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“Developing Identities: What is Progressive
Islam and Who are Progressive Muslims”
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Introduction:

Progressive Islam is a deeply contentious term for some and yet so empowering for others. It remains, however, an ambiguous term, with little clarity around the identity. Though the identity is by no means a new one, it has gained greater prominence post 9/11. With the publishing of the book "Progressive Muslims: On Gender, Justice, and Pluralism," discussions about progressive Islamic theology have become popular in academia. Additionally, many articles have appeared in the news, lauding progressive Muslims as "moderate" Muslims, and the hope for the Muslim world. This identity has even found its way into the mainstream Muslim community, where people are labeled "progressive" in connection to their vocal opposition to several trends and belief systems within the Muslim community. The question, however, still remains: What exactly is progressive Islam? And who are progressive Muslims? This paper will track the development of progressive Islam, exploring the theological and sociological origins of the movement, and contemporary scholarship on progressive theology. The paper is also based on interviews and observations of people who attend the progressive Muslim meetup in Washington DC. The study focuses on the development and adoption of a progressive Muslim identity. In addition, the interviews explore people's definition of progressive Islam, how they engage with Islam, and their hopes and aspirations for the movement.

History of the Progressive Islamic movement:

"Like most religious movements, we claim we've always been there and that there have always been strands of it in Islam,"¹ says Farid Esack, a prominent scholar of the Progressive Muslim movement. Though progressive Islam has existed in some form or another throughout Muslim history, it has neither been the accepted nor official theology. Scholars and activists point to the example of Abu Dharr, a companion of the Prophet (peace be upon him) who was known for his rejection of materialism and vocal opposition to developing oppressive structures. It is this understanding of Islam, that functions to empower the oppressed, that is mentioned by progressive Muslims when there is talk of "returning to Islam." As Ali Shariati said:

It is not sufficient to say that we must return to Islam. We must specify which Islam: That of Abu Dharr or that of Marwan, the Ruler. Both are called Islamic, but there is a huge difference between them. One is the Islam of Caliphate, of the palace, and of rulers. The other is the Islam of the people, of the exploited, and of the poor. Moreover, it is not good enough to say that one should be "concerned" about the poor. The corrupt Caliphs said the same. True Islam is more than "concerned." It instructs the believer to fight for justice, equality, and elimination of poverty.²

The core ideological concern of the progressive Islamic movement, is in redefining Islam, taking into account modernity and the knowledge and scientific advancement that accompany it. In achieving this goal, progressive Muslims have the difficult task of rethinking Islam, in its entirety, while still maintaining connection and continuity with tradition.

The history of the movement, as it exists in its current form, can be traced back to the late 18th and 19th century, starting with prominent scholars and activists such as Shah Wali Allah, Jamal-ud-Din Afghani, and Syed Ahmed Khan. All three scholars lived at a time when western powers had colonized much of the Muslim world. Such an invasion and subsequent rule over the Muslim world, left the populace in a state of shock and trauma. Much of the scholarship during the 19th century focused on the question "what went wrong?" Increasingly, people wrote and theorized as to why

¹ "Is the Face of Islam Changing," U.S. Catholic, January 2002 <<http://www.uscatholic.org/2002/01/cov0201.htm>>

² Abrahamian, Ervand, "Ali Shari'ati: Ideologue of the Iranian Revolution," MERIP Reports, Jan 1982: 24-28.

the Muslim world, once a mighty and glorious empire, had fallen to foreign invasion and rule. Many remedies and plans of action were suggested, in order for the Muslim peoples to regain their independence and freedom. The challenge facing all scholars and intellectuals at that crucial time was how to rethink and reinterpret Islam so as to make it relevant to the current times. Traditional interpretations had proven themselves to be unhelpful and “backward” in a rapidly changing world. Scholars such as Shah Wali Allah, Jamal-ud-Din Afghani, and Sir Syed Ahmed Khan called for a radical rethinking of Islam, in order to make it compatible with the changing currents of time.

Shah Wali Allah, born in India, during the last days of the Mughal empire, was the son of a religious cleric. He inherited that position from his father and traveled to Mecca for religious education. Like others around him, Wali Allah perceived Islam to be in danger, holding the traditional understandings of Islam responsible for the decline of the Muslim world. Islamic law, he argued, though divinely inspired, must be reinterpreted to have relevance to different peoples and eras. A strong believer in societal change, Wali Allah believed that all traditions have both repressive and liberative tendencies, provided they are practiced by the right people, at the right time, and in the right situation. His belief was certainly revolutionary, since he was proposing that certain laws and injunctions become outdated and irrelevant if they no longer apply to the social reality of people. Islam, he believed, was a universal religion, however, it was revealed to the Arabs and, therefore, included traditions and laws that were relevant to the Arab culture of the 7th century. He proposed that since Islam was a universal religion, the Prophet took issues and principles that are applicable to all societies and then laid down specific traditions that were tailored to Arabs. However, since Shariah rules are specific to a certain culture and “their observance is not an end in itself, they cannot be enforced in the case of future generations.”³ What needs to be accomplished is the extraction of the universal principles-not their culture specific manifestations-and then applying them in cultural traditions relevant to people in their own culture and time. “Time has come that the religious law of Islam should be brought into the open fully dressed in reason and argument,”⁴ stated Wali Allah. To Wali Allah, religious injunctions and rituals are to be observed not only because they are divinely ordained, but also because they have great benefits for individuals and society at large. Wali Allah’s greatest contribution to progressive theology was the articulation of his belief that the scholars of the past made interpretations that were suited to their reality and society; a world that bears no resemblance to the world that Muslims live in now.

It was the 19th century that saw a firm and clear articulation of progressive ideology. The beginning of such an articulation can be attributed to Jamal-ud-Din Afghani. Afghani set out to redefine traditional Islam from simply a religious faith to an ideology of political solidarity. Afghani encouraged Muslims to adopt a secularist, meliorist, and activist approach to politics. In light of Afghani’s assertions, the progressive Islamic movement is characterized by an anti-imperialist agenda in the political sphere. Economically, the movement is staunchly anti-capitalist and believes that Islam is an ideology that can mobilize the Muslim masses to struggle for social justice.

Afghani’s concentration on Islam as a political ideology, left him little time to articulate a progressive Islamic theology. This task was accomplished by Afghani’s contemporary, the leading Muslim intellectual of the time, Syed Ahmed Khan. Khan struggled to establish a rationalistic approach to the Quran in light of contemporary times. Syed Ahmed strongly believed in Islam as a revolutionary, democratic, and egalitarian ideology and clearly articulated this in his letter to an

³ Irfani, Suroosh. “The Progressive Islamic Movement.” *The Pakistan Experience: State and Religion*. Ed. Asghar Khan. Lahore: Vanguard, 1985. 40.

⁴ Ahmad, Aziz. “Political and Religious Ideas of Shah Wali-Ullah of Delhi.” *Muslim World* Jan 1962: 26.

English friend:

*I have firm faith in Islam, which teaches radical principles, is against personal rule and accepts neither limited monarchy nor hereditary government, but approves of an elected president. Nor does Islam allow the concentration of wealth.*⁵

Khan's focus was entirely on societal and educational reform, believing that the best strategy for Muslims, at that time in history, was to establish a mutual trust between the British and themselves. Khan was, however, no friend of the colonizers. He simply recognized that any struggle for independence would be long term and require Muslims to be socially empowered and on par with the Western world in order to complete such a task.

Regardless of the different approaches of the two men, it was the fusion of their approaches that laid the foundations for the progressive Islamic movement. Khan's and Afghani's political ideology allowed for the development of Islam as a revolutionary message of liberation and empowerment of the masses that is espoused by progressive Muslims today. In addition, Khan's focus on educational reform and his attempt to interpret Islam to be relevant to the realities of people in a particular time and culture, is a struggle still continued by progressive Muslims today.

The 20th century saw the revival of progressive Islam in the Iranian revolution through the ideology of Ali Shariati and the *Mujahideen-i-Khalq*. The *Mujahideen-i-Khalq*, influenced by the teaching of Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Taleqani, and Mehdi Barzagan, struggled to bring radical theory into practice in the form of revolutionary action. Their activist zeal emanated from the belief that the Quranic message emphasizes action over ideas. Due to their efforts, by the time of the Iranian revolution, progressive Islam had strong support amongst the Iranian people. The popularity of the *Mujahideen* created strong opposition against them from both the Pahlavi regime and the traditional clergy. They were branded "terrorists" and "Islamic Marxists" by the state, and the clergy sided with the regime, issuing fatwas of apostasy against the group.⁶ Once the Shah was overthrown, and Khomeini came to power, he became an avowed enemy of the *Mujahideen*. For the group this was simply a manifestation of the eternal struggle of the "religion of evolution" versus the "religion of legitimating" as theorized by Shariati. The *Mujahideen*, the proponents of the "religion of evolution", were striving to create a revolutionary message of Islam that empowered the masses and eliminated oppression. As such, they saw the clergy as proponents of the "religion of legitimization," using religion to legitimize and ensure the existence of structures of oppression. With the death of Ali Shariati, and the persecution of *Mujahideen* members by Khomeini, the group lost its stronghold within the Iranian people.

The late 20th century saw the revival of the progressive Islamic movement again. This time, however, it took on a more international approach, with the emergence of several independent scholars scattered across the globe, advocating a radical reinterpretation of Islam.

