

Defining *Du'a*: A Study of Contested Meanings in Immigrant Muslim Schools In the New York City Area

Abstract: Using ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with students and teachers in two Sunni Muslim high schools in the New York City area, the author examines how Muslim Americans understand and practice prayer, specifically *salah*, or ritualized daily prayer, and *du'a*, or supplication. The author contrasts *du'a* and *salah*, showing how *salah* is understood as a central and largely unchangeable element of Muslim daily life, while *du'a* is much more mutable, with disagreement within the communities about the degree to which it should be understood as formalized. The author provides two possible hypotheses for these differences, the first related to the American religious landscape and the second related to broader problems across the *ummah*, or global Muslim community, related to ease of language use.

Key words: Muslim Americans, adolescents, prayer, spirituality, ritual

Introduction¹

In her monograph on Muslim prayer, Marion Katz (2013) describes how, from the thirteenth to nineteenth centuries, Christian Europeans who traveled in Muslim countries were fascinated and impressed by how often Muslims prayed. Prayer is almost always a central and constitutive part of Muslim identity, both for those studying Muslims and for Muslims themselves. In 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” (Swidler 2001: 90), “[playing] a crucial role as repeated ritual confirmations that something is indeed what it is” (ibid: 98). That “something” is not only the existence of Allah², but also the entire community and way of approaching the world that Allah has revealed and the community carries forward through time. Prayer anchors the self and the community to each other and anchors both in time and space. This spatial and temporal anchoring of Muslim life through prayer is especially salient in the five daily prayers (called *salah*), which are set at specific times and pointed in a specific direction. A key element of Sunni Islam is that such prayer happens without any intermediary. *Salah*—and other forms of prayer to be discussed later—often do occur in collective settings, but even if collective *salah* is considered superior to individual *salah*, it is certainly not required. Unlike in other

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 extremely helpful comments. Most importantly, this research would not be possible without the warmth and hospitality of the Muslim schools where the research was conducted.

² To be clear, I write as a methodological atheist e.g. 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 the name God.

religious traditions, a practitioner of Sunni Islam—as the tradition is usually understood—requires no intermediary for a connection to God.

To be clear, while *salah* is a central part of what Talal Asad would call the Sunni Muslim tradition (2009), there is nothing *sociologically* essential about any element of “Muslimness.” As Asad describes in his criticism of Geertzian ethnography (Asad 1993, see also Varisco 2005), Islam is a living tradition constituted in key texts and practices but which also remains deeply heterogeneous and often mutually contradictory. Indeed, as I will argue, the American Muslim communities I describe here 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: 23).

In this paper, I describe findings from interviews and fieldwork in two New York City area Muslim high schools, showing how two kinds of Muslim prayer (*salah* and *du'a*) have different roles within these communities and, more importantly, how, because of *salah*'s physicality and centrality, it has changed much less than *du'a* between an older immigrant generation and a younger cohort of American-born Muslims.

Prayer is increasingly a field of study within the social sciences, and in two senses. First, social scientists have examined its intercessory power, such as the ability of prayer to affect medical improvements or “do something” in the world (Baesler 2012, Bender 2008, Cerulo and Barra 2008, Wuthnow 2008a and 2008b). A smaller group of studies has examined prayer's centrality to individual projects of self-cultivation (Bowen 1989, Mahmood 2001, 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 much about how they understand that relationship. This issue was especially salient in my fieldwork in Sunni Muslim high schools in the New York City area. I found that, in the schools I was studying, students and teachers contested the meaning, function, and form of Muslim prayer—especially *du'a*, or prayers of supplication, with certain students insisting the form can be a more casual conversation with Allah, asking for whatever that person praying might need. Beyond striving to adhere to norms structuring ritual prayer, many of the Muslim American teenagers in my field sites placed heavy emphasis on a personalized, individual relationship with Allah, perhaps manifesting a American focus on unmediated, democratic immediacy in religious experience. To be clear, a relationship with God absent any intermediary is a central tenant of Sunni Islam: the key distinction here is therefore less the experience of immediate connection and more the changing nature of language and ritual form in serving that connection.

