THE "NEW HORIZONS" OF AMERICAN MUSLIMS

THE ROLE OF SYMBOLIC BOUNDARIES AND SOCIAL

STIGMA IN PROCESSES OF IDENTITY FORMATION

By

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Abstract

In the past decades, literature on Muslim Americans has been burgeoning due to the increased numerical presence and growing visibility of Muslims in the American public sphere. Nonetheless, much of this scholarship approaches the study of Muslim American identity formation from the theoretical perspective of whether and to what extent Islam is becoming an American religion, thus begging the fundamental question of why religion is becoming a crucial identity marker for American Muslims. This research suggests a different approach to embark on the study of Muslim Americans. By looking at strategies of ethnic and religious boundary reconfiguration adopted by a sample of parents that enroll their offspring in the New Horizon Islamic Schools in Los Angeles, this thesis argues for the combination of theories on symbolic boundaries with theories on stigma management to account for the increased salience of the religious marker in Muslim Americans' identity formation strategies. The analysis of the data collected from: a) expert interviews; b) semi-structured interviews; and c) participant observation, demonstrates that three elements partake in the reconfiguration of ethnic and religious boundaries within Muslim Americans: 1) religious and/or cultural continuity; 2) stigma management; and 3) processes of outbidding. From the identification of these crucial and interconnected variables follows the conclusion that the blurring of ethnic boundaries and the salience of religious ones is not causally linked to the substantive content of Islam itself, but rather to meso-institutional incentives and macro-social processes that affect individual and collective representations.

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Introduction

Over the past decades, the literature on Muslim Americans has been mushrooming. Once a neglected area of research, Muslim Americans' strategies of identity formation,[1] forms of civil associationism,[2] patterns of religiosity, and competing visions on cultural values,[3] have all become major topics of research in Western academic institutions. Particularly, after the watershed events of 9/11, attention has been devoted to the shifting salience of the category Muslim in the American environment.[4] Despite the increasing interest in the topic, the literature on Muslim Americans remains lacking, presenting a dearth of empirical data and frequently treating the Muslim American category as a homogeneous group, consequently neglecting its internal complexity. The American *umma*'s extraordinary complexity arises from the numerous cleavages that characterize it; apart from the socio-economic cleavage that vertically classifies social groups according to their economic status in society, the American *umma* is divided also by ethnic and religious differences, two cleavages not fully addressed and accounted for in the extant literature. As a matter of fact, recent publications have focused either, on the one hand, on the reconfiguration of ethnic and religious boundaries in the American context;[5] or, on the other hand, on the role of stigmatization

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[1] To quote just a few works: Yvonne Y. Haddad, *Becoming American? The Forging of Arab and Muslim Identity in Pluralist America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011); Sally Howell, "Cultural Interventions: Arab American Aesthetics between the Transnational and the Ethnic," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 9, no. 1 (2000): 59-82; Amina Wadud, "American Muslim Identity: Race and Ethnicity in Progressive Islam," in *Progressive Muslims. On Justice Gender, Pluralism*, ed. Safi Omid (Oneworld Publications, 2003): 270-285.

[2] Among the works on the topic: Mucahit Bilici, *Finding Mecca in America*: *How Islam is Becoming an American Religion* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2012); Zareena A. Grewal, *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslim Youth and the Global Crisis of Authority*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2014).

[3] Two major publications on Muslim American values: Yvonne Y. Haddad, *The Muslims of America* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993); Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1997).

[4] See Lori A. Peek, *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010); Nadine Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23, no. 1 (2000): 37-61.

[5] Paul D. Numrich, "Emergence of the Rhetoric of a Unified Ummah Among American Muslims: The Case of Metropolitan Chicago," *Journal of Muslim Minorities Affairs* 32, no. 4 (December 2012): 450-466; Diane Shammas, "We Are Not All the Same: Arab and Muslim Students Forging Their Own Campus Communities in a Post-9/11 America," *Journal of Muslim Minorities Affairs* 35, no. 1 (2015): 65-88; Haddad (2011); Bilici (2012).

and the increasing episodes of discrimination that have skyrocketed in the last two decades.[6] Nonetheless, a comprehensive investigation of the existing causal mechanisms between stigma management and the redefinition of ethnic and religious boundaries in groups of Muslim Americans is still missing, as well as a satisfactory understanding of the contemporary salience of the religious marker of identity among Muslim Americans.

This research aims to bridge this gap by investigating the mechanisms through which a more comprehensive Muslim American identity is built as a form of stigma management in a set of Islamic institutions. Furthermore, this research approach further allows to reconsider the main theoretical perspective adopted thus far to study American Muslim patterns of identification and, more generally, the developments of an American Islam. Indeed, scholars have concentrated on investigating the extent to which Islam is becoming an American religion. Nonetheless, this perspective is strongly tainted by assumptions of incompatibility of Islam with Western values and is more aimed at proving the flexibility of Islamic doctrine from a theological perspective more than understanding current social processes at the heart of the formation of a Muslim American identity.

The empirical site selected for the research has been the Islamic Center of Southern California, in Los Angeles, and the New Horizon Schools funded and founded by the Center itself. The choice of focusing on these pre-K and K to 5th grade Islamic schools derives from their stated intent to build a positive Muslim American identity in students, thus combating the social stigma to which Muslim Americans are usually subject. Through a mix of participant observation, expert interviews, and semi-structured interviews to the parents of the children who attend these schools, the following theoretical research questions has been addressed: a) What does it mean to build a positive Muslim American identity?; b) What is the relationship between ethnicity and religion in

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[6] Hakim Zainiddivnov, "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Perceptions of Discrimination among Muslim Americans," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2016): 1-21; Michelle D. Bing, "Complex Inequalities. The Case of Muslim Americans after 9/11," *American Behavioral Scientist* 51, no. 5 (2008): 659-674; Lousie Cainkar, *Homeland Insecurity: The Arab American and Muslim American Experience after 9/11* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009),

process of boundary making in the case of Muslim Americans?; and c) Why is the religious boundary more salient in processes of formation of a Muslim American identity?

The inclusive Muslim American identity embraced by the schools and the attendees, both parents and children, paves the way for a reconfiguration of ethnic and religious boundaries through processes of categorical blurring. This reconfiguration serves the purpose of managing the perceived stigma to which the social group at stake, i.e. Muslim Americans, is subject in everyday interactions with out-group members. This thesis argues in favor of an integration of theories on ethnic and religious boundaries making and unmaking with the newest theories elaborated in the field of social stigma management studies so as to provide a better understanding of the ways in which Muslim American identity is dialectically constructed in the New Horizon Schools in Los Angeles.

This thesis is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1 offers the readers a review of the relevant literature on ethnic and religious boundaries, Muslim American identity, the role of schools as agents of social reproduction and social change, and the most recent theories on stigma management. Chapter 2 is devoted to the account of the methodology used both in collecting data and in analyzing them, presenting also possible limitations of the project. Chapter 3 presents an account of the processes of blurring of ethnic boundaries and reconfiguration of the religious ones in the institutions under investigation, by focusing specifically on the background information collected during a series of expert interviews. Chapter 4 focuses on the analysis of the empirical data, identifying three main mechanisms from which the inclusive Muslim American identity embraced by the interviewees stems; namely, a) cultural and religious continuity; b) stigma management; and c) processes of outbidding to set internal boundaries between in-group members.

Chapter 1: Symbolic Boundaries and Educational Institutions

The study of ethnicity and the study of religion have been historically two separately-established fields of research. On the one hand, ethnicity has attracted the attention of two broad types of scholars: namely, researchers interested in race and, more recently, academics devoted to the study of nationalism.[7] On the other hand, religion has been vastly investigated by social scientists and humanists alike as a separate and substantively different area of analysis whose interrelations with ethnicity have rarely been subject to critical scrutiny. Only recently, a series of works have drawn attention to the considerable advantages that would derive from a more comprehensive approach to the topic of religion and ethnicity. Indeed, as Anna Gryzmala-Busse contends, "For scholars of ethnicity and identity, religion presents new analytical challenges."[8]

The main challenge that needs be faced is the alleged uniqueness of religion in shaping identities and, consequently, its comparison and/or intertwining with ethnicity. Constructivist theorists have long argued for considering religion as a functional equivalent for other markers of identity, like race, language, and tribe, which can be situationally activated, without one being more demanding or cogent than the other.[9] Hence, according to this view, religion is conceived of as fungible and not unique in its potential to draw group boundaries and to maintain them. Gryzmala-Busse argues against this position in her work, pointing to the uniqueness of certain aspects of religious identity that make it less interchangeable than other identity markers.[10]

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[7] For works on ethnicity and race: Stephen Cornell and Douglass Hartmann, *Ethnicity and Race: Making Identities in a Changing World* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 1998). For works on ethnicity and nationalism: Rogers Brubaker et al*., Nationalist Politics and Everyday Ethnicity in a Transylvanian Town* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

[8] Anna Gryzmala-Busse, "Why Comparative Politics Should Take Religion (More) Seriously," *Annual Review of Political Science* 15 (2012): 421-442.

[9] For contsructivist approaches to the study of religion and ethnicity: Kanchan Chandra, *Constructivist Theories of Ethnic Politics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012); Daniel N. Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[10] Gryzmala-Busse, 424.

This ongoing discussion among scholars concerning the relationship between religion and ethnicity is not an easily solvable issue for a series of compelling reasons. First, the social constructedness of the heuristic devices we use to confer meaning to the world around us is frequently forgotten. Consequently, much discussion becomes unfruitful if it is not grounded in the basic assumption that both religion and ethnicity are "not things *in* the world, but perspectives *on* the world."[11] Second, even if accepting the theory that posits the functional equivalence of religion and ethnicity, this approach cannot properly explain the salience of one marker over the other in specific situations. In the case analyzed in this thesis, why is there a category Muslim American that is being built and is becoming politically and socially salient? This question cannot be answered in light of constructivist theories, but needs a more comprehensive and nuanced approach. Last but not least, identities are always interactional and, as such, studying identities from the perspective either of their substantive content or of the function of various social and symbolic cleavages, being them religious or ethnic, leads to a neglecting of the pivotal role of symbolic interaction in identity formation.[12] Therefore, the issue of the interrelationship between religion and ethnicity and their role in drawing salient social and symbolic boundaries remains unsettled.

This chapter offers an overview of the scholarly discussion on the topic. By looking first at the macro-categories of ethnicity and religion, the chapter narrows the discussion to the compelling case of Muslim Americans, an area of research that promises to draw insights into the formation mechanisms of religious and ethnic identities and their mutual intertwining. Last but not least, the chapter provides an overview of the scholarly literature on the social function of religious education in the United States, pointing to the novelty of the case of Islamic education and the peculiarities thereof.

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[11] Rogers Brubaker, *Ethnicity Without Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 65.
[12] Robin Williams, *Making Identity Matter. Identity, Society and Social Interaction* (Sociology Press, 2000), 92.

1.1 *The Intertwining of Religion and Ethnicity*

Over the last decades, researchers have devoted increasing attention to the study of social and symbolic boundaries. A pioneer in this fundamental and rising field of research has been the Norwegian social anthropologist Fredrik Barth. He has been the first scholar to systematize the social-scientific study of boundaries, first and foremost by providing an operational definition of his object of analysis, a definition that is influential even today. For Barth, a social boundary is the defining element of ethnic group belonging.[13] Consequently, Barth's work has been considered a milestone in the path towards the elaboration and systematization of constructivist approaches to the study of social boundaries.[14] His main contribution to the topic has been the drastic shift of attention from groups as static events, represented as "culture-bearing units,"[15] to groups as dynamic processes of boundary formation and maintenance. The ethnic groups, he explains, can vary both synchronically and diachronically, but continuity is guaranteed by the maintenance of the boundary between perceived insiders and outsiders.[16] Thus, reproduction mechanisms of social boundaries become the main scholarly focus of attention, regardless of the cultural content that these boundaries are supposed to enclose.[17]

As mentioned above, Barth was interested in the study of a particular kind of boundaries; namely, ethnic boundaries. Indeed, much of the scholarly work on boundaries carried out so far has focused on ethnicity as the preferred site for the study of the mechanisms of boundary formation and boundary maintenance. While research on the "boundary-work" of religious groups has been consistently carried out by sociologists of religion,[18] little attention has been paid thus far to the study of religious boundaries' dynamic and contextual processes of change. Empirical research has

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[13] Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference* (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, [1969] 1994), 15.

[14] Ibid., passim.

[15] Ibid., 11.

[16] Ibid., 15.

[17] Andreas Wimmer, *Ethnic Boundary Making. Institutions, Power, Networks* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 4.

[18] Benjamin T. Gurrentz, "'A Brotherhood of Believers: Religious Identity and Boundary Work in a Christian Fraternity," *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 1 (2014): 113-135.

mainly focused on religious conversions as forms of boundary crossing. Nonetheless, individual boundary crossing does not entail a redefinition of the social boundary itself. On the contrary, individual crossing tends to reinforce existing boundaries, without fostering change or transformations at both the social and the symbolic boundary level.