*From the hermeneutics of tolerance and gender characterizing the work of Khaled Abou-Fadl (2002) and Amina Wadud (1999) to the democratic pluralism of Abdolkarim Soroush (2002) and the Islamic liberation theology of Farid Esack (1997) to the cosmopolitan human rights of Chandra Muzaffar (2002): Islam is rife today with discourses that seek to protect spaces of alterity. It also gives renewed credence to the notion of the ummah that a mapping of the names just mentioned would trace a line from Los Angeles to Virginia in the United States across to Iran down to South Africa and over to Malaysia.*⁷

⁵ Khan, Asghar, ed. The Pakistan Experience: State and Religion. Lahore: Vanguard, 1985. 37.

⁶ Irfani, 1985.

⁷ Mandaville, Peter. "Digital Islam: Changing the Boundaries of Religious Knowledge?" ISIM Newsletter March 1999: 28.

Being scattered around the globe, the internet was the most economical and practical means of communication. Mandaville mentions: "More than anything else, the Internet and other information technologies provide spaces where Muslims living in the Diaspora Muslim can go in order to find others "like them". It is in this sense that we can speak of the internet as allowing Muslims to create a new form of imagined community, or a re-imagined *umma*."⁸ It was in this context that the Progressive Muslims Network (PMN) was formed in January 1999, "its creation was the result of months, even years of discussion and debate among some of the activists of different Muslim communities in Toronto (Canada) regarding the issues of their communities and the need for a forum to discuss, decide and eventually act upon such obstacles."⁹ The network started off by setting up an email discussion group, a common mode of on-line communication employed by religious and other special interest groups.¹⁰ The subscriber group knew from the start that some of the most important issues were poverty, racism, social injustice, political oppression and discriminations based on gender, age, sexual orientation, color, or physical ability. It was also agreed that there were hundreds of other topics that would require their attention. Furthermore, it seemed clear that to get a precise and accurate view of the issues, the input of a much larger group was needed, one that would include people of different ideas, races, backgrounds, economical status and geographical locations. With that in mind, the logical solution was to use the global reach of the Internet to spread our concerns and attempt to find others with similar ideas.

Within a few short weeks, Progressive Muslims Network enjoyed a tremendous growth and caused a collection of scholars, students, professionals, activists, organizations and communities to come together that was beyond the original group's expectations. Members from Singapore, Australia and South Africa joined others in the Middle East, Europe and North America to discuss their ideas in a friendly, non-judgmental forum.

Regardless of the internet's dynamism and ability to bring together people from all around the globe, the virtual community is no substitute for forming grassroots level communities. For the individuals who make up the virtual community, soon the desire for "getting the word out supplants the earlier felt need to reach out to others like oneself; public space replaces virtual community."¹¹ It was just this sentiment that led to the establishment of the Progressive Muslims Network of Washington, D.C. (PMN-DC). PMN-DC was formed in early February 2002, when a few PMN members in the DC area decided to form a grassroots level physical presence. The group started with about 5 members who, in a matter of few months, grew to over 40. PMN-DC sponsored many activities in the local community and spoke at many events as representatives of the progressive Islamic movement. In April 2003, the group organized a conference on Progressive Islam at American University in Washington, DC. The purpose of the conference was clear. Progressive Muslims needed an avenue to express and explore their ideas and beliefs about Islam and its relation to the world at large. The conference was to be the first retreat where self-identified progressive Muslims would gather together to discuss the progressive Islamic movement, and explore avenues of change.¹² After the conference, however, the group became largely inactive, mostly due to members

⁸ Mandaville, 23.

⁹ Progressive Muslim Network. 1999. Access date <www.progressivemuslims.com>

¹⁰ Anderson, Jon W. "The Internet and Islam's New Interpreters." New Media in the Muslim World: The Emerging Public Sphere. Eds. Eickelman, Dale F. & Jon W. Anderson. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999. 44-46.

¹¹ Anderson, 51.

¹² Progressive Muslims Network - DC Ed. Saadia Yacoub. 2003 <<http://geocities.com/pmndc/index.htm>>

moving out of the DC area.

There was, however, a new development on the horizon. “Muslim WakeUp! came together in the late 1980’s in Southern California as a small group of individuals united against all forms of oppression, bigotry, and racism.”¹³ The group launched a website in January 2003, which has been a huge success with more than 800 articles posted and over 90,000 hits per month.¹⁴ The website is unapologetic in its progressive identity and its belief in a progressive understanding of Islam:

*Muslim WakeUp! seeks to bring together Muslims and non-Muslims in America and around the globe in efforts that celebrate cultural and spiritual diversity, tolerance, and understanding. Through online and offline media, events, and community activities, Muslim WakeUp! champions an interpretation of Islam that celebrates the Oneness of God and the Unity of God’s creation through the encouragement of the human creative spirit and the free exchange of ideas, in an atmosphere that is filled with compassion and free of intimidation, authoritarianism, and dogmatism. In all its activities, Muslim WakeUp! attempts to reflect a deep belief in justice and against all forms of oppression, bigotry, sexism, and racism.*¹⁵

The website publishes several articles on issues related to spirituality, gender, sexuality, and U.S. politics among others. The articles are both humorous as well as controversial. Perhaps the two most controversial sections on the website are the “Hug a Jew” and “Sex and the Ummah” columns. Regardless of the controversy surrounding the articles, it is a popular website among young American-muslims. As one reader describes it: “I feel Muslim Wakeup! is the most relevant website in terms of exploring issues facing American Muslims...It’s a young, edgy, modern thing. It’s a place to read about taboos and explore them. I feel it reflects my experience as a woman, a Muslim and someone with progressive views.”¹⁶ In the past few months, the website organized an International Progressive Muslim Meetup Day. The main idea of the meetups is to bring together people around the world who identify as progressive muslims. The members are encouraged to setup local groups to discuss progressive Islam in a non-judgmental environment. So far, 700 people have signed up for the meetups and groups have developed in over 100 cities around the world.

Progressive Islamic theology:

The progressive movement is still at a nascent stage and there is much need for a clear articulation of progressive Islamic theology. Much of the scholarly discourse around progressive Islam has been taking place in the writings of progressive muslim scholars such as Omid Safi and Farid Esack. In the introduction to the book Progressive Muslims, Omid Safi provides a definition of progressive Islam. “The progressive Muslim movement is above all an attempt to start swimming through the rising waters of Islam and modernity, to strive for justice in the midst of society.”¹⁷ Progressive ideology advocates a radical reinterpretation of societal structures and ideals, rather than proposing reforms that do not question the inherent oppressive foundations upon which the societal structures are built. As an example, Farid Esack offers the analogy of patriarchy and poverty in displaying the progressive view of societal change.

While others would, for example, be content with asking why men cannot create more social space for women or present systematic charity such as zakah as a response to poverty, progressives attempt to go beyond this and

¹³ MuslimWakeup.com Ed. Ahmed Nassef. 2003 <<http://www.muslimwakeup.com>>

¹⁴ Watanabe, Teresa. “Website Promotes ‘Progressive Muslim Movement.’” Los Angeles Times 26 June 2004. 24 August 2004 <<http://www.muslimwakeup.com/info/archives/000915.php>>.

¹⁵ MuslimWakeup.com <<http://muslimwakeup.com/info/>>

¹⁶ Watanabe, 2004.

¹⁷ Safi, Omid. “Introduction.” Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism. Ed. Omid Safi. London: Oneworld Publications, 2003. 1-29.

*challenge the patriarchal nature of society reality and an economic system that, in their reasoning, must lead to a society where the poor will forever be dependent on the rich.*¹⁸

To many Muslims who identify with the movement, the term “progressive” can mean “simply an anti-authoritarian or anti-conservative Muslim discourse”¹⁹, or a more complex and multiple critique approach to the many systems and communities that perpetuate injustice around the world.

Describing this multi-headed approach, Safi writes:

*...an important part of being a progressive Muslim is the determination to hold Muslim societies accountable for justice and pluralism...A vital corollary component of our multiple critique entails standing up to increasingly hegemonic Western political, economic, and intellectual structures that perpetuate an unequal distribution of resources around the world.*²⁰

The term “progressive” is also a contentious label. Though many people identify as progressive Muslims, they have reservations about using the word “progressive.” There are many ambiguities around the word and the need for a clear definition of what “progressive” means. In his introduction, Safi states that progressive “refers to a relentless striving towards a universal notion of justice in which no single community’s prosperity, righteousness, and dignity comes at the expense of another.”²¹

In defining the critique made by progressive muslim scholars of the Muslim world, Safi passionately states that progressive muslims must identify structures of injustice and oppression that are built into the tradition of Islam. Such injustices, Safi states emphatically, “have to be unapologetically identified and dealt with.”²² To do so would require progressive muslim scholars to first engage tradition, learning what exists in the tradition that has been inherited by Muslims. Once this tradition is engaged, only then can the progressive muslim scholars decide that the tradition, as it was setup, no longer relates to the world that Muslims exist in today. To fail to do so, Safi claims, would lead to a lack of legitimacy of progressive Islam, much like the critique made of liberal Muslims, who sidestep Shariah and fiqh instead of facing the challenge head on. The end result of this process, envisioned by Safi, “is not to find some magical, mythical middle ground, but rather to create a safe, open, and dynamic space, where guided by concerns for global justice and pluralism, we can have critical conversations about the Islamic tradition in light of modernity.”²³ Even though this critique is necessary, Safi also warns against the movement becoming dogmatic and taking on the stance that after a 1000 years of tradition, progressive Muslims in the 21st century, have finally “gotten it right.” Instead, Safi suggests, progressive muslims must recognize that their voice and interpretation is just one amongst an entire spectrum of interpretations that have existed within the rich tradition of Islam.

