HAZARA DIASPORA RELIGIOUS DISAFFILIATION: AFGHANISTAN'S SHIʿA WHO TURN AWAY FROM ISLAM

by

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ABSTRACT

NASIM FEKRAT. Hazara Diaspora Religious Disaffiliation: The Afghanistan's Shiʿa who Turn Away from Islam (Under the direction of DR. GREGORY STARRETT)

The topic of irreligiosity and secularism among Muslim immigrants is an understudied subject. Academic studies of Muslim immigrants, in particular, tend to focus on religious beliefs at the expense of other issues. This is particularly evident in North American scholarship. This study attempts to address the lack of literature on the topic through ethnographic research among members of the Hazara community in the Washington D.C. metro area. Unlike the majority of Muslim immigrants who hold tight to their faith, some of Afghanistan's Shiʿa immigrants who have recently arrived in the U.S. have chosen to break away from their religion, sometimes embracing atheism and in some cases exhibiting a preference for Christianity. Hazara immigrants in this population gave a variety of reasons for their religious disaffiliation, which throughout this paper is represented by the term "undoing Islam." Most of these individuals acknowledged their disagreement with the teachings and principles of Islam, while others mentioned terrorism and jihadism as reasons why they do not want to associate with the faith. This study aims to contribute to the existing literature on immigrants and secularism through an ethnographic analysis.

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DEDICATION

To Asad Buda, for his friendship and inspiration.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Historical studies of immigrant groups in America propose that religion is vital for the integration and assimilation of immigrants and their children into American society (Handlin 1951; Alba, Raboteau, and DeWind 2009; Ecklund 2007; Hirschman 2004). Indeed, they have not only emphasized religious participation as an imperative step toward becoming American (Herberg 1983), but they also have argued that religion and religious membership can help to ameliorate the traumas of early resettlement and discrimination (Foner and Alba 2008; Foley and Hoge 2007). The topic of irreligiosity and secularism among Muslim immigrants is an understudied subject. Academic studies of Muslim immigrants, in particular, tend to focus on their religious beliefs at the expense of other issues. This is particularly evident in North American scholarship.

To date, research has mainly focused on the importance of immigrants' faith and how it helps them cope with assimilation difficulties in a new society, yet research has disregarded those immigrants who no longer associate themselves with their faith. To fill this gap, this study explores the question of what inspires newly arrived Hazara immigrants in the United States to break away from their faith. While churches, temples, and mosques can offer opportunities for fellowship, solace, and friendship, not all immigrants turn to these spaces, especially those immigrants who are either not religious or not followers of organized religions. Unlike the majority of Muslim immigrants who hold tight to their faith, some minority groups no longer have a religious life. Among those are some Afghanistan's Shiʿa diaspora who recently arrived in the U.S. through the

Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program and have chosen to break away from their religion, sometimes embracing atheism and sometimes showing a preference for Christianity. When I asked my participants to specify why they left Islam, they listed a variety of reasons. Most of them cited issues with the teachings and principles of Islam, while others mentioned terrorism and jihadism as reasons they do not associate with the faith.

We lack proper knowledge on the religious disaffiliation of Muslim immigrants. This research will examine religious change as well as expose the extent to which immigrants carry their religious values with them or acquire the cultural values of their new home. Answering these questions may have important political implications, but more importantly, help us understand the longevity and malleability of cultural values and whether these values are traits of individuals or attributes of the given society (Inglehart and Norris 2009).

In my study, I found that some members, despite identifying themselves as atheists or non-religious, participate in religious events and retain certain traditions that they have recharacterized as "cultural." They sometimes expressed nostalgia about their religious past and consider the retention of certain Islamic traditions necessary for communal harmony and inclusion. These immigrants are religiously unobservant; but because they still identify with Muslim culture, and might be thought of as "cultural Muslims." Their sense of being "Muslim" no longer has to do with a relationship to God. Instead, it is focused on maintaining social and cultural ties with other Hazara immigrants. I argue that religious disaffiliation among Hazara immigrants has been a process of undoing Islam from their identity not only by denouncing and rejecting the

principles of Islam, doing forbidden things, and looking for alternative religions such as Christianity, but also creating a social identity that is informed by a new way of framing ethnic solidarity within a host society in which they are widely dispersed geographically.

