue, but whether the leaders charged with addressing it are qualified to do so.

### **Perceived irreconcilability between science and religion**

In line with the broader perception that religion and science are irreconcilable—a position championed by highly visible public intellectuals and “new atheists”<sup>12</sup>—a number of respondents mentioned how scientifically-based doubts tend to crop up particularly among college-aged American Muslims. One interviewee relayed an encounter he had with an individual questioning whether the Quran could be considered “scientifically inaccurate” in light of verses that seem to describe the sun as stationary. Although in this situation our interviewee felt that the questioner’s concerns were easily allayed, the following case



study details a far less straightforward interaction.

### ***Case Study—Scientific***

#### ***Incongruence:***

One respondent related the story of a mother who feared her daughter, a college student, was on the brink of leaving Islam. When the imam sat down with the daughter one-on-one, she admitted her struggles with faith as a student of biomedicine. It was not so much that the information she was learning contradicted the Islamic sources of knowledge, but more so that the way in which she was obtaining her scientific learning was in stark contrast to her religious education. The latter, more specifically, was a ritualistic and cultural amalgam that left her with a superficial understanding of the faith while her college studies in the sciences were systematic and engaging. According to the interviewee, this story is quite typical. Importantly, it highlights that rather than science simply being “more believable” than Islam, it is often the case that a scientific system of understanding can be more comprehensive and comprehensible than the disjointed and shallow conception of Islam that many American Muslims are taught.

### **Philosophical concerns**

Beyond questions of science and religion, respondents also noted doubts arising due to more philosophical considerations. These kinds of concerns were particularly prevalent among Muslim college students who were often exposed to critiques of religion through their college classes and fellow students. We have already mentioned how the issue of theodicy—i.e., “the problem of evil,” “how can an all-good God allow suffering?” etc.—is one common pathway to doubt. Other pathways are more epistemological in nature. Not infrequently, our respondents were asked by their community members to explain how it is possible to prove with certainty that God exists and that Islam is true. When “proof” was not forthcoming, this became a source of doubt that affected all parts of the questioners’ faith. In their minds, if there is no satisfying proof that God even exists, then how can there be proof about anything else in Islam, like the personal religious obligation to pray five times a day, to abstain from alcohol, etc.?

## Personal Trauma

Our final pathway to doubt, personal trauma, is perhaps the most common among the conversations our respondents reported. This frequency is owed, in part, to some manner of personal trauma at times informing or reinforcing the other sources of doubt discussed above, making it difficult to get a clear sense of which causes are most operative. This is certainly not to say that the social and intellectual bases for doubt are disingenuous, rather that instances where these critiques are raised may consciously or subconsciously mask a deeper, more intimate grievance. To be sure, there are numerous instances where personal trauma manifests in its own right. We discuss three modes below that capture much of the variation we observed in our interviews.

### Personal—Prolonged

One type of trauma that leads to doubt is that which takes place over an extended period of time, often years. This can take the form of child abuse, spousal abuse, or abuse at the hands of a family friend or community leader. Given this spectrum and what we know

about who is more likely to be the victim in such incidents,<sup>13</sup> it is not surprising that women are often the ones that bring such grievances to imams:

*“A lot of young sisters have come to me [...] Almost always, there’s abuse that takes place by the father or the mother, or an abusive relationship or marriage, or they had a traumatic experience with the hijab—the hijab was forced on them. The women that come to me with faith crises, it’s almost always trauma as opposed to intellectual criticisms.”*

### Personal—Acute

Trauma may also be sudden, such as the death of a close family member, the diagnosis of a serious illness, or divorce. Per our interviews, this was not a common source of doubt. Indeed, several respondents admitted that they could not recall any instances when a sudden tragedy brought someone to the point of leaving Islam. Some respondents even commented that the inverse was more likely—that such tribulation is a means by which one’s belief is

strengthened. All this is not to deemphasize acute trauma as a source of doubt. Rather, as alluded to earlier, it could be that acute grief is the underlying cause of doubt, though it may not be immediately apparent, as the following case study highlights.

