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Self-identity and private schooling:

The detrimental effects of public schools on the formation of Muslim-American self-identity

“Integration is perhaps a rather loose word. I do not regard it as moaning the loss, by immigrants, of their own national characteristics and culture. I do not think we need in this country a melting pot, which will turn everybody out in a common mould, as one of a series of carbon copies of someone’s misplaced vision of the stereotyped Englishman... I define integration, therefore, not as a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, coupled with cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance.”¹

English Labour Home Secretary, Roy (now Lord) Jenkins, commenting on a new interpretation for the concept of integration into English society (1966)

The make-up of the United States of America has often been referred to as a melting pot, but that analogy only really referenced the mixing of the many white Christian Europeans who initially emigrated here. The concept of integration is what is needed when looking at non-European migration because there is a big difference between assimilation and integration when it comes to immigrant communities. While it was quite easy for a white Christian Irishman or a white Catholic Italian to eventually assimilate into ‘American’ culture², it was quite another thing for a Syrian Muslim, or a Palestinian Christian, or a Thai Buddhist, or Mexican Catholic, to assimilate. Quite often the assimilation never took place and even fourth generation Mexicans in the southwest are treated like immigrants in a nation that their family has always called home.³

¹ Poulter, Sebastian; “Muslim Headscarves in School: Contrasting Legal Approaches in England and France”, Oxford Journal of Legal Studies, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), pp. 43-74 at 48.

² This is not to say that many groups such as the Irish, Italian, Germans, Russians, or Jews did not face initial hurdles in their attempts to assimilate into ‘American’ culture. But they were eventually accepted because their backgrounds were so similar to the population that was already here and it was easy to blend in after some time.

³ This is in reference to the Mexicans who stayed in the southwest after the U.S. seized nearly 50% of Mexican territory as a result of the Mexican-American War and The Treaty of Guadalup Hidalgo. This territory includes all or part of present day California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Wyoming and Oklahoma. And the people who stayed have continually faced persecution and

The focus of this paper is the Muslim-American community and their attempts to integrate into the greater ‘American’ community, while also maintaining and forming positive self-identities. Part of this identity formation can be greatly aided by private religious school attendance because it allows the young Muslim-Americans an opportunity to be surrounded by other members of their peer group and to grow in their identities together.

The aim of this paper is not to argue whether private schools have higher test scores than public schools, or that more students from private schools go to college than public schools. The reason is that it has been pretty well established that both types of school have positive effects in terms of academic achievement dependent on the type of community that they are located in. For instance, private Catholic schools have much better academic achievement rates in urban areas –

[t]he "effect" of Catholic schooling differs across demographic groups. There is clear evidence that the benefits of Catholic schooling vary with location...the benefits of Catholic schooling are greatest for students who live in heavily populated areas [and] Catholic schooling has no effect on graduation rates in rural areas.⁴

While the aforementioned study cites to Catholic schools, this paper will explore self-identity of Muslim-American youth in terms of the benefits available in the private school setting versus public schools. There can be plenty of arguments that a public school may offer better academic benefits to a Muslim-American student, but the argument here is that their self-identity may be greatly hindered by only attending a public school. This is of course dependent on a number of factors, one of which is the inclusiveness of the public school community. Some communities may be more inclusive to all students, while many others are not so inclusive and create a negative atmosphere where it is hard for students to focus on their studies.

sometimes even deportation, such as during the era of the Bracero Program(s) or after the Pachuco/Zoot Suit Riots.

⁴ Neal, Derek; “What have we learned about the benefits of private schooling?”, *Economic Policy Review* (19320426), Mar. 1998, Vol. 4, Issue 1.

The difficulty in writing on this topic is that there is not a lot of research on point with this particular minority group – “few empirical investigations have specifically explored the process of developing a religious identity among Muslims in the United States.”⁵ Although there is a lot of research in the Catholic school setting, the Muslim private schools have not been written about as much. As a result, I will use various sources to back up my arguments and this includes personal experience working in public schools in San Francisco and Chicago, as well as work that I have done in Bridgeview (a southwest suburb of Chicago) at a private Muslim K-12 school. I will also compare and contrast the situation here in the U.S. with the situation in France, and to a lesser extent, England.

