

# Defining *Du‘ā*: A Study of Contested Meanings in Immigrant Muslim Schools in the New York City Area

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*This article uses ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with students and teachers in two Sunni Muslim high schools in the New York City area to examine how Muslim Americans understand and practice prayer, specifically salah (ritualized daily prayer) and du‘ā’ (supplication). The author shows how the former is viewed as a central and largely unchangeable element of Muslim daily life, while the latter is much more mutable and thus engenders disagreement about the degree to which it should be considered “formalized.” Two possible hypotheses are posited for these differences: (a) the American religious landscape and (b) broader issues across the Ummah (the global Muslim community), such as the ease of the language to be used.*

**Key Words:** Muslim Americans, adolescents, prayer, spirituality, ritual

## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In her monograph on Muslim prayer, Marion Katz (2013) describes how, from the 13th to the 19th centuries, Christian Europeans who traveled in Muslim countries were fascinated and impressed by how often Muslims prayed. Prayer is usually a central and constitutive part of Muslim identity, both for those studying Muslims and for Muslims themselves.

In my ethnographic research conducted in Muslim high schools in the New York City area, I found prayer to be a practice that “anchor[s] constitutive rules”

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(Swidler, 2001, p. 90) by “[playing] a crucial role as repeated ritual confirmations that something is indeed what it is” (Swidler, 2001, 98). That “something” is not only the existence of Allah,<sup>2</sup> but also the entire community and way of approaching the world that Allah has revealed and that the community carries forward through time. Prayer anchors the self and the community to each other and in time and space. This spatial and temporal anchoring is especially salient in the five daily prayers (*salah*), which are set at specific times and directed toward a specific location on Earth. A key element of Sunni Islam is that such prayer happens without any intermediary. *Salah*, along with other forms of prayer to be discussed later, often occurs in collective settings. But even if collective *salah* is considered superior to individual *salah*, it is certainly not required.

To be clear, while *salah* is a central part of what Asad (2009) would call the Sunni Muslim tradition, there is nothing *sociologically* essential about any element of “Muslimness.” As Asad describes in his criticism of Geertzian ethnography (Asad, 1993; Varisco, 2005), Islam is a living tradition constituted by key texts and practices, but one that also remains deeply heterogeneous and often mutually contradictory. Indeed, as I will argue, the American Muslim communities I describe herein are marked not so much by a set list of practices, but rather by ongoing arguments about the practices as they are lived in heterogeneous and contested ways (Asad, 2009, p. 23).

In this paper, I describe my findings of how *salah* and *du'a'* have different roles within these communities and, more important, how the physicality and centrality of the former has led it to change far less than the latter between an older immigrant generation and a younger cohort of American-born Muslims.

Prayer is increasingly a field of study within the social sciences in two senses. First, social scientists have examined its intercessory power, such as prayer’s ability to affect medical improvements or “do something” in the world (Baesler, 2012; Bender, 2008; Cerulo & Barra, 2008; Wuthnow, 2008a; Wuthnow, 2008b). A smaller group of studies has examined its centrality to individual projects of self-cultivation (Bowen, 1989; Mahmood, 2005; Sharp, 2013; Winchester, 2008). This less explored area of research—focusing on prayer as a dimension of self-cultivation—stresses the importance of ritual prayer in particular as a means by which one may constitute and develop a certain kind of self, a self that is transformed into a virtuous believer. An important element of that second way of studying prayer is the belief that the virtuous self is developed in relationship with God. In this modality, prayer is envisioned as a relational act through which the bond between supplicant and God is given greater emotional intensity and strength.

In other words, prayer is the vehicle through which believers seek a particular kind of relationship with God. As such, the structure and actual language of their prayers reveal a great deal about how they understand that relationship. This issue was especially salient in my fieldwork. For example, I found that the students and teachers contested their meaning, function, and form, especially *du'a'* (prayers of supplication), with certain students insisting that its form can be a more casual conversation with Allah, asking for whatever one might need. Beyond striving

to adhere to the norms structuring ritual prayer, many of the Muslim American teenagers in my field sites placed heavy emphasis on a personalized, individual relationship with Allah. This perhaps is a manifestation of an American focus on unmediated, democratic immediacy in religious experience. The key distinction here, therefore, is less the experience of immediate connection and more the changing nature of language and ritual form in making that connection.

Also, as I will describe in the conclusion, an empirical question remains: Is the *cause* of this heterogeneity a kind of religious American isomorphism common among recent immigrants (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001; Cadge & Ecklund, 2007), or a process found across the Ummah that makes certain ritual forms more flexible to emphasize the even more common need for a felt immediacy in ritual communication with God?