Who Are the Hazaras?

Hazaras are distinctive in Afghanistan because of their Asiatic features, as well as their specific beliefs and language. Due to these differences, they have been persecuted throughout history and are survivors of two genocidal campaigns. One occurred between 1888 and 1893; more than 60 percent of the Hazara indigenous population disappeared due to systematic killings and enslavement (Rajan 2015; Lansford 2017; Shahrani 2018). In 1998, the Taliban declared a *fatwa* that the Hazaras are not Muslim and that they should convert to Sunni Islam or die (Rashid 2002). They did not convert, and thousands of Hazaras were massacred (Filkins 1998). Some members of the communities that I have interviewed for my thesis have traumatic memories. This research shows that a history of persecution has become an important aspect of Hazara ethnic consciousness and identity in their diasporic lives.

Scholarship on Afghan Immigrants in the U.S.

The few historical studies on Afghan immigrants in the U.S. mostly focus on their mental health but also discuss social and cultural issues tied to their acculturation experience (Akalou 1989; Lipson 1991; Lipson and Omidian 1992; Parvanta 1992; Edwards 1994; Lipson and Miller 1994; Mghir and Raskin 1999; Aziz 1999; Morioka-Douglas, Sacks and Yeo 2004; Lindgren and Lipson 2004; Alemi, James, Cruz, Zepeda, and Racadio 2014; Alemi, James and Montgomery 2016). In addition to examining pre-immigration trauma, they discuss Afghans' experiences of fleeing their country,

resettling, adjusting to American life, and their health issues. Most available literature has focused on Afghan immigrant groups in one geographical area, the San Francisco Bay, which is home to nearly 50,000 Afghan immigrants (Lindgren and Lipson 2004), the largest in North America. All participants in these studies come from Sunni backgrounds, though; Shiʿa Hazara participants have never been included in such research.

CHAPTER ONE: SECULARISM

Western social thinkers of the nineteenth century, such as Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx, prophesized modernization as a secularizing force that would gradually peripheralize religion and eventually it would wither away as societies progress (Kunin 2003; Norris and Inglehart 2011; Aldridge 2007). Thinkers who came after them followed their course with confidence and believed that sometime soon people would outgrow God and superstitious religious beliefs would disappear. This change is precisely recounted by C. Wright Mills, whom Hadden (1987) quotes, "Once the world was filled with the sacred - in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm." These were the earliest propositions that would become known as the secularization thesis. Thus, secularization is a process in which religion declines as societies move towards modernization.

During the past decades, secularism has been a controversial topic of discussion in different societies, and scholars have tried to define it differently. A significant body of scholarship has recently emerged that not only enriched the discussion of secularism, but, more importantly, produced a consensus view to distinguish between "religion" and "secularism" and problematize the concept of "the secular" and "secularism," especially when studying religion in places other than the West (Asad 2003; Mahmood 2015;

Taylor 2007; Agrama 2012; Starrett 2010; Hirschkind 2010; Schielke 2012). Traditional definitions of secularization required some refinement. For the past two decades, social science scholars have resumed the conversation and added more nuanced definitions to secularism.

Classic debates and arguments about secularism and modernity have been fruitful for a certain period and context, but historically they lacked nuances. This is a central concern for Talal Asad, whose *Formations of the Secular* has had a significant influence on the anthropological debate of secularism. He argues that while secularism should be perceived as a political doctrine, "the secular" is an episteme that lies behind political movements as an ontological and an epistemological understanding. Without having a solid grasp of "the secular," understanding secularism as a doctrine remains elusive to us. Asad argues that the secular "is neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it (that is, it is not the opposite, an essence that excludes the sacred)" (Asad 2003, p. 25). From Asad's perspective "the secular" has a parallel relationship and conformity with "the religious." He not only complicates the definition and the understanding of "the secular," but also negates the earlier proposition that prophesized the decline of social significance of religion in societies.