Also, as I will describe in the conclusion, it remains an empirical question whether the *cause* of this heterogeneity I identified is a kind of religious American isomorphism common among recent immigrants (Yang and Ebaugh 2001, Cadge and Ecklund 2007) or else, a common process found across the Muslim world which makes certain ritual forms

more flexible so as to emphasize the even more common experience of the need for a felt immediacy in ritual communication with God.

Finally, It is also important to acknowledge that I am developing my argument through fieldwork in two schools composed almost entirely of either immigrant Muslims or the children of immigrant Muslims. 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 there has been much important work on the religious lives and identities of African-American Muslims (Curtis 2012, Abdullah 2010, Jackson 2005, Khabeer 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 Muslim spiritutual practices primarily as things in themselves rather than as prisms through which to understand other questions, especially those related to gender, political, and identity.

In what follows, I will briefly describe my methods. After that, I will first describe the role of *salah* in the communities I studied. I then describe the role of *du'a* and debates within the communities about what *du'a* means and its relationship to “just talking to God.” I close by reflecting on the potential American causes of these differences about the meaning of *du'a*, also describing how other Muslims communities around the world face similar distinctions in practice.

Methodology

I conducted about a year and half of 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 School³ and then, in the spring semester of 2012, I spent about two days a week at Al Haqq Academy. By the time fieldwork was completed, I had conducted around 50 field visits at Al Amal and around 25 visits at Al Haqq. Field visits ranged from 12 hours at the school to three, with an average of around five hours. Interviews were generally digitally recorded, although a few teachers (and no students) expressed discomfort with being recorded and I simply typed notes as they spoke. Nearly all interviews took place in the schools themselves, with a few taking 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 all schools and individuals within them have been changed.

The Centrality of Salah

For non-Muslim North Americans influenced by Evangelical Christianity, the word prayer tends to mean “just talking to God,” (Luhrmann 2012, Miller 1997) or among American Catholics, it might mean specific recitations, such as the Our Father or Hail Mary (Aumann 1995). For American Muslims, the term is often more complex. Most of my Muslim respondents used the word “prayer” to refer specifically to *salah*, yet they also

³ The names of all schools and individuals within them are pseudonyms. I am extremely grateful to all of the teachers and students for their generosity and hospitality.

sometimes used it to refer to *du'a* and *dhikr*.⁴ To “make dhikr” means to remember (or make mention of) God and this practice is often characterized as 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 “*La Ilaha illa Allah*,” “*SubhanAllah*,” or “*Alhumdulillah*”⁵, sometimes using prayer beads as a means of focusing the mind. There are various guides for how to make *dhikr* that American Muslims can access online. To “make *du'a*” generally means to say 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 also easily available online. While it is often considered important to make *du'a* following the prophet’s example (or Sunnah), Muslims in various Islamic cultures will supplement or replace these supplications with their own improvised prayers, as I will describe in a later section of this paper.

In virtually all Muslim communities—and certainly the two I studied—*salah* is the most important and emphasized of these three forms of prayer. However, these distinctions get complex: after all, there is a moment in *salah* in which Muslims make *du'a* themselves, almost always 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 the prayers said as separate from *salah*.

Salah is a physical process repeated five times daily, and it is the second of Islam’s five pillars, preceded only by the *shahada*, or the statement of belief in Allah and the Prophet

⁴ 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 make 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.

⁵ There is no God but God; Glory to be to God; and Praise be to God

Mohammad. *Salah* can be done either individually or communally—though men are required (and women encouraged) to attend communal services on Friday afternoon. *Salah* entails a series of opening rituals and then kneeling, standing, prostrating, and recitations, which, in one iteration, are called a *rakat*. The number of required *rakats*⁶ varies slightly among the five required performances of *salah* each day, and the *salah* is generally performed early in the morning, in early afternoon, in later afternoon, in the evening, and shortly before bedtime (with an optional and encouraged prayer near midnight). Within the *salah*, Muslims recite passages of the Qur’an and have time to make their own intentions.