As a result of their colonial past, France had a large scale immigration of Northern Africans, mostly Muslim, throughout the 20th century, mainly from Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria (the largest percentage). Since France has been more for assimilation and an extreme separation of church and state (but Catholicism is still shown favoritism), the Muslim community in France has faced unique hurdles in finding their own identities. This is a result of the official French assimilation policies and the desire for a nationwide French identity. As a result, the young Muslims in France face a “current search for *identity* between an 'official' French society and the reality of disadvantaged suburbs characterised by insecurity, violence, unemployment and new forms of solidarity in gangs or community-based associations.”⁶ This reality of marginalization and ghettoization is common to most of the French Muslims and is not unlike the situation faced by many in the African-American and Latino populations in the U.S.

⁵ Peek, Lori; “Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity.” *Sociology of Religion*; Fall 2005, Vol. 66 Issue 3, 215-242 at 216.

⁶ Limage, Leslie J., “Education and Muslim Identity: the case of France”, *Comparative Education*, 03050068, Feb. 2000, Vol. 36, Issue 1.

In addition, the struggle for self-identity is quite similar to that of most minorities in the U.S., including the Muslim-American community. A large issue that has arisen in France over the past twenty years has been the wearing of the hijab (the cloth that is used to cover a woman's hair, neck, bosom and most commonly, ears). Recently a law was passed in France that banned the wearing of religious garments, including hijabs for Muslims, turbans for Sikhs, yarmulkes for Jews, and large crosses for Christians.⁷ It is a way for the French to maintain their strict separation between church and state, but many people feel that it was specifically aimed at the Muslim population. In addition, modern day France views "religion as a *private* matter and the republican ideal of neutrality and secularity in the public sphere"⁸ is maintained by laws such as the aforementioned one.⁹ Some French feared that the outward appearance of a Muslim woman wearing a hijab was akin to proselytizing and the State Council even stated that "[r]eligious affiliation may be discreetly displayed as long as there is no attempt to convert or disturb the public in any way."¹⁰ But the choice to wear hijab for many of the young French-Muslims was a way to return to their roots. Similarly, part of the new Muslim-American identity has been a

⁷ France's national legislature passed the controversial bill and President Jacques Chirac signed it into law on March 15, 2004 and it came into effect on September 2, 2004, at the beginning of the new school year.

⁸ Limage.

⁹ Yet, it is interesting to note that France is a party to the European Convention, the two International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights respectively, and the Convention against Discrimination in Education. All four of which guarantee the protection of human rights and in particular, article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights contains an additional protection for minorities by stating – "In those States in which ethnic, religious or linguistic minorities exist, persons belonging to such minorities shall not be denied the right, in community with the other members of their group, to enjoy their own culture, to profess and practise their own religion, or to use their own language." But France has claimed that this is not applicable to them because they are a Republic and are thus "... indivisible, secular, democratic and social. It shall ensure the equality of all citizens before the law, without distinction ... of origin, race or religion. It shall respect all beliefs, since the basic principles of public law prohibit distinction between citizens on grounds or origin, race or religion. France is a country in which there are no minorities...." I am sure the claim that there are no minorities is news to the many North African minorities who are segmented to a lower social status than the native & white French, except of course those North African minorities who play soccer extremely well and then they are elevated to hero status (*see* Thierry Henry, Zinedine Zidane etc.).

¹⁰ Limage.

reconnection with Islam and as a result, many young Muslim-American women are **choosing**¹¹ to wear the hijab and young men are attending Friday prayers in increasing numbers, as well as establishing very active Muslim Student Associations (MSA's) at various universities – “religion can assume greater importance for immigrants' definition of self and group affiliations than was the case in their homelands.”¹² Of course part of this is attributable to wanting to be affiliated with a particular group, but in large part, it also stems from a finding of one's self-identity.

These attempts at self-identity have come under fire because there are several school districts in the U.S. that have sought to ban the hijab. Since this is the most outwardly apparent sign that a person is Muslim, this has been the first thing to be attacked. Sadly, young children have had to face discrimination for coming to school while wearing the hijab and in the case of twelve-year old Nashala Hearn it took the U.S. Department of Justice to step in and have her reinstated at her Oklahoma middle school. Nashala's story took place in 2003-04 and as she said - “I didn't know it was going to be a problem because on Aug. 18, 2003, my first day of school last year, I explained to my homeroom teacher that I am Muslim and I wear a *hijab* and that I also pray between 1 and 1:30. She said that was fine and that she had a room for me to pray in.”¹³ The acceptance of her wearing hijab soon changed when another teacher approached her on September 11, 2003, in the cafeteria line and said her hijab looked like a bandanna or a handkerchief. The school system had a dress code ban for both head coverings and Nashala was suspended from school until the U.S. Justice Department interceded and had her reinstated in