Finally, I acknowledge that I am developing my argument through fieldwork in two schools composed almost entirely of either immigrant Muslims or their children. Their experience of “American Islam” (Bilici, 2012; GhaneaBassiri, 2010; Grewal, 2013) is therefore quite distinct from the African-American Muslim experience, which is another important Muslim constituency in the New York City area. While much important work has been done on this latter group’s religious lives and identities (Curtis, 2012; Abdullah, 2010; Jackson, 2005; Kha-beer, 2016; Karim, 2008), spirituality in the “Blackamerican” Muslim tradition remains critically understudied (though see Aslan, 2017). This project is therefore part of a broader series of studies (Curtis, 2017; Howe, 2016) that look at Muslims’ spiritual practices primarily as things in themselves, rather than as prisms through which to understand other questions, especially those related to gender, politics, and identity.

In the following sections, I will briefly describe my methods, the role of salah and *du‘ā* in the communities studied, the debates within as to what *du‘ā* means, and its relationship to “just talking to God.” I close by reflecting on the potential American causes of these differences in terms of the meaning of *du‘ā* and describing how Muslim communities in other countries face similar distinctions in practice.

## METHODOLOGY

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork (January 2011-July 2012) in two Sunni Muslim and two Evangelical Protestant religious high schools in the New York City area. During the calendar year of 2011, I spent about two days a week each at Al Amal School<sup>3</sup> and then, during the spring semester of 2012, about two days a week at Al Haqq Academy. By the time my fieldwork was completed, I had visited Al Amal around 50 times and Al Haqq around 25 times. The duration of these on-site visits ranged from three to 12 hours at the school, with an average of around five hours. Interviews were generally digitally recorded, although a few teachers (and no students) were uncomfortable with that. While talking with those who did not want to be taped, I simply typed notes. Nearly

all of the interviews took place in the schools themselves; a few took place in a neutral location chosen with the interviewee. I conducted formal, recorded interviews with four students at Al Amal and 27 students at Al Haqq. The names of the schools and the individuals within them have been changed to ensure their privacy.

## THE CENTRALITY OF SALAH

For non-Muslim Americans<sup>4</sup> influenced by Evangelical Christianity, the word “prayer” tends to mean, “just talking to God” (Luhrmann, 2012). Among American Catholics, however, it might mean specific recitations, such as the “Our Father” or “Hail Mary” (Aumann, 1985). For American Muslims, the term is often more complex. Most of my Muslim respondents used “prayer” to refer specifically to salah; however, they also sometimes used it to refer to *du'a'* and dhikr.<sup>5</sup> To “make dhikr” means to remember (or mention) God, a practice often characterized as saying simple words or exclamations of praise throughout the day. Dhikr can also be enacted by spending a certain amount of time ritually repeating important phrases, such as “*Lā ilāha illā Allāh*,” “*Subḥān Allāh*,” or “*al-hamdu lillāh*,”<sup>6</sup> sometimes using prayer beads to focus the mind. There are various guides on how to make dhikr that American Muslims can access online.

To “make *du'a'*” generally means to recite a memorized prayer as a form of supplication in a certain set of circumstances, of which there are hundreds if not thousands. Lists of *du'a'* are easily available online. While it is often considered important to supplicate in accord with the Prophet’s example (Sunnah), Muslims in various Islamic cultures will replace such utterances with their own improvised prayers, as described below.

In virtually all Muslim communities—and certainly the two I studied—salah is the most important and emphasized type of these three forms of prayer. However, these distinctions get complex, for there is a moment during the salah in which Muslims make their own *du'a'* and usually in their own words. Nonetheless, at least in the schools I studied, when people said “make *du'a'*” to each other, they usually referred to those types of prayers that are separate from salah.

Salah, a physical process repeated five times daily, is the second of Islam’s five pillars, preceded only by the *shahādah* (the Muslim profession of belief in Allah and Prophet Muhammad). It can be done either individually or communally—although men are required to attend Friday’s communal service (and in the schools where I did fieldwork, women’s attendance was encouraged, even if there are schools of Islamic thought that discourage women’s attendance). Salah entails a series of opening rituals and then kneeling, standing, prostrating, and reciting, which, in one iteration, are called a *rak'ab*. The number of required *rak'abs*<sup>7</sup> varies slightly depending upon the salah being performed at that particular time. During the salah, Muslims recite Qur’anic passages and have time to make their own intentions.

One of the main reasons for observing salah is simply that doing so is required. As many hadith attest (and as I continually heard throughout my field-work), Muslims' lives will be judged first by their prayer, and increased prayers will yield increased rewards in the afterlife. This is also the case with *du'a'* and dhikr. The Muslim parents and students I encountered and interviewed have been learning how to "make salah" since they were children, and thus it had become second nature for the high school students. This emphasis on salah extended to the Islamic studies classes in both schools, where it came up regularly, in some ways simply because it is complicated. For example, there are certain rules about when and what to do, how to make up missed prayers, how to clean oneself beforehand (*wudū'*), and how to supplement one's prayers by additional devotions (Sunnah)<sup>8</sup>. Yet is also true that it is challenging to observe it regularly and on time. Muslims in this research generally acknowledged that salah was difficult, both because of its time commitments and because of the necessity for concentration (*khushū'*).