An explanation for the scholarly neglect of the study of dynamic change in religious boundaries making, and their interplay with ethnic ones, is found in the way ethnicity and religion have been usually conceptualized in the work of Joseph Rothschild[19] and Donald Horowitz.[20] Indeed, Rothschild conceived of ethnicity as an empty umbrella term to which meaning is conferred by the situational activation of different social markers and social cleavages, according to the specific historical and political contingencies. Similarly, Horowitz provides an all-encompassing definition of ethnicity that "embraces differences identified by color, language, religion, or some other attributes of common origin."[21] Hence, in these two comparable formulations, all principles of vision and division of the social world, i.e. race, religion, language, or any other cultural traits, are considered as functionally equivalent in determining the content of the macro-category of ethnicity.[22]

This theoretical tradition of subsuming religion under ethnicity in the study of social boundary making has been embraced by many recent theorists interested in the study of ethnicity and ethnic boundaries. More specifically, both Kanchan Chandra[23] and Andreas Wimmer[24] have recently elaborated their theories by arguing from within a constructivist tradition that touches upon the study of religion only tangentially. Notably, Wimmer attempts to go beyond the usual dichotomy between primordialist and constructivist positions on ethnicity. To this end, he provides a nuanced account that takes into consideration the meso-level of analysis; namely, the role of

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[19] Joseph Rothschild, *Ethnopolitics: A Conceptual Framework* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1981), passim.
[20] Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic Groups in Conflict* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), passim.
[21] Ibid., 41.
[22] Rogers Brubaker, "Religious Dimension of Political Conflict and Violence," *Sociological Theory* 33, no. 1 (2015): 3.
[23] Chandra, passim.
[24] Wimmer, passim.

institutions, power dynamics, and social networks in defining the nested system/s of ethnic boundaries in social actors' daily life.[25]

The work of Wimmer on ethnic boundary making and unmaking draws heavily on the dual conceptualization of social boundaries put forth by Lamont and Molnár.[26] According to these scholars, social boundaries are made up of two distinct components. On the one hand, they identified a categorical dimension that operates primarily at the institutional level; on the other hand, they distinguished a cognitive and behavioral dimension of social boundaries. This latter component makes a social boundary not "a thing *in* the world, but a perspective *on* the world," to quote the famous expression that Rogers Brubaker used to describe ethnicity construed as cognition in one of his works.[27] Indeed, as Andrew Abbott contends, the study of boundary is not a study of entities or "thing-ness," but of "events."[28] In addition, Lamont and Molnár's work is also germane for this discussion insofar as it shows how social boundaries may take on different forms, including symbolic, moral, and religious ones.[29]

The renewed interest for the study of social boundaries has been signaled by the publication of an influential book on the topic by the late American sociologist Charles Tilly.[30] His definition of social boundary is fundamental for the present research for two sets of reasons. First, it takes into serious consideration the dynamic nature of the boundary itself. Second, it postulates the unavoidable social nature of symbolic boundaries, echoing thus the position of Lamont and Molnár.[31] In a nutshell, for Tilly, a social boundary is "any contiguous zone of contrasting density, rapid transition, or separation between internally connected clusters of population and/or activity for which human participants create shared representations."[32] Shared representations, thus, become the

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[25] Wimmer, passim.
[26] Michéle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 167-195.
[27] Rogers Brubaker (2004), 65.
[28] Andrew Abbott, "Things of Boundaries," *Social Research* 62 no. 4 (1995): 873.
[29] Lamont and Molnár, passim.
[30] Charles Tilly. *Identities, Boundaries, and Social Ties* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), passim.
[31] Lamont and Molnár, passim.
[32] Tilly (2005), 134 [Italics in the text].

crucial element defining the limit of the boundary, either ethnic or religious. Shared representations, nonetheless, are in continuous process of modification, thus making the study of ethnic and symbolic boundaries one of the more fruitful sites of research to investigate social group formations.

As for religious boundaries, the absence of research on the topic has been already noted above. Only a few works addressing the issue have recently appeared. Among them, a recent article published by Devin *at al.* called for a greater attention to be paid to religious boundaries as an object of contention, especially when social mobilization is at stake.[33] Even more importantly, Phalet *at al.* have recently tried to apply Wimmer's multi-dimensional model of boundary making to the case of changing religious boundaries by analyzing patterns of belonging among Muslims in Europe.[34] Despite their useful contributions, these articles fail to provide any theoretical solutions concerning the intertwining of religion and ethnicity in boundary making processes. Nevertheless, they are a response to the increasing need to tackle religiously-related issues in many academic disciplines that have traditionally neglected religion due to the quasi-axiomatic character that the secularization thesis has had until very recently.[35]

Why has religion not been taken seriously by scholars of social and symbolic boundaries? As Emerson *et al.* contend in a recent piece, the two academic fields of race and ethnicity, on the one hand, and religion, on the other "rarely talk to each other."[36] The first reason lies in the already discussed tendency to conceive of ethnicity as an inclusive concept, of which religion is just one possible (and situational) component. A second reason for the "religious" shortcoming in the theory of boundary is due to the problems social scientists have encountered in defining religion in

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[33] Joe Devin, Graham K. Brown, and Séverine Deneulin, "Contesting the Boundaries of Religion in Social Mobilization," *Journal of South Asian Development* 10, no. 1 (2015): 22-45.

[34] Karen Phalet, Mieke Maliepaard, Fenella Fleischmann, and Derya Gungor, "The Making and Unmaking of Religious Boundaries. Comparing Turkish and Moroccan Muslim Minorities in European Cities," *Comparative Migration Studies* 1, no. 1 (2013): 123-145.

[35] See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), passim; Steve Bruce, "The Social Process of Secularization." In *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*, ed. Richard K. Fenn (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 249-263.

[36] Michael O. Emerson, Elizabeth Korver-Glenn, and Kiara W. Douds, "Studying Race Shand Religion: A critical Assessment," *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 1, no. 13 (2015): 352.

analytical terms. These definitional problems are twofold. First, religious boundaries are considered as voluntarist, chosen, selected, and, as such, pertaining to a completely different category if compared to other ascribed characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, and sex/gender.[37]

Second, the difficulties in defining religion as a useful and distinct heuristic device have been on the agenda of the social sciences and humanities alike in the last few years. The solutions found to the problem have been diverging, albeit interestingly intertwined. For example, William Cavanaugh has clearly called for the abandonment of any attempt to define religion in trans-historical or transcultural terms.[38] Jeffrey Guhin, instead, has suggested to analytically deal with religion not as a category but rather as a site; namely, "*a location at which we can observe social life*."[39] Last but not least, Paul Lichterman has begged the question of the definition of religion and has suggested to move the attention of the researcher from the religious actor him/herself to religious settings.[40] In fact, according to Lichterman, focusing attention on the religious actor risks misleading the researcher: she/he might consider any action performed by the social actors under investigation as "religious," whereas other variables may be at stake. Interestingly enough, this last observation fits perfectly well with the idea that social boundaries are not fixed, but contextually set according to the different situations (we may be willing to call them "settings" as well),[41] thus creating a series of nested identifications activated only occasionally. This theoretical puzzle can be fruitfully untangled by looking at the dynamic processes of formation of Muslim American identities in the contemporary United States.

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[37] For a more detailed account of the voluntarist/involuntaristic arguments on the various categories of difference, see Rogers Brubaker, *Grounds for Difference* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

[38] William T. Cavanauh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009), 119 [Italics in the text].

[39] Jeffry Guhin, "Religion as Site Rather Than Religion as Category: On the Sociology of Religion Export's Problem," *Sociology of Religion* 75, no. 4 (2014): 579.

[40] Paul R. Lichterman, "Religion in Public Action: From Actors to Settings," *Sociological Theory* 30, no. 1 (2012): 15-36.

[41] Wimmer, passim.

1.2 Muslim Americans in the Literature

The problem identified by Lichterman concerning the risks involved in identifying religious actors as religious tout-court is echoed in Brubaker's observations concerning the term "Muslim," a category that is becoming increasingly used both in academia and in mainstream discourse in an uncritical manner.[42] As he explains, 9/11 and successive historical events have made the category Muslim politically and socially, and consequently theoretically, salient. Hence, the external categorization ascribed to Muslims has shifted from a mainly ethno-national to a predominantly religious one. The external categorization has dialectically played a role in influencing the self-identification of the social actors themselves. Nonetheless, as Brubaker puts it, "people who identify as Muslims (like those who identify with any other religion) do not identify *only* or *always* as Muslims, and they may not identify *primarily* as Muslims, though some of course do."[43]

The category Muslim becomes increasingly complex in the case of the United States, where its heterogeneity is determined not only by ethno-national differences, but also by religious and racial ones. Indeed, as John Esposito put it, "[t]he Muslims of America are far from homogeneous in their composition and in their attitudes and practices. Islam in America is a mosaic of many ethnic, racial, and national groups."[44] In 2007, the Pew Research Center reported that "No single racial group constitutes a majority among the Muslim American population."[45] The variety described by the report is astounding. Only to cite a few data, Muslim Americans are 38% white, 26% black, 20% Asian and 16% mixed, a diversity that bears considerable weight in determining the peculiarities of American Islam.[46]

One of the main divisions among the American *umma* is that between an indigenous Islam, represented by African American converts, and immigrant Islam, typified by Arab or Asian

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[42] Rogers Brubaker, "Categories of Analysis and Categories of Practice: A Note on the Study of Muslims in European Countries of Immigration," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2012): 2.
[43] Ibid., 6.
[44] Yvonne Y. Haddad and John L. Esposito, *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.
[45] *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, Pew Research Center (May 22, 2007), 17.
[46] Pew Research Center (2007), 17. Data collected through self-reporting questionnaires.

immigrants (but not limited to them).[47] Far from being a monolithic cultural container, the American *umma* appears to be internally divided in many ways. According to Amina Wadud, the inner division between African-American Islam and immigrant Islam is due to the different past experience that the two groups have gone through.[48] On the one hand, African-American Islam is marked by the common trauma of slavery; on the other, immigrant Islam shares the common immigration experience and numerous transnational networks.[49]

The sociological literature on the subject of Muslim American identity has either focused on immigrant Islam or on African-American Islam. Few research has been carried out so far concerning religious and ethnic boundaries reconfiguration within the Muslim American community, and the few ones that are available mainly take a priori the race divide as the salient boundary along which patterns of exclusion are established.[50] Two recent important contributions for the development of a critical study of internal boundaries within Muslim Americans are constituted by the works of Saher Selod, on the one hand,[51] and Hakim Zainiddinov, on the other.[52] Both investigate racial dynamics that are affecting Muslim Americans, albeit from two different but complementary perspectives. Selod focuses on the degree to which Muslims in America are racialized from "the outside" as a consequence of recent historical events. According to Selod, a religious identity (i.e., being Muslim) "contribute[s] to the racialization of a group,"[53] that is thus denied access to citizenship and to whiteness.

Although Selod's sample is constituted by Arab Americans, i.e. immigrants or individuals with a recent family immigration history from an Arab country, the effects of this form of external discrimination affect also other groups that identify as Muslim Americans. This is exactly the

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[47] Wadud, 271.
[48] Ibid., 280.
[49] Grewal (2014), passim.
[50] Jamillah A. Karim, "To Be Black, Female, and Muslim: A Candid Conversation about Race in the American Ummah," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2006): 225-233.
[51] Saher Selod, "Citizenship Denied: The Racialization of Muslim American Men and Women post-9/11," *Critical Sociology* 41, no. 1 (2015): 77-95.
[52] Hakim Zainiddinov, "Racial and Ethnic Differences in Perceptions of Discrimination among Muslim Americans," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (2016): 1-21.
[53] Selod (2015), 79.

perspective adopted by Zainiddinov in his research. Interestingly, Zainiddinov does not treat the Muslim American macro-category as a homogenous one. Rather, he investigates different perceptions of discrimination among different Muslim racial and ethnic groups.

Despite these few attempts, the field of study of Muslim Americans' forms of identification and "boundary-work" is still at an initial stage and mostly adopting an exclusionary perspective, neglecting case studies that point towards a process of inclusive blurring. Indeed, only recently Islam has become visible in American public sphere sparking off interest in a research field that remains still fragmentary.[54] Work on boundaries in educational settings has been recently carried out by Diane Shammas, albeit only at the level of college campus communities.[55] The main issue investigated by Shammas relates to the reasons why Muslim and Arab students tend to form ethnic and religious separate groups of peers on university campuses, mainly as a consequence of the perceived discrimination.[56] Does the perceived discrimination lead to "ethnic clustering," thus alleviating the suffering experienced as a result of discrimination? Or does formation of ethnic groups lead to increased discrimination?[57] Although highly interesting, Shammas' research begs the question of the difference between the Arab category (an ethnic category) and being Muslim (a religious category). She is interested neither in showing the situationality of identifications along religious or ethnic lines nor in analyzing the internal divisions and/or unity of the American *umma*. Rather, she is interested in investigating whether discrimination comes ex ante or ex post the process of ethnic clustering.

Other recent works have tried to account for the construction of an American Muslim form of identity as a normative term rather than one reflecting current social dynamics, paying attention to the role that generalized social stigma plays in processes of identity formation. Indeed, as Yvonne Haddad has long argued in her works, the experience of Muslim Americans in the United States

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[54] Bilici, 19.
[55] Shammas, passim.
[56] Ibid., 69.
[57] Ibid., 68.

may be considered different from that of other immigrants due to the general climate of hostility that has historically surrounded Islam.[58] Thus, taking Islamophobia seriously, Anna Mansson McGinty has carried out a study on Muslim geographies in the United States, arguing in favor of a conceptualization of the Muslim American category as a politicized term to which Muslim leaders refer to as a counter-narrative strategy to combat the widespread Islamophobia. As she herself contends, reference to a politicized 'American Muslimness' "exemplifies a subordinate group's participation in assimilation discourse, the ongoing negotiation of what 'Americanness' constitutes and who belongs to the American polity and social life."[59] Even though her analysis does not take into consideration the specificity of the boundary work at stake in the process of the creation or reconfiguration of a Muslim American identity, she interestingly points to the dialectical interrelations existing between perceived prejudice in the broader society and mechanisms of stigma management that include the creation of a politicized Muslim American category for identification.

In the field of social psychology, instead, a work on stigma management germane for the analysis here presented is that of the American sociologist John O'Brien. In his analysis on strategies of stigma management rehearsals carried out by a group of Muslim youths at the Islamic Center of Southern California, in Los Angeles, he highlights the positive role that "backstage work" on stigmatization plays in coping with a socially stigmatized identity, as is that of Muslim in the contemporary American environment.[60] To the commonly recognized strategies of stigma management, i.e. passing, disclosure, and disavowal, O'Brien adds the fourth one of rehearsal, further subdivided into deep education and direct preparation.[61] The categories identified by O'Brien seems to be insufficient for the analysis of parental choice in Islamic education as

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[58] Yvonne Y. Haddad, "The Dynamics of Islamic Identity in North America," in Haddad and Esposito (2000), 20.
[59] Anna Mansson McGinty, "The 'Mainstream Muslim' Opposing Islamophobia: Self-Representations of American Muslims," *Environment and Planning A* 44 (2012): 2970.
[60] John O'Brien, "Spoiled Group Identities and Backstage Work: A Theory of Stigma Management Rehearsal," *Social Psychology Quarterly* 74, n. 3 (2011): 291-309.
[61] Ibid., 292.

investigated in this research. Through the analysis of the empirical data presented in Chapter 4, a further analytical category of postponement will be added to account for stigma management strategies in schooling choice by the parents interviewed for this research.

To sum up, the phenomenon of Muslim American identity is an interesting case in which religious and ethnic boundaries intertwine. The category Muslim, traditionally a religious one, has become salient in an American environment increasingly affected by the challenges of religious diversity.[62] Nonetheless, identities are never fixed and given. Rather, they are interactionally constructed.[63] As such, the American Muslim identity must be conceived of as an ongoing process, dialectically interrelated with the broader society in which it is to operate as a meaningful category. Specifically, the United States is a place where Islam is not the majoritarian religion, thus leading Muslims to a reconceptualization of what it means to be Muslims in America both for themselves and for their offspring.