***Case Study—Personal Trauma:***

One interviewee told us a story about a student who was referred to him by a prominent imam because of a theological quandary the student could not settle on his own. He was unable to reconcile free will with divine will and concluded that due to this seeming contradiction, all of religion must be “made up” and God Himself may not exist. This respondent took the time to engage the young man rationally, pointing out the flaws in his logic while sensing there was likely more to the story. The next day after their dialogue, he saw the young man at fajr prayer where they started up their conversation once more. This time, the tone changed. The student was less aggressive than he had been the previous day and asked more questions. Not long into this follow-up conversation, the student began weeping over the recent death of his brother in a car crash.

The above case study highlights the multiple layers that can shape any individual instance of doubt. First, the apparent problem is one of perceived theological incongruities in Islam. Beneath this surface-level discontent, however, is a traumatic life experience. If we go even deeper beyond the pain of losing a loved one, we find that the inability to process tragedy within a religious framework may be the root cause of doubt.

Additionally, this incident points to the phenomenon of masking that a number of our interviewees observed. As in the above story, this can take the form of superficial grievances concealing more fundamental tribulations. It may also be the case, however, that individuals are masking their doubt altogether by opting to talk about more “acceptable” troubles. A number of our interviewees mentioned, for example, that individuals would often come to them ostensibly wanting to talk about a common issue—e.g., problems with their family, difficulty sleeping, etc.—but an experienced and empathetic assessment of their situation soon made it clear that their issues went much deeper and that they were, for one reason or another, uneasy about opening up. This point

further underscores the challenge of fully identifying let alone addressing the numerous and sometimes hidden layers of doubt.

### **Communal**

A final mode of trauma comes by way of negative interaction with members of the Muslim community. That is, individuals may either implicitly or explicitly be made to feel unwelcome at the mosque or other communal spaces and consequently associate this negative experience with a shortcoming in the faith itself. At times, the trigger can take the form of repeated and overt discrimination.

#### ***Case Study—Communal Judgment:***

A young black American woman in Detroit grew up Muslim while much of her extended family, including her grandmother, remained Christian. The young woman had a decent Islamic education and upbringing, but, according to the imam, she lacked an Islamic “culture” to help solidify her Muslim identity. Also crucially lacking was a wider positive community influence. Her experiences in mosques had been consistently negative. For example, she would often feel “judged” by other mosque attendees who would

criticize her dress. Having been disenchanted by these experiences, she one day accepted her grandmother’s offer to attend church with her. In church she found women with open arms, hugging her, embracing her, and inviting her over for meals while the sermon emphasized God’s love and loving each other. Not long after, she left Islam and became a Christian.

#### ***Case Study—Communal Racism:***

One imam told of a convert who left Islam not after a few months or a handful of years, but after nearly two decades of being Muslim. Beyond the longer than typical time span, this case is noteworthy in that when this man left Islam, his wife and teenage children similarly followed him out of the faith. Sometime after making this life altering decision, the man in question caught up with our interviewee and revealed how persistent racism in the Muslim community eventually raised in his mind theological doubts:

*“He said for the first five, ten years of Islam, [he would think to himself], ‘Yeah I know these people are racist, but Allah and His Messenger are Allah and His Messenger.’ Eventually, that*

*[certainty gave way] to deep doubts about the faith: 'Maybe the reason why Islam is unable to transform these people is because Islam isn't transformative; therefore, if Islam is not transformative, then it is not true [...] then it kind of rolls downhill.'*

Although race and gender are oft-recurring issues when it comes to communal trauma, a broader generational divide may also contribute to these negative interactions. These dynamics, in part, inform the so-called “third space” or “unmosqued” movement. Ultimately, there are multiple and intersecting touchstones that lead to doubt through a communal pathway.

## Conclusion

This report, the first of its kind, had a modest, yet important objective: provide a baseline assessment for understanding and examining the sources of doubt in the American Muslim community. This report establishes such a reference point by mapping the informed perceptions of Muslim institutional leaders across America. Two primary insights emerged from this

examination. First, the data collected from our in-depth interviews suggests that the problem of doubt in the American Muslim community is not simply one of magnitude (that is, one in which the problem is great, but altogether infrequent). Rather, it appears that our respondents encounter doubting individuals semi-regularly, on average, with a few experiencing these interactions so frequently that they describe them as “normal.”