It is worthwhile to reflect briefly on *khushū'* here, for its importance reveals the importance of a felt immediacy and relationship to Allah as co-extensive with, and constituted and enabled by, the prayer's ritual forms (Powers, 2004). A speaker at a special day dedicated to salah at Al Haqq told students that *khushū'* is "talking to God." Shaykh Yusuf, the school's primary Islamic studies teacher, regularly told them about its importance and of having "a personal relationship with Allah."

In one of these discussions about *khushū'*, a female student in Shaykh Yusuf's class at Al Haqq said that "when I have the *khushū'*, I feel spiritually [that] everything is coming together. But when I'm not [feeling it,] I feel like what's the point?" Another girl mentioned a famous hadith about Imam 'Alī ibn Abī Tālib, who had requested that an arrow be pulled out of his leg while he prayed. His *khushū'* was so strong that he felt no pain. The shaykh repeated the story, and the girls were shocked. "How do you do that?" one asked. Another complained, "The smallest thing can distract me when I'm praying—it's bad but I'm just being honest." The teacher nodded. "Thank you for your honesty." After an extended conversation, the teacher said:

Yes, this is very important... Anytime you approach your salah, ask yourself this question, [for] the moment you lose sight of this question, you lose *khushū'*: what is the point of salah—why am I praying? If you're able to successfully answer this question, you'll be able to pray successfully.

If focusing is difficult in salah, students generally found it easier within the context of *du'a'*, especially given the ways they understood *du'a'* to operate. Many of my high school participants related that when making *du'a'*, they were able to focus far more on their individual, extemporaneous requests—"just talking to Allah"—than they were while making salah.

## THE RITUAL, RELATIONSHIP, AND CONTESTED SHAPE OF *DU'A'*

One poster at Al Haqq said simply: “Never underestimate the power of duah.”<sup>9</sup> In my interviews with students at this school, many of them told me about the importance of *du'a'*. What stood out in such conversations was that a large minority of them defined it as “just talking to God,” whereas the adults I interviewed at the schools did not.

As commonly understood, *du'a'* is different from dhikr, and both are quite different from salah. As Shaykh Yusuf informed me:

Dhikr are words that the prophets taught—part of the Sunnah, the hadith. These are words that remind the one who says them of Allah (SWT): when they wake up in the morning, when they eat, after they finish eating, when they go to bed, when they come out of the bathroom, when it rains, when they see the lightning.

*Du'a'* is subtly different:

The *du'a'* is a central aspect of a Muslim's life, asking of Allah, for whatever, in whatever situation you are in, whatever they need from Allah (SWT). There are specific things to be learned here in terms of these words of Allah, how to follow these words of Allah, making these specific prayers. There are different kinds of prayers that cover almost everything.

It is noteworthy that his description of *du'a'* emphasizes specific, as opposed to improvised, words of Allah because doing so creates a personal relationship with Allah. Indeed, it was quite important to him that his students' prayer lives did not become rote or mechanized, but that they continued to be felt as personal and immediate. There might be an American prejudice against memorized words, as if they are somehow less functional in creating a relationship than improvised words. However, Shaykh Yusuf would strenuously disagree. This insistence that form leads to a free, immediate, and personal relationship echoes Mahmood's (2005) work on conservative Muslim women's prayer in Egypt.

I heard various definitions of both *du'a'* and dhikr, which were sometimes used interchangeably. But in the communities I studied, dhikr (lit. remembrance) was often understood as acknowledging God and *du'a'* (lit. calling out) as an act of supplication. Both draw the content of their prayers from the Qur'an, the Hadith, previous prophets, the Companions, and even specific scholars.<sup>10</sup>

When I asked Yaqub, an Al Haqq Islamic studies teacher, about *du'a'* being “just talking to God,” he told me, “If I said [to the students] make *du'a'*, they would understand. But if I said talk to God, they wouldn't know what I was talking about.” I would say that was certainly true of most of the students I interviewed. However, some of them took the emotional effect of the “personal relationship with God” they had learned in reference to focus and *khushū'* during salah and shifted it to a certain verbal extemporaneousness. When I talked to Shaykh Yusuf about this, he was very clear that what they were doing was good, although it was not *du'a'*.