1.3 The Role of Religious Schools in the United States

Educational institutions are a privileged point from which to investigate the making and unmaking of ethnic and religious boundaries within the broader and increasingly politicized macro-category of Muslim Americans. The literature exploring cultural reproduction goes back to the work of Louis Althusser and Karl Marx,[64] but only with the work of Pierre Bourdieu the systematic study of the role of educational institutions in social reproduction achieves a systematization in sociological theory.[65] As Bourdieu himself asserted, "the patterns informing the thought of a given period can be fully understood only by reference to the school system, which is alone capable of establishing

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[62] Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), passim.

[63] Rogers Brubaker even suggests abandoning the analytical term "identity" in favor of that of "identification" so as to avoid reifying connotations usually associated with the term. See: Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity'," *Theory and Society* 9, no. 1 (Feb. 2000): 296.

[64] Chris Jenks, *Culture* (London: Routledge, 1993), 120.

[65] Ibid., 128.

them and developing them, through practice, as the habits of thought common to a whole generation."[66]

Bourdieu's work is among the first to show the inextricable link that exists between cultural and social reproduction. Education serves the purpose of cultural reproduction, where culture is intended as the totality of semiotic systems that can be present in societies, including language. This broader definition of culture as agent of social reproduction makes it possible to include religious schools within the broader framework of institutions that serve the purpose of reproducing certain semiotic systems. But, as Émile Durkheim argued, cultural reproduction can be either phenotypical or genotypical. In the former case, reproduction is mechanical and there is no room for innovation or positive transformation. In the latter case, reproduction is "positive and vibrant,"[67] and a catalyst for change.

Neglecting the double function of educational institutions, the phenotypical and the genotypical dimensions in Bourdieusian terms, contemporary literature on Islamic private schools in the United States has focused on the "cultural reproduction" of religious identity as their main goal and their main *raison d'être*.[68] Nonetheless, educational institutions can also be agents of social change. The case of the schools under investigation in this research addresses a significant gap in the literature on Islamic education in the United States by looking at these institutions both as loci and agents of religious and ethnic boundary making and unmaking.

The existing literature on religious schooling in the United States is heavily centered around the analysis of Jewish Day Schools. One of the reasons for this specific focus is the long-standing tradition of Jewish private education in the United States, contrary to the Islamic counterpart which is a fairly recent phenomenon. Theories on Jewish Day Schools have pointed to the centrality of

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[66] Pierre Bourdieu, "Systems of Education and Systems of Thought," in *Knowledge and Control. New Directions for the Sociology of Education* edited by Michael F. D. Young (New York, NY: Collier-Macmillan, 1971), 128-129.
[67] Jenks , 122.
[68] Michael Merry, *Culture, Identity, and Islamic Schooling. A Philosophical Approach* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), passim.

cultural and religious continuity that these schools guarantee.[69] As Alvin I. Schiff wrote, "Continuity indicates the state or quality of being *continuous*. It denotes the fact that Jewish life is an uninterrupted succession of Jewish people and events."[70] The cultural and religious continuity warranted by private religious schools is mirrored in the higher level of "Jewishness" of students in Jewish private schools when compared to those who attend public schools, where "Jewishness" is measured in the form of "ritual behavior, having Jewish friends, being married to a Jewish spouse, visiting Israel."[71]

Mutatis mutandis, the trope of cultural and religious continuity can be applied also to the case of Islamic education in the United States. Nevertheless, in the data analysis carried out in Chapter 4 the term continuity will be put under critical scrutiny. Indeed, continuity highlights the role of schools as agents of social reproduction, whereas it overshadows the room for innovation that leads to social change (the genotypical reproduction in Durkheimian terms), both at the local and the global level.[72] Cultural reproduction and change are two sides of the same coin and need be theoretically tackled by acknowledging their dialectical relationship. Indeed, as Joao Fernandes pointed out, "[s]chools enjoy a relative (limited) autonomy in relation to the economic production system, the State, the dominant class and other dominant social groups (dominant race, ethnic groups and gender)."[73] Which are the elements of continuity and which those of reproduction in the reconfiguration of a Muslim American identity in the schools under investigation? What does it mean to build a positive Muslim American identity? And why do parents decide to send their children to these schools? By providing an answer to these questions, the main theoretical concern of the making and unmaking of religious and ethnic boundaries that this thesis addresses will be

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[69] Alvin I. Schiff, "Jewish Continuity Through Jewish Education: A Human Resource Imperative," *Journal of Jewish Education* 48, no. 2 (1980): 5-53.
[70] Ibid., 5.
[71] Stuart Schoenfeld, "Jewish Education and Jewish Continuity in the United States and Canada: A Political Culture Perspective," *Journal of Jewish Education* 65, no. 1-2 (1999): 60.
[72] Peter Mandaville, "Transnational Muslim Solidarities in Everyday Life," in *Nations and Nationalism* 17, no. 1 (2011): 7-24.
[73] Joao V. Fernandes, "From the Theories of Social and Cultural Reproduction to the Theory of Resistance," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 9, no. 2 (1988): 170.

investigated. In the next chapter, the methodology and the sample chosen for addressing these

questions is presented.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Research Design

The present research addresses two main and interconnected research questions. On the one hand, the analysis will focus on the way in which progressive Islamic schools aim to build a positive Muslim American identity at a time of heightened prejudice against Muslims in the country and the way in which prejudice and social stigma shape the boundaries of the Muslim American identity. On the other hand, this research investigates the individuals' reasons behind the decision to send their children to private Islamic schools, and the New Horizon specifically, linking their decision to the situational, relational, and contingent nature of nested ethnic and religious boundaries in the daily life of the parents that decide to send their offspring to progressive Islamic schools. I believe that these two levels of analysis, the institutional and the individual one, complement each other in trying to shed light on the mechanisms of ethnic and religious boundary making and unmaking among Muslim Americans in light of the social stigma that targets Muslims in the United States.

Thus, the analysis will take into account both the institutional dimension and the individual one. In order to investigate the institutional dimension, a small set of expert interviews has been conducted; namely with (1) the Imam of the Islamic Center of Southern California, (2) the school principal of New Horizon School Los Angeles (NHLA), (3) the religious studies program coordinator at New Horizon School West Side (NHWS), and (4) an elementary-level teacher at NHLA. Expert interviews provide useful background material to study the institutional discourse of schools that put at the center of their mission the construction of a positive Muslim American identity. Expert interviews are chosen to analyze the institutional level since, as Uwe Flick points out, the expert "interviewees are of less interest as a (whole) person than their capacity as expert of a certain field of activity,"[74] thus being referred to in the research as representing the institution and the institutional discourse. Specifically, the institutional level of analysis will provide a descriptive

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[74] Uwe Flick, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2009), 165.

more than an explanatory perspective and, as such, these interviews provide useful material for the background section of the thesis in Chapter 3.

As for the individual level of analysis, the general idea guiding both the sampling and the interview template follows Andreas Wimmer's suggestion of de-ethnicizing research designs in order to fruitfully study processes of boundary formation, change, or dissolution.[75] Indeed, Wimmer suggests to choose "alternative units of observation"[76] as to avoid the theoretically dangerous mistake of conferring to ethnic boundaries an importance that is not in conformity with the social reality of the individuals under investigation. As such, the unit from which the recruitment and the sampling have been carried out is broadly that of parents sending their kids to the New Horizon schools, without concentrating on any particular religious or ethnic group, thus allowing the researcher to better investigate situational and relational patterns of social boundaries formation without assuming them ex ante. As suggested by Wimmer, "choosing individuals of varying backgrounds as units of analysis, without prearranging them into ethnic groups"[77] provides a good technique to de-ethnicize the research design.

The kinds of interviews that have been carried out with parents are semi-structured qualitative interviews. The choice of the methodology is justified insofar as semi-structured interviews allow for a great degree of flexibility while, at the same time, providing a blueprint for addressing the main topics the researcher deems important to explore during the interviews as to fulfil the main research needs.[78] First, the choice of the qualitative method based on interviewing is grounded on the idea that individuals *qua* social actors are the relevant units of analysis for investigating personal experiences and meanings.[79] Moreover, the ethnic and religious boundaries at the center of my investigation possess both a categorical and a social behavioral component. While the

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[75] Wimmer, 38.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Ibid.
[78] Alan Bryman, "Interviewing in Qualitative Research," in *Social Research Method,* ed. Alan Bryman (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 439.
[79] Uwe Flick*, Designing Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2007), 111.

categorical component can be investigated at the institutional level, the social/behavioral one can be analyzed only by accessing the social actors' perspective of the visions and divisions operating in their social world.

Second, the choice of semi-structured interviews, among the various typologies of interviews available, is justified by the higher degree of topical control that semi-structured interviews allow for. While incentivizing the natural flow of speech and valuing possible alternative trajectories and deviations, the question template will ensure: a) the collection of the necessary data to analyze boundary making/unmaking processes; and b) the possibility of analytical comparisons between the interviewees of the sampling.

2.1 Semi-Structured Interviews: The Template

As a fluid instrument of data collection, semi-structured interviews are less fixed than generally assumed. Particularly, the boundaries between in-depth, non-structured interviews, and semi-structured ones are highly blurred. As such, Table 1 provided below summarizes the main guidelines for the topics through which I was able to investigate the construction and de-construction of social boundaries in the different daily-life situations of the interviewees. The methodology, nonetheless, leaves room for creativity, deviations, and improvisation.

Table 1: Question template

1)	How did you decide to send your kid/s to the New Horizon School and how has it been so far?
2)	What do you like the most about the schools?
3)	Does/do your kid/s attend other extra-school activities?
4)	How do you usually spend the days off from school?
5)	How do you spend your leisure time? Which are your hobbies?
6)	Do you attend any mosque here in Los Angeles?
7)	What about your best friend? How is he/she?
8)	Do you have any relatives here?
9)	Do you perceive that something has changed in the country after Trump's election?

10) Have you ever perceived some form of stigmatization and/or discrimination here in Los Angeles or somewhere else in the United States or abroad?
11) Is there anything else you would like to add?

2.2 Table of Interviewees and Sampling Method

Table 2: Sample of Interviewees

Interviewee	Gender	Country	Classification
No. 1	Female	Italy	Convert
No. 2	Female	Afghanistan	First generation immigrant
No. 3	Female	Bangladesh	First generation immigrant
No. 4	Female	African American	Second generation convert
No. 5	Male	Egypt	First generation immigrant
No. 6	Female	Netherlands	Convert
No. 7	Female	Palestine	First generation immigrant
No. 8	Female	Palestine	First generation immigrant
No. 9	Male	Egypt	First generation immigrant
No. 10	Female	Egypt	First generation immigrant

The sampling methods utilized for carrying out this empirical research was mainly made up of two different strategies. For expert interviews, I relied on contacting directly the persons interviewed via email or phone, setting up appointments in their offices. For the sample of parents, I relied on snowball sampling as the main sample-building technique. Snowball sampling is a common method for recruitment of interviewees in qualitative research projects. This is especially true in cases in which an etic approach to research is chosen. Indeed, as an outsider to the group under investigation, i.e. Muslim Americans, I had to rely on the help of a gatekeeper in order to gain access to the community and reach the number of research participants that would lead to the achievement of theoretical saturation.

The interviews have all been conducted in English, apart from occasional switches to Arabic and Italian in specific cases. The medium through which the interviews have been carried out varied. Most of them have been face-to-face interviews. Two interviews have been conducted on the phone. The first has been conducted on the phone for problems with meeting up in person due to difficulties in arranging a face-to-face meeting. The second phone interview was carried out on the phone due to technical problems with the recording during the first face-to-face meeting. The length of the interviews varies from 34 minutes to 1 hour and 22 minutes.

2.3 Data Analysis

Grounded Theory is the preferred approach of the present thesis to research design and data analysis. A methodology first developed by Glaser and Strauss in the 1960s, Grounded Theory further developed during the 1980s and became a useful and flexible method of research, able to integrate the theoretical and the empirical level of analysis by putting the two in mutual conversation.[80] According to Timmernans and Tavory, Grounded Theory offers "an analytical choreography" between data and theory, empiricism and abstraction, hence resulting in a "dance [that] emerges from lived experiences, actions, observations, and conversations while simultaneously engaging in a conceptually dense and theoretically abstract writing."[81]

The methodology that I use to analyze my interviews is Qualitative Content Analysis. I have chosen this method of data analysis because it allows me to subdivide my data in topical groups, thus "reducing the amount of material" to investigate as to focus on "selected aspects of meaning"[82] that are fundamental for answering the main research question/s. While leaving room for flexibility, this method helps me organize my material coherently through the use of coding frames. Coding

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[80] Stefan Timmermans and Iddo Tavory, "Advancing Ethnocgraphic Research through Grounded Theory Practice," in *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory,* eds. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2011), 3.
[81] Ibid., 4.
[82] Magrit Schreier, "Qualitative Content Analysis," in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis,* ed. Uwe Flick (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 170.

frame elaboration has been an ongoing process: each interview helped me revise, reconsider, and adjust the coding frames that seem to provide useful material for answering my research questions.

2.4 Limitations

A few observations need be made in order to recognize the limitations that resulted from the research in general and the research methodology in particular. The first and most compelling issue to address is the fact that I am a non-Muslim researcher. Opinions among scholars have been highly different concerning what anthropologists have called emic and etic approaches. In a nutshell, while some have praised the outsider perspective by highlighting the willingness of the people subject to analysis to explain themselves, their worlds, and their systems of meanings, others have contended that an insider researcher would be more appropriate to understand and account for the worldviews of the members of his/her group.

Paul Lichterman reports having had a positive experience while conducting his field research among Protestant community service groups. By presenting himself as an interested Jewish sociologist, most of the time he managed to receive positive feedback from insiders willing to explain their worldviews to him. As he himself puts it, "as a non-Christian, I consider myself particularly well disposed to learn […] by taking as interesting what other scholars raised as Christians might take for granted."[83] In my research, I adopted Lichterman's position, trying to portray myself as an interested outsider. Nonetheless, I am aware that this can be a double-edge sword. It can lead to openness on the part of the interviewees or, on the contrary, to a greater closure.

The second order of problems comes from the nature of qualitative research as such. In fact, according to some theories, the small sample at my disposal and the specific institutions under investigation do not allow for macro-generalization of the research results to American Muslims as

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[83] Paul R. Lichterman, *Elusive Togetherness: Church Groups Trying to Bridge American Division* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), 5.

a whole. The issue of generalization in qualitative research designs is a highly debated issue among theorists. For the present research, a *moderatum* generalization perspective is preferred.[84] By *moderatum* generalization perspective theorists mean an approach to generalization that sets itself as a medium way between interpretivist approaches, typical of qualitative analysis, which deny any possibility of generalization, and quantitative designs that encourage "total or axiomatic generalizations."[85] As Payne and Williams assert, "Qualitative research methods can produce an intermediate type of limited generalization,"[86] i.e. the *moderatum* generalization. This is the approach to generalization of research result adopted in the present research.