Furthermore, beyond simple conformity, the secular and the religious are not fixed categories. Asad explains that he "take [s] the secular to be a concept that brings together certain behaviors, knowledges, and sensibilities in modern life," which evokes a contingent effect (Asad 2003, p. 25). The secular is not a replacement or negation or simply a pathway to emancipation from religion: rather, it is a rearrangement,

embodiment, and incorporation as well as a new kind of realization of both politics and religion. In other words, as Hussein Agrama (2012) argues in his book, *Questioning Secularism: Islam, Sovereignty, and the Rule of Law in Modern Egypt*, secularism invites constant reevaluation and shapes one's concept of religion and religious practice. How can one then negotiate fluidity between religion and the secular? According to Asad, "there is nothing essentially religious, nor any universal essence that defines 'sacred language' or 'sacred experience'" (Asad 2003, p.25). Asad's argument for the secular and the religious as fluid categories resembles Charles Taylor's assertion that the secular and religious overlap. One major similarity between these scholars is their shared depiction of a dynamic space where both religion and secularism interact to negotiate differences.

In his seminal book, *A Secular Age,* Taylor challenges the familiar definition of the secular and differentiates between the secular and secularity. According to Taylor, secularity ascribes individuals with certain social, political, and psychological orientations or characteristics while secularism is considered to be the domain of social and non-religious institutions. Taylor opens the subject by asking "what does it mean to live in a secular age?" (2003, p. 1). From the start, he challenges our understanding and familiarity with the secular and explores the exclusivity of secularity. He identifies three meanings of secularity and uses the third definition as a guide to his study for the rest of the book. The first definition of secularity refers to institutions and public spaces, and the practices observed there (Taylor 2003). Modern public space is a functional space where God has no presence because people are actively involved in economic, political, cultural, and everyday life which demands that they operate based on their own internal logic, rather than being influenced by religion or God. According to Taylor, this is the

sphere of rationality, which is intrinsic in secular societies, contrary to pre-modern societies where governing institutions were highly dependent on God.

The second meaning, which emerged after the Enlightenment, "consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God and no longer going to Church" (Taylor 2003, p. 2). The first and second meanings resemble that of secularization theory which asserts that modernization will cause the decline of religion; however, Taylor fails to mention this connection. Though these two meanings are closely connected, it is primarily the third meaning that occupies him the most for the rest of the book. In third meaning, secularity consists of "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (Taylor 2003, p. 4). This is where he explores the condition of belief as he thinks is the best way to understand what it means to live in a secular age. As he puts it, secularity "is a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and search takes place" (p. 3). Taylor explores the broad and complex history leading to the modern secular age in the West, focusing specifically on Christianity.

For the past decades, the secularization thesis has faced serious criticism, especially when religion did not only decline but resurged. The second half of the twentieth century experienced unexpected and tumultuous political developments that brought religion into the public sphere to be used as a tool for political gains. The world began to experience what social scientists describe as the "resurgence of religion," which is considered to be a byproduct of the Cold War and its contingencies (Thomas 1995). Events in which this resurgence can be seen include the Iranian Revolution (1979) which

led to the emergence of the new Islamic republic in Iran, the Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan (1979), the rise of Islamic Jihadist warfare known as Mujahedeen, and ultimately the emergence of Islamist movement groups such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and more recently the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS). Simultaneously, Southeast Asian countries like Indonesia and Malaysia experienced movements of renewal in Islamic traditions (Muzaffar 1986; Sundaram & Cheek 1988; Rosyad 2006). The resurgence of religion was also witnessed in other parts of the world, for instance, liberation theology movements in Latin America, Hindu fundamentalism in India, and the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the United States. In the Islamic world, for the past four decades, radical Islam has filled voids where secular states failed to enact or gravitated towards dictatorship and authoritarian leadership, which left people oppressed and distrustful.

The question about secularization remains unanswered: Were early social thinkers misled or wrong to claim that modernization would cause religion to wither away? It is clear that the resurgence of religion is real; however, what remains ambiguous is whether resurgence is as a result of recent historical and political events or whether religion has been there all along but has not been in the public eye. In this context, it is worthwhile to examine the resurgence of religion since the colonial era. Given the history of colonial rules in Asia and the Middle East, one can argue that religion has not only been a tool for national solidarity but also as an indicator of national identity which has been effectively used to resist colonialism and promote independence. Events such as the rise of Hindu nationalism in the nineteenth century that inspired independence movements in India and the events that took place towards the end of the nineteenth century in the Middle East

where Islamic ideologists such as Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī (d. 1897) and his student Muhammad ʿAbduh (d. 1905) advocated for Pan-Islamism and instigated resistance against colonialism. In this respect, one can argue that the resurgence of religion is not new and definitely not a response to secularization, rather, it has become an effective tool for gaining political power.