To be clear, *du'a'* in its specific meaning refers to “calling out” to God, so that one can imagine a Muslim talking to God more conversationally at first and then calling out to God for assistance in a more formalized way. Indeed, there are prophetic *du'a'* with just that pattern.<sup>11</sup> Yet what is important for my purposes here is that many students’ understandings of *du'a'* differed from that of their teacher. Shaykh Yusuf often talked to them about the importance of *du'a'* and dhikr. On one beautiful day near the end of my semester at Al Haqq, he took a group of senior boys outside, where we all sat in a circle on the grass. He then asked them to share their favorite dhikr. One muttered something in Arabic, and a few of the boys smirked. The shaykh started laughing. “I’m sorry,” he said, “but I have to laugh.” “That’s the one for the bathroom, dude,” another boy remarked. The first boy blushed and said he had the actual wording, but that it was in his wallet. This example highlights the practical reality that it can be a lack of Arabic knowledge, as much as a different theology, that compels some young American Muslims to “just talk” to God.

Interestingly, among both teachers and students I found many more references to *du'a'* than to dhikr. While I would occasionally see both groups with dhikr “prayer beads” at both schools, they were relatively rare. I also heard teachers giving students examples of *du'a'* or encouraging them to “make *du'a'*” at least a dozen times. Only once did I notice a teacher giving a student a dhikr to recite. (To provide context, they were told to make their five salahs each day, including the one that occurred during the school day.) Of course, any exact counting of interactions within an ethnographic project is always a bit haphazard, as it is extremely difficult to do so in any standardized way. But while I was in the schools, it was striking how *du'a'* was emphasized far more often dhikr and how salah was emphasized most of all.

I mentioned this discrepancy in my notes to some of my respondents at Al Haqq. One of them, a student, said that it sounded about right since, as she stated, dhikr is more private. However, another Islamic studies teacher there, Leila, said in an e-mail that she:

would not say that Al Haqq emphasizes *du'a'* more than dhikr. I believe both are equally stressed; the importance of dhikr and the power of *du'a'*. In fact before every prayer time, we ask the students to make dhikr instead of making so much noise talking. And routinely after every prayer, we make dhikr first followed by *du'a'*. So definitely in my opinion, the two concepts (*du'a'* & dhikr) are on the same playing field...

Leila’s e-mail described something I had not noticed, namely, the fairly intense focus on dhikr. But in hindsight, this might have been because it was something harder for me to notice, both as a non-Muslim and as an ethnographer.

### ***DU'A' AS "JUST TALKING TO GOD"***

Why might Al Haqq’s students have a different perspective on *du'a'* than Shaykh Yusuf? Perhaps because salah’s form is far more physical (and therefore

translatable and transcendent) and more immutable, as so many of the hadith outline a specific way of performing it exactly as Muhammad himself did. Additionally, the schools emphasized the centrality of *khushū'* as a way to allow students who might not understand Arabic to still feel a connection to God while following the prayer's ritualistic form as laid down by Muhammad.

Finally, because salah is often performed communally, there is a sense of collective effervescence (Durkheim, 2008) that hinges on the shared enactment of a ritual that transcends a particular time and place and unites the one praying to a trans-historical community of Muslims. The combination of physicality practiced through muscle memory and the opportunity to use *khushū'* to concentrate on one's relationship with God makes salah a deeply personal experience, even if it is, for many of the Muslim American teenagers in this research, done in a foreign and sometimes unintelligible language using Allah's words. (The same, by the way, might be said for any collective worship, such as Hindu chants, Protestant hymns, or the Catholic Mass).

The students at Al Haqq watched an online video in class about the importance of their relationship to Allah and heard repeatedly about prayer's centrality to strengthen that relationship. The most important part in this regard is salah. However, these videos and instructions also frequently mentioned *du'a'*, and students were regularly told at both schools about the importance of "making *du'a'*." Yet this focus on this relationship, as well as the students' general lack of fluency in Arabic, led them to treat their *du'a'* in a more immediate manner, namely, just calling out their needs to God in their own language and words. While some of the students I interviewed at Al Haqq agreed with Shaykh Yusuf that *du'a'* had to be made in the standard Arabic preset phrases, the vast majority said that they could be spontaneous conversations in English.

The difference in language, however, might be key to explaining why *du'a'* might feel distant. Studies of Muslim communities in other parts of the world have also identified the challenge of saying prayers in Qur'anic Arabic, as I will elaborate upon in the final section. As a 12<sup>th</sup>-grade boy told me, "You can say it [*du'a'*] in Latin, Arabic, English, in any way as long as your intention's there." When I asked another senior if she prayed in English, she responded that "you can connect to Allah in however way—He knows all the languages." While very few students I interviewed said they thought of *du'a'* as *conversational* in the way that many scholars describe Evangelical prayer (Luhrmann, 2012), some did think of it in these terms, and just about all of them insisted that they could just ask God for help in their own language and that doing so was just as effective.