The parallel critique of the Western powers, involves being mindful of the arrogance of modernity. Such criticism entails being mindful of “an alleged teleology that posits a Hegalian, unidirectional, and inevitable march towards the end game of modern Western civilization.”²⁴ Progressive Muslims thus carry the heavy burden of not only critiquing and struggling within the Muslim community, but

¹⁸ Esack, Farid. "In Search of Progressive Islam Beyond 9/11." Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism. Ed. Omid Safi. London: Oneworld Publications, 2003. 78-97.

¹⁹ Esack, 79.

²⁰ Safi, 2-3.

²¹ Safi, 3.

²² Safi, Omid. "The times they are a-changing' - a Muslim quest for justice, gender equality, and pluralism." First Annual Conference on Progressive Islam. Progressive Muslims Network-Washington, D.C. American University, Washington, D.C. 3 April. 2003.

²³ Safi, 6.

²⁴ Safi, 4.

also challenging and striving against the hegemony of Western powers that continue to colonize Muslim lands through economic and, more recently, through military power.

In the developing theory of progressive Islam, there are certain issues that have come to the forefront as defining characteristics of the movement. Firstly, progressive theology incorporates not only the knowledge received through religious texts, but also incorporates other disciplines in its understanding of the world. As such, the Quranic message and ideals are shaped not only through traditional scholarship but also through the lens of the reality of the individuals interpreting the texts. With the ideal of pluralism and the equality of all humans so deeply entrenched in progressive ideology, “being a progressive Muslim means not simply thinking more about the Qur’an and the life of the Prophet, but also thinking about the life we share on this planet with all human beings and all living creatures. Seen in this light, our relationship to the rest of humanity changes the way we think about God, and vice versa.”²⁵ This belief in the intrinsic worth of all human beings, far from being a secular humanist idea, is rooted in the Quranic descriptions of creation. This fundamental and radical idea, that since God breathed His/Her spirit into every human,²⁶ all of humanity is a manifestation of the divine and has, therefore, the same intrinsic value and is equal before the eyes of God.

Secondly, progressive theology is based on praxis and the struggle against injustice. The theology is thus continuously in development since the “struggle to experience a personally and socially meaningful Islam is rooted in praxis geared towards creating a more humane society as part of a sustainable eco-system in the service of the Transcendent.”²⁷ Praxis, as explained by Farid Esack, is how faith is inextricably linked to action. Thirty six times the Quran ties faith and righteous deeds together and this link between the two, prevents faithful actions from becoming oppressive. Thus, praxis takes on a crucial role in the development of progressive Islamic theology because it emphasizes considered action as a means of understanding. Justice is a core concept within the Quran, one that the Quranic message keeps returning to as the spirit behind any and all injunctions. As such, if the faithful action does not lead to justice, then a mistake has been made, by believers, in the understanding of the injunction. The link between faith and righteous deed, based on the spirit of justice, form the crux of progressive Islamic theology. So central is this concept of justice in the Quranic message that it seems “that standing firmly for God or standing firmly for justice are one and the same, or, at least, coexist in the same moral plane.”²⁸ For those engaged in this struggle, truth is never absolute. One knows truth according to the condition that they are in. If praxis and jihad are a constant struggle through which one comes to the realization of truth, then truth can never be absolute, but must remain relative in order to allow for the continuous struggle. By focusing on the theology of praxis, progressive Islam helps create truth, but does not claim to be *the* truth.

Esack also points out that progressive Muslims should not strive for certainty in their theology. He believes that certainty belongs to God and the task of the believer is simply to struggle to understand God’s message.²⁹ Since certainty is for God alone, then it is both expected and acceptable for one to

²⁵ Safi, 3.

²⁶ See Quran, Chapter 15, verse 29.

²⁷ Progressive Muslim Network. 1999. <www.progressivemuslims.com>

²⁸ Abou El Fadl, Khaled. Speaking in God’s Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women. Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2001. 270.

²⁹ Esack, Farid. “Progressive Islam and the Theology of Praxis.” First Annual Conference on Progressive Islam. Progressive Muslims Network-Washington, D.C. American University, Washington, D.C. 5 April. 2003.

make mistakes in their understanding. As Khaled Abou El Fadl states:

*The purpose of the search, however, is not simply to locate the Path, but is the very act of engagement, and the very involvement with the Will of God. A large number of jurists even argued that the reason for the search is the search, and not necessarily to locate the Straight Path at all. In other words, the search is the Straight Path.*³⁰

Thirdly the focus of progressive Islamic theology are the underprivileged and marginalized of the world, the group the Quran refers to as the *mustad'afun fi'l-ard*.³¹ There is, therefore, a strong opposition and intolerance, within the theology, of those that perpetuate injustices around the world, be they governments, multi-national corporations, or communities and individual relationships.

Study:

This paper is based on interviews of seven individuals, all of whom attend the Progressive Muslim Meetup in Washington, D.C. The individuals were asked several questions pertaining to progressive Islam. The individuals were of varying ages, the youngest being 20 and oldest 52. The racial composition was also diverse, representing the different ethnic groups that attend the meetups. The seven individuals were questioned about their masjid experience. They were asked whether they attend their local masjid often, and to discuss any reasons that prevented them from doing so. The individuals were then asked to whether they identify as progressive muslims. In exploring this identity further, they were asked clarify whether their identity is simply personal or whether they would identify as a progressive Muslim in muslim and non-muslim circles. They were then asked to discuss their definition of progressive Islam. The seven people were then presented with a list of four issues (gender, social justice, pluralism, and sexuality) and were asked to rate them in order of importance. They were also asked to briefly describe why they thought that these issues are important. While rating the issues, most of the people stated that they saw all these issues as deeply interconnected. The study also explored the individuals relationship with the Quran and how they engage Islam as progressive muslims. They were asked to discuss tools that they use in interpreting the Quran. They were also asked to discuss how they deal with the Sunnah and the role it plays in their beliefs as a Muslim. Finally, the individuals were asked to discuss what they saw the future of the progressive movement and what direction they would like the movement to take.

Conclusion:

There were some obvious commonality between the answers given by subjects of the interview. All of the individuals had common experiences and held common beliefs and definitions. Most of them were completely unaware of these commonalities, however, and assumed that they were the only people with such unusual beliefs.

Experience with local masjid:

Of the seven people interviewed, six felt uncomfortable in their masjid environment. Feeling unwelcome and isolated at the masjid was a common experience between these individuals. None of the people interviewed attended the masjid regularly, often because they did not find the masjid

³⁰ Abou El Fadl, Khaled, 33.

³¹ The phrase, appearing often in the Quran, refers to the downtrodden and marginalized of the world. See Quran 4:97 and 8:26.

to be an open and inviting establishment where they could increase in their spirituality.

Progressive Muslim identity:

All of the people interviewed identified as progressive muslims even though they felt that the identity was an ambiguous one. Their identity, however, was not without reservations. Though they personally identified as progressive, they were concerned about identifying as such in public.

In relating with non-muslims, they were a lot more comfortable identifying as progressive muslims because they felt that they would not be negatively judged or ostracized. However, they also believed that non-muslims have strong stereotypes about muslims and would not know the difference between the different interpretations of Islam. Some of the people had experiences where non-muslims assumed that they weren't "real muslims" because they didn't fit the stereotypes commonly held about muslims.

With regards to muslims, the concerns of the group were a lot stronger. They were clearly afraid of being judged negatively and labeled a secularist. They were worried that fellow muslims would question their muslim identity if they publicly identified as progressive muslims. Regardless of these fears, none of the people interviewed had any qualms about articulating beliefs and opinions that would lead to them being labeled as a progressive by fellow muslims.

Definition of progressive Islam:

The definition of progressive Islam provided by the seven people also had many elements in common. Each one of the individuals strongly believed that progressive Islam was not an attempt to change Islam or "make it better." They saw it, instead, as a return to core and basic principles of Islam that have been neglected. These principles, they believe, have been ignored by the muslim community and need to be brought back into the consciousness of the muslim community. They believe that progressive Islam is a humane and pluralistic interpretation of Islam, and an attempt to return to the spirit of Islam, taking into account the complexities that are an inevitable part of any religious theology.

Important issues:

Except for one person, everyone else in the group rated gender as the most important issue. As a whole, the group saw gender justice as the one issue that needed immediate and drastic attention. The men in the group were greatly concerned about the oppression of women in the muslim community and felt that it was an important issue since it affected such a large population of the world. The women felt the importance of the issue on a more personal level. They were clearly upset and frustrated with the treatment of women in the muslim community and had experienced, first hand, the second class status of women in the masjid. It is important to note the similarity between the academic scholarship on progressive Islam and the perceptions of people on the group who identify as progressive muslims. All seven individuals saw gender inequality as a crucial and fundamental issue, that must be given immediate attention. Academic scholars too, feel the same way about gender. As Omid Safi passionately states: "The Muslim community, as a whole, cannot achieve justice, until and unless, justice is achieved for the women in Muslim society. There is no

social justice without gender justice.”³² For Safi, the gender justice movement is “crucial, indispensable, and essential. In the long run, any progressive Muslim interpretation will be judged by the amount of change in gender equality it is able to produce in small and large communities... Gender equality is a measuring stick of the broader concerns for social justice and pluralism.”³³

Social justice and pluralism were the two second most important issues. Of the seven people, three rated social justice as the second most important issue and pluralism as the third, while the rest saw pluralism as the second most important issue and social justice as the third.