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[84] Geoff Payne and Malcom Williams, "Generalization in Qualitative Research," in *Sociology* 39, no. 2 (2005): 295-314.
[85] Ibid., 295.
[86] Ibid., 296.

Chapter 3: Islam and Muslim Education in the United States

3.1 Competing Visions of American Islam

Exact estimates of the number of Muslims living in the United States are not available given the prohibition to ask questions about one's religious affiliation in the U.S. Census.[87] Nonetheless, The Pew Research Center carried out an interesting survey in 2007 to approximately provide an account of the internal differences characterizing the Muslim population living in the United States. According to the survey, 65% of Muslims living in the United States are first generation immigrants, with a high proportion coming from Arab countries; 20% of American Muslims are of African-American descent and are mostly convert.[88] In addition, we find a small but rapidly increasing number of American-born Latino converts.[89] The last survey carried out on American Muslims and published by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) in 2017 confirmed that American Muslims are the most ethnically diverse faith community in the United States, with no group or ethnicity which is numerically over-represented, thus attesting to its non-dimished internal complexity.[90]

As Kambiz GhaneaBassiri asserts, "[t]he United States is undoubtedly a microcosm of the world's Muslim population."[91] And Los Angeles, among the many American megalopolis, constitutes a microcosm of the microcosm itself, characterized by a huge Iranian presence but not limited to it.[92] Although Muslims in Los Angeles do not differentiate themselves from Muslims in other parts of the United States, Los Angeles presents certain peculiarities that make it an

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[87] Pew Research Center (2007), foreword.

[88] Ibid., 1.

[89] Lisa Viscidi, "Latino Muslims a Growing Presence in America," *The Washington Report on Middle East Affairs* 22, no. 5 (June 2003): 56-59.

[90] Data retrieved from "American Muslim Poll 2017: Muslims at the Crossroads," *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding* (2017), Retrieved from: http://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/AMP-2017-Key-Findings_Final.pdf

[91] Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order* (New York, NY: Oxford Unjversity Press, 2010), 2.

[92] See Table 1.1. in Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *Competing Visions of Islam in the United States* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 18.

interesting and fruitful field of research for investigating the processes through which a form of American Islam is constructed in everyday life.[93] Among its distinguishing characteristics, two are worth mentioning for the sake of our analysis. First, the immigrant Muslim presence in the city is relatively recent, dating back to the past thirty or forty years.[94] Second, the ethnic composition of the Muslim immigrant population is far more varied than that of other American cities that present one or more specific form/s of ethnic clustering.[95]

This diverse American-Islamic microcosm gives rise to competing visions concerning how to "be Muslim" in America. As GhaneaBassiri writes, "[i]ndigenous Muslims and Muslims from all over the world dwell here [in Los Angeles] and practice multiple forms of the religion known as 'Islam'."[96] The cleavages that separate the American *umma* are mainly of two types: on the one hand we find the ethnic divides; on the other we encounter the religious ones. As for the ethnic divides, the main cleavage is that between "immigrant" and "indigenous" Islam. The former encompasses Arab and non-Arab immigrants. The latter is made up by African-Americans and converts. As Jamillah Karim puts it, "ideally a symbol of unity and solidarity, the *ummah* in America is marked by ethnic and racial divides."[97] These divides are often neglected by researchers who, most of the time, treat the Muslim American group as a homogeneous minority.[98]

The presence of Islam in the United Sates dates back to the time during which African Muslims were brought to America as slaves.[99] Nonetheless, some scholars have argued that the process of Americanization of Islam as an indigenous religion has started after the more recent wave of immigration from Arab countries of the 1960s.[100] In fact, in 1965 the United States passed a law that increased the number of accepted lawful immigrants from Arab countries.[101] This

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[93] GhaneaBassiri (1997), 18.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Karim, 225.
[98] Zainiddinov, 3.
[99] GhaneaBassiri (2010), 29.
[100] Bilici, passim.
[101] GhaneaBassiri (2010), 273.

increase in Arab Muslim presence had two main consequences. On the one hand, it placed more weight onto Islam in America in terms of population numbers. On the other hand, it accentuated the degree of diversification of forms and interpretations of Islam.

The latter point is of particular importance for the purpose of the analysis here presented because the encounter on the American soil of various forms of Islam led immigrants to reconsider their idea of Islam as a monolithic entity shared by all members of the community of the faithful. This newly-experienced diversity led Muslims in America to engage "in a range of boundary work."[102] This boundary work entails the reconfiguration of the ethnic and religious boundaries that characterize the American Muslim identity. From an analytical point of view, the American Muslim identity should be conceived of as a work-in-progress, a process more than an entity, constructed at both institutional and individual level through a dialectic process of symbolic boundary making that reconfigures the meaning of "us" and "them" both within American Muslims and between American Muslims as a unitary macro-category and the surrounding American environment.[103]

As GhaneaBassiri already noticed in 1997 in his study on American Muslims in Los Angeles, one striking finding is that the doctrinal and ideological differences between Sunnis and Shi'is are often neglected or downplayed in the American environment.[104] Looking at this phenomenon through the lenses of social and symbolic boundaries, it seems that a process of redefinition of relevant religious boundaries is in place. Andreas Wimmer has long studied social boundaries, mainly paying attention to ethnic boundary making processes.[105] Among the processes identified by Wimmer, the mechanism of boundary blurring fits the phenomenon investigated by GhaneaBassiri.

In addition, the process of boundary blurring plays a role also in the redefinition of the various ethnic divides. Although ethnic differences remain salient, especially in the case of the divide between immigrant Islam and African-American Islam, Mucahit Bilici has shown how the

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[102] Bilici, 19.
[103] Ibid., 20.
[104] GhaneaBassiri (1997), 61.
[105] Wimmer, 81.

spatial redefinition of Islam in America has led to a certain degree of convergence of these two macro-groups. As he himself asserts, "there has been a growing compatibility between the two groups' theological discourses. Initially ethnic or racial, they have both increasingly become religious."[106] Thus, although the African-American Muslim experience has been dramatically different in a historical perspective,[107] this does not imply that researchers should uncritically accept the inevitability of an internal dichotomy in the Muslim American community between immigrant Islam and indigenous Islam. Literature on the topic has mainly adopted a perspective aimed at highlighting processes of exclusion between immigrant and African-American Islam, mostly neglecting the many cases in which ethnic boundaries are reconfigured in a much more inclusive fashion, [108] as seems to be the case with the institutions and social actors investigated for the present research.

As observed by Lori Peek, religion is becoming a much more important basis for identification than other variables such as ethnicity, nationality, or race. Among the various reasons she identified to explain this phenomenon, we find: a) the aptness of the immigration experience in the framework of a theological discourse; b) the fundamental social functions of religion in conferring meaning to social order; c) the role that religion can play in "eas[ing] the tensions caused by incongruent immigrant, ethnic, and American identities"; and d) the distinctive social identity that religious affiliation guarantees in multicultural America.[109] In her study on a sample of second-generation Muslim university students, Peek investigated the three-stage process of embracement of a religious identity among her sample, highlighting the mechanisms through which religion transforms into the main identitarian referent for certain groups of Muslim Americans.

The preeminence of religion as a referent for identity construction is identifiable in the words of the Imam of the Islamic Center of Southern California in Los Angeles, Shaykh Asim Buyuksoy.

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[106] Bilici, 61.
[107] Haddad and Esposito (2000), 10.
[108] Among the few exceptions we find: Numrich, passim.
[109] Lori A. Peek, "Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity," *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 3 (2005): 218-219.

In fact, he explained that the Center is built on the idea of being accessible to everyone, regardless of ethnic or religious differences. Answering my question of whether the Center was Sunni or Shi'a, he made clear that they refuse any kind of labelling. Undoubtedly, the Center is still predominantly run by Sunni and immigrant leaders. Nonetheless, a process of religious boundary blurring seems to be in place, at least at the categorical and symbolic level, if not yet at the social one.[110] Due to this openness to religious and ethnic differences, the Center is called by its attendees "Sushi" mosque, as a married couple of first generation Egyptian immigrants reported during an interview. But how is this translated in the education practices of the schools founded by the Islamic Center of Southern California?

3.2 The Case of Islamic Education

On April 7th, 2017, during the Khutba at the Islamic Center of Southern California, Dr. Khaled Abu el-Fadl warned the audience about the risk of losing the Islamic faith and the Islamic values in the American environment. He claimed that, should Muslims refrain from building solid Islamic institutions, "[their] children will not even remember that they are Muslims."[111] Dr. Abu el-Fadl emphasized the pivotal role that Islamic education plays in guaranteeing the continuity of the Islamic system of belief in a society where being Muslim stops being a taken-for-granted issue and becomes a question of choice, instead.

The fear of losing the Islamic identity is a common trope among Muslim Americans, both immigrants and natives. Indeed, as Susan Douglass and Ann el-Moslimany argue, parents are scared that "their children will lose knowledge of and loyalty to Islam if sent to public schools […]."[112] Consequently, the first Islamic institutions of education were built already in the 1930s by

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[110] To recall the distinction elaborated by Lamont and Molnár in their work (2002) as reported in the first chapter.

[111] Dr. Khaled Abu el-Fadl, *Khutba*, Islamic Center of Southern California, Los Angeles (April 7th, 2017), retrieved from: http://www.icsconline.org/media/khutbas/April72017.mp3

[112] Susan Douglass and Ann el-Moslimany, "Principles of Democracy in American Islamic Schools," in *Philosophies of Islamic Education: Historical Perspectives and Emerging Discourses*, eds. Mujadad Zaman and Nadeem A. Memon (Routledge, 2016), 188.

the Nation of Islam movement.[113] Despite the esoteric and heterodox character of the Nation of Islam movement during the years of Elijah Muhammad, the schools later embraced Sunni theology under the leadership of Warith Deen Mohammed. With the increase in Arab immigration to the United States in the 1960s, a period of expansion of Islamic education started, particularly from the 1980s onwards.[114]Among the Islamic schools founded in this period we find the four New Horizon Schools in the Greater Los Angeles Area. The closest to the Islamic Center of Southern California is the New Horizon School Los Angeles (NHLA hereafter). Its building is situated right adjacent to the Islamic Center of Southern California (ICSC), an area highly populated by the immigrant Bangladeshi community. But the sample on which this research is based encompasses also the New Horizon School West Side (NHWS hereafter), located nearby Culver City in an area increasingly populated by Japanese immigrants.

The motive of preserving one's Muslim identity in a predominantly non-Muslim environment has been accompanied by the increasing visibility that the category of practice "Muslim" has acquired in the American political discourse, particularly after the watershed events of 9/11.[115] Muslims have been increasingly referred to as the meaningful Other of the West, a process that has also influenced their own self-representation, thus making the category "Muslim" a salient one in the contemporary American environment.[116] As Yvonne Haddad asserts, "[t]here can be little doubt of the reverberations of the event [9/11] in all spheres of American life in general and in the lives of Muslims and Arabs in particular."[117]

The institutions of Islamic education that have been mushrooming in the country aim at fostering religious knowledge in children. Most of the times, these private schools follow closely

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[113] Zareena A. Grewal and R. David Coolidge, "Islamic Education in the United States: Debates, Practices, and Institutions," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam,* eds. Juliane Hammer and Omid Safi (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press), 248.
[114] Ibid., 250.
[115] Fethi Mansouri, Michele Lobo and Amelia Johns, "Addressing the 'Muslim' Question," *Journal of Muslim Minorities* 35, no.:2 (2015): 165.
[116] Abubaker Y. Al-Shingiety, "The Muslim as the 'Other': Representation and Self-Image of the Muslims in North America," in *The Muslims of America*, ed. Yvonne Y Haddad (Cary, US: Oxford University Press, 1994), 53.
[117] Haddad, (2011), 1.

state-mandated curricula, with the addition of extra teaching hours dedicated entirely to the study of Islam and of the Arabic language.[118] In the specific case of the NH schools, the usual, state-mandated curriculum approved by the state of California is complemented by the addition of one hour and a half everyday of religious studies during which the children devote themselves to the study of the Arabic language, the memorization of the Qur'an, or the learning of basic Islamic values through various forms of storytelling based on the life of the Prophet. Moreover, Islamic schools frequently pursue the explicit aim of cultivating a positive Muslim-American identity in children. Nevertheless, in the case of NHLA, the principal, Jolanda Hussein-Hendriks, explained to me that, behind this statement of good intents, much is done to nurture a positive and proud Muslim identity, whereas, on the contrary, the American side of that identity is often tacitly left unaddressed. In her own words,

> So, again I am on the record… not all parents would agree with me, but we are not preparing them for the American Muslim identity […] and what I see is for example the fifth grade next year they are going to be in public school. So, they are going to learn in middle school about sexual education, we should do that here, before they leave, because then you can prepare them for what they are going to hear there… just a topic… or drugs, alcohol, or sexuality... we need to prepare them here and we are not doing that, so that is… I intend to… for the next school year, I am thinking maybe I can do a little something before the end of the year, but to set up like a life skills series… really preparing them for being an American Muslim. (Principal NHLA)

As Jolanda Hussein-Hendriks explains, the American side of the hyphenated identity is not the main concern of the school. Preservation and consolidation of the Islamic side of it seems to be the crucial task the school is carrying out. This recalls Grewal and Coolidge's assertion that "the Muslim-majority school environment creates an Islamic ethos that normalizes Islamic practices and cultivates pride and a strong 'Muslim-first' identity in students."[119] In fact, the American side of the identity is not the one under threat in the American environment. America has been constructed on the idea of diversity; consequently, maintaining one's particular religious and/or ethnic identity is

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[118] Grewal and Coolidge (2013), 251.
[119] Ibid.

perceived as an integral part of being American. As Michael Walzer asserts, "the people are Americans only by virtue of having come together. And whatever identity they had before becoming American, they retain (or, better, they are free to retain) after."[120] Nonetheless, the non-American side of the hyphenated identity is the one perceived to be in need to be cultivated, as is the case with the Muslim side of the Muslim American identity. Or, to better put it, in need to be harmonized with its American counterpart.