One of the main reasons for *salah* is simply its requirement: as many hadith attest (and as I continually heard through my fieldwork), Muslims’ lives will first be judged by their prayer, and increased prayer will yield increased rewards in the afterlife (this extends to *du’a* and *dhikr* as well). The Muslim parents and children who I encountered and interviewed during my fieldwork have been learning how to “make *salah*” since they were children, and for the high school students, it had become second nature to them. This emphasis on *salah* extended to the Islamic Studies classes in both schools, where it came up regularly, in some ways simply because *salah* is complicated: there are certain rules about when and what to do, how to make up missed prayers, how to clean oneself beforehand (*wudu*), and how to supplement one’s prayers by additional devotions (*sunna*)⁷. Yet is also

⁶ 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 *rakat* is *raka’at* and the Arabic plural of *du’a* is *ad’iyah*.

⁷ The word *sunna*—or *sunnah*—is a broader term denoting the corpus of the Prophet Muhammad’s behaviors, sayings, and example, which are encompassed in a compendium of hadith. The word can also refer to those actions and sayings of the Prophet’s companions. It is a *sunna* practice to say additional prayers before and/or after the fard, or required, ritual prayers. Muslims often refer to these additional prayers as *sunnah* prayers.

true that *salah* is challenging to do regularly and on time. Muslims in this research generally acknowledged to me that *salah* was difficult, both because of its time commitments and also because of the necessity for concentration, or *khushu'*.

It is worthwhile to reflect briefly on *khushu'* here, because the importance of *khushu'* reveals the importance of a felt immediacy and relationship to Allah as co-extensive with and constituted and enabled by prayer's ritual forms (Powers 2004). A speaker at a special day dedicated to *salah* at Al Haqq told students that *khushu'* is "talking to God" and Sheikh Yusuf, the school's primary Islamic Studies teacher, regularly told students about the importance of both *khushu'* and having "a personal relationship with Allah." In one discussion about *khushu'* in Sheikh Yusuf's class at Al Haqq, a girl said that "when I have the *khushu'*, I feel spiritually everything is coming together, but when I'm not I feel like what's the point?" Another girl raised her hand and mentioned a famous hadith about a companion named Imam Ali ibn Abu Talib (who would later become the fourth Rightly Guided Caliph after the death of the Prophet Muhammad) who had an arrow in his leg. Pulling it out would have been too painful, and so it was pulled while he prayed. His *khushu'* was so strong that worldly sensation disappeared during prayer. The Sheikh 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, the moment you lose sight of this question, you lose *khushu'*: 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 that question of focus 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. For many of the Muslim American high school students participating in this research, in *du'a* they were able to focus much more on their individual, extemporaneous requests in which they are “just talking to Allah” in moments outside of the *du'a* they make within *salah*.

The Ritual, The Relationship, and the Contested Shape of Du'a

There was a poster at Al Haqq that said simply, “Never underestimate the power of duah.”⁸ In my interviews with students at Al Haqq, many of them told me about the importance of *du'a*, and what stood out to me in their descriptions of this form of prayer was that a large minority of them defined *du'a* as “just talking to God,” which is distinct from how it was described in my interviews with adults at the schools.

As commonly understood, *du'a* is different from dhikr, and both are quite different from *salah*. As Sheikh Yusuf explained to 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 here that Sheikh Yusuf, in his description of *du'a*, emphasizes specific words of Allah (as opposed to improvised words) and the

⁸ Like many Arabic words, the spelling of *du'a* in English varies.

purpose of saying these words of Allah is create a personal relationship. Indeed, it was quite important to him that his students' prayer lives not become rote or mechanized but rather felt as personal and immediate. There might be an American prejudice that memorized words are somehow less functional in creating a relationship than improvised words, but Sheikh Yusuf would strenuously disagree. This insistence that form leads to a free, immediate, and personal relationship echoes Saba Mahmood's work on conservative Muslim women's prayer in Egypt (2005).