While conversing with a senior boy at Al Haqq, he told me that part of the problem stems from just not knowing: "I don't know all these *du'a'*'s like the shaykh does," but he said this did not really matter because "God knows all tongues." Instead, this student simply insisted that a Muslim should "say what you wanna say then...finish off by praising....It's a Sunnah—but in the end, it comes down to you what you wanna tell God."

What is remarkable here is his contrast to what I know he could tell me about salah, for which there are clearly prescribed actions, and what he might have been able to tell me about *du'a'*; for example, there is one for entering a room and before giving a speech. The fact that he felt entirely comfortable telling me that *du'a'* is “what you wanna tell God” itself indicates an important difference both in its *content* and *form*, at least in contrast to the more circumscribed form described by Shaykh Yusuf.

To be clear, that same student later told me about a “list of *du'a'* [that he reads] before a test,” and so he is not opposed to the pre-established *du'a'*s his teacher prefers. Similarly, a younger teacher at Al Haqq once asked me to keep her and the school community in my “*du'a'*.” The fact that she felt comfortable describing my prayers as a Christian as “*du'a'*” further implies an expansive understanding of its use and structure.

This emphasis on making *du'a'* in any language comes amidst pressure from an older generation—especially among Arab immigrants—to see Arabic as the true language of conversation with Allah. Their point is not entirely parochial: Because the Qur'an itself is in Arabic, there is a tremendous focus on Arabic in Islam and an insistence that the salah be conducted in Arabic as much as possible. However, there is debate among Muslim scholars about what non-Arabic speakers should say and do while in salah (Katz, 2013). When I asked a senior girl whether it would be better to make *du'a'* in Arabic or English, she told me:

God understands all languages. I think some people in the school really, I mean when we were in elementary school, people would say that ‘oh no, if you don’t know Arabic, on the Day of Judgment you won’t understand anything and you’ll go to hell.’ But I don’t think that’s right.

Another senior girl assured me that “you can do it in any language. It’s preferred in Arabic, but you can do it in English.”

Again, language appears to be a central part of this distinction between instructors and students at Al Haqq, with having a greater capacity in Arabic making certain forms of prayer more immediately available. A sophomore boy told me:

I think [*du'a'*'s] better in Arabic. Like if you guys are Christians or anything and they pray or something. They’ll do it in Latin if they’re very serious about it. Jewish people will do it in Hebrew if they’re really serious about it. Like, you know, if someone dies and you do a prayer in Hebrew. My friends went to a funeral and they did it there. So I think it has to do with language of origin for the religion.”

Whether or not the boy is right about Jewish and Christian prayer, he is insistent that Arabic has a priority not only in salah but also in *du'a'*.

I found this prioritization to be the case among instructors, who regularly taught their students *du'a'*s to memorize. However, this was far less the case for the students. For example, Al Haqq had a special day dedicated to salah, at which the entire school community gathered to listen to guest speakers and attend workshops

on their prayer life. Between speakers, Shaykh Yusuf quizzed students on specific *du'a'*'s that the Prophet would call out at various moments in his life. Many of them had no idea what to say, and while those who raised their hands with the correct answer were praised, their knowledge seemed more like an impressive addition to a meaningful spiritual life rather than something important in and of itself. While it was clear that Shaykh Yusuf and the other adults were proud of certain students who recited this or that *du'a'* in Arabic, it was also the case that they were gathered on a day to celebrate salah and not *du'a'*. It might well be the latter's supplemental role to the former that made the contestations of *du'a'* I have been describing possible, with some students being more comfortable describing it as talking to God.

As I mentioned above, during his interview Shaykh Yusuf made clear that “just talking to God” is a fine thing to do, but it is not really *du'a'*. In some sense, he is obviously right, for *du'a'* literally means to call out to Allah. Thus, it is the calling out portion of the prayer, not the conversation part. However, there are various examples of the Prophet talking to God before or after calling out for aid, something with which Shaykh Yusuf would surely have no problem. So part of this story is about how *du'a'* changes its meaning and sensibility in a context in which its original Arabic meaning is often forgotten or unknown.

The students I interviewed were quite diverse in their framing of the appropriate language for *du'a'*. Some of them stated that it should be made in English because it is actually more effective that way. One senior girl insisted that the “impact” of prayers in Arabic is less if one does not understand them: “I just feel like because I don’t necessarily understand it completely, it doesn’t have that same, it wouldn’t have that same impact as if it just came from my heart.” For a junior boy, the prayer’s effectiveness is driven less by its language than by its intention and its “heart,” an intensity that can only be heightened by understanding what one is saying. He told me, “I believe that what you understand the most would be the most effective because if you’re saying *du'a'* that you learned from Shaykh [Yusuf], but don’t know what it means, it’s useless.” He went on to describe how “it’s pointless” if “you’re blurting out words with no heart” because “Islam believes there is always a need for the inner self... I think that you shouldn’t prioritize one over the other.” Ideally, most Muslims insist that ritual is precisely the means one uses to expose his/her inner self to Allah, whether via Sufi forms of recitation or the physical movements of salah.