In another school that has been an object of empirical investigation during my field study period in Los Angeles, The New Horizon School West Side (NHWS), the stated mission of the school is to "inspire excellence through rigorous academics and the promotion of universal moral values in a progressive Islamic environment. We nurture a positive American Muslim identity, a devotion to God, and a strong commitment to family and diversity in a global community."[121] Asked directly about the mission of the school during one of my expert interviews, the head of the religious studies program commented:

> Our mission… we just want to nurture and bring out our Muslim children to be effective members of their community… the larger community as the American community… we want them to come out with self-esteem, the American Muslim identity… to be proud of who they are at the same time not to be separated from the larger community… so we do a lot of outreach programs so they know they are Muslims but they also know that the outside world is not like a bubble. (Religious Study Coordinator, NHWS)

A series of interesting observations arise from both the statements of the principal of NHLA and the religious studies coordinator of NHWS. On the one hand, the NHLA principal's answer implicitly addresses one of the main themes at the heart of the need to build a Muslim American identity; namely, the assumed incompatibility of the American (or more generally Western) values with what is perceived/considered as Islamic ones.[122] Recent studies in the sociology of morality

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[120] Michael Walzer, "What does it Mean to be an 'American'?" *Social Research* 57, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 595.
[121] Complete mission statement retrievable from: http://newhorizonwestside.org/about-us/our-mission/
[122] Christina Joppke, *The Secular State Under Siege. Religion and Politics in Europe and America* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2015), passim.

have emphasized the social constructedness of moral values, which are never fixed and absolute, but subject to change both at the individual and at the social level.[123] Despite this acknowledgment, scholarship in the most disparate fields still focuses on value differences between a generic Western culture and an even more non-specific Islamic one,[124] thus tending to essentialize difference and to neglect those contact zone *à la* Tilly where boundaries are blurred and shared meanings are selectively constructed.

On the other hand, the official mission statement of the NHWS heralds the universal and inclusive approach adopted by this institution. Universal moral values, diversity, and progressive Islam come to the forefront as the key characteristics of the kind of educational project embraced by these schools. Furthermore, the religious studies coordinator's reference to the importance of self-esteem and pride of being Muslim will be a major category of analysis fully addressed in the theoretical discussion of the empirical data put forth in Chapter 4.

3.3 Diversity and Pan-Ethnicity in the New Horizon Schools

Grewal and Coolidge contend that "Islamic schools often reflect far more racial, ethnic, class, and even sectarian diversity than the congregations of the mosque communities that found them."[125] Contrary to this observation, the New Horizon schools seem to focus on building a pan-Muslim identity in the American context by breaking down ethnic specificities within the Muslim community. Indeed, the religious study coordinator at NHWS cherished the diversity of the schools and the insignificance of ethnic divisions among Muslim Americans. Similarly, during the interview I carried out with the principal of NHLA, Jolanda Hussein-Hendriks, she explained that the school

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[123]Steven Hitlin and Stephen Vaisey, "Back to the Future. Reviving the Sociology of Morality." In *Handbook of the Sociology of Morality. Handbooks of Sociology and Social Research*, eds. Steven Hitlin and Stephen Vaisey (New York, NY: Springer Publishing, 2010), passim.
[124] Kevin J. O'Toole, "Islam and the West: The Clash of Values," *Global Change, Peace and Security* 20, no. 1 (2008): 25-40.
[125] Grewal and Coolidge (2013), 251.

is open to everybody and identifies itself as non-sectarian, as the mosque who founded it. As she herself stated,

> I think the most that we are addressing and we are proud of is the diversity… I think my kids and two other students are the only half white kids in the school, actually. As for the rest, we have Korean moms, of course Middle Eastern, Asian, etc. We all are friends and we all come together this is something that I am proud of that we are doing as a school. Cultivating all the different backgrounds and the different languages. (NHLA Principal)

Much of the existing literature on Muslim Americans has thus far focused on the persistence of forms of ethnic clustering in communities all around the United States. For instance, the work of Sally Howell on immigrant Arab communities in Detroit has widely focused on the complex relationship between the two phenomena of local ethnic clustering and transnationalism. In her work, religion (and Islam in particular) has played a minor role partly because, as she herself explains, Arab Detroit is mainly made up of Christian immigrants from Middle Eastern countries, thus presenting an "overrepresentation […] of Arab minorities and politically disenfranchised population." [126] In the Detroit case investigated by Howell, other and more specific ethnic loyalties are usually more salient and determine the daily life of Arab immigrants whose religious identity appears to be less defining in identitarian terms than the country of origin or belonging to the macro-category of Arabs.

The focus on ethnicity has been adopted also in studies concerning mosque participation. For instance, according to Ihsan Babgy *at al*., mixed ethnic attendance occurs between Muslim Arab communities and ethnic groups such as South Asians or Latinos, but rarely if ever between immigrants and African-Americans.[127] On a similar note, Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis report, in their now dated but still foundational study on Muslim Americans, on sources of internal conflict that arose in mosques due to the coming of new ethno-national groups. This is because, as

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[126] Howell, 63.
[127] Iḥsan Babgy, Paul M. Perl and Bryan T. Froherle, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait. A Report from the Mosque Study Project* (Washington D.C.: Council on American Islamic Relations, 2001).

they explained, the mosques under investigation were subject to "conscious self-definition along national or other lines."[128]

On the contrary, the institutional analysis of the New Horizon schools seems to point in the direction of a construction of a pan-ethnic Muslim American identity, where the non-importance of ethnic differences is grounded in the message of the Qur'an itself and thus legitimized in a religious framework. As one of the religious teachers I interviewed reported, "the breaking down of any ethnic differences… it is all in the Qur'an! God created us in different shades and colors… They [the children] have really awareness of difference… it is so cute! Even our toys are multicultural!"[129] Hence, the breaking down of ethnic boundaries among Muslim Americans is grounded in a theological discourse of acceptance of difference that is to be found in a certain interpretation of the sacred texts.

Hence, the process of ethnic boundary blurring theorized by Wimmer can be identified in the statements of the expert interviewees that I have met. To provide a further example, these are the words of a teacher at NHLA when asked about the ethnic composition of the classes:

> They come from anywhere, from Pakistan to Mexico to Guatemala… it is a very mixture of different things but then they all share the same values so that's the great thing about Islam, you know, because it is not like you have only people from one place… you can be from all over the world but you share the same values! (Elementary school teacher, NHLA)

Indeed, the student body of the school represents the Muslim microcosm that attends the ICSC, reconfiguring a form of Islam deprived of ethnic peculiarities and redefining an all-inclusive Muslim identity. In addition, the Muslim and American component of the identity embraced by the schools and fostered in the children is well represented by the modified pledge of allegiance that the NHWS promotes:

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[128] Yvonnne Y. Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987), 39.
[129] Religious Studies Coordinator, NHWS, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 18th, 2017.

I am an American Muslim, I pledge allegiance to God and His Prophet.
I respect and love my family and community, and
I dedicate my life to serving the cause of truth and justice.
And
As an American citizen, with rights and responsibilities,
I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America
And to the republic for which it stands, one nation,
Under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

No mention whatsoever is made to ethnic differences or peculiarities among Muslim Americans in this modified pledge of allegiance that is characterized by two main components. First, allegiance is pledged to the religious component of one's identity. Being an American Muslim means pledging allegiance to god and his prophet even before the nation. The second part of the oath is devoted to America, the only and overarching ethnic boundary that links together all the Muslims born, raised, or emigrated to the United States.

The theme of American civil religion clearly emerges from a careful analysis of the pledge reported above. As the late American sociologist Robert Bellah postulated, American civil religion constitutes a "religious dimension" characteristic of the American nation that permeates all aspects of political and public life, regardless of the Jeffersonian wall of separation between church and state operative at the institutional level.[130] The peculiarly American civil religion guarantees that, as Philip Gorski recently wrote, "[o]ne of the greatest wager of the American experiment is that it is possible to forge a nation of nations and a people of people, to incorporate an ever more diverse stream of immigrants into an already diverse collection of citizens."[131]

Hence, the pledge of allegiance of the NHWS demonstrates how the political and civic language used in the American public sphere allows for an incorporation of diversity within the broader category of American. To this aim, ethnic specificities are abandoned in the schools'

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[130] Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 117, no. 3 (1998): 93-118; For the Jeffersonian wall of separation see: James Hitchcok, "Church, State, and Moral Values: The Limits of American Pluralism," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 44 (Spring 1981): 3-21.

[131] Philip Gorski, *American Covenant. A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Pres*ent (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 220.

institutional discourse in order to embrace a pan-ethnic Muslim American that deconstructs ethnicity only to reconstruct it as framed in the American civil religion discourse.

3.4 Towards a "Sushi" Islam?

When one looks at the dynamics of boundary formation and boundary maintenance from the perspective of the religious cleavage, the picture becomes highly puzzling. Indeed, many of the interviewees have stressed the extreme openness towards difference of the ICSC and, consequently, of the schools founded by it. As a matter of fact, the principal herself is a convert to Shi'ism, recently immigrated to the United States from the Netherlands. As she claimed,

> I am Shi'a… that's very, very particular about this mosque I have to say that… and he also [the Shaykh] is very open… I think he is the first imam I have ever met who shook my hands… I am like "I am shaking the hand of an Imam, ok cool!" So they actually… when they asked me to become the principal I spoke with the imam of my mosque because I am Shi'a, and this is a Sunni school, so I said this one, and they said, "Oh, then you should be fine!" They said any other school probably not, but this school, this particular school, is very open-minded. (NHLA Principal)

According to GhaneaBassiri, ignoring the differences between Sunni and Shi'a among American Muslims is a peculiar characteristic of American Islam.[132] In Europe, "seldom are there comprehensive Islamic associations" that work towards a downplaying of sectarian differences.[133] Apropos, an Egyptian couple that I have interviewed reduced the difference between Shi'a and Sunni practices to the use of the *turbah* (stone) when praying, without any mention whatsoever to the ideological and theological differences between the two religious groups. Moreover, the principal of NHLA reported that a limited number of Shi'a students attend the school, without this creating any problem in the classroom. When asked about how this difference is dealt with from a curricular perspective, she answered,

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[132] GhaneaBassiri (1997), 61.
[133] Nezar al-Sayyad and Manuel Castells, eds., *Muslim Europe or Euro-Islam: Politics, Culture, and Citizenship in the Age of Globalization* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 37.

So here there is just a focus on the prophets and it is the same… Sunni and Shi'a, the only difference is with the successor after the Prophet… that's the only difference and my child when she was in pre-school, she was asked who is your favorite prophet… and so she said Imam Hussein and then, here, the teacher is ok with it. But I know there are some other Sunni schools where they have a problem with it and during Muharram… because also some of the Sunnis actually celebrate it because I think it is the ten days, auspicious days for Sunnis and they have a celebration… I heard some people in the mosque going to these schools saying their child felt very unwelcome and unaccepted in other schools… so I think that's the only area where that could go wrong in the Sunni school… the other way around, you know, Shi'a… where there is more focus on the imams that could be a problem, but usually here there is focus on the principles of Islam, Allah, about the prophets, and it is very very general, there is not anything in the teaching that I feel goes against what all Muslims stand for… so that's why I feel very comfortable to have my kids go to the school (NHLA Principal)

Can we then confidently accept the claim that the form of Islam embraced by the school and by the ICSC is a form of "Sushi" Islam, as colloquially referred to by the attendees? In order to answer this question, a theoretical observation needs be addressed; namely, the distinction between symbolic and social boundaries can be fruitful in critically investigating the process of religious boundary making and unmaking in the case of the ICSC and the NHLA. On the one hand, a symbolic boundary is a conceptual and categorical boundary that operates at the cognitive level.[134] To use a famous Bourdieusian expression, it is a principle of vision and division of the social world. On the other hand, a social boundary refers to the daily life networks of social actors. In other words, a social boundary encompasses the actual relationships that social actors establish in their daily life.

In light of this theorization, one can observe that, on the symbolic level, the distinction between Sunni and Shi'a Islam is being downplayed both by the ICSC and by the NH's leadership. On the social level, nonetheless, the difference seems to permeate the daily life of the social actors involved. In fact, as Jolanda Hussein-Hendriks asserted during her interview, many parents do not completely accept that the school be run by a Shi'a principal. In addition, the difference between Shi'a and Sunni is left unaddressed and it is not openly tackled both at school and in the mosque. As she explains,

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[134] Lamont and Molnár, 15.

So I pray like this right, and I combine the prayers… sometimes when we attend the khutba here… another Shi'a girl from the school, she wants to pray with me 'asr… so all the kids they look at us, they are done with their prayers... they look at us and they see us standing like that… but nobody asks any question, and if they do we say, you know, this is how some families pray…this is how some families pray… it is not really addressed, not like "I am Shi'a and you are Sunni"… we think they are too young to understand. (NHLA Principal)

Leaving the dichotomy Sunni/Shi'a unaddressed in Sunni schools might be a good strategy in order to achieve a symbolic, i.e. categorical, redefinition of a comprehensive American Muslim identity in which the sectarian divisions do not play a prominent role. Nonetheless, at the social level, the division is still operating. A very slim number of Shi'a students attend the school. Intergroup contact between Sunnis and Shi'as seems to be an exception rather than the norm in Sunni schools in Los Angeles. The opposite situation is practically nonexistent. As Jolanda explained, finding Sunni children attending Shi'a schools is highly unlikely due to the different religious studies program highly centered on Shi'ism that Shi'a schools embrace.

Therefore, one can observe that the form of "Sushi" Islam usually associated with the mission and ideology of the ICSC and the NHLA is a work-in-progress, setting itself as a goal more than a fact, to be achieved though the redefinition of more inclusive religious boundaries. The process of blurring is at place at the categorical level, embraced and supported by the leadership, but still *in fieri* at the social level, where tensions between the two groups persist and are left tacitly unaddressed.

Chapter 4: Muslim Americans, Symbolic Boundaries, and Social Stigma

4.1 Why a Positive Muslim American Identity?

Following the analysis of the school institutional discourse offered in the previous chapter, one of the main aims of the New Horizon Schools is that of leading children to embrace a positive Muslim American identity. As a matter of fact, the second goal in the mission statement of NHWS reads: "Foster a positive self-image as an American Muslim."[135] Nonetheless, as happens frequently, what remains unstated is by far more significant than what is openly enunciated. In fact, the compelling need to balance out the American and the Muslim side of the children's identity stems from the widespread assumption that Islamic values are at odds with Western ones.