I heard various definitions of both *du'a* and dhikr and they were sometimes used interchangeably, but, in the communities I studied, dhikr (literally meaning remembrance) was often understood as the acknowledgment of God and *du'a* (literally meaning call out) was often understood an act of supplication. Both draw the content of their prayers from the Qur'an, the hadith, previous Prophets, companions of the Prophet, and even specific scholars.⁹

When I asked Yaqub, one of the Al Haqq Islamic Studies teachers about *du'a* as "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'd say that was certainly true of most of the students I interviewed. However, some of them took the emotional affect of a "personal relationship with God" they had learned in reference to focus and *khushu'* in *salah*, and shifted it to a certain verbal extemporaneousness. When I talked to Sheikh Yusuf about this, he was very clear with me that what they were doing was good, though it was not *du'a*.

⁹ I am grateful to an anonymous Reviewer for the wording of this passage.

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.¹⁰ Yet what is important for my purposes here is that many students had different understandings of *du'a* than did their teacher. Sheikh Yusuf often talked to his students 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 asked the boys to share their favorite *dhikr*. One muttered something in Arabic and a few boys smirked. The sheikh started laughing. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But I have to laugh.” “That’s the one for the bathroom dude,” said another boy. The first boy blushed and said he had the actual wording, but it was in his wallet. This example highlights the practical reality that it can be a lack of Arabic, 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 I did to *dhikr*. While I would occasionally see students or teachers with *dhikr* “prayer beads” at both schools, they were relatively rare, and I heard teachers giving students examples of *du'a* or encouraging them to “make *du'a*” at least a dozen times, while there was only one time I noticed a teacher giving student a *dhikr* to recite. (To provide context, they were told to make their five *salahs* each day, including one which occurred during the school day.) Of course, 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 over my time in the schools, it was striking how much more often *du'a* was

¹⁰ I am grateful to an anonymous Reviewer for this distinction.

emphasized than *dhikr*, and how *salah* was emphasized most of all. I mentioned this discrepancy in my notes to some of my respondents at Al Haqq, and one of them, a student, said it sounded about right since, as she said, *dhikr* is more private. However, another Islamic Studies teacher there, Leila, said in an e-mail:

“I would not say that Al Haqq emphasizes *dua'a* [spelling hers] more than *dhikr*. I believe both are equally stressed; the importance of *dhikr* and the power of *dua'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 *dua'a*. So definitely in my opinion, the two concepts (*dua'a* & *dhikr*) are on the same playing field...”

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

Du’a as “Just Talking to God”

Why might the students at Al Haqq have a different perspective on *du’a* than that of Sheikh Yusuf? Perhaps because *salah*’s form is much more physical (and therefore translatable and transcendent) and it is also more immutable, as so many of the hadith outline a specific way of doing *salah* just as it was done by Muhammad himself. Additionally, the schools emphasized the centrality of *khushu’* (concentration) as a means of allowing students who might not understand what they’re saying in *salah* to still feel a connection to God while they are saying what they should say and moving as they should move. Finally, because *salah* is often done 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 that unites the one praying to a trans-historical community of Muslims. The combination of physicality practiced through muscle memory and the opportunity to use *khushu'* 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, 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 both heard repeatedly about the centrality of prayer in strengthening that relationship. While the most important part of that relationship is *salah*, these videos and instructions also often mentioned *du'a*, and students were regularly told at both schools about the importance of "making *du'a*." Yet this focus on relationship—as well as the students' general lack of fluency in Arabic—led them to treat their *du'a* in a more immediate manner than the prescribed form described by adults in the schools (e.g. just calling out to God for one's needs, in one's own language and one's own words). While some of the students I interviewed at Al Haqq agreed with Sheikh Yusuf that *du'a* had to be the standard Arabic preset phrases, the vast majority said that *du'a* could be spontaneous conversations in English.