The question of religion's resurgence and of God's requires a great deal of investigation into historical, political, and more importantly colonial history, which is beyond this thesis. In the Muslim world, especially in the Middle East, secularism is seen a political doctrine that grew out of Christianity in the West and exported through colonial invasion and occupation to Muslim societies (Esposito 2011). Scholars often refer to the rise of Islamist movement groups like ISIS and the Taliban to support their arguments that Islam is inherently in conflict with secular values. If we consider secularism a product of modernization, then why do societies that are modernized in the Muslim world fail to experience secularism? I will argue that secularism has not disappeared but rather continues to exist even in societies that have experienced a resurgence of religion.

Recent research and surveys show that the decline of religion is a world phenomenon. It is not only the United States that witnesses a rapid decline of Christianity (Pew Research Center 2019), but also Islamic nations. A recent survey by the Arab Barometer research network at Princeton University shows that Arabs are increasingly turning their backs on Islam (Arab Barometer 2019). The survey that was conducted between 2018 and 2019 is based on interviews with more than 25,000 people across ten countries in the Middle East and North Africa, except Iran and Israel. According to the

survey, since 2013 the number of people who said they were not religious has risen from 8 percent to 13 percent. This is significant as the region has experienced the jihadist violence by ISIS whose messages are rooted in Islam. We should also bear in mind that surveys like that of Arab Barometer and Pew Research Center have only documented individuals who are resisting religion which influences public opinion concerning the presence of religion. For example, one cannot assume that the rise of a jihadist group like ISIS reveals the resurgence of religion. In contrast, survey data indicating that people are gradually disaffiliating themselves with religion indicates that secularization is an ongoing process.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODOLOGY

This study stems from three-months of concentrated ethnographic fieldwork and several shorter field trips. I spent three months in the field, from May 15 to August 15, 2019. Investigations for this study took place in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, where members of the Hazara community reside over a wide area but stay in close contact with each other. There is no official figures about the Hazara immigrant population, but in conversation with some community leaders of the area; their population is considered over three thousand people living in the Washington D.C. metro area, which largely covers part of Virginia and Maryland. The area includes the District of Columbia, Virginia, and Maryland. They usually gather when there are major events, such as religious events, picnics or any historical celebration day, such as Eid, Nawruz (Persian new year), etc. This area was chosen because the Hazara's presence is more visible compared to other cities in the United States. In addition to their social and cultural activities within their own circles, they are also proactive and politically engaged with issues of the country they immigrated from. They closely follow the social and political vagaries inside Afghanistan and often hold demonstrations in the capital to show their support and solidarity with their people in Afghanistan

For this project, I conducted semi-structured interviews and participant observations of members of the community, which includes eight men and eight women, aged from early twenties to late sixties, I used snowball sampling because the members of the Hazara community are scattered over a large area, but they stay in close contact

with each other and through their association, the Hazara-American Association. The combination of semi-structured interviews and observations was the best method to conduct this research because this topic is sensitive and it requires a level of trust from the person who conducts the study. During the interview, I asked open-ended questions, which lasted between 45 minutes to one hour or more. Due to the sensitive nature of this study, the interviews were conducted in a quiet environment where the participants felt comfortable. Places chosen for the interview were the park, the coffee shop, or their houses.

Scheduling did not go as I had planned. I had established connections with thirty-five people, but I was only able to interview sixteen. Some were not able to be interviewed because they were traveling, while others were too busy. Upon my arrival, I conducted my first interview; it was short, and I was left unsatisfied because not all of the questions were answered. It was not what I had expected; I realized that I needed to build trust with my participants. Therefore, I changed the strategy as well as the questions. Instead of asking them about their religious beliefs, I asked questions regarding their immigration experience in the U.S. and let them talk freely. Framing my questions differently helped me gain trust during the interviews, and often I met the same person multiple times. This was frequently at the request of my participants who wanted to add or clarify their ideas. While most of my interviews were audiotaped, only two interviewees preferred not to be recorded.