The narrative of the clash of civilizations, first introduced by Samuel Huntington in 1993 after the end of the Cold War period and the beginning of new wars in the Middle East, as is the case with the First Gulf War in 1991,[136] gained a new momentum in the contemporary historical situation as a consequence of the increase in Muslim immigration to Western countries. The arrival of immigrants from majority-Muslim countries posed new challenges of integration, mainly in Europe but partly also in the United States.[137] As Robert Wuthnow reports, attitudes of Americans towards Islam and Muslims are mostly characterized by mistrust of Islamic values and the Islamic system of beliefs.[138] This is in part due to the shift that has taken place at the discursive level from "Arab terrorism" to "Islamic terrorism," particularly after the events of 1979 in Iran. This switch in the rhetoric of American foreign policy has had major effects on the way Islam has been portrayed, making it more visible and, consequently, affecting the salience of Islam as a form of identity

incorporated by Muslim Americans.[139] In fact, social psychology studies have demonstrated that external categorization plays a pivotal role in shaping one's own self-identification or collective identities.[140]

The perception of the oddity of Islam in the American context reiterates itself until today despite the frequent inter-group contacts between those who classify themselves as non-Muslim Americans and those who self-identify as Muslim Americans, thus debunking the well-established inter-group contact theory postulated by Gordon Allport.[141] The reasons behind this ongoing juxtaposition between Islam and the West, GhaneaBassiri explains, is in part due to the American need "to define a new national identity in the aftermath of the Cold War," a national identity that increasingly "framed Islam essentially as a monolith." [142] Therefore, Islam and the West become cognitively functional containers that mutually confer meaning to each other through a bi-directional process of othering, thus giving rise to an apparently insurmountable dichotomy. Contrary to widespread essentialiazing assumptions, Islam and the West have been changing concepts that have dialectically and interdependently shaped each other, thus disproving any assumptions of their inherent incompatibility.[143]

From the process of othering and the well-established dichotomy Islam versus the West derives the need to foster not simply an American Muslim identity, but a positive one. As one of the interviewees reported while talking about the children's simulation of the Hajj and the Juma'a prayer at the New Horizon School in Pasadena:

> It is very elaborate and it makes that very *normal* to them… it is not something that seems *weird*… and all the other kids are participating… so that's just what they do, it is nothing that's *odd or different or strange*… so I feel it *normalizes* who they are, their faith and how they practice […] They put different students to be the Imam and it just

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[139] GhaneaBassiri (2010), 307.
[140] Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 21.
[141] Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub, 1954), passim.
[142] GhaneaBassiri (2010), 367.
[143] Ibid., 371.

becomes like *second nature* for them, like *nothing out of the ordinary*! (Interviewee no. 5, Egypt, First generation, M)

The theme of normalization is crucial to illustrate the point and constitutes the leitmotif of the passage quoted above. Islam is perceived as alien and "weird," to use the interviewee's own words, hence in need to be normalized. The effort to build a positive Muslim American identity is inextricably linked to the perception of an existing contradiction between Islamic values and American ones, as one interviewee pointed out: "You know, you can do everything that you want to do as an American and be proud of Islam and do not let anybody tell you that either of them are *mutually exclusive* because they are not!"[144]

As these quotations show, the perception of oddity between Islamic values and American values is incorporated by American Muslims who, then, try to find mechanisms to reconcile Islam and the main values that are considered the pillars on which the American narrative is grounded. This incorporation of the external categorization imposed by the out-group is an essential part of any social identity and it is possible "if one is authoritatively labelled within an institutional social setting."[145] Indeed, social identities are always constituted by means of a dialectical process of identification that involves two different but concomitant moments; namely, self-definition and the definition of the self provided by others.[146]

Therefore, various discursive strategies are implemented to cope with the negative stereotyping of Islam imposed on Muslim social actors by the prevailing social categorization. One of the most recurrently adopted strategies consists in considering the Western values of democracy, respect of diversity, and human rights as foundational principles sanctioned in the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet Muhammad. This phenomenon has been called by Omid Safi "pamphlet Islam" and it is characterized by the discursive reconfiguration of Islam from being a religion

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[144] Interviewee no. 10, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 8th, 2017.
[145] Jenkins, 22.
[146] George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behavioralist* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 1934), passim.

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inherently violent to being a religion inherently peaceful. The discourse on human rights is then reframed as constitutive of Islam rather than alien to it.[147] As one interviewee explains,

> Because a lot of the values of this American community, a lot… I am going to say the majority of the values… are as if you are just taking them from the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad… even one of the thinkers, he said, "I went to the United States, I found Islamic practice but I did not find any Muslim!" He was a scholar and he said that people are practicing Islam more than Muslims here in the United States. So, with *diversity, respect for others, rights, human rights, all these things are very basic in Islam*… like equality and… all these human rights issues were the basics of the teachings of our Prophet… so it is very easy to adapt to the environment… if you are following the *real Islam*! (Interviewee no. 7, Palestine, First generation, F)

As the excerpt above demonstrates, a process of impression management is here in place. Impression management is that strategy through which social actors adjust the image that others have of them.[148] One of the variables that engenders mechanisms of impression management is precisely the discrepancy between the majoritarian image of oneself coming from outgroup members and the desired image that one is willing to depict.[149] Thus, not only is Islam, the "right" Islam, made compatible with American/Western values, but the same values that are considered a product of a Western *Weltanschauung* are re-conceptualized as inherently Islamic so as to influence the predominantly negative view of Islam on the part of non-Muslims. In addition, the discourse on the right version of Islam is a well-established trope of American Islam. In fact, already in the 1980s, community leaders stressed the need to purify Islam from cultural and indigenized forms of practice that seeped into Islam through the centuries. Trying to satisfy the desire to unify the diverse universe of American Muslims, some leaders started calling for the return to a pure form of Islam based only on the teachings of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet.[150] As a group of Muslim leaders wrote in a pamphlet published in 1989, "[s]ome Muslim circles tend to imply that the

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[147] GhaneaBassiri (2010), 368.
[148] For a complete account on impression management: Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London, UK: Penguin, 1959), passim.
[149] Mark L. Leary and Robin M. Kowalski, "Impression Management: A Literature Review and Two-Component Model," *Psychological Bulletin* 107, no. 1 (1990): 35.
[150] GhaneaBassiri (2010), 318.

process of Islamization should essentially lead to Arabization or Pakistanization, etc. It is regrettable that there exists a confusion between ethnicity and religion."[151]

In a nutshell, before delving into the analysis of the mechanisms at the heart of the construction of a Muslim American identity, it has been shown why a positive Muslim American identity needs be established in the first place given the crucial role of discrimination to which Muslim Americans are subject on various levels. Indeed, the negative external categorization of Muslims and the widespread idea that Islamic values are at odds with American and, more generally, Western ones constitute the main catalysts of the various processes of impression management, stigma management, and boundary reconfiguration that are specific to the inclusive Muslim American identity embraced by the interviewees.

4.2 Forming a Muslim American Identity: Mechanisms and Strategies

As already discussed in the previous chapters, the sites where either ethnic or religious identity formation structures can be observed are those that are situated in liminal positions, at the crossroads of contrasting and compounding forms of identification. In a Barthian model of ethnic groups, not all the members who conceive of themselves as part of the group share a given culture in the same way and to the same degree. As Wimmer contends, members of a given group may consider themselves as part of the group without sharing a common form of culture cultivated through daily social interaction.[152]

While Barth and Wimmer referred to ethnic identities in particular, the scenario complicates further if both the religious and the ethnic diacritics are taken into consideration. In the case of American Muslims investigated for the present research, the interplay between ethnicity and religion becomes utterly important in shaping the boundaries of an American Muslim category. As other macro-categories, like "Asians" or "White," also the category of American Muslim can be

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[151] Fathi Uthman, Hassan Hathout, and Maher Hathout, *In Fraternity: A Message to Muslims in America* (1989), quoted in GhaneaBassiri (2010), 318.
[152] Wimmer, 25.

considered a pan-ethnic category whose actual influence in social actors' daily life is to be empirically proved rather than taken-for-granted ex ante. Indeed, Wimmer himself argues that most of the times these macro-categories do not reflect the systems of social networks active in group members' everyday life.[153]

As a matter of fact, the interviews revealed that the fostering of an American Muslim identity is a work-in-progress, a process more than an entity, an ongoing project more than an accomplished objective. Bearing in mind the two structural components of boundaries, i.e. the categorical/symbolic and the social one, the analysis that follows addresses three main points: a) the mechanisms of ethnic boundaries blurring both at the symbolic and the social level; b) the strategical blurring of religious boundaries; and c) the fundamental role of institutional incentives in determining the salience of a given boundary.

a)   First, all interviewees embraced the goal pursued by the New Horizon schools to encourage and celebrate diversity within the American Muslim community. The boundary of the group becomes thus religious affiliation to the Muslim faith. A process of ethnic boundary blurring is in place both at the categorical level and at the social one. The diverse school environment creates a community that interacts on a daily basis and, through these consistent interactions, redefines the meanings associated with being Muslim in America. As one interviewee explained:

> So, the community… it is everything, there is South Asian, Indian, Pakistani, Middle Eastern, African immigrants, African Americans, white Muslims and it is reflected in the students there… it is very, very mixed… there is no one group… I do not know that a private school, a private Muslim school can be sustained by one ethnic group… because the Islamic community here is so diverse that you really need to cater to all the different groups and they do, so it's nice for the kids too because Ibrahim, who's my son, he is 5 and in his class he knows everybody, he knows Pakistani kids, African American kids, white American kids, a lot of mixed kids… like he is actually mixed, I am from Egypt, his mother is from Yugoslavia, so you know to him it is normal, his best friend, his mother is Palestinian and his father is Pakistani… so everything is mixed, so to them *it's more about the religion than ethnicity because… that's the link that really united them*! (Interviewee no. 5, Egypt, First generation, M)

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[153] Wimmer, 24.

Being Muslim is the link that unites the ethnically diverse community that attends the schools. Therefore, the religious category becomes more salient than the ethnic one. The process of ethnic boundaries blurring carried out by the schools is mirrored in the daily life of the families that attend these schools. In fact, almost all interviewees pointed to the sense of community and family that the schools create:

> It is a very small school so we have I think 90 or 88 students, so all the parents know each other, so *we spend a lot of time together*. For example, last Friday all the kids were in the mosque for the family movie night… every Friday, no, two times a month or one time a month we have family movie nights at the Islamic center… and then all the kids go there after school, then go home, change their clothes and then all the parents go and meet there at the mosque… they sell pop corns and things like that… *you stay together* and the kids have a playdate in the weekends, in the summer break, spring break… *we are always in touch, we are always together*! (Interviewee no. 1, Italy, Convert, F)

Hence, the blurring of ethnic specificities that the institutional discourse of the school embraces is not only mirrored in the life of the kids that are raised in a diverse environment, but also in the life of the parents themselves that interact with other Muslim parents of very different cultural backgrounds in their daily life.

According to Wimmer's analysis of processes of boundary making and unmaking, various mechanisms can be activated by social actors to reconfigure already-established boundaries. Among these mechanisms, that of boundary blurring consists in a de-evaluation of the importance of the ethnic boundary in favor of other typologies of boundaries, e.g. the religious ones. As Wimmer himself acknowledges, making recourse to the universalizing discourse of major religious traditions is a very frequent strategy implemented to diminish the salience of ethnic boundaries.[154] Nonetheless, the preeminence of the religious boundary does not automatically mean the abandonment of any form of ethnic solidarity among Muslim Americans. For example, among the people interviewed, one woman of Bangladeshi origin pointed to the vital importance of the ethnic

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[154] Wimmer, 61.

element in her and her child's identity, despite her embracement of an inclusive Muslim American identity:

> *Muslim is just my identity of the practice of religion…* definitely I am born Bengali but I started doing high school here, college here, and then obviously I became more of an American… adapted to the culture… but because of the belief we practice Islam… so that's our Islamic belief… when people talk about building the identity, I mean, every person has his own identity and *they identify as the culture they are from*, you know, the language they speak and stuff like that. (Interviewee no. 3, Bangladesh, First generation, F)

This passage clearly demonstrates that identity is neither given nor exclusionary, but rather a nested system of identifications that are activated contingently and situationally. Hence, the salience of ethnic boundaries may still play a role in social actors' daily life without diminishing the importance of attempts at blurring them in another institutional context, such as that of the schools analyzed. Specifically, the case of the Bangladeshi community in Los Angeles is peculiar insofar as it is the only Muslim community geographically clustered in a single area of town, namely Little Bangladesh. In this situation of geographical proximity, social networks are more likely to be influenced by the ethnic component, despite welcoming an inclusive notion of American Muslim.

b)   Second, also the religious boundary undergoes a process of redefinition in the case of the Muslim Americans interviewed, albeit through different mechanisms. Two main dimensions of reconfiguration have been identified during the analysis of the data collected. One the one hand, we encounter the reframing of the Sunni/Shi'a divide in the discourse of the interviewees; on the other hand, we find the re-positioning of Islam in the American environment vis-à-vis other religious traditions. As for the former, the downplaying of the theological differences between Sunni and Shi'a is a common trope of American Islam. Already in 2007 leaders of both groups signed a document called "Intra-faith Code of Honor," through which they committed to respect each other and to collaborate to foster peaceful coexistence.[155] Undoubtedly, the international situation and the rampaging war in Iraq played a major role in the decision to sanction a form of official cooperation

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[155] GhaneaBassiri (2010), 365.

between Sunni and Shi'a leaders in the United States. Nevertheless, the situation in Muslims' daily lives appears to be one of denial or neglecting of difference more than one of acknowledgment. As one interviewee stated, "I did not know what Shi'a was until I went to college."[156] And another:

> [The difference between Sunni and Shi'a] is not really discussed. I mean, something but a very small portion of it… so it is not big like in some countries, like Iran… here it is not... and as far as the kids are concerned, *they are not really aware* unless there is actually a Shi'a when they practice their prayers… it is a very small difference so it is not really discussed. (Interviewee no. 2, Afghanistan, Firs generation, F)

Furthermore, the sectarian differences that divide Muslims all around the world as of recent years are usually imputed to politics, broadly speaking. Political interests are widely deemed responsible for internal divisions of Muslims around the world, especially in Middle Eastern countries where tensions are currently particularly hightened. By creating a theoretical distinction between politics and religion, the unity of the community is restored. As one interviewee claims,

> When the sects of every religion come is more of a *political thing…* like Shi'a… when I started studying Shi'a I found out Shi'a started after Muhammad died… so, after the last messenger died… the last messenger… after he died there was a confusion about who was supposed to be the Khalif… and a group of people would say, ok, Ali was the successor… so he should be the one… and that's when the controversy started that's when the groups started but until Muhammad was alive he did not create the group of Shia.. so it was created much later after he died… so that's why I think it is more… when they are talking about Sunni/Shi'a/sect always *is more of politics… not religion*! (Interviewee no. 3, Bangladesh, First generation, F)

This neglecting of the sectarian differences by attributing their cause to the realm of politics does not actually lead to the establishment of inter-sectarian social networks in the lives of the interviewees. Despite the downplaying of differences, contacts between the two groups remain rare and the Shi'a minority maintains separate institutions from the Sunni majority. Hence, the blurring of religious boundaries appears to be active only at a symbolic and cognitive level. During my research month in Los Angeles, I used to attend the mosque almost every Friday for the Juma'a prayer and I never observed the presence of any Shi'a Muslim in the women's section of the

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[156] Interviewee no. 3, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 17th, 2017.

mosque where I used to sit. Thus, despite claims to the contrary, the social boundary is still active and interactions between Sunni and Shi'a are limited in social actors' daily lives, although they are said to be accepted, appreciated, and cherished by the experts and parents interviewed.