The difference in language, however, might be the key piece in explaining why *du'a* might feel distant, and 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 describe more in this paper's final section. As a 12th 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, “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 (e.g. Luhrmann 2012), some did think of their *du’a* as just such a conversation, and just about all of them insisted that they could just ask God for help in their language, and that doing so was just as effective.

In one conversation 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’as* like the sheikh does,” he told me, but he said this doesn't really matter because “God knows all tongues.” Instead, this student simply insists a Muslim should “say what you wanna say then...finish off by praising.... It's a sunna--but in the end, it comes down to you what you wanna tell God.” What is remarkable about the student's words is his contrast to what I know he could tell me about *salah*, for which there are clearly prescribed actions, and also for what he might have been able to tell me about *du’a* (e.g. there is this *du’a* for entering a room, this *du’a* before giving a speech, etc.) The fact that he felt entirely comfortable telling me that *du’a* is “what you wanna tell God” itself indicates an important difference not only in the *content* of *du’a* but also in its *form*, at least in contrast to the more circumscribed form described by Sheikh Yusuf.

To be clear, that same student later told me about a “list of *du’a* [he reads] before a test,” and so he's not opposed to the pre-established *du’as* 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 on the use and structure of *du’a*.

This emphasis on *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 the Arabic language in Islam, and an insistence that the *salah* is conducted in Arabic as much as possible, though 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 [make *du'a*] 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 greater capacity at Arabic making certain forms of prayer more immediately available. As such, a sophomore boy told me that *du'a* is better in Arabic in a way that holds true for other religions: “I think [*du'a* is] 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 of Arabic certainly to be the case among instructors, who regularly taught their students *du'as* to memorize. However, it was much less the case for 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, Sheikh Yusuf quizzed students on specific *du'as* the Prophet would call out at various moments in his life. Many of the students had no idea what to say, and while the students 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 Sheikh 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 this supplemental role of *du'a* to *salah* that made the contestations of *du'a* I have been describing possible, with some students more comfortable describing it as talking to God.

As I mentioned above, in his interview, Shiekh Yusuf made clear that “just talking to God” is a fine thing to do, but it is not really *du'a*. In some sense, Sheikh Yusuf is obviously right here: *du'a* literally means to call out to Allah, and so it is the calling out portion of the prayer that is *du'a*, not the conversation part. However, there are various examples of the Prophet talking to God before or after calling out for aid, and Sheikh Yusuf would surely have no problem with this process as well. So part of this story is about how “*du'a*” comes to change 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*. For some of the students, *du'a* should be made in English because it is

actually more effective that way. Another 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, even the effectiveness of the prayer 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. The student 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 Sheikh, 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 towards the inner self's exposure to Allah, whether via Sufi forms of recitation or the physical movements of *salah*.

While there are many reasons this boy 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 Allah, as opposed to the more symbiotic understanding of ritual and relationships often described in Muslim theology. Though, to be clear, Muslim theology is quite diverse, and there is also a long tradition of suspicion of ritualism (Anjum 2006; see also Powers 2004). As such, it hard to differentiate whether the diverse understandings of *du'a* I am describing here are the results of enduring debates within the Muslim intellectual tradition, the result of an Americanized suspicion of forms, or some combination of the two.