In terms of observation, I attended their public events and collaborated in their activities. This helped me gain an emic perspective, which I could use for my project. In public events, I particularly observed their cultural and religious behavior, their religious

and cultural knowledge, and their cultural artifacts. Forming a social connection produced expectations of reciprocity. My involvement included inviting them to dinners, coffee or tea, helping individuals with translation and finding lawyers for their court cases, counseling and volunteering for their community. Undoubtedly, this form of relationship brought me closer to my participants. I was often invited to their houses for dinner, and when there was a gathering, I was invited too. I observed them during the course of their daily interactions and their cultural practices within their families and between community members. I took photos as well, generally when the community had public gatherings. Due to privacy matters, the photos will not be presented in a way that the participants could be identified; rather, it will illustrate the landscape and the events that took place. The photos will only be used for presentations and post-fieldwork analysis to help me as a researcher remember the topography of the area. Finally, all participants who were interviewed for this study are given a pseudonym in an effort to protect their identities.

Finally, it is important to note my positionality as an ethnographer for this study that I have a lot in common with the people, which I have studied. I belong to the same ethnic group and share the same cultural and religious background. Methodologically, I see my approach as an insider and an outsider, meaning that as an insider, I benefited from being familiar with the people, their history, and culture. I also benefited from my personal connection with a few individuals in the community, which facilitated my efforts to meet more people whom I interviewed for this project. However, such connection had its own advantages and disadvantages, which to some degree became challenging. The strength was that my participants trusted me as a person of their own

who understood their cultural sensitivity. As a result, they were open to share their ideas and talk about their religious views without the fear of judgement or repercussion.

The disadvantages of such familiarity materialized in the fact that they were not willing to elaborate on certain ideas and issues because they assumed that I knew them already. Under these circumstances, I had to put more effort into acquiring details that I needed for my ethnographic work. As an outsider, I was cognizant of positionality in relation to my participants who (only a couple of them) were curious about my own religiosity, in which I identify as non-religious. Knowing that I am not a religious person, some of my participants (non-believers) were more open to talk about their beliefs, but at the same time this put constraints on certain individuals who were religious. While I tried to position myself and my role as an independent researcher whose job is to build a rich ethnographic work by using any possibility to facilitate such effort, there were certain occasions that I felt I was part of the research process, which I think is inevitable when conducting qualitative research.

CHAPTER THREE: ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

In the sweltering humid air we sat on the lawn in front of the U.S. Capitol in Washington D.C. Chaman, a 39-year-old Hazara man who recently immigrated to the U.S. requested to have our interview in the open air, thinking that it might be quieter than his home or a coffee shop. He now works for a multimedia company, something that he used to do in Afghanistan. Chaman fought against the Taliban and when they took over the city of Mazar-e Sharif, he went into hiding. This was a particularly dangerous time for him and his family. In August 1998, the city was shaken by a series of gruesome mass killings of the ethnic Hazaras. Thousands of people were massacred; streets, roundabouts, and alleyways were strewn with corpses for weeks. When the dust settled, people started coming out of hiding to collect the remains of dead bodies unfinished by dogs (Human Rights Watch 1998; Filkins 1998). Soon, the family became desperate for food but everyone was in fear of being killed. Finally, Chaman decided to go out in the market to find physical work in order to put food on the table for his parents and siblings, otherwise they would starve to death. Chaman worked as a porter in the city, which was a physically demanding occupation. Eventually he was arrested and taken to a Taliban prison. He spent more than three weeks in the prison and deceived the Taliban into believing that he was an Uzbek not a Hazara.

Chaman told me that it was in the prison that he first began questioning his faith in God after witnessing the brutally of the Taliban who represented themselves as true

Muslims. He told me that the seed of religious doubt was planted in the Taliban prison, but he was still not sure whether to reject religion conclusively.

> My doubt about God began in Mazar-e Sharif when the Taliban started the biggest massacre in the city. I saw when the Taliban were killing people mercilessly. We were calling God for help but he wasn't there for us. Three months after the massacre I was arrested and imprisoned by the Taliban. I lived under the Taliban in Mazar-e Sharif. I was released after three weeks. It was then that I rethought about Islam and God.