As for the second dimension, a process of repositioning of Islam within the framework of other American religions is in place. Many interviewees made reference to interfaith work carried out both on the part of the schools where the parents send their children and in their private and personal life. As Qamar ul-Huda explains, one growing area of activism among American Muslims is that of interfaith dialogue with other religious communities, following the widespread idea that the efforts expended by American Muslims in this form of activism will improve interfaith relationships not only in the United States but in the entire world.[157] Thus, the discourse on interfaith dialogue embraced by mosques and Muslim organizations in the United States reverberates in actual interfaith social networks in the lives of the social actors interviewed. As one interviewee explains while talking about his child's extra-school activities:

> So, he plays sport in a league called "The Care Youth League," they play basketball, soccer, baseball, and football and that's an interesting league because *it is a Christian league* and they have kids from all over the spectrum. […] There is a little bit of a *Christian component* to it where they talk about *values* after the game and team work and sportsmanship… and it is funny because they tell stories about the prophets… this is kind of like the tradition of prophet so and so… and he has a frame of reference as a Muslim kid, like when they say about prophet Abraham he said, "I am named after prophet Abraham, I know about prophet Abraham!" So it is funny because he gets to educate them a little bit about Islam! And Muslims also believe this stuff and to him he sees, well, *Christians also believe what I believe*… like he really gets to understand the *unity of it* and that *we are all one*… which is what we need to teach all of our kids! (Interviewee no. 5, Egypt, First generation, M)

The institutional discourse that welcomes interfaith dialogue is thus fully embraced in the life of this interviewee who cultivates interfaith relationships in his and his child's private life. Furthermore, the idea of the unity of monotheistic creeds, i.e. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, is a common theme that frequently emerged during the field research. Similarity of values and

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[157] Qamar-ul Huda, "Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building Efforts by American Muslim Organizations following September 11," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 26, no. 2 (2006): 188.

belonging to the same religious tradition are the two main justifications for pursuing forms of interfaith dialogue and activism. This overlapping of Islamic values and values coming from the other monotheistic traditions is best explained by the answer to a question I posed to a teacher at NHLA school concerning which values were to be considered peculiarly Islamic. Her answer well summarizes the point:

> So, even though we were Muslims, it is still the same thing because we kind of look across the board… if you have the love of god, you teach the same things, maybe in a different tone, maybe from a different angle, or your book is in a different language, but basically *it is all underlying the same values* that you want your kids to learn… and that's why we have non-Muslim teachers here too! (Interviewee no. 7, Palestine, First generation, F)

Looking at interfaith activities through the theoretical lenses of symbolic and social boundaries, it is worth noticing how the categorical boundary is set at the border between Abrahamic religions and non-Abrahamic religions on the one hand, and religion versus non-religion on the other. In all the interviews I have conducted, no mention has been made to religions other than the Christian and Judaic ones. Similarly, the option of ungodliness or secularity is ruled out completely and America is discursively constructed as a Christian nation in the eyes of the interviewees. As a second-generation African American Muslim convert explained, "Well, technically [public] school is secular […] but it is heavily grounded in Christianity!"[158] As a matter of fact, the conceptualization of America as a Christian nation is increasingly being embraced also by Christian Americans who strive to "align the boundaries of national belonging with membership in their particular communities."[159] This narrative dialectically affects also perceptions of Muslims on Americanness and, consequently, their incorporation of the social stigma.

c)   Lastly, institutional incentives play a major role in shaping the contour of religious and ethnic boundaries in the life of the individuals interviewed for the present research. Before

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[158] Interviewee no. 4, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 23rd, 2017.
[159] Jeremy Brooke Straughn and Scott L. Feld, "America as a 'Christian Nation'? Understanding Religious Boundaries of National Identity in the United States," *Sociology of Religion* 71, no. 3 (2010): 301.

delving into concrete examples, it is worth recalling what it is meant by institutional incentives. Wimmer's theoretical framework for the investigation of ethnic boundaries making processes identified three major components that influence the production of ethnic boundaries; namely, organizations and institutional discourse, allocation of power and resources, and social networks. The first component is particularly relevant in the case at stake because it confers defining power to leaderships that are able to influence the way in which individuals perceive and represent their in-group vis-à-vis the majority. In the case of the construction of an inclusive American Muslim identity, the role of leaders and mosques have been crucial. In the case at stake, the New Horizon schools' mission derives from the ideology embraced by the leadership of the ICSC. When asked about the historical formation of the idea of a Muslim American identity, one interviewee mentioned one influential Muslim leader who was a member both of the ICSC and of the Muslim Public Affairs Council in Los Angeles. According to the interviewee's narrative, he established the very idea of an inclusive Muslim American identity and spread it through his public speeches:

> He is commonly referred to in many Muslim circles as the founder of the American Muslim identity. He had been very involved in this community for decades and he just passed away two years ago now, in 2015, and that's one of his great contribution to America… he tied young Muslims here for generations to be proud to be American and be Muslim! (Interviewee no. 5, Egypt, First generation, M)

Nevertheless, going back to the theoretical level of analysis, Wimmer's variable of the institutional incentives does not explain the reasons for the appearance of institutional incentives in the first place. The section that follows, devoted to the analysis of parental choice in Islamic education, tries to shed light on this crucial point by investigating the micro-level of analysis and linking it to the meso- and macro-levels, represented respectively by Islamic institutions and the wider cultural framework into which the various levels are enmeshed.

4.3 Religious Continuity, Stigma Management, and Outbidding

Following the discussion in the previous section, all the parents interviewed for the present research embraced a highly inclusive notion of Muslim American identity, one of the kind promoted by the institutional discourse of the schools. Thus, the researcher might easily be drawn to conclude that the choice of a private Islamic school devoted to building an inclusive Muslim American identity is the key variable in directing parental choice towards Islamic education. Nonetheless, the analysis of the data has shown that other crucial variables are at stake. For the sake of clarity, the aim of this section is not to address any independent level of analysis. Rather, the main objective is that of accounting for the interdependence of different variables in shaping both parental choice in Islamic education and the inclusive and positive notion of a Muslim American identity strongly intertwined with the choice of attending a private Islamic school.

Specifically, the code framing of the data collected leads to the isolation of three crucial components. They all partake in parental choice and in the connected phenomenon of the reconfiguration of ethnic and religious boundaries associated with the category of American Muslim. First, the theme of cultural and/or religious continuity has been overwhelmingly present, albeit differently construed by the various interviewees. Second, the role of perceived discrimination and, more generally, of the widespread social stigma attributed to Islam has surfaced as a pivotal variable. Lastly, the need to rely on processes of outbidding in order to differentiate between "good" Muslims and "bad" Muslims has been a leitmotif of the interviews carried out for this research. This section addresses each component so as to provide insights into their mutual interconnections and their links with macro-processes happening at the broader social level.

First, all the interviewees have touched upon the theme of religious and/or cultural continuity. I use here the option religious and/or cultural continuity because answers have varied in terms of what has to be continued, whether the religious tradition detached from its cultural components or the cultural tradition of the religion itself. The confusion on the topic is not easily solvable due to its theoretical complexity that prevents researchers from achieving a useful differentiation between

culture and religion as separate heuristic devices. The conceptualization of religion as a form of culture, as a system of symbols guiding human action, was posited by Clifford Geertz in 1993.[160] The aim pursued here does not include a solution to the never-ending definitional problem of what culture is and how it differentiates itself from religion. Nonetheless, it is germane for the purpose of this analysis to address the various ways in which the issue of continuity is conceived of by the interviewees for two main reasons: first, it shows the inadequacy of the concept of continuity itself; and, second, it points to a discrepancy between what is believed to exist, i.e. a Muslim American identity to pass down to the new generations, and what is actually being constructed partly ex novo in the American environment.

In the words of the interviewees themselves, the schools provide a "safe environment" in which children can learn the basics of their religion, deprived of any mistakes that may come from the enmeshing of Islam with local culture in countries of emigration or in the non-Muslim majority American environment. Exemplary on this point has been an interview with a Bangladeshi parent who, when talking about her own personal immigration experience, pointed to the positive role that the United States have played in allowing her to purify her religious practices from "wrong" cultural components. As she herself claims, "It is a blessing for us to come from a Muslim country to a non-Muslim country to know our religion better because if I was still back home than I probably would have practiced the wrong religion!"[161]

On the contrary, other interviewees celebrated the possibility of separating religion and culture and of granting religious continuity without discrediting the multifarious cultural backgrounds of the school attendees. For instance, an African American Muslim interviewee reported:

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[160] Clifford Geertz, "Religion as a cultural system," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays,* ed. Clifford Geertz (Fontana Press, 1993), passim.
[161] Interviewee no. 3, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 17th, 2017.

> I think this school specifically is really representative of Islam in terms of… you practice your religion but you very much are *tied to your culture* and you practice the same although very differently because you come from different places, but Islam unites you and it is celebrated in Islam to *hold on to your cultural heritage*! (Interviewee no. 4, African American, Second generation, F)

Therefore, the discursive trope of cultural and/or religious continuity does not seem to be analytically useful to describe the case under investigation. In fact, the only element that "continues" by sending the children to the NH schools is the recognition of being Muslim, whereas the content of this religious identity changes through the interaction with Muslims coming from different backgrounds, the stated need to return to a purified and peaceful form of Islam, and the overarching American context and political climate. Religion and culture cannot be conceived of as completely independent tools. They interact, intertwine, and influence each other. Both aspects of culture and aspects of religion are subject to continuity and change in the schools under investigation. As already discussed in the previous chapters, any educational institution performs two very different but inextricably interrelated functions, i.e. social reproduction and social change. These two concomitant processes shape the meanings associated with being Muslim in America. As one interviewee stated: "Islam changes everywhere you go, right?"[162]

Inherently interconnected with the need to guarantee the (alleged) continuity of the Muslim identity in the American environment is the issue of social stigma. According to Erving Goffamn's definition, a social stigma is operationally defined as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed."[163] Hence, the need to build and maintain a positive Muslim American identity stems from an overarching feeling of exclusion and stigmatization on the part of the majority. The social stigma does not need to be experienced personally, although personal episodes of stigmatization have been reported by a certain number of interviewees. The cultural stigma at the broader social and national level is a

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[162] Interviewee no. 5, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 20th, 2017.
[163] Erving Goffman, *Stigma. Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1963), 9.

sufficient variable that triggers the implementation of stigma management strategies.[164] Specifically, media outlets are usually imputed as the carrier of a negative representation of Islam, thus causing the spreading of an allegedly incorrect idea of Islam among non-Muslim Americans.[165] For instance, the passage reported below is from an interview with an Italian convert to Islam now living in Los Angeles with her Yemeni husband. As a blonde and non-veiled Italian woman, physically very different from the widespread stereotype of the Muslim woman, she reported not having experienced any form of discrimination throughout the years. Nonetheless, she felt compelled to explain to me that Islam is dramatically different from how it is commonly depicted in Western media:

> You can't force people to convert to Islam, you can't force people to do something if they do not want to… that's haram that's a sin! So, nobody can force me to do anything, if I do not want to. People just need to know more about the religion. When you understand more about Islam, I think, you can reject the wrong information that they [referring to the media] try to create… our religion is so beautiful, it is so peaceful! (Interviewee no. 1, Italy, Convert, F)

Similarly, other interviewees have adduced reasons connected to the management of social stigma as the main motivation that has led them to choose a private Islamic school that could grant a safe and non-ostracizing environment for their kids: "Kids are free to be around individuals that share their same beliefs, so we do not have to worry about them being excluded […] without feeling, you know, ostracized!"[166] Thus, contrary to what Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis found in their first study on Islam in the United States in 1987, the sample of Muslim parents used for the present research mostly shows parental concerns in sending their children to public school due to fear of exclusion. On the contrary, thirty years ago Haddad and Lummis found that most parents felt that "their children's pride in being Muslim has been strengthened through interaction with those of

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[164] O'Brien, passim.
[165] Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin, *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/1*1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 20.
[166] Interviewee no. 4, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 23rd, 2017.

other backgrounds and religious beliefs."[167] Haddad and Lummis based their research on qualitative interview carried out with a sample of Muslims living on the East coast, specifically in the Midwest, the East Coast and Upstate New York.[168] During their interviews, only one parent is reported to have been critical towards the negative climate against Islam present in U.S. public schools.