So far, I have been describing an expansiveness and openness to the language of prayer. That 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 to extend even 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: even the most formalistic Muslim scholar of spirituality would enthusiastically agree that the prayerful relationship to Allah extends beyond the five daily prayers; yet what is unique about her argument is 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 not rules. You just – kind of just say anything you want.” This expansiveness about the term *du'a* is in contrast to Sheikh Yusuf's more circumscribed understanding of the term, 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 ancient 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 however. 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 these students understand, in words they make up on the spot. Yet it's not quite "just talking to God about anything" Du'a had this role for the Muslim students I interviewed, but only to a certain level. 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 discussion of everything. Du'a, she told me, is "not chatting with God about my day." For her, *du'a* is a chance to ask for help, saying to God "Look, this is what's going on and I need help." She distinguishes such calls for aid from "casual conversation"; while she says *du'a* could that that form for "other people" it does not for her. I found this distinction almost universally to be the case. 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 the meaning and form of *du'a* I have identified in the communities I studied. I will outline two here: the first, a hypothesis of American anti-formalism and, the second, a hypothesis of longstanding Muslim heterogeneity. Of course, it seems plausible to me 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 Toqueville's famous study of American democracy (2002)¹¹. Similarly, in Will Herberg's 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" (1960: 83). If form is less essential to religions in America, and if *du'a* is less wedded to a specific form than *salah*, it is at least plausible that some of what I am describing here is the result of this American 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 much less authoritarian and ritualistic than the more traditional European church. Indeed, the Vatican II insistence that Catholicism and democracy can co-exist was inspired by an American Jesuit, John Courtney Murray (Murray 2005; see also Noonan 1993: 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 sheikh is not the mediator of sacraments; Muslims are their own priests in the Protestant sense of the term.

It is also important to make clear 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: for Catholics, rituals and religious forms are

¹¹ For more on how Toqueville 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 (263), see Graebner (1976). For more on American religion's individualist strains, see Ahlstrom's (updated) classic history (2004).

required by specific individuals who hold sacramental power over their lives; for Muslims, there is a similar commitment to certain rituals and religious forms, but with a much more democratic sense of access to God, with the rules established more by a tradition of key texts than by a set of religious leaders.¹² 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 et al 2007).

One example of this distinction in both Muslim and Catholic prayer can be seen in recent work on adolescent spirituality, especially the work of Christian Smith. The Muslim students Smith and his colleagues study (of which there were only 15), like the vast majority of teens in their study, were remarkably inarticulate. Smith and his colleagues 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 asshole, you know.” (Smith and Denton 2005: 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.¹³ They found similar results with Catholics, of whom Smith was surprised to learn that “Catholic teens as a whole show up as fairly weak” in comparison “both to official Catholic

¹² However, 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).

¹³ For a similar discussion of American spirituality, see Ammerman’s description of “Golden Rule Christians” in *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes* (2013)

norms of faithfulness and to other types of Christian teens in the United States... on most measures of religious faith, belief, experience, and practice” (Smith and Denton 2005: 216).

However, Catholics have criticized Smith’s and his colleagues’ 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 verbalization of their faiths, but they also ignore the degree to which Catholics—as Smith points out—are often as likely as Evangelicals to reject the more rigid strictures of their own faith commitments.

Perhaps part of the explanation for the casual attitude these Catholics in Smith’s research maintain are the same mechanisms that explains why some of the Muslim teens I meant 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 methods and content of prayer 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” that characterizes dominant American Protestant spirituality (respectively, the *salah* and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist), that these different ways of characterizing *du’a* do not create significant controversy.

Hypothesis Two: A Linguistic Challenge Across the Ummah

The above hypothesis compares the experience of the immigrant American Muslim communities with whom I worked with the experience of immigrant Catholicism, 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 in my field sites, 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 I am unable to provide here. Indeed, as some of the work I am going to show demonstrates, the United States would not be the only places where Muslim practice fused with local custom (Bowen 1989), even if, in some cases, such however-heterodox customs “came to Indonesia as part of Muslim civilization, even if they perhaps did not belong to the core of the Muslim religion” (van Bruinessen 1999: 161).