His rejection of Islam occurred after reading religious text in the library that was run by the Taliban in Mazar-e Sharif. Chaman established a good relationship with the Mullah, a member of the Taliban in charge of the library. Rather than use his real identity he introduced himself as an Uzbek, an ethnic group whose people are mostly Sunnis, and he spoke their language. After months of reading religious texts about Islam, Chaman began ignoring daily prayers and religious observances.

> "[I] realized that it [Islam] is void of basic modern human values. I turned away from Islam, then."

Dawlat, who is in his 40s, had a similar experience. He came to the U.S. through a Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) program that grants visas to those who have assisted U.S. Armed Forces or under Chief of Mission authority as a translator or interpreter in Iraq or Afghanistan (U.S. Department of State, 2019). In the beginning he did odd jobs, now he is an independent contractor. He also fought against the Taliban, and when they captured his city he went into hiding in a Sunni neighbor's home; however, his neighbor later reported him to the Taliban. For the first few months was in Mazar-e Sharif in the Taliban's prison, but later, he was put in a container with hundreds of others to be transported to Kandahar, in southern Afghanistan. He told me that many prisoners died in containers, but he and a few others survived. He was released after three years (just two

days prior to September 11) in a prisoner exchange between the Taliban and Hezbe Wahdat, a political party belonging to ethnic Hazara that fought the Taliban in central Afghanistan. He taught himself English in prison and when the international invasion force landed in Afghanistan, he was hired as a translator.

Both Chaman and Dawlat have worked for the US army as translators and media advisors. Unlike Chaman, Dawlat spent more than three years in a Taliban prison where he was tortured. Rather than read about Islam like Chaman, Dawlat saw the negative aspects of Islam while working with the U.S. Army. Dawlat expressed to me that working as a translator for the U.S. Army was a life changing experience.

> I worked with a lot of nice people and I saw good things in them, they were not even Muslim, but they were good people with good morals. I told myself, you don't have to be Muslim to be a good person.

Though he did not question his faith he stopped praying and became liberal in his religious views. Dawlat told me that his lax attitudes were a result of the strict discipline that he experienced during his time in the Taliban prison. Islamic extremism has been one of the reasons that Dawlat and Chaman left Islam, but they could not pronounce it publicly until they arrived in the United States. Now they proudly call themselves atheist and not Muslim.

Undoing Islam

The process of departing from Islam that some of my interlocutors experienced could be phrased in various ways, but I call it undoing Islam. The closest terms are *entislamisiegung* or *deislamisierung* in German, which mean de-islamification or de-islamization. These terms have similar conceptual meanings through the shared concept of "undoing," however, I consider them to be imbued with political connotations. In the

case of the Hazara immigrants, leaving Islam is an individual choice, which is motivated by personal conscientious awareness. They are not encouraged or forced through any means but due to specific circumstances decide to push back against Islamic ideals and the spread of Islam. Perhaps immigration, a phenomenon that has happened throughout history, could be attributed to the spread of Islam. And so, I see the term ex-Muslim as problematic because it obliquely points to a status that is being created as a result of something else, in this case, Islam. In the following paragraphs, I will explain how my interlocutors' disaffiliation with Islam has been a procedure of undoing, not an overnight decision. I therefore use the term "undoing" because it displays the nuances of authenticity in relation to the way disaffiliation is performed.

Most of my interlocutors expressed disdain for religion, particularly Islam. Upon their arrival in the U.S. the individuals I interviewed decided to distance themselves from Islam. Some of them even publicly proclaimed themselves atheists, something that would lead to the death penalty in Afghanistan or in some other Muslim societies. Both Chaman and Dawlat have not been to *takyakhāna*[1] or mosque unless there is a funeral, in which they only attend to pay respect to family and relatives. Since their arrival in the United States, none of my participants have been to *Muharram* or *Ashura*, an important annual day for mourning among Shiʿas. In fact, they see Shiʿa rituals as problematic as these rituals spread Islamic ideologies which they no longer ascribe to. Hussain, in his early 40s, considers himself a religious scholar, and yet he sometimes identifies as a non-believer. He came to the U.S. as an asylum-seeker with his wife and three children.

[1] *Takyakhāna* is another term for masjid. It is a Shiʿa congregation hall used for not only religious ceremonies, but also community gathering, schooling, and funerals. In central Afghanistan, *takyakhāna* or masjid is also as a guest house for residents and rest house for travelers.