While there are many reasons why this teenager might be making this claim, it is striking how much it parallels longstanding American Protestant critiques of ritual as distinct from a meaningful connection to God, as opposed to the more symbiotic understanding of ritual and relationships often described in Muslim theology. But to be clear, Muslim theology is quite diverse and there is a long tradition of suspicion of ritualism (Anjum, 2006; Powers, 2004). As such, it hard to differentiate whether these diverse understandings are the results of enduring debates within the Muslim intellectual tradition, of an Americanized suspicion of forms, or of some combination of the two.

So far, I have been describing the expansiveness and openness found in the language of prayer. This expansiveness can also extend into a discussion about form. I asked a senior girl about salah, and she told me:

I feel like salah itself, it doesn't need to be the physical practice...it's supposed to be... your closest moment to God and I don't think you actually need to be physically praying in that sense to actually build that connection and get that kind of enlightenment.

Note here how she extends the relational focus on salah she is learning in school beyond the confines of the five prayers themselves, and yet she still calls the experience salah. What she is saying is, in some sense, uncontroversial, as even the most formalistic Muslim scholar of spirituality would enthusiastically agree that the prayerful relationship to Allah transcends the five daily prayers. And yet her argument is unique in its insistence that the salah itself can be understood differently.

This expansiveness extends into *du'a'*. She told me, "I think like to talk to God you don't need a specific language or even like to recite anything." A sophomore boy insisted that such spontaneous conversations are actually superior to memorized prayers, "because when you're sitting there and you're just talking to God, you know that there's nobody else in the room and you know that God ultimately has total control of everything." "Just talking," in his opinion, makes a Muslim "more spiritually connected." A junior girl made it simple. When I asked her to distinguish between salah and *du'a'*, she told me, "Well salah, there's rules for it. *Du'a'*, there's no rules. You just—kind of just say anything you want." This expansiveness contrasts with Shaykh Yusuf's more circumscribed understanding of *du'a'*, even if he would be open to his students saying "anything they want" to God in prayer. This distinction reveals an important diversity regarding spiritual practice in the communities I studied—a diversity that reflects longstanding differences in how Muslims consider their prayer (Katz, 2013).

At least in the communities I studied, this expansiveness about form only extends to a certain point. For these young American Muslims, *du'a'* might well be just talking to God in its original sense of calling out, asking God for help in a language that they understand and in supplications they utter on the spot. Yet it is not quite "just talking to God about anything." *Du'a'* had this role for the Muslim students I interviewed, but only to a certain point. A junior girl told me, "I guess the point [of *du'a'*] is relative to the person, but the point to me is to feel closer to God, to feel more spiritually comfortable." Yet to feel "spiritually comfortable" does not necessarily mean that one can discuss everything. *Du'a'*, she told me, is "not chatting with God about my day," but a chance to ask for help, saying to God "Look, this is what's going on and I need help." She distinguishes such calls from "casual conversation." While she says *du'a'* could take that form for "other people," it does not do so for her.

I found this distinction to be the case almost universally. Many students told me that they made *du'a'* in any language using whatever words came to mind, but very few told me they thought of *du'a'* itself as just chatting with God or that they

even could have a totally open, casual conversation with God, as described by many American Evangelicals.

## THE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE, MUSLIM HETEROGENEITY, AND DEBATES ABOUT *DU'A'*

It is hard to identify the causes of the disagreements about *du'a'*'s meaning and form that I identified during my fieldwork. I will outline two here: (a) a hypothesis of American anti-formalism and (b) a hypothesis of longstanding Muslim heterogeneity. Of course, it seems plausible that the best answer might be some combination of the two.

### Hypothesis One: American Anti-Formalism

American religion has traditionally been described as radically democratic, spontaneous, and relational, all the way back to Tocqueville's famous study of American democracy (2002).<sup>12</sup> Similarly, in Will Herberg's (1960) classic study of American religion, *Protestant Catholic Jew*, he writes, "Religion in America has tended toward a marked disparagement of 'forms,' whether theological or liturgical. Even the highly liturgical and theological churches have felt the effects of this spirit to the degree that they have become thoroughly acculturated" (p. 83). If form is less essential to religions in the United States, and if *du'a'* is less wedded to a specific form than salah, it is at least plausible that some of what I describe here is the result of this anti-formalism.

To provide a parallel case, scholars of American Catholicism have described how this egalitarian and immediate sensibility has made Catholicism in the United States far less authoritarian and ritualistic than the more traditional European church. Indeed, Vatican II's insistence that Catholicism and democracy can coexist was inspired by an American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray (Murray, 2005; Noonan, 1993, p. 674). A similar process can be seen in American Sunni Islam. Of course, Sunni Islam is already more radically democratic than Catholicism, inasmuch as the shaykh is not the mediator of sacraments. In other words, Muslims are their own priests in the Protestant sense of the term.