The second chief contribution of this report is the elaboration of the paths that lead toward doubt. While recognizing the nuance and particularity of crises of faith on an individual level, we were able to identify a number of recurrent themes that, taken together, provide a holistic picture of doubt at the aggregate level. The three nodes from which doubt often stems—moral and social concerns, philosophical and scientific concerns, and personal trauma—are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but can often overlap or reinforce one another.

With this basic framework in place, there are a number of avenues for future research. One route would be to home in on the differential

sources and manifestations of doubt across particular segments of the American Muslim community. This report has already highlighted some ways in which race, gender, and age can condition which modes of doubt are most operative. Converts similarly face an array of unique challenges that at times may interact with and enhance the effects associated with these broader demographic categories. Thus, while general inference on American Muslims is the foremost goal, we should not be content with a one-size-fits-all model of doubt within the community.

A second path, and indeed the next phase in our on-going project, is to quantitatively test and elaborate the set of priors that we gleaned from the qualitative analysis presented herein. More specifically, we next plan to examine whether the perceptions of these Muslim leaders accord with the reality of Muslims who themselves are experiencing doubt as well as those individuals who have left Islam or consider themselves to be marginal

Muslims. Will the findings on the elite level map to the mass level, or will there be discrepancies between the leaders' rarified views and the on-the-ground realities? Through a mixed-methods approach that combines large-n survey analysis and in-depth interviews, we aim to directly incorporate the attitudes and insights of doubting, marginal, and former Muslims into our still nascent, though expanding understanding of doubt in the American Muslim community.

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## Respondent Bios

**Abbas Abdullah** serves as the youth director at the Islamic Center of Irving in Dallas, Texas.

**Taymullah Abdurrahman** is the chaplain for Harvard University where he also teaches a graduate course on Islam at Harvard Divinity School.

**Tahera Ahmed** is Associate Chaplain and Director of Interfaith Engagement at Northwestern University.

**Hatem Al-Haj** served as an informal imam in the New York and Northern Jersey region since arriving to America 25 years ago and is currently the dean of the college of Islamic Studies at Mishkah University.

**Mohamed Almasmari** serves as the imam of the Muslim Unity Center in Bloomfield Hills. He also serves as the Executive Director of Michigan Muslim Community Council and is a member of the Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America (AMJA).

**Tahir Anwar** serves as the imam of the Islamic Center of San Jose and teaches at Zaytuna College.

**Mohamed Abutaleb** serves as the imam of the Islamic Association of Raleigh. He is also an instructor for the OakTree Institute, working with youth and organizations.

**Waleed Basyouni:** Imam Waleed Basyouni currently serves as the Vice President of Al-Maghrib Institute and is a Director of the Texas Da'wah Convention.

**Jamaal Diwan** serves the Muslim students at UCLA and USC as a chaplain with the Institute of Knowledge and is the Co-Founder and Director of Safa Center for Research and Education.

**Shadee Elmasry** is the Director of Religious Programming at New Brunswick Islamic Center and founder of Safina Society.

**Mohammad Elshinawy** is Da'wah Director at "Muslims Giving Back" and the Imam at Muslim Community Center in Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

**Celene Ibrahim** is a chaplain at Tufts University.

**Abdul Nasir Jangda** serves as the Imam at the Colleyville Masjid in the Dallas and is also an instructor with Bayyinah Institute.

**Rami Kawas** is a youth director at the Muslim American Society in Dallas.

**Marc Manley** is the Religious Director at the Middle Ground Muslim Center, in Upland, California.

**Shafayat Mohamed** is the Founder/Principal of Darul Uloom Institute in Pembroke Pines, Florida.

**Omer Mozaffar** is the Muslim Chaplain at Loyola University Chicago.

**Abdu Rasheed Muhammad** works as chaplain for the Islamic Society of North America.

**Shpendim Nadzaku** currently serves as the Imam and Resident Scholar for the Islamic Association of North Texas.

**Amin Nathari** founded the Islam in America Movement (IAM) in 2008, and serves as its National Representative.

**Muslema Purmul** currently serves the Muslim students at UCLA and USC as a chaplain with Institute of Knowledge and is a Co-Founder and contributor to Safa Center for Research and Education.

**Yasir Qadhi** is the Dean of Academic Affairs at AlMaghrib Institute, a resident Scholar of the Memphis Islamic Center and a professor at Rhodes College, in the Department of Religious Studies.