All of the people interviewed saw social justice as a core principle of Islam that has been neglected and overlooked by the muslim community. Three of the seven people gave the example that when talking about social justice, muslims tend to talk about giving zakat but have lost the spirit of the institution and instead concentrate on the material details. They stated that social justice is not just about giving money to the poor, but about challenging the structures of power that create poverty. As one individual mentioned, there is a great need for discourse in the muslim community about the meaning of social justice in Islam. Without such a conversation, the just spirit of Islam cannot be fully realized.

The individuals also believe that Islam is a pluralistic religion. They were greatly concerned about the lack of pluralism in the muslim community, both on an intellectual as well as a racial level. Of the seven people interviewed, four were converts and were concerned about the domination of certain ethnic groups in the masjid. They were particularly frustrated with South Asian and Arab members of masajid around the country who expect African American and White converts to adopt their definition of Islam, regardless of whether that interpretation is influenced by certain cultural beliefs. Everyone in the group had experienced the intellectual intolerance of the muslim community and felt that there is a great need for muslims to become more accepting of the fact that there can be multiple interpretations of Islam.

The fourth issue, sexuality, was a very contentious issue. Of the seven people, six rated the issue as the least important, while the seventh person rated it as the most important. Jim Brooks rated sexuality as the most important issue because of he is queer identified and sexuality is, therefore, an important and personal issue for him. He disagrees strongly with the muslim community in their belief that homosexuality is a repugnant sin. He suspects that even in progressive muslim circles people are uncomfortable with the issue of homosexuality, but he feels comfortable being open about his queer identity in progressive circles.

The other six people rated sexuality as the least important issue because they saw it as a divisive issue. They felt that it would be tactically imprudent to make sexuality one of the issues on which to engage in a dialogue with the muslim community. They were all quick to point out, however, that the issue was important to them and they strongly disagreed with the treatment of gay Muslims within the muslim community. In rating the issue, they were simply concerned with the fact that starting out with the issue of sexuality would result in progressive Islam being identified as “so out there” that it would lose its legitimacy entirely.

The issue of sexuality not only included homosexuality, but also the repression of female sexuality

³² Safi, Omid. Speech at Conference on Progressive Islam, 5 April, 2003.

³³ Safi, 11.

and male/female dynamics in the muslim community. Here too, the individuals felt that the repression and negative attitude towards sex is an important issue that needs to be addressed.

Engaging with Islam:

All the people interviewed consider themselves to be ritually observant and actively engage with Islam. None of them considered rituals to be irrelevant or unnecessary, but they were also adamant in pointing out that rituals are a means to an end and not the goal in themselves. As believers they see Allah as the eventual goal and rituals as a means to achieve that goal.

All seven individuals saw the Quran as the center of their faith. They all used certain tools in interpreting the Quran, taking into account the principle and spirit behind different verses of the Quran. They also took into consideration the historicity and cultural context of the revelation. Though they believed that the Quran is for all times, they did not necessarily see that relevance being in the literal reading of the Quran, but in the spirit and principle behind the revelation.

In relating to the Sunnah, none of the individuals rejected the sunnah or ahadith. They had many concerns and questions about the authenticity of the ahadith and clearly distinguished between the position of the Quran and sunnah in muslim belief. Though they believed themselves to be bound by the Quran, they did not have any such belief with regards to the Sunnah. Most of the individuals simply choose to accept the ahadith that made sense to them and were in compliance with the Quran. In coming across a hadith they found unacceptable they would question its authenticity and interpretation and would simply put it aside.

Future and direction of movement:

There were some key differences among the individuals when talking about the future of the movement. Three of the people interviewed believe that progressive Islam is a trend and a way of thinking. They hope that the future of the movement will be such that people will have a progressive way of thinking and yet continue to be part of their own communities. As such, they envision a future where there will be progressive sunnis, progressive shias etc and that progressive muslims will not become yet another sect in the muslim community. The other four people hope that the future of progressive Islam is to become the mainstream thought in Islam. They hope that the future definition of Islam in the mainstream community will be that of a humane and pluralistic Islam. One of the individuals believes that as Islam grows in America, the current issues that set progressive muslims apart from others will not longer be so divisive. He sees the traditional interpretation of Islam to be untenable in this age and society; an interpretation that can only be followed at the expense of the Ummah.

In talking about what direction they would like the movement to take, the individuals again had several different ideas. Two of the individuals wanted to see progressive muslims take on a more self-critical approach, always being mindful of the need for humility and to make their discourse more firmly rooted in Islamic discourse rather than in universalistic language. Three of the other individuals would like to see the movement become more organized and centralized so that they can start dealing with concrete issues and engaging the muslim community. The seventh person also hopes that the movement will start engaging the muslim community and is afraid that unless the progressive movement is able to do that, they will simply fizzle out. She was, however, wary of the movement becoming too organized. Though she recognizes the importance of organization and

centralization to any movement, she stated that what attracted her to progressive Islam is the lack of a “litmus test” about being muslim. If the movement becomes more centralized, she is afraid, it will also become more dogmatic and exclusionary.

This paper is a rudimentary attempt at beginning to explore the development of progressive Islam and a progressive muslim identity. Though the research is ongoing, this paper is the study of seven individuals who identify as progressive muslims. The results show surprising commonalities in the experiences and beliefs of the individuals. All these individuals feel strongly about both their muslim identity and their progressive understanding of Islam. They have certain hopes and aspirations for the movement but they are also aware of the ambiguity around the term and the need for clarity. They are, however, dedicated to Islam and are embarking on a journey similar to that of Prophet Nuh. They do not know what the landing will look like, however, they hope that it will be shaped through praxis and the theology that develops through the struggle.

Appendix

Interview 1:

Name: Svend Mohammad Akram White

Age: 32

Gender: Male

Ethnicity/Race: White

State of Residence: Virginia

Comfortable with local masjid:

Svend finds his local masjid to be insular and conservative. The language barrier and racial hegemony concern him and give the masjid an aura of being foreign. He fails to feel a sense warmth and community at the masjid and is also greatly concerned about the treatment of women and gender relations at the masjid.

Do you identify as a progressive muslim? If not, what are your reasons for not doing so?

Though openly identifying as a progressive muslim, Svend, felt ambivalent about the identity due to the lack of clarity surrounding it, however, is not willing to abandon the identity just because of the ambiguity surrounding it.

In relation to non-muslims, Svend openly identifies as a progressive muslim, making sure to explain to them that progressive Islam is not a new version of Islam, but simply an orientation, based on a common set of assumptions that exist in multiple cultures.

With muslims, however, Svend would not identify as a progressive muslim for several reasons. One of his main concerns was the fact that the average person in the muslim community has a poor understanding of what the identity means and instead use it as a catch all phrase to categorize people who hold secular, or corrupt ideas; using the phrase to identify the *munafiqeen*³⁴. He would, however, advocate progressive ideas and openly identify as someone who believes in reform. He was greatly concerned with the fact that identifying openly as a progressive muslim, rather than just advocating progressive ideas, would reduce important causes to just ideological labels, allowing for the issues to be crushed because of a label. As an example, he mentioned a seminar that he attended with his wife. Though he didn't stand up and identify himself as a progressive, he was labeled as such by the audience because both him and his wife stood up and challenged the speaker on certain comments he had made regarding gender in Islam.

How do you define progressive Islam?

Svend defined progressive Islam as a self consciously humane and socially aware conception of

³⁴ Hypocrites

Islam that is a rigorous and authentic perspective within Islam, rooted in authentic methodology. Progressive Islam, he believes, uses critical inquiry to revive traditions that have existed in Islam, particularly in the Quran, that have been neglected by the mainstream muslim community.

What issues are of utmost importance to you as a progressive Muslim. Listed in order of importance.

Gender: Svend listed gender as the number one issue. He found the issue to be of dire importance not only because it affects such a large number of people but also because many reformers are blind to the gender injustice. Svend felt that in this particular issue, his greatest interest was in tackling interpretation because it is the patriarchal understanding of Islam that provides people with an aura of tradition with which to camouflage their misogyny.

Social Justice: Ranking it as the second most important issue, Svend believed that progressive Muslims tend to pay more importance to the issue of social justice than most mainstream muslims. As a self-identified progressive he was greatly concerned about equitable economics, just social dealing and the exploitation of the weak by the strong.

Pluralism: Svend felt that pluralism is an important issue both in terms of intellectual pluralism within the muslim community and social coexistence with other religions. He was, however, more concerned about intrafaith rather than interfaith dialogue. Muslims, he felt, need to learn to disagree with other muslims without getting upset over it. He was quick to point out, however, that one does not need to be relativistic but it is important to have a presumption of freedom; that no one has the right to impinge on the freedom of others. The muslim community must remember the phrase *Allahu Alam* that was used by the scholars of old when they expressed their opinion. It is important to remember that though you have a particular opinion, in the end, it is Allah who knows best.