¹¹ The term ‘choosing’ is in bold because many Islamaphobes argue that Muslim women are forced to wear hijab and the situation in the U.S. could not be any further from that stereotype. In fact, it is common to see young Muslim-Americans wearing a hijab walking in the mall alongside their mother who is not wearing one. While some non-Muslims hold the view that they are saving the ‘oppressed’ Muslim women from having to wear hijab, many Muslim women feel that by wearing hijab they are being saved from objectification and that they are doing so in order to please God, not society.

¹² Peek at 218.

¹³ Moore, Kathleen M., “Visible through the Veil: The Regulation of Islam in American Law”, *Sociology of Religion* 2007, 68:3 237-251 at 244.

March 2004. The government stepped in based on allegations that the school district had violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, “which bars states from applying dress codes in a discriminatory manner.”¹⁴ The dress code was changed soon thereafter “to accommodate attire worn for religious reasons, and to offer a training program to all teachers and administrators educating them about the change.”¹⁵ Nashala actually had the chance to testify at the Senate hearing for her case and said that the incident caused her to have feelings of depression and humiliation.

While many attempts to ban hijabs have either failed outright or been struck down by the courts, the fact that there have been many attempts to do so is disconcerting. This is sending a message of exclusion to young Muslim-Americans and it will only make the creation of self-identity for Muslim-Americans a much more difficult process.

Dress is an issue of considerable controversy in American public schools because, as in France, the school is considered an important instrument of the secular state for the public education of its future citizens. From this perspective, the prohibition on religiously inspired attire, such as the *hijab*, strengthens the boundaries of the secularized public sphere against any religious interference and upholds the separation of church and state.¹⁶

The above stated view of the separation between church and state does not acknowledge the fact that a student who chooses to wear a hijab or pray at school is not advocating for state-sponsored religion. There is no fostering of an excessive government entanglement with religion and this is a form of self-expression. All children go through the process of forming their own identity and for Muslim-Americans - “[m]embership in a minority religion can be an important source of identity and experience that lends meaning to existence in a pluralistic society.”¹⁷ As a general rule there is a right to freedom of expression except if the disruptive or offensive conduct can be

¹⁴ *Id.* at 244.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 245.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 244.

¹⁷ *Id.* at 239.

forecasted to create a disruption. An exception to this rule came in the *Hazelwood School Dist. v. Kuhlmeier* case, which dealt with school sponsored expressive activities, the yearbook club. If it is a school sponsored event then it becomes school speech and not just student speech and the speech can be limited by the school. In addition, as a result of *Bethel School Dist. No. 403 v. Fraser* offensive and lewd speech can also be limited. But the wearing of a hijab or time taken out of a student's day to pray are not offensive or lewd, nor are they actions meant to cause a disruption. Actions that attempt to hinder the freedom of expression that should be allowed per the constitution for Muslim women to wear the hijab or Muslim students to pray during school hours¹⁸, have a negative effect on a Muslim's self-identity. While it has been established that in-class prayer is unconstitutional (*see Engel v. Vitale*, 370 US 421 (1962)), the ability for a Muslim-American student to take some time during their lunch break to pray is not infringing on another student's rights, nor does it rise to the level of optional prayer or moments of silence in the classroom since it would be during a student's free time away from other students who may object.

As a result of already experienced or potential religious persecution many Muslim-Americans will try or have already tried to assimilate into 'American' culture - "[a] policy of assimilation is generally understood as entailing the absorption of the minorities into the mainstream culture of the majority community. Minority groups are required to surrender the distinctive characteristics of their separate identities and blend into the wider society."¹⁹ They do this at the expense of their own self-identity and usually do so after "[v]arious situational, personal, and social identities [being] invoked based on the specific costs and rewards associated

¹⁸ In an area set aside for them, not a common space in front of the other students.

¹⁹ Poulter at 46.

with those identities.”²⁰ In other words, the student views their own background as different and if they are to assimilate and take on the dominant culture’s identity, then they may receive more reward, as opposed to the cost of forming their own identity based on their unique background and integrating into the larger society. This process often results in confused youth who may not find their identity until college, or maybe they will never find it - “[i]ndividual identity can shift over time, due to personal experiences and larger social changes.”²¹ The benefits of a private Muslim school setting allow young Muslim-Americans to nurture their self-identity alongside their Muslim-American peers; whereas the negativity that a young Muslim-American may face in the public school setting can have lifelong detrimental effects on a person’s self-identity.