**Jawad Qazwini** currently leads the American Muslim Foundation, Based in Houston, TX and Washington, DC.

**Abdulmalik Ryan** serves as the Muslim Chaplain at DePaul University. He was one of the founding members and is a past President of the Board of Directors of the Inner City Muslim Action Network, IMAN.

**Ahmed Salim** is the Program Director for the Muslim Interscholastic Tournament.

**Talib Shareef** is President and Imam of the Nation's Mosque, Masjid Muhammad in Washington, DC.

**Ali Siddiqui** serves as imam of The Islamic Center of Northern Virginia.

**Mikaeel Smith** is Resident Scholar at the Islamic Society of Annapolis.

**Omar Suleiman** is President of Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research and resident scholar at Valley Ranch Islamic Center.

**Ailya Vajid** currently works as Multifaith Advisor at Gustavus Adolphus College. Before this role, she served as the Muslim Student Advisor at Swarthmore College.

**Dawud Walid** is currently the Executive Director of the Michigan chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, and frequent lecturer at Detroit area mosques.

## About the Author

Youssef Chouhoud is a Provost's Fellow at the University of Southern California, where he researches political attitudes and behavior in North America, Europe, and the Middle East. He has previously been affiliated with MuslimMatters and the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding. Youssef's research has appeared in law reviews and, most recently, in the Oxford Handbook on Polling and Polling Methods. His work specific to American Muslims has utilized in-depth interviews, comparative historical analysis, and large-n surveys to shed an empirical light on this understudied population.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of this divergence, see, Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations* (Aldershot, England: Routledge, 2008). For a more recent assessment of the exceptional standing of religion in America, see, Pew Research Center, “Generally, Poorer Nations Tend to Be Religious; Wealthy Less So, except for U.S.,” April 19, 2016, [http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/19/5-ways-americans-and-europeans-are-different/ft\\_16-04-14\\_religioussalience-update/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/19/5-ways-americans-and-europeans-are-different/ft_16-04-14_religioussalience-update/).

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape” (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center, “Muslim Americans: No Signs of Growth in Alienation or Support for Extremism; Mainstream and Moderate Attitudes” (Washington, D.C: Pew Research Center, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> See, e.g., Youssef Chouhoud, “(Muslim) American Exceptionalism: Contextualizing Religiosity among Young Muslims in America” (Master’s Thesis, Lehigh University, 2011); David Voas and Fenella Fleischmann, “Islam Moves West: Religious Change in the First and Second Generations,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 38, no. 1 (2012): 525–45.

<sup>6</sup> For the relative infancy of religious institutions, see, Ihsan Bagby, “The American Mosque 2011,” US Mosque Study 2011 (Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2012). In terms of Islamic higher education options in America, the current tally stands at four: Zaytuna College in Berkeley, CA, Bayan Claremont Islamic Graduate School in Claremont, CA, the American Islamic College in Chicago, IL, and the American Islamic Institute based in Boston, MA. These educational institutions are similarly relatively young, with each only taking on its present form within the past decade.

<sup>7</sup> Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape.”

<sup>8</sup> Most often, these organizations would be of the brick-and-mortar variety, although leeway was granted for more nebulous “third spaces.”

<sup>9</sup> Bagby, “The American Mosque 2011.”

<sup>10</sup> The regional designations correspond to the following states where our respondents were based: New York Metro (New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania); Mid-Atlantic (Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia); New England (Connecticut, Massachusetts); South (North Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Tennessee); Midwest (Illinois, Michigan).

<sup>11</sup> Special dispensation was granted to attribute this quote to its author given its specificity.

<sup>12</sup> Hemant Mehta, “Neil deGrasse Tyson Explains Why He Believes Faith and Reason Are Irreconcilable,” *Friendly Atheist*, accessed September 10, 2016, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2014/01/21/neil-degrasse-tyson-explains-why-he-believes-faith-and-reason-are-irreconcilable/>.

<sup>13</sup> See, “Child Sexual Abuse Statistics,” accessed August 7, 2016, <https://victimsofcrime.org/media/reporting-on-child-sexual-abuse/child-sexual-abuse-statistics>; “Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics | RAINN,” accessed August 7, 2016, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence>.