Sexuality: Svend found sexuality to be an important issue, however, he approached it with great trepidation due to the fact that it is a difficult issue to deal with. He believes that there are vested interests in both the Muslim community as well as in the western secular circles and progressive muslims have to do a balancing act so as not to get co-opted by either side. He found the issue of sexuality to be so complicated partly due to the fact that muslims tend to view the issue as black and white and refuse to recognize or deal with the subtleties around sexuality. Though he himself was not quite clear about how he viewed the issue of homosexuality, Svend was adamant that any interpretation that is developed must keep the people who face these issues in mind, because as the Islamic tradition states, people come first. Regardless of his theological ambiguity on the issue, Svend was adamant that homosexuals should not be treated as second-class citizens or be ostracized from the muslim community.

In terms of sexuality in the Muslim community, Svend felt that muslims to be more open to discussing the issue. It is important to remember, he felt, that in Islam there is no shame around sex and that historically Muslims were a lot more relaxed about sexuality. He was careful, however, to point out that in Islam *zina* is considered a grave sin and that progressive muslims must continue to recognize and observe the limitations and *hudud* with regards to sex.

Other: Svend brought up another issue that was of great importance to him, and he ranked it in equal importance to the issue of gender. He thought that it was important to spread a more nuanced understanding of the process of values and norms; reminding people that scholars are people and are not protected from error. He felt that it is important to bring back into the equation

the idea that the interpretations of scholars are arbitrary and time bound. A believer has to be critically engaged and can't just passively accept the interpretation of the scholars. Svend felt that without working on this issue, it would be impossible to work on other issues such as gender etc.

How do you engage with Islam as a progressive Muslim? How do you interpret the Quran and Sunnah?

Svend felt, that fundamentally there is not much difference in how he engages Islam and how any sincere muslim would engage Islam. Muslims strive to implement Islam as they understand it and live up to its principles and he feels he is doing the same. Ritually observant himself, Svend believes that rituals are at the heart of being Muslim, since Islam makes no distinction between faith and deed.

In interpreting the Quran, Svend seeks the help of scholars and others who might understand the text better than himself. He was quick to point out, however, that he would adopt the interpretation if he is ethically capable of agreeing with it and not just because it comes from a scholar. Personal responsibility is important to Svend. He takes direction from the example of the idolaters given in the Quran. When criticized for believing in idols, the Quran doesn't allow them to escape personal responsibility, even though idolatry was the accepted religious belief. Idolatry is assumed to be evidently false and each individual is held responsible for their decision. Similarly, Svend sees that one should judge for themselves whether a certain interpretation is acceptable or not, and can't rely on scholars to make those decisions for them. In dealing with the interpretation of difficult passages, Svend takes the spirit and principle of the verse into account. Though he would not question the ayah itself, he would question its applicability, taking into account the principle. As an example, he mentioned the ayah about women's testimony. He does not interpret that ayah to limit women's testimony but instead concentrates on the principle of expert testimony that is laid out in that ayah.

With regards to the Sunnah, Svend is constantly aware of the possibility that hadith can be misconstrued, fabricated, or simply not related in its entirety. Nonetheless, he approaches the sunnah with humility and does not believe in discarding hadith, though he is comfortable questioning any hadith that seems to contradict the Quran.

What do you think is the future of the movement? What direction would you like the movement to take?

Svend believed that the future of the movement is to disappear. This will occur not because the movement will fail to take hold in the muslim community but because the issues that set progressive muslims apart from others now will no longer serve as a means of division within the muslim community. He believes that traditional interpretations of several issues are not tenable and can only be adhered to at the expense of the ummah. He also believes, however, that some members of the progressive muslim community will become more traditional, while other might even leave Islam and join other traditions because Islam, for them, is a cultural identity and not a religious belief.

With regards to the direction of the movement, Svend hopes that the movement will become more firmly grounded in Islamic discourse. He feels strongly that progressive muslims have to stop making arguments in obvious liberal and universalistic terms and instead make arguments from within the tradition.

Interview 2:

Name: Shabana Mir

Age: 36

Gender: Female

Ethnicity/Race: Pakistani

City/State of Residence: Virginia

Comfortable with local masjid:

Shabana no longer attends her local masjid. The few times that she did attend she faced situations that left her feeling uncomfortable and frustrated. The masjid is completely segregated between men and women, with the women occupying a small room with a closed circuit TV to hear the Jumah khutba. There are also several ladies present, who Shabana referred to as the gatekeepers; women who preach after prayer and bully other women in the congregation. When Shabana confronted one of these women, a tense situation ensued that caused her great distress. She felt that she couldn't enjoy her prayer and have a spiritual experience at the masjid if such situations continue.

Do you identify as a progressive muslim? If not, what are your reasons for not doing so?

Shabana was comfortable identifying as a progressive muslim with those individuals who know enough about the ideology to understand what the identity implies. She mentioned that she did not feel the need to wave any banners about her identity. Though she doesn't walk up to people and identify as a progressive muslim, it becomes pretty clear to people, soon after they meet her, that she is both muslim as well as a progressive. To her, issues are the definitive factor and she usually gets identified as a progressive or feminist etc, because she is vocal on certain issues that are identified with those particular groups.

How do you define progressive Islam?

To Shabana progressive Islam is a definition of Islam that is working towards gender equity, and progressive principles of equity, mercy, open-mindedness, diversity, flexibility of interpretation, and pluralism. To Shabana, progressive Islam is simply a return to pristine Islam; an effort to reclaim values that have been forgotten. She also strongly believes that since spirituality is the main issue, a reflexive tendency for self-critique should be a very important part of the progressive muslim identity. Though Shabana was articulate in her definition of progressive Islam, she was quick to point out that she has trouble with the word "progressive" since it implies that Islam is going to be improved by progressive Muslims. As a sufi she believes that Islam is from God and reflects God's attributes of peace and mercy, and as such Islam cannot be made better.

What issues are of utmost importance to you as a progressive Muslim. Listed in order of importance.

Gender: This issue was of utmost importance to Shabana and she strongly identified and sympathized with people who struggle with gender issues. She believes that she is passionate about

gender because it is a blind spot in the Muslim community and Muslims tend to gloss over the issue rather than dealing with it seriously.

Pluralism: Shabana felt very strongly about the issue of pluralism, alongside the issue of gender. She tries to incorporate this issue in her own research to the best of her ability. She mentioned that she has noticed that Muslim Student Associations that are dominated by either South Asians or Arabs tend to assume that Muslims from other ethnic groups will fall in line with them and adopt their cultural practices.

Social Justice: Shabana feels strongly about the issue of social justice though not as strongly as she felt about gender. She does, however, make an effort to be conscious of issues of social justice and tries to integrate a class conscious critique in her work.

Sexuality: Shabana felt that this issue is also important, however, she had certain hesitations in terms of the appropriateness of discussing the issue of sex. She believes that Muslims have a Victorian attitude towards sex and double standards for men and women which often oppress women and confuse men. It is important for Muslims to be comfortable with their sexuality and to discuss these issues but there is a need to create spaces where these issues can be discussed. With regards to homosexuality, Shabana said that she approaches the issue with humility and though she is ambiguous as to the theological acceptance of homosexuality, she has realized that it is not a simple issue and tries to be as tolerant and compassionate as possible.

How do you engage with Islam as a progressive Muslim? How do you interpret the Quran and Sunnah?

As a teenager, growing up in Pakistan, Shabana decided that she was going to dedicate her life to Islam. Though she is still committed to Islam, today she no longer uses the same language. She now sees Islam as a loving submission; a path for finding and knowing God, and seeing Him in every encounter and every emotional and spiritual process. To her, Islam is no longer about didactic commands to do this and that but more of a way of being with God. She is ritually observant and feels strongly that observance is an important part of being Muslim. She is quick to point out, however, that rituals are simply a means not an end. The goal of life is to reach God and rituals are a significant and important means to get there.

Shabana regards the Quran as a letter from the beloved (i.e God) and as such reads it carefully but recognizes that since it is a loving letter, it is acceptable to interpret it. She stresses that, in interpreting the Quran, it is important to recognize that the job of humans is to struggle to interpret. She believes that mistakes will be made but that God is forgiving. Recognizing that God is both compassionate and just, any verse of the Quran must be interpreted through that lens. The struggle of progressive Muslims strive to interpret the Quran in a way that reflects God's justice and compassion. The spiritual principles and the historicity of the text are both important to Shabana. She believes that God expects believers to use their common sense in interpreting the Quran and take into account that the historical context of revelation can impact its interpretation. In dealing with verses which are difficult to interpret, Shabana said that she often prays for help and agonizes over the text. She was adamant, however, that it is of utmost importance to remember that since God is just and compassionate any interpretation of the text must reflect those attributes and that she would prefer to err on the side of compassion, recognizing that she could be wrong and that God is forgiving.

In dealing with the Sunnah, Shabana employs several principles such as the historicity and authenticity of the hadith. She mentioned that she has stopped seeing the hadith as on-dimensional, recognizing that a single hadith does not have to be right at all times, in all situations. She recognizes that people often get confused when dealing with ahadith and feel the urge to give up, an approach that she disagrees with, finding it important to engage the sunnah. In dealing with the sunnah, she thinks it is important to engage not only your head but also your heart and your soul. Literalism kills the soul because it expects people to simply follow the text and not engage it. Agonizing over the text is an important part of building a spiritual connection with God.