It is also important to clarify that while the Roman Catholic tradition and most Muslim traditions tend to emphasize certain pre-established rituals, the relationship to authority within those rituals is distinct. Catholic rituals and religious forms require specific individuals who hold sacramental power over their lives, whereas Muslims have a similar commitment to certain rituals and religious forms, but with a far more democratic sense of access to God. Moreover, Islam's rules were established more by a tradition of key texts than a set of religious leaders.<sup>13</sup> Despite these differences, a common focus on certain ritual forms might make a comparison to changes in Catholic spirituality, piety, and religious identity instructive. Especially since Vatican II, American Catholics have felt increasingly comfortable with a less hierarchical and traditional understanding of their faith (D'Antonio, Davidson, Hoge, & Gautier, 2007).

This distinction can be seen in recent work on adolescent spirituality, especially in Christian Smith's work. The 15 Muslim students studied by Smith and his colleagues were, like the vast majority of teens in their study, remarkably inarticulate. The researchers quote a 16-year-old Muslim describing his religion: "Nothing really, like, just hard work. My parents really believe in hard work, so it's one thing. Like, concern for other people, things like that, like just don't be an [expletive], you know" (Smith & Denton, 2005, p. 132). For most of the teenagers they studied, Smith and his colleagues found that American spirituality was marked by a "moralistic therapeutic deism," a sort of generic belief in a God who functions as a cosmic butler and therapist, whose only demand is that people be nice.<sup>14</sup> They found similar results with Catholics, of whom Smith and Denton (2005) were surprised to learn that "Catholic teens as a whole show up as fairly weak" in comparison "both to official Catholic norms of faithfulness and to other types of Christian teens in the United States... on most measures of religious faith, belief, experience, and practice" (p. 216).

However, Catholics have criticized their findings for judging Catholic spirituality by an Evangelical standard, arguing that Catholics are not socialized to be as articulate as Evangelicals are about the inner workings of their faith lives. Unlike Evangelicals, who are often religiously socialized to practice "sharing their faith" and articulating how and why they believe what they do, Catholics are not necessarily encouraged to believe in religious exclusion in the manner of other Christians (Beaudoin, 2008). These criticisms highlight important potential explanations of Catholic and Evangelical verbalizations of their faiths, but they also ignore the degree to which Catholics—as Smith points out—are often just as likely as Evangelicals to reject the more rigid strictures of their own faith commitments.

Perhaps part of the explanation for the Catholics' casual attitude in Smith's research lies within the same mechanisms that explain why some of the Muslim teens I met were less concerned with saying *du'a'* in the ways that their teachers suggest. First, the American religious landscape encourages a kind of individualism and sense of self-sufficiency that is in marked tension with an insistence that the prayer's methods and content must be copied exactly from religious authorities or authoritative texts. Second, it is arguably because Muslims and Catholics have something utterly separate from the "just talking to God" attitudes that characterizes the dominant American Protestant spirituality (respectively, the salah and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist), that these different ways of characterizing *du'a'* do not create any significant controversy.

#### Hypothesis Two: A Linguistic Challenge Across the Ummah

The above hypothesis compares the experience of those immigrant American Muslim communities with whom I worked with the experience of immigrant Catholics, positing that a change documented in American Catholic religious practice—that of gradually de-emphasizing formal requirements as a result of American Protestant anti-formalism—might be recapitulated in the communities

I observed. Here I suggest a second hypothesis to explain the heterogeneity I witnessed: that of language difference. These two causal processes are by no means mutually exclusive: either, or neither, or both, might accurately provide the causal explanation that I am unable to provide here. Indeed, as some of the work I am going to show demonstrates, the United States is not the only place where Muslim practice has fused with local custom (Bowen, 1989) even if, in some cases, such heterodox customs were imported “as part of Muslim civilization, even if they perhaps did not belong to the core of the Muslim religion” (van Bruinessen, 1999, p. 161).

Here, I cite the example of Indonesian Muslims. Islam in that country is an interesting case in that, unlike the experience of immigrant Muslims in the United States, it is quite old—indeed, it is older than any form of American Islam, which dates back no earlier than American colonization (GhaneaBassiri, 2010). Not much English-language work is available on the specific practice of *du'a'* in Indonesia. Indeed, as Möller (2005) argues, Islamic practice is in general woefully understudied in comparison to that country's beliefs and politics. However, more general work on prayer and Islamic religious practice emphasizes—as I find in my own work—the prioritization of Arabic over local languages in Muslim contexts, not only for *salah*, for which there is more global consensus that Arabic is required (Bowen, 1989; Simon, 2009; Katz, 2013), but also for other forms of Muslim spiritual practice as well (Lukens-Bull, 2001; Weix, 1998).