On the opposite, my interviewees all expressed concerns towards the way Islam is dealt with in a public school environment, either because of the impossibility to practice Islam or celebrate Muslim holidays or because of the fear of exclusion their children might be subject to in the classroom environment. One interviewee clearly addressed his negative personal experience in public school back in the 1970s and 1980s as the chief reason for sending his child to the NH schools, contrary to Haddad's findings. He explained to have emigrated to the United States with his family from Egypt at an early age, thus having been entirely educated in United States' institutions. His negative experience in the American public school system led him to make a different educational choice for his child:

> So, there is a lot of reasons… Number one is growing up in the United States, I grew up like in the 60s and 80s in a place called Orange County which is mostly white and mostly conservative, so there was not a lot of Muslim kids and I felt very, I guess, *marginalized and isolated* and I was *not very confident of my identity or my faith* and I did not want that for them. I wanted them to feel somewhere where they are comfortable being who they are and expressing themselves and not being embarrassed! I never wanted to tell people that I was Muslim or that I spoke Arabic because usually people would either make fun of you or say something not nice, so I wanted them to have a more comfortable upbringing. So, I like the New Horizon schools because they very much nurture their identity, make them feel comfortable and I think it is important especially at the beginning! (Interviewee no. 5, Egypt, First generation, M)

As the quote above illustrates, personal experience of discrimination might play a crucial role in the decision to pursue Islamic education. The feeling of marginalization due to one's own identity has led to the refusal of that same identity. The interviewee would hide from his classmates his religious convictions out of fear of exclusion and derision. This phenomenon has been observed in a large number of first generation immigrants eager to assimilate within the mainstream in order to "receive

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[167] Haddad and Lummis, 84.
[168] Ibid., 11-13.

acceptance from the host society."[169] Consequently, the choice of sending the children to an Islamic

school is meant to provide them with the necessary tools to feel "comfortable," avoiding the risk of

neglecting their faith out of fear of ostracism. As Nira Yuval-Davis argues, "[b]elonging tends to be

naturalized and becomes articulated and politicized only when it is threatened in some way."[170]

Therefore, the general climate of hostility towards Islam, either experienced personally or perceived

at the broader social level, has made the category Muslim a personally, politically, and socially

salient one in the contemporary American situation. As Peek discusses, 9/11 was a watershed event

insofar as it led many Muslims in America to reconsider the role of their religious identity in their

lives. As she herself writes, groups of American Muslims "decided that it was vitally important to

both strengthen and assert their identities at this time in order to retain a positive self-perception and

correct public misconceptions."[171]

The dialogical nature of identities needs be addressed in order to understand how perceived

social stigma can influence both the micro-level of individual lives and the meso-institutional level

of the school discourse. As Bakhtin magisterially wrote,

> To be, means to be for the other and through him, for oneself. Man has no internal sovereign
> territory, he is always on the boundary; looking within himself he looks in the eyes of the other
> or through the eyes of the other. I cannot do without the other; I cannot become myself without
> the other; I must find myself in the other; finding the other in me in mutual reflection and
> perception.[172]

Bakhtin's words recall what the American pragmatist school of sociology already contended

decades before; namely, that processes of identity formation are made up of two inseparable

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[169] Jasmin Zine, "Safe Havens or Religious 'Ghettos'? Narratives of Islamic Schooling in Canada," in *Educating the Muslims of America*, eds. Yvonne Y. Haddad, Farid Senzai and Jane I. Smith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009), 39.
[170] Nira Yuval-David, "Theorizing Identity: Beyond the 'Us' and 'Them' Dichotomy," in *Patterns of Prejudice* 44, no. 3 (2010), 266.
[171] Peek (2005), 236.
[172] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1984), 311-12, in Nira Yuval David, 271.

components that interrelate in an "internal-external dialectic of identification."[173] If identities are to be conceived as narratives of the self and of its boundaries, either individual or collective, then the boundaries of the self are never set unilaterally, but always in relation to another self or collective narrative of identity. In the case of American Muslims, processes of inclusion and exclusion are both in place in defining this social identity.

Thus, the Muslim American identity is undoubtedly marked by the experience of stigma and discrimination. As a consequence, strategies of stigma management are implemented in the backstage, to use Goffman's theatre metaphor, in order to prepare in-group members to address the widespread social stigma "on stage." The choice of sending the kids to the NH Islamic schools can be located inside this framework since the choice is made in order to allow the children to build a strong, positive, and proud Muslim American identity that would prepare them to fight the social stigma once they find themselves on stage. Another relevant story I collected during my field research is that of a religious studies teacher who became a practicing Muslim after the episodes of 9/11 and decided to send her children to the NH schools in order to build in them a strong Muslim identity despite the general climate of aversion towards Islam:

> And I became religious… a lot factors came in to form my identity… I pick the school as well for my identity, I was just a teacher, but I saw things and all the political situations and September 11… all these things I think touched certain things in me and I wanted them [her kids] to be noticed as a Muslim and to be recognized as a Muslim! (Interviewee no. 7, Palestine, First generation, F)

Parental choice in Islamic education can thus be interpreted as a stigma management strategy aimed at postponing exposure to social stigma to a moment in which the Muslim identity is thought to be consolidated and fully developed in children so as to make them active and proud American Muslims, despite the general negative climate towards Islam. By stigma management it is meant "the attempt by persons with stigmatized social identities to approach interpersonal interactions in

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[173] Jenkins, 20.

ways aimed at minimizing the social costs of carrying these identities."[174] The "social salience of

Muslim stereotyping" leads individuals to identify mechanisms to cope with the stigma although

they might not be affected by it on a daily basis. In fact, many interviewees singled out Los Angeles

as an island of tolerance within the broader American context:

> We are lucky… I personally do not have any kind of experience in that sense [discrimination]
> because here in Los Angeles, so many different people come here! So you see a lot of
> immigrants here, you see many Mexicans, Bangladeshi, Pakistan, African, Italians, Europeans,
> Canadians… so I think who chooses to live in California cherishes the diversity we have in this
> state. (Interviewee no. 1, Italy, Convert, F)

> You know what I noticed since the elections? I noticed some people will come to me and
> welcome me and they would tell me, "Oh, we accept you, we love you, we support you!" and
> that's really beautiful to see in Los Angeles! (Interviewee no. 8, Palestine, First generation, F)

Still, much of the responsibility for the negative stereotyping of Islam is attributed to the

media and to Muslims themselves who did not engage in dialogue and hid their own identity.

As one interviewee claimed:

> It is fear and ignorance… ignorance… and there is a problem with the Muslim community: it
> was enclosed and a lot of Muslims were really just trying to assimilate… this is a problem that
> as a community we have to face […]. A lot of Muslims they just blended in and changed their
> names and nobody knew they were Muslims. So, when things started to happen and Islam
> popped up on the media, they were put on the spot… people did not know them… nobody knew
> there were Muslims… it is like the other, you are a stranger… so, it is the Muslims' fault!
> (Interviewee no. 7, Palestine, First generation, F)

The idea that it is the Muslims' fault if stereotyping of Islam became widespread is

inextricably linked with the third element that is at the heart of parental choice in Islamic education;

namely, the process of outbidding. Outbidding is that strategy through which new boundaries are set

within the in-group between "good" members and "bad" members. As the title of a book by

Mahmood Mamdani recalls, *Good Muslims, Bad Muslims*, the strategy of qualitatively dividing the

Muslim macro-category into two different poles is a common trope of American political

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[174] O'Brien, 292.

discourse.[175] Nonetheless, this strategy of outbidding is widely employed also by American Muslims themselves, as the excerpt above demonstrates. Specifically, the analysis of the data showed that the process of outbidding happens on two different dimensions. On the one hand, we find a discursive separation of American Muslims from Muslims in other parts of the world, especially Muslims in Europe and the Middle East. On the other hand, we encounter a differentiation between Muslims in the United States who embrace a Muslim American identity and extremists who wronged in their interpretation of Islam. By sending their children to the NH schools, parents are reassured that they will be instructed in the "good" and "right" version of Islam, the one that should not be stigmatized. The two examples below illustrate each of the two dimensions of the process of outbidding. The first excerpt below highlights the peculiarity of being American Muslim vis-à-vis being Muslim in Europe or the Middle East. The second excerpt points to the differentiation between Muslim who interpret the Qur'an and the Sunna of the Prophet correctly and extremists who misread the "real" message of Islam:

> I think we are different… to be American Muslim here, when the world sees us like "Oh, she is a Muslim, but she is American!" I think they see us like more not too much traditional. We are a little bit more open-minded… just because we live in an environment that is so diverse in terms of people! it is different from being a Muslim in the Middle East or a Muslim in Europe now! (Interviewee no. 10, Egypt, First generation, M)

> I do not consider these people Muslims, I do not consider the terrorists Muslims. They think in another way and they are another kind of people, they are extremists, they read the Qur'an the wrong way… that's not us! What the world has to understand is that we are not the same as they are… and this is not our fault, because you have in your religion, in your government, good people and bad people! (Interviewee no. 1, Italy, Convert, F)

To summarize, this section has identified three main components determining parental choice in Islamic education in the case of the parents of the NH schools investigated for the present research: a) religious and/or cultural continuity; b) management of the perceived social stigma towards Islam; and c) processes of outbidding, i.e. differentiation, from other in-group members.

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[175] Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim. America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2004), passim.

All these three elements are dependent variables, intertwining with each other in providing justification for the choice of a school setting that fosters a positive Muslim American identity in children. The concluding section suggests an integration of theories on ethnic and religious boundaries with theories on stigma management so as to account for the boundary reconfigurations that are taking place among the Muslim Americans subject to this study and suggests further implications that emerge from the analysis.

Conclusions

The analysis carried out in these pages has investigated two separate but closely interconnected levels of analysis; namely, the institutional discourse of the NH schools that aims at building a positive Muslim American identity in children and the individual motivations of parents that decide to send their children to these private Islamic schools in Los Angeles. The micro-focus on these two aspects has allowed the researcher to address a series of theoretical issues and to reach significant conclusions that invest three different but interconnected areas of research. Indeed, the contributions of this thesis are three-fold and affect three different levels of analysis: 1) the micro socio-psychological level; 2) the macro-level of ethnic and religious boundary reconfiguration; and 3) the general theoretical perspective adopted thus far in the study on Muslim Americans.

First, parental choice in Islamic education for the sample of parents analyzed for this research can be analytically framed as a strategy of stigma management. The code framing of the data has identified three primary motivations that lead parents to embrace an inclusive Muslim American identity that they are willing to instill in their offspring; namely, a) religious and cultural continuity; b) stigma management; and c) processes of outbidding. Albeit interconnected and reinforcing each other, stigma management appeared to be the most defining element concurring in the formation of a Muslim American identity. Therefore, parents feel compelled to submerge their children in a school environment that nurtures a positive Muslim American identity so as to prepare them in the "backstage," to use Goffman's theater metaphor, to face social stigma "on stage,"[176] that is to say once they get in touch with the broader cultural and social environment heavily defined by Islamophobia and negative representations of Islam. Parental choice in Islamic education can thus be conceived of as a stigma management strategy of postponement of social stigma, adding thus to the categories identified by the social psychologist John O'Brien.[177]

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[176] Goffman, passim.
[177] O'Brien, 292.

Second, the effort to build a positive Muslim American identity through processes of outbidding, i.e. symbolic differentiation from other social actors that are considered as in-group members by the predominant external categorization, is reflected in the blurring of ethnic boundaries and the symbolic redefinition of religious ones among the interviewees. Indeed, by redefining the Muslim American category in a much more inclusive fashion, social stigma is tackled and a symbolic boundary is set between good American Muslims and others (extremists, Middle Eastern Muslims, European Muslims, etc.). The reconfiguration of the boundaries of the group is a causal mechanism catalyzed by social stigma and discrimination. Wimmer already noted the crucial role played by discrimination in redefining ethnic groups' boundaries. As he himself asserted, discrimination is "an effective tool to enforce a specific distinction between ethnic 'us' and 'others'."[178] Wimmer specifies the three levels at which discrimination operates; namely, the legal-institutional level of state practices, the non-institutionalized bureaucratic state level, and, last but not least, the level of everyday life exchanges and interactions between in-group and out-group members. Describing this last level, Wimmer asserts that "[i]f pursued systematically by a sufficiently large number of individuals, such informal discrimination leads to social closure along ethnic lines."[179] In a functionalist perspective, this can be applied also to religious boundaries, as suggested in the analysis presented in these pages.

Nevertheless, the theoretical model presented by Wimmer does not take religion seriously enough in the process of symbolic and social boundary formation. This analysis has shown the importance of religion as the main marker of identity for Muslim Americans. Indeed, religion overrides ethnicity as the meaningful principle of vision and division of the social world for the interviewees. The reasons behind this, hardly addressed by researchers, do not lie in any inherent propriety of religion, or Islam in particular. On the contrary, in a functionalist perspective, the cogency of a marker of identity is inextricably linked to the broader social processes through which

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[178] Wimmer, 66.
[179] Ibid.

it acquires defining power. In the case at stake, social stigma plays again a pivotal role in making religion a stronger identitarian component of the Muslim American identity and one that is increasingly conceived of in an inclusive fashion. Therefore, in light of this framework, the increased salience of the religious category in defining identities in the case of groups of Muslim Americans can be understood in light of broader social and structural processes of external categorization, stigma management, and outbidding that lessen the role of substantive religious dogmas in determining patterns of identity formation, contributing thus to the de-essentialization of conceptualizations of Islam as a monolithic entity and of religion as unique in its defining power at identity level, as Gryzmala-Busse contends.[180]

Third, and following from the assumption that religion is a social construct not characterized by any peculiar or inherent characteristics, this thesis contributes to reframing the approach to the study on Muslim Americans. In fact, the main research question that has been addressed in the literature is the degree to which Islam is becoming an American religion.[181] The study of the construction of a Muslim American identity in the NH schools, an identity widely embraced by the parents interviewed, shows that investigating whether Islam is an American religion is not a fruitful starting point for analysis. Indeed, the question is tainted by the clash-of-values assumption that has been discussed in chapter 4. Inevitably, also academia is affected by the general climate of Islamophobia and has reacted by producing an interested kind of scholarship aimed at reassuring and informing readers about the peaceful nature of Islam more than at achieving a genuine and disinterested understanding of social phenomena. Hence, instead of inquiring whether Islam - a polyphonic referent that can assume a myriad of meanings according to different places, peoples, times - is becoming American – an adjective used to describe a country built on the appreciation of diversity but highly contradictory in the practical translation of this principle –, it is more fruitful to investigate institutions and individuals that operate in the American context and that identify

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[180] Gryzmala-Busse (2012), passim.
[181] See: Haddad (1993), passim; Haddad and Esposito (2000), passim; Bilici (2012), passim.

themselves as American Muslims, regardless of the theological discourse they embrace. In fact, as the study on symbolic and social boundaries demonstrates, the existence of a group that conceives of itself as delimited by well-established boundaries does not imply that all members of the given group share the same culture or, in the case at stake, the same interpretation of Islam.

In conclusion, the limitations of this research lie in the small sample used and the short time span during which this field research has been conducted. But these same limitations pave the way for future research on the topic. Specifically, three main suggestions for future research arise, each one adopting a different approach. First, new questions arise concerning the degree to which the blurring of ethnic boundaries and the salience of the religious ones are concerned. More specifically, it would be useful to carry out a comparative study of different Islamic institutions so as to acquire a better understanding of other socio-economic or geographical variables that might have influenced the results of this analysis. Second, a comparative approach can be adopted also in order to investigate the construction of Muslim American identity in private Islamic schools and public American schools so as to better weigh the role of stigma in identity formation. Third, a longitudinal study would be useful to investigate the complex relationship between the institutional and social level of identity formation and the individual acceptance or refusal of the version of American Islam advanced by Islamic institutions. Focusing the analysis on the children that are attending these schools would provide useful insights on the intertwining of the individual and the social levels of analysis, an issue that has been only marginally tackled in this thesis.

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