What do you think is the future of the movement? What direction would you like the movement to take?

Shabana feels that the progressive movement is not a new movement but that strands of it have existed in many groups throughout the history of Islam. She sees it as perennial as opposed to a contemporary movement. She doesn't believe that there is just one progressive movement but instead thinks that progressives exist amongst sufis, salafis, sunnis etc. Therefore, she sees progressive Islam as more of a trend than a movement. She stressed that it is important that progressive Muslims begin to draw upon tradition and start to develop an identity that is not based on what they are opposed to. Unless they do so, they will fail as a movement.

She also hopes that the movement will take on a self-critical direction, always approaching ideas with humility and not arrogance. It is important to continue to be accepting of other people's lives and experiences and not constantly criticize other groups.

Interview 3:

Name: Anonymous (for the purpose of the paper, she will be referred to as KA)

Age: 20

Gender: Female

Ethnicity/Race: South Asian

State of Residence: Virginia

Comfortable with local masjid:

KA attends the masjid on campus for community events. When at home, she attends the masjid whenever she can. She felt uncomfortable at both these masajid for several reasons. She found it disturbing that the masjid environment is not open and welcoming. She felt that people judged her because she did not fit into the mold established by the masjid of what it means to be a Muslim. Though no one has directly confronted her, she felt the difference in her relationships with people at the masjid once she stopped wearing a headscarf. Having been a part of the masjid youth group before, she remembers discussions about how girls who don't wear a headscarf were considered borderline muslims and knows that people now see her that way as well.

Do you identify as a progressive muslim? If not, what are your reasons for not doing so?

KA personally identifies as a progressive muslim. However, she had deep reservations with identifying as such in public. She had trouble with the label progressive muslim due to the lack of clarity around the identity. This lack of clarity, however, was not necessarily something negative in her view. She likes the ambiguity surrounding the identity and the absence of a mold that one has to fit into.

With regards to the Muslim community, KA was concerned that openly identifying as a progressive Muslim would lead to her being labeled as a heretic, taking away from her legitimacy as a Muslim. She is concerned about that the fact that people are not interested in learning about progressive Islam, but simply confirming their own assumptions. She mentioned that she has been confronted by members of her community about her identity as a progressive. However, she felt that they were not genuinely interested in learning about progressive theology but were simply trying to identify her beliefs on issues that they identify with progressive Islam; issues such as homosexuality and hijab.

In dealing with non-Muslims, KA felt a lot more comfortable identifying as a progressive Muslim. She felt that in non-Muslim circles, her legitimacy as a Muslim would not be questioned just because she identified with a progressive theology. Even with non-Muslims, however, KA had her concerns. She was concerned about the growing trend, post 9/11, of seeing progressive Islam as “cool” or pro-American Islam and assumptions that non-Muslims have about progressive Muslims being uncritical of the American establishment.

How do you define progressive Islam?

KA defines progressive Islam as an interpretation of Islam that allows for complexity rather than looking for simplistic solutions. By dealing with differences and contradictions, progressive Islam allows for a more pluralistic approach to the question of what makes one a Muslim. To KA, progressive Islam is more about the philosophy and mindset of people rather than a “laundry list” or mathematical equation of being Muslim.

What issues are of utmost importance to you as a progressive Muslim. Listed in order of importance.

Gender: To KA, gender is the most important issue because this is the area where she feels the most progress can be made. Additionally, she believes that struggling against gender inequality has historically lacked, and that dealing with the issue will spill over into other areas of social injustice.

Pluralism: Pluralism is also a very important issue to KA, alongside gender. She believes that though there is place for discussion about gender issues in the mainstream community, pluralism is a lost cause. Pluralism is the issue that sets progressive Muslims apart from the mainstream Muslim community; an issue that is so important that KA can’t envision a progressive movement without the inclusion of pluralism.

Social Justice: KA also ranked social justice as an important issue. She feels that Islam has been abused and misinterpreted in order to privilege some people over others. Rituals in Islam that had been instituted to eliminate social ills have lost their meaning. As an example, KA mentions zakat. Instituted as a means of helping the poor, the spirit behind the concept is to eliminate poverty. However, Muslims now view zakat as simply charity that is given to the poor rather than keeping with the principle of zakat and trying to eliminate systems of inequality that perpetuate poverty.

Sexuality: KA ranked the issue of sexuality as the least important due to the fact that she sees the Muslim attitude towards sexuality changing as gender issues improve. She sees this change taking place as women realize their own autonomy is economic and social issues. The issue, however, is very important to her and she finds it disturbing that a woman's Muslim identity is tied to her sexual organs, with virginity almost becoming a sixth pillar of Islam for women. She related the story of an officer of the MSA at her school who became pregnant outside of marriage and was immediately ostracized by the community. KA, however, views sexuality in terms of rights not in terms of sex or desire. She believes that sexuality is such a complex issue that progressive muslims cannot tackle it alone and must engage the muslim community. With regards to homosexuality she believes that it not a moral issue to her in terms of spirituality. Ones sexual orientations does not impact their spirituality. She believes that since Allah created all of humanity, why then would the Creator punish people for being true to their selves.

How do you engage with Islam as a progressive Muslim? How do you interpret the Quran and Sunnah?

Islam has become a very subconscious ideology, one that she engages with in terms of ideas and philosophy. She feels that her career choice is influenced by her belief that working for the betterment of society is a way of worshipping Allah. Engaging with Islam, she believes, is not a static state of being but an ongoing process. In terms of ritual observance, KA felt that though she was strongly ritually observant before she has been moving away from rituals. Though there are many rituals that she continues to observe, there are others that she no longer practices. She first questioned her observance of rituals when she did not experience the spiritual feelings that people told her she should as a believer. Feeling a strong sense of guilt, KA felt worse about her spirituality and found the rituals to be counterproductive and detrimental to her faith. She is ambivalent, however, about her beliefs around rituals. Even though she does not view them as useless, she does not believe that the observance of rituals makes one a "good muslim." She strongly believes that Allah is so great and humans are so diverse that there cannot be just one way of worshipping Allah. Using rituals as the sole means of determining the spirituality and muslim identity of a person, she believes, is an abuse of rituals.

The Quran for KA is a painful issue due to the fact that she has struggled greatly in her understanding of the Quran. She believes that Quran is the revealed word of God, but has a hard time understanding how to interpret the Quran. In order to truly understand the Quran, she believes she must learn Arabic and interpret the Quran for herself. Until then, she relies on translations which are inherently biased due to the perspectives of the translators. In dealing with these translations, her greatest difficulty is in figuring out how to relate the scripture to her daily life. She sees the Quran as bound by a historical and cultural context and believes that interpreting it literally will make it irrelevant to our contemporary society. When faced with verses she finds difficult to understand or accept, she takes into account the historicity and cultural context of the verse, recognizing that what made sense in one culture might not make sense to her. She also continues to remain aware that what she reads is a translation and interpretation of the text and not the text in itself.

The sunnah is hard for KA to follow since she believes that it has been greatly abused. Many of her previous beliefs were based on ahadith that she later learnt were weak. The discovery shook her faith and she now regards the sunnah as a historical reference for what people did during the time of the Prophet but does not regard it as commandments that dictate her personal belief system or spirituality.

What do you think is the future of the movement? What direction would you like the movement to take?

KA sees the progressive movement currently as small ripples of change taking place around the world. She sees this as a positive development but believes that there is a need for the progressive muslim communities to start engaging the larger muslim community in order to have an strong impact. At this time, however, she is afraid that the movement is becoming a fringe movement because it has failed to engage in a discussion with the established belief system and understanding of Islam. She hopes that the movement will soon take the direction of becoming more involved with the larger muslim community and engage in more discussions and open dialogue. If this happens, she thinks progressive Islam will go far and there will be a lot less confused muslims who have left the masjid and feel they have no where to go. Such people will then have a space to come to where they can have a fulfilling spirituality. In the future, KA hopes that progressive Islam will not be a separate faction but a trend that exists within the several sects within Islam. She envisions a muslim community where there are progressive shias, progressive sunnis, progressive ismailis etc. Progressive Islam, she believes, is not a movement that has specific rituals that would bind people together but instead is based on a mentality and theological beliefs that people can adopt while staying within their particular sect.

Interview 4:

Name: Marcus Allgood

Age: 33

Gender: Male

Ethnicity/Race: Black

State of Residence: Maryland

Comfortable with local masjid:

Marcus attends his local masjid periodically and is unable to go as often as he would like due to time constraints. He likes the masjid and finds the people friendly and open-minded. Even though they are not a progressive establishment, he feels that they are more so than other masajid in the area.

Do you identify as a progressive muslim? If not, what are your reasons for not doing so?

Marcus personally identifies as a progressive Muslim but chooses when to be open about his identity with others. With regards to muslims, he is vocal about progressive issues but won't say that he identifies with a progressive ideology unless he is in a dialogue. He is concerned that muslims will assume that he is not committed to Islam because he identifies as a progressive. With non-muslims he is also concerned because he believes that they don't necessarily recognize the difference and simply lump muslims together into one category. Similar to his concern with muslims, he feels that that non-muslims will question his muslim identity because he does not fit their stereotype of a muslim.

How do you define progressive Islam?