The argument here though is not to say that a Muslim-American should go to a private religious school for their entire K-12 years, but the formative years are the most important to a young person’s self-identity. This could mean that a young Muslim-American would go to a Muslim middle school and then go back to a public high school, or vice versa. But the main issue is that Muslim-American youth in public schools do not just have to deal with finding their own self-identity, they have to constantly justify their beliefs to the larger community. In the case of young girls who choose to wear hijab they will face constant criticism for ascribing to subjugation, even though the young Muslim-American girls feel empowered when they wear the hijab. Part of this persecution stems from the events of September 11, 2001. In her in depth analysis of Muslim-American self-identity in a post-9/11 world, Lori Peek described three stages of religious identity development that the interviewees in her study went through in their lives.

²⁰ Peek at 220.

²¹ *Id.* at 217.

Religion as ascribed identity

“No student should be forced to choose between following her faith and enjoying the benefits of a public education”²²

This first stage means that a Muslim was born into a Muslim family and raised in a Muslim home (with various ranges of piousness). The self-identity as a Muslim was more because that’s how they were raised, but it was not always an outward identification or the core of their identity; it is combined with many different aspects to make up their identity. While their outward practices may have identified them as Muslim, this was more in line with following what they parents told them to do, not a self-reflective identification. A lot of the Muslims in this category also faced a lot of pressure to assimilate as a result of being one of the few Muslims in their area or school, or just feeling a need to fit in with the overall ‘American’ society. This of course is not a stage that is unique to Muslim-American youth since most youth go through a similar process of figuring out their own identities. As the son of a Russian-German Jewish father and a Mexican Roman Catholic mother growing up in Madison, Wisconsin, I went through many of the same sentiments. I felt a huge inclination to assimilate and often felt stigmatized as one of the few non-white students all the way through to high school.

Religion as chosen identity

“Wearing the veil is an expression of autonomy as second generation college-age women seek to carve out an identity within the tension between traditional Islamic and U.S. value systems.”²³

This next stage is where a person consciously chooses their religious identity, moving away from the unquestioned and ascribed identity in the previous stage. Part of what spurs this stage into action, at least for a lot of young Muslim-Americans, is leaving high school and heading off to college. Entering college is a time in many people’s lives when they become more

²² Moore at 244.

²³ Ajrouch, Kristine J.; “Global Contexts and the Veil: Muslim Integration in the United States and France”, *Sociology of Religion* 2007, 68:3 321-325 at 324.

introspective and begin to question their own identity. And along with that people search out members of a peer group who are similar to them in beliefs. This does not always have to occur in college, for some it can happen in high school (such as in a private Muslim school). But the overarching theme is that Muslim-Americans begin to feel like a part of a community, of a peer group where they are accepted for who they are and they do not have to try and fit in by being something that they are not.

Religion as declared identity

“As the participants moved through each of the stages, their faith became more intense and their religious practice increased, as did their identification with the religion of Islam and the individual characteristic of being Muslim.”²⁴

This last stage, at least in recent U.S. history, came about as a result of September 11th. Many Muslim-Americans felt a need to learn more about their religion so that they could answer questions that would arise about Islam or defend Islam when people were ignorantly defacing it. This had the effect of drawing many Muslim-Americans closer to Islam.²⁵ In general, tragedy can draw people closer together and this is the result that September 11th had on many Muslim-Americans. The result is a strengthening of one’s identity through an outward assertion, partially done to retain a positive self-identity.

Conclusion

“For many individuals religion remains an important organizing factor in the hierarchy of identities that compose the self.”²⁶

While it has been established that all students have a freedom of expression in the school setting, so long as it does not include offensive or lewd speech or is foreseeable to cause a

²⁴ Peek at 223.

²⁵ As well as drawing in many converts to Islam as well, myself included.

²⁶ *Id.* at 219.

disruption, Muslim-American youth face a constant battle to express their religion freely in the public school setting. Once these attacks subside the public school setting could be a very comfortable environment for a young Muslim-American to create a healthy self-identity, but until that time, the setting of a private Muslim school can offer this student an opportunity to create a positive and healthy self-identity in the comfort of an understanding peer group.