While I earlier used a comparison to American Catholics, here I use a comparison to Indonesian Muslims. Islam in Indonesia 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). There is not much work available in English on the specific practice of *du'a* in Indonesia—indeed, as Möller (2005) argues, Islamic practice is in general woefully understudied in comparison to beliefs and politics. However, more general work on prayer and Islamic religious practice emphasizes—as I find in my own work—a 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, though see Katz 2013)

but for other forms of Muslim spiritual practice as well (Lukens-Bull 2001, Weix 1998). That does not mean Arabic is the only thing that is allowed, simply that it is prioritized: for example, Möller describes how some Javanese Muslims make *taraweeh* prayers 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” (2005: 49). This request to state an intention in Javanese—along with Weix’s study of local languages in Islamic prayer groups—shows how the necessities of understanding in a local language exists in uneasy tension with the prioritization of Arabic within Islamic practice. Indeed, the role of local languages vs. Arabic has become itself a site of political contestation (Hasan 2009: 233). As such, the tension I am describing about the use of Arabic in prayer is clearly not only a North 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 that a Muslim might use to call 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 whether what I am describing here holds across generational differences outside of the schools I studied, both within the United States and outside of it.

I have suggested two potential hypotheses for these differences, and given the constraints of space within this article and within my own data, I am not able to do much more here than to postulate them. First, I suggest that one reason for this difference might be the American religious landscape, which tends to eschew form and focus on a believer’s

relationship with God. The second hypothesis I suggest is that a 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 a language in which they are comfortable.

Relatedly, in a study of Sufi Islam in Britain, Werbner describes how “the language of sermons and even supplicatory prayer in the Pakistani mosques, whatever their tendency, is Urdu rather than Arabic” (Werbner 2007: 199). This is a fascinating distinction, as it reveals a separation both from the language of the host country and the language of 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: that of Muslims seeking an intimate connection with God.

Works Cited

- Abdullah, Zain. *Black Mecca: The African Muslims of Harlem*. Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Ahlstrom, Sydney E. 2004. *A Religious History of the American People*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Ammerman, Nancy Tatom. 2013. *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Aumann, Jordan. 1985. *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- Asad, Talal. 2009. "The idea of an Anthropology of Islam." *Qui Parle*. 17(2): 1-30.
- Asad, Talal. 1993. *Genealogies of Religion*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Aslan, Rose. 2017. "Salah" in Curtis, Edward (ed). *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction*. pp. 15-35. New York: New York University Press.
- Baesler, E. James. 2012. "Prayer Research: Foundations, Review, and Agenda." *Review of Communication* 12(2): 143–158.
- Beaudoin, Tom. 2008. *Witness to Dispossession: The Vocation of a Postmodern Theologian*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books.
- Bender, Courtney. 2008. "How does God answer back?" *Poetics* 36(5-6): 476–492.
- Bilici, Mucahit. 2012. *Finding Mecca in America: How Islam is Becoming an American Religion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
- Bowen, John R. 1989. "Salat in Indonesia: The social meanings of an Islamic ritual." *Man* 24: 600–619.
- Cadge, Wendy, and Elaine Howard Ecklund. 2007. "Immigration and religion." *Annual Review of Sociology* 33: 359-379.

- Cerulo, Karen A. and Andrea Barra. 2008. "In the name of...: Legitimate interactants in the dialogue of prayer." *Poetics* 36(5-6): 374–388.
- Curtis, Edward (ed). 2017. *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Curtis, Edward E. 2012. *Islam in Black America: identity, liberation, and difference in African-American Islamic thought*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- D'Antonio, William V, James Davidson, Dean Hoge, and Mary Gautier. 2007. *American Catholics Today: New Realities of Their Faith and Their Church*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Durkheim, Emile. 2008 (1915). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Tr. Joseph Ward Swain. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc.
- GhaneaBassiri, Kambiz. 2010. *A history of Islam in America: From the new world to the new world order*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Graebner, Norman A. 1976. Christianity and Democracy: Toqueville's Views of Religion in America. *The Journal of Religion*. 56(3): 263-272.
- Grewal, Zareena. 2013. *Islam is a foreign country: American Muslims and the global crisis of authority*. New York: NYU Press.
- Hasan, Noorhaidi. 2009. "The making of public Islam: piety, agency, and commodification on the landscape of the Indonesian public sphere." *Contemporary Islam* 3.3: 229-250.
- Herberg, Will. 1960. *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Howe, Justine. 2016. "Interpreting the Qur'an in the US: Religious Pluralism, Tradition, and Context." *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18(3): 34-69.