Marcus believes that progressive Islam is defined by its emphasis on pluralism, open-mindedness, and social justice. He sees progressive Islam as a return to core principles of Islam that have, unfortunately, been neglected.

What issues are of utmost importance to you as a progressive Muslim. Please list the following issues in order of importance.

Gender: Marcus listed gender as the most important issue. He believes that his emphasis on gender is influenced by his cultural background. Traditionally black families are matriarchal and Marcus grew up around many strong female icons. He believes that a nation is no greater than its women and if the women of a nation are second class, then that nation will be second class.

Social Justice: Alongside gender, Marcus listed social justice as the most important issue because of his background as a black man in America. Social justice, to him, is the essence of Islam and a core principle of the religion. He is concerned about the fact that though the muslim community is conscious of social justice, they have a fairly simplistic and primitive definition of the concept.

Pluralism: Pluralism was also an important issue to Marcus. He believes that Islam, in its early years, blossomed because of its openness and there is a need to return to that principle. Being open to new ideas and discoveries does not mean that one has to give up their morals; one can be conservative and yet be open to different ideas.

Sexuality: Marcus rated sexuality as the least important out of all the issues. He believes that, unfortunately, all cultures have a double standard when it comes to sexuality. In Islam men's sexuality also has restrictions on it just as women's sexuality. With regards to homosexuality, though he was ambiguous about his theological position, he was clear that he was against the ostracism of people who are queer identified.

Other: Marcus identified another issue that he believed is extremely important to the movement. He believes that in order for progressive muslims to begin to work on any of the abovementioned issues, they must first begin to organize and collect funds. They must also begin to engage the muslim community and educate them about progressive theology.

How do you engage with Islam as a progressive Muslim? How do you interpret the Quran and Sunnah?

Marcus considers himself to be ritually observant and believes that rituals are important in Islam. He acknowledged that he went through stages with his observance, first being very strict in his observance and then leaving it entirely because he didn't see the purpose of rituals. He now has a more moderate approach and keeps his observance in perspective. It is important to remember, he believes, that rituals are important and a way to God.

With regards to the Quran, Marcus believes in a rational approach. He believes that the traditional interpretations of the Quran were developed by the aristocracy and there is a need to move the interpretation into the hands of the masses. Though he understands that many people are concerned about there being many splinter groups because of this individualistic interpretation, he

does not necessarily see the splintering as a negative development. He believes that looking at the historical context of revelation is an important tool to use. Additionally, he recognizes that many verses of the Quran are metaphorical and that literal interpretations are not always the best approach. In dealing with verses that are difficult to understand, Marcus employs what he calls the “grocery store” approach. When one walks into a grocery store, they don’t buy everything. They simply take what they need and leave the rest on the shelf. As such, when Marcus approaches the Quran and finds a verse that he has difficulty understanding, he simply puts it back on the shelf, and reminds himself that one does not always understand everything at the same time.

In dealing with the Sunnah, Marcus believes that there is a dire need for further investigation, employing modern approaches of critical inquiry. He does not regard the Sunnah on the same level as the Quran, and though he does not reject the Sunnah, he keeps in mind that ahadith have a political and historical context. He strongly believes that Allah is just and if a hadith advocates something that is unjust then it should be rejected.

What do you think is the future of the movement? What direction would you like the movement to take?

Marcus sees two possible futures for the movement, based on the direction that it takes now. One possible future is where progressive Islam becomes another sect in Islam and Marcus is hesitant about such a development. The other possibility is where progressive Islam become a way of thinking within the already existing groups in the Muslim community. He hopes that this is the direction that the progressive movement takes and develops to a point where there are people who identify as progressive in every masjid and work from within to effect change.

Interview 5:

Name: Jim Brooks

Age: 51

Gender: Male

Ethnicity/Race: Father was Irish/Mother was Turkish.

State of Residence: Virginia

Comfortable with local masjid:

Jim used to attend his local masjid. He felt uncomfortable in the masjid environment mostly because he was constantly harassed about his marital status. Upon learning that he is single, people would immediately try to get him married. His experience with the local masjid left him feeling alienated from the mainstream muslim community and he is now in constant search of a community where he can be comfortable and experience his spirituality with other muslims.

Do you identify as a progressive muslim? If not, what are your reasons for not doing so?

Jim personally identifies as a progressive muslim, but is open about this identity based on the people he is interacting with. With his non-muslim friends he is open about his identity because he does

not want them to think that he is a muslim who identifies with hardline ideas. As a convert, particularly, he felt the need to qualify Islam and identify as a progressive muslim. On the other hand, with his muslim friends he does not identify as a progressive because he is afraid that they will assume that he rejects the tenants of Islam.

How do you define progressive Islam?

Jim sees progressive Islam as pristine Islam and a return to the basic principles of Islam. For him, progressive Islam is a humane understanding of Islam, an interpretation that works to reclaim the beautiful in Islam and reject the ugly. It is an effort to go back to the soul and essence of Islam.

What issues are of utmost importance to you as a progressive Muslim. Listed in order of importance.

Sexuality: Sexuality is the most important issue for Jim because of his queer identity. He believes that the Quran is very sexually liberated, not viewing sex in a negative light. He feels that this sex positive aspect of Islam was suppressed and now the muslim community has adopted Victorian attitudes towards sexuality. He is troubled by the attitude of many muslims towards homosexuality and their belief that scripture clearly forbids homosexuality.

Pluralism: Jim believes that pluralism is a very important issue and that Islam is a pluralistic religion. He is reminded of the hadith that a muslim should seek knowledge even if they have to go all the way to China. He sees this hadith as a precedence for gaining knowledge even from non-muslim sources.

Gender: Jim believes that gender is an important issue and that many other issues will be resolved once the gender issue is confronted. He had a difficult time separating the issue of gender and pluralism and considers them to be deeply connected. He mentioned, for example, that the way men and women interact with each other translates into the way they interact with people of other races.

Social Justice: Social justice is an important issue to Jim as well. He stated that he was deeply disappointed by the lack of emphasis on social justice in the muslim community. He believes that social justice is one of the most important principles in Islam and one that is overlooked in the mainstream muslim community.

How do you engage with Islam as a progressive Muslim? How do you interpret the Quran and Sunnah?

Jim stated that he has grown to love Islam and the Quran. He is ritually observant and strives to become stronger in his observance. With regards to the Quran, he sees the ayat as signs, points to ponder over. He reads the verses as general guidance and thinks that it is important to read between the lines. When faced with verses that are difficult to understand, he first takes into account the historical context of the revelation. He also believes that certain verses are not intended to be historical but are spiritual messages that are not necessarily meant to be historically true.

Jim makes a strong distinction between the Sunnah and the Quran and believes that ahadith are lessons that provide guidance and not commandments that have to be followed. In coming across ahadith that he finds helpful, he adopts them, but when he comes across a hadith that he has difficulty believing he does not hesitate to reject it. He believes that he is perfectly within his right

to judge ahadith.

What do you think is the future of the movement? What direction would you like the movement to take?

Jim hopes that the future of progressive Islam is to become the mainstream of Islam. He believes that progressive Islam is more accepting of differences and goes back to the basic tenants of Islam. As such, he hopes that it will become the interpretation of Islam that most people subscribe to.

Interview 6:

Name: Erin Hizi

Age: 28

Gender: Female

Ethnicity/Race: Caucasian

State of Residence: Maryland

Comfortable with local masjid:

Erin attends her local masjid about twice a month and feels that she would make a greater effort to attend the masjid if it was a positive experience. She found the khutbas to be lacking in inspiration and the community to be unwelcoming. She still attends the masjid, however, because of a feeling of obligation and some sense of being part of a community.

Do you identify as a progressive muslim? If not, what are your reasons for not doing so?

Erin identifies as a progressive muslim both with muslims as well as non-muslims. She identifies as a progressive muslim with non-muslims because she feels that it is important that they know that there are multiple interpretations of Islam. Doing so, she believes, challenges the stereotypes that many non-muslims have about muslims.

With muslims she was comfortable identifying as a progressive muslim as well. She felt that it was important for her to identify as such so that people don't assume that she doesn't follow certain rituals because she is lazy but that there is a particular methodology that she follows. She felt, however, that many muslims might identify her as a secularist or lazy because of her progressive identity. She would be more open to identifying as a progressive muslim if it identified her as part of a critical and thoughtful movement.

How do you define progressive Islam?

Erin defines progressive Islam as a critical examination of Islam and a return to the fundamental roots of Islam. Progressive Islam, she believes, focuses on core principles of Islam such as gender equality, justice, and moderation. Taking into account the context of the modern world and the societies in which people live, it is an interpretation that is more pluralistic and conscious of differences in ideas and beliefs.

What issues are of utmost importance to you as a progressive Muslim. Listed in order of importance.

Gender: Gender was the most important issue to Erin. She believes that gender equality has complete Quranic basis and validity and oppression of women in the name of religion is simply the practice of pre-Islamic cultural beliefs under the guise of Islam. Erin finds the issue of gender equality to be so important because silencing 50% of the population of the world is extremely detrimental to society. If mothers are truly valued and charged with raising the next generation of muslims, then how can their opinion be disqualified. Erin believes that the world would be a different place if women were allowed to participate in critical decision making. Similarly, our understanding of Islam would also be drastically different had women been encouraged to take part in interpreting Islam.