This does not mean that Arabic is the only language allowed, but simply that it is prioritized. For example, Möller (2005) describes how some Javanese Muslims make *tarāwih* prayers (special prayers prayed during the holy month of Ramadan) in Javanese if they cannot do so in Arabic, and that the imam he observed invited “the congregation to state the intent for the next day's fast, first in Arabic and then in Javanese” (p. 49). This specific request shows, along with Weix's study of local languages in Islamic prayer groups, how the necessities of understanding in a local language exists in an uneasy tension with the prioritization of Arabic. Indeed, the issue of local languages versus Arabic has itself become a topic of political contestation (Hasan, 2009, p. 233). As such, the tension I describe about the use of Arabic in prayer is clearly not only an American story.

## CONCLUSION

In my research, I observed that the older generation of Muslim Americans tended to insist on *du'a'* as a set of formalized Arabic sentences or phrases to be used when calling out for God's help. The younger Muslim students and teachers with whom I worked tended to think of *du'a'* less formalistically; it was simply asking God for help, and in whatever words or language the situation required. It remains an empirical question as to whether this contention holds across generations outside of the schools I studied, both within and outside the United States. I have suggested two potential hypotheses for these differences. However, given

the constraints of space within this article and my own data, I cannot do much more here other than to postulate them. First, I suggest that one reason might be the American religious landscape itself, which tends to eschew form and focus on a believer's relationship with God. My second suggested hypothesis is that one reason for this difference might simply be a question of language capacity and that Muslims around the world tend to pray—especially when making *du'a'*—in the language in which they are most comfortable.

Relatedly, in a study of Sufi Islam in Britain, Werbner (2007) describes how “the language of sermons and even supplicatory prayer in the Pakistani mosques, whatever their tendency, is Urdu rather than Arabic” (p. 199). This is a fascinating distinction, as it reveals a separation both from the language of the host country and the Qur'an: Instead, the language chosen, presumably, is the language in which the Muslims in question are most adroit. Perhaps the data revealed here tells a similar story, and a very old one—namely, that of Muslims seeking an intimate connection with God.

## Notes

1. I am extremely grateful to Christine Sheikh for initially encouraging this project. I also thank Cynthia Miller-Idriss, Shariq Siddiqui, Steve Warner, and two anonymous reviewers for their extremely helpful comments. Most importantly, this research would not have been possible without the warmth and hospitality of the Muslim schools in which the research was conducted.
2. To be clear, I write as a methodological atheist, meaning that I do not posit God (or Allah) or the supernatural as a possible explanation or element of what I study. However, how people talk about God or understand God's work in the world is obviously important in any study of religion. Rather than write “what people say or believe” about God every time, when God is mentioned, I simply say God. Also, while the majority of Muslims with whom I worked said “Allah,” many also used “God.”
3. The names of the schools and the individuals within them are pseudonyms. I am extremely grateful to all of the teachers and students for their generosity and hospitality.
4. My use of the word “American” refers to those in the United States, though I recognize the word can also refer to all the countries in two continents.
5. The English word “prayer” is imperfect in the Muslim context, both because it is loaded with Christian baggage and because there simply is no one word that matches it within Islam. Other scholars have studied Muslim prayer and made different categorizations. For an old but still classic introduction to Muslim spirituality, see Padwick (1996). For a more recent and excellent overview, see Katz (2013).
6. “There is nothing worthy of worship except God,” “Transcendent is God,” and “All praise and gratitude belongs to God,” respectively.
7. To follow the pattern of many of the American Muslims with whom I worked, I use English plurals here for the Arabic words throughout. The Arabic plural of *rak'ah* is *rak'at* and the Arabic plural of *du'a'* is *ad'iyyah*.
8. The word Sunnah—or Sunna—is a broader term denoting the corpus of Prophet Muhammad's behaviors, sayings, and examples, all of which are encompassed in a compendium of hadith. The word can also refer to those actions and sayings of his Companions. It is a Sunnah to say additional

prayers before and/or after the required (*fard*) ritual prayers. Muslims often refer to these additional prayers as Sunnah prayers.

9. Like many Arabic words, the spelling of *du'a'* in English varies.
10. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this passage's wording.
11. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this distinction.
12. For more on how Tocqueville viewed American religion as "republican ... [submitting] the acceptance of truths regarding the other world to private judgment just as politics abandoned all temporal interests to the common sense of the masses," see Graebner (1976, p. 263). For more on American religion's individualist strains, see Ahlstrom's (updated) classic history (2004).
13. However, the debate about those who interpret those texts—and the relative binding power of those interpretations—remains an ongoing and complex series of conversations (Zaman, 2010).
14. For a similar discussion of American spirituality, see Ammerman's description of "Golden Rule Christians" in *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes* (2013).

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