- Jackson, Sherman A. 2005. *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the third resurrection*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Karim, Jamillah. 2008. *American Muslim women: Negotiating race, class, and gender within the Ummah*. New York: NYU Press.
- Katz, Marion H. 2005. "The Study of Islamic Ritual and the Meaning of Wuḍū'." *Der Islam* 82(1): 106–145.
- Kat, Marion H. 2013. *Prayer in Islamic Thought and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Khabeer, Su'ad Abdul. 2016. *Muslim cool: Race, religion, and hip hop in the United States*. New York: NYU Press.
- Luhrmann, Tanya M. 2012. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York: Vintage.
- Lukens-Bull, Ronald A. 2001. "Two sides of the same coin: Modernity and tradition in Islamic education in Indonesia." *Anthropology & education quarterly* 32(3): 350-372.
- Mahmood, Saba. 2005. *Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Möller, André. 2005. Islam and Traweh prayers in Java: Unity, diversity, and cultural smoothness. *Indonesia and the Malay World*, 33(95): 37-52.
- Murray, John Courtney. 2005. *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition*. Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward.
- Noonan, John T. 1993. "Development in Moral Doctrine." *Theological Studies*. 54: 662-677.
- Padwick, Constance E. 1996. *Muslim Devotions: A Study of Prayer-Manuals in Common Use*.

Oxford: Oneworld.

Powers, Paul R. 2004. "Interiors, Intentions, and the 'Spirituality' of Islamic Ritual Practice."

Journal of the American Academy of Religion 72(2): 425–459.

Schimmel, A. 1952. "Some Aspects of Mystical Prayer in Islam." *Die Welt des Islams*, 2(2):

112–125.

Sharp, Shane. 2013. "How to Do Things with Prayer Utterances." *Symbolic Interaction* 36

(2): 159–76.

Simon, Gregory M. 2009. "The soul freed of cares? Islamic prayer, subjectivity, and the

contradictions of moral selfhood in Minangkabau, Indonesia." *American Ethnologist*

36(2): 258-275.

Swidler, Ann. 2001. "What Anchors Cultural Practices." Pp. 83–101 in *The Practice Turn in*

Contemporary Theory, edited by Theodore R Schatzki, Eike Von Savigny, and Karin

Knorr-Cetina. New York, NY: Routledge.

deToqueville, Alexis. 2002. *Democracy in America*. Tran. Harvey C. Manfield. Chicago:

University of Chicago Press.

Van Bruinessen, Martin. 1999. "Global and local in Indonesian Islam." *Japanese Journal of*

Southeast Asian Studies 37(2): 158-175.

Varisco, Daniel 2005. *Islam obscured: The rhetoric of anthropological representation*.

Springer.

Weix, Gretchen G. 1998. "Islamic Prayer Groups in Indonesia: Local forums and gendered

responses." *Critique of anthropology* 18(4): 405-420.

Werbner, Pnina. 2007. *Intimate disciples in the modern world: the creation of translocal*

- amity among South Asian Sufis in Britain. *Sufism and the "modern" in Islam*. (Ed. Martin Van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell) pp. 195-216. New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Winchester, Daniel. 2008. "Embodying the faith: Religious practice and the making of a Muslim moral habitus." *Social Forces* 86(4):1753-1780.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2008a. "Prayer, cognition, and culture." *Poetics*, 36(5-6): 333-337.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 2008b. "Teach us to pray: The cognitive power of domain violations." *Poetics*, 36(5-6): 493-506.
- Yang, Fenggang, and Helen Rose Ebaugh. 2001. "Transformations in new immigrant religions and their global implications." *American Sociological Review* 66(2): 269-288.
- Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. 2010. *The ulama in contemporary Islam: custodians of change*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.