Pluralism: Erin believes that Islam is an inherently pluralistic religion. Before converting, what attracted her to Islam was the Quranic belief that all believers, regardless of whether they are Muslim or not, will go to heaven. She believes that to not have a pluralistic perspective as a muslim is antithetical to the basic tenants of Islam.

Social Justice: Social justice is also a very important issue to Erin. In her experience, most muslims have lost sight of major tenants of Islam, such as social justice, and have instead become caught up in the material aspects of the religion (such as women's dress code etc). With a background of working in Catholic charity organizations, Erin is disappointed to see that compared to the focus on social justice in Catholic communities, there is a lot less emphasis on social justice in muslim circles. Most muslims talk of zakat when asked about social justice, but Erin believes that zakat is not enough. There is a significant difference between giving someone money and helping people change their circumstances. She believes that there is a dire need for discussions to take place on what social justice means in Islam.

Sexuality: Sexuality, though an important issue to Erin, is one that she rated the least important because she sees it as an extremely divisive issue. She believes that the muslim communities attitudes towards sexuality have been influenced by pre-existing cultural beliefs. She thinks that Islam is a sex positive religion that allows people to enjoy their sexuality, provided it is within certain realistic limitations. Muslims, she believes, tend to react to what they perceive as the immorality of the western world. Rather than making a theological inquiry of different issues, they regard certain beliefs as Islamic simply because they are the opposite of beliefs held in the western world. Specifically, with regards to the issue of homosexuality, Erin never felt completely comfortable with the mainstream muslim position on homosexuality. Though she does not see homosexuality as a moral issue, she does believe that limitations regarding sexuality should be observed in both heterosexual and homosexual relationships. Muslim, she believes, should simply honor monogamous relationships regardless of the form they take.

How do you engage with Islam as a progressive Muslim? How do you interpret the Quran and Sunnah?

Erin has always had a strong sense of God, even before she became muslim. As such, she does not feel any different from before her conversion but believes that Islam gives her a structure to practice her long held beliefs. After becoming a muslim, her greatest concentration in terms of engaging Islam has been to incorporate rituals and religious education into her life. She is ritually observant and strives to increase in her observance. Though she observes all the major rituals, she admits to

being critical of certain ritual practices that are observed by mainstream muslims.

With regards to the Quran she believes that she is still at the stage where she is learning more about the different interpretations of Islam. She believes that the Quran is God's revelation but often wonders how, in 1400 years, could the Quran be completely unaltered in its text. In interpreting the text she takes into account the historical context of the revelation and recognizes that concepts have different meanings from one culture to the other. Understanding the Quran in its spirit is also important to her particularly when she finds the literal translation of the verse difficult to understand. She is conscious of the dangers of this approach and tries not to make a stretched and weak interpretation of the verse. However, she is also wary of making a fundamental and reactionary reading of the Quran.

In engaging with the Sunnah, Erin believes that it is important for one to use their powers of reasoning more actively. She finds it important to make the distinction that the Sunnah, unlike the Quran, and has been related through a human process, and could have been corrupted by the human process of transmission. She sees ahadith as proverbs or guides to people but not as binding commandments. She believes that it is important to take the historical context into consideration when interpreting the ahadith. The sunnah is the way of the Prophet who lived 1400 years ago. If the historical context is not taken into consideration, then how can the life of someone who lived in Arabia 1400 years ago be relevant to life of someone living in 21st century America. She strongly believes that the Prophet, though a radical thinker, had to take into account the cultural norms of his people when advocating radical ideals. Failing to do so would make him, and the message he preached, invalid to the people around him.

What do you think is the future of the movement? What direction would you like the movement to take?

Erin believes that Islam has a strong future in America. She is fearful, however, that the muslim community in America will become polarized as both the progressive muslim and fundamentalist muslim communities continue to expand and grow away from each other. In order to grow, however, she believes that progressive Islam has to remain valid to muslims and not take on issues that are so unacceptable that progressive theology is no longer relevant to muslims. She would like to see the movement become more centralized and organized and develop a platform of concrete issues on which action can be taken. In order for this process to take place, Erin believes that a central organization would need to be formed that can then work on building consensus on issues important to progressive muslims. She would also like this organization to take on a more active role in engaging the muslim community, organizing educational seminars in mosques and Islamic schools on progressive Islam. Though she would like this central organization to maintain views that are not completely unacceptable to the muslim community, she does believe that in very social movement you need people who are viewed as being on the fringe and those who are viewed as being more acceptable and yet push people in their beliefs. These two forces together, Erin believes, create social change.

Interview 7:

Name: Saadiq Wolford

Age: 33

Gender: Male

Ethnicity/Race: White

State of Residence: Washington, DC

Comfortable with local masjid:

Saadiq is not consistent in his attendance of the masjid. He feels uncomfortable at his local masjid and feels that the culture of people bleeds over into their understanding of Islam. He feels isolated by the language barrier and is frustrated by the fact that, due to his ethnicity, people assume that he is either a non-muslim or treat him like he has no knowledge of Islam.

Do you identify as a progressive muslim? If not, what are your reasons for not doing so?

Saadiq personally identifies as a progressive muslim and is open about his identity with both muslims and non-muslims. With regards to non-muslims, Saadiq feels that, as a white convert to Islam, he has the ability to play the role of an ambassador; serving as a bridge between Muslim and American culture. He felt, however, that most non-muslims were clearly uncomfortable with his muslim identity, regardless of whether he identified as progressive or not. Unfortunately, they are largely ignorant of Islam and cannot identify the differences between the different interpretations within the muslim community. Saadiq has identified as a progressive muslim with other muslims and feels that often his vocal support of certain issues identify him as a progressive.

How do you define progressive Islam?

Saadiq defines progressive Islam as an attempt to return to the spirit of Islam. He points out that progressive Islam is not an effort to change Islam in any way, but is a return to the formative period of Islam, concentrating on core principles that have been neglected.

What issues are of utmost importance to you as a progressive Muslim. Please list the following issues in order of importance.

Gender: Saadiq believes that gender is the most important issue. He is greatly aware of the need for gender equality in the muslim world and feels strongly that women have as much right, as men, to be fulfilled as human beings.

Social Justice: Social justice is also an important issue for Saadiq and he places it alongside gender in terms of importance. He politically identifies as a socialist and believes that social justice is a belief in the altruistic notion of equality. It is not enough to simply give a certain amount of money to help the poor. He believes that social justice is the effort to help those who have had bad breaks in life and provide them with the opportunities to fulfill their potential.

Pluralism: Saadiq believes that Islam is, in its essence, pluralistic. He is wary of the neurosis of muslims when it comes to being accepting of new ideas. He believes that Islam has a strong core and is not a static religion. People are simply afraid of new ideas, and are mistaken in their belief that the purity of Islam will be compromised by the incorporation of different ideas. He believes, instead, that new theories and ideas simply refine our understand of Islam and gives us a fresh perspective on our spirituality.

Sexuality: Sexuality is also an important issue to Saadiq but he was not sure how this issue could be tackled. He wishes that muslims can get to the point where they can be open to have a discourse on this issue and perhaps that is what progressive muslims can work towards. With regards to homosexuality, he has difficulty accepting the mainstream understanding of the issue because he cannot bring himself to believing that people will go to hell for being true to who they are.

Other: Saadiq believes that public relations is an issue that is as important as that of gender and social justice. He feels strongly that progressive Muslims need to spearhead the movement of educating mainstream Americans about Islam and believes that Americans will be receptive to a progressive articulation of Islam.

How do you engage with Islam as a progressive Muslim? How do you interpret the Quran and Sunnah?

Saadiq's conversion to Islam took place without any interaction with the muslim community. He started reading the Quran on his own and was so greatly impressed with its message that he decided to convert. Not having any experience with a muslim community, he believed that the community would be striving to live up to the ideals he saw in the Quran. He was greatly disappointed to see, however, that there are great differences between the ideals expressed in the Quran and the reality of the muslim community. It is easy for him to identify as a progressive because he was not instilled with orthodox dogma growing up. He has always identified with a progressive articulation of Islam and believes that muslims have lost this progressive spirit of Islam. Though he is ritually observant, he wishes to increase in his observance. The Quran to him is very natural but he finds the rituals difficult to relate to, largely due to the fact that Arabic remains a foreign language to him.

The Quran is the center of Saadiq's life and reading it brings him a great sense of peace. Growing up, he experimented with several religions but never really knew what faith was until he read the Quran. Saadiq believes that verses of the Quran are of two types. The first type are unalterable laws that never change. The second type are those that are focused on daily life and were meant to shift over time. These verses, he believes, cannot be applied literally because they belong to a different historical period. Such verses need to be interpreted in their spirit taking into account the historicity of the revelation.

With regards to the Sunnah, Saadiq said that his frame of reference is the Quran. If a hadith makes sense to him he believes it but if it contradicts the Quran, or his sense of reasoning, then he questions its validity and authenticity.

What do you think is the future of the movement? What direction would you like the movement to take?

Saadiq hopes that, in the future, progressive Islam becomes the current and mainstream articulation of Islam. In order for this to take form, he believes, there is a great need for progressive muslims to become more organized. He sees the dire need for both grassroots level activism and centralized organization of progressive muslims around the country. Concentrating on these two aspects is the only way that the movement can reach critical mass and spread rapidly as an ideology. He believes that the movement will soon need to make this crucial decision and either become more organized or it will cease to exist.