When I asked him if he is an atheist, he paused and said, “that is too extreme for me.” He has studied in Qom, Iran, which is considered a holy city and the second most important center of Shiʿa religious establishment after Najaf in Iraq. He told me that his years of education in Shiʿa jurisprudence has provided him with a good understanding of Islamic beliefs, which he uses in his critiques.

One of his arguments against Islam, particularly Shiʿism, is that it impedes human progress and we should not let our children follow it. Hussain sees the Ashura ceremony, the day of commemoration of the death of Hussein (the grandson of Prophet Muhammad), as a controversial event that has created a gulf between Shiʿa and Sunni.

> The Ashura prayers are problematic. During the ritual, you have to curse all the caliphates except Ali. If you pay attention to this kind of prayers’ meanings, you can realize that Shiʿism literally wants to destroy humanity. If they have the power, they can do it. There are many dangerous ideas in Shiʿism. I started a campaign against Ashura, describing the meaning and its implications.

Hussain’s statement about the Ashura ritual resonates with others in the community who disaffiliated or distanced themselves from Islam. Many of my interlocutors were born and raised as refugees in Iran, but returned to Afghanistan after the collapse of the Taliban regime. Some of them told me that in Iran Sunnis were believed to be unclean and unbelievers. Sectarian tension between Sunni and Shiʿa is as old as Islam itself.[2] When my participants returned to Afghanistan, where Sunni Muslims constitute more than eighty percent of the country's population, they inevitably came into contact with people from different ethnic groups who were Sunnis. They told me that the

[2] Sunni Islam as a religion is recognized in the Iranian constitution, however, in practice, Sunnis are facing systematic discrimination. Sunni Muslims are considered second class citizens and often barred from building mosques. See Castellino, J., & Cavanaugh, K. A. (2013). Minority rights in the Middle East. OUP Oxford.

experience was startling, but they soon realized the prejudices against Sunnis they learned in Iran were false. Personal experiences such as these were shared by many participants and they believed the discriminatory attitudes towards Sunnis were responsible for deep societal fissures between the Sunni and the Shiʿa. Jamila, in her 30s, who was born and raised in Iran, had a similar experience:

> In Iran, I was given a terrifying picture of Sunnis. They were saying that Sunnis are unclean, and even they were saying Sunnis are infidels because they don't believe in one of Shiʿa's five pillars, the *imāmat.* They are bad, they are oppressors. When I went to Afghanistan, I realized Sunnis are no different from Shiʿas. I thought, well, the problem is not with Shiʿa, the problem is with Islam.

The doctrine of *imāmat* (leadership) lies at the heart of Shiʿa belief system, which attests that certain individuals (that would be call *imām* or leader) from Muhammad's lineage have the right to leadership to lead the *umma*, the world community of Muslims. More importantly, for Shiʿas, the *imāms* are not only close family members of Muhammad, *ahl al-bayt* (People of the House), but they are also authoritative sources in Islam. Shiʿa Muslims disregard the *ṣaḥābah,* who were companions or disciples of Muhammad, while Sunni Muslims reject *imāmat* of Shiʿa.

Hussain told me that despite some hesitancy and concern, he took the risk of sharing his opinions about *Ashura* on Facebook. He faced a barrage of attacks from his friends and followers who live in Afghanistan and Iran. They called him an apostate who deserves to be executed. I asked whether he is worried about ever returning to Afghanistan. Our conversation was abruptly halted for a minute when his wife came to ask him for his car keys. I asked him whether his wife knows about his beliefs. His wife (who wore jeans, long sleeve T-shirt and no headscarf) overheard me and told me they are on the same page on those issues. Hussain was trained to be an expert in religious

issues and was expected to be sent for *tablīgh* (preaching), someone whose job is to propagate Muhammad's mission and the Islamic doctrine, but instead, he became irreligious. His doubts were fostered in seminary when he saw contradictions in the Shiʿa belief system. Now, he regrets those days he spent at seminary.

> I regret the past that I spent my life religiously. I laugh at myself when I think of those days that I was very religious. This really bothers me. Humans shouldn't be in such a dire lack of information to believe a religion like Shiʿa. I have gone to the end of Islam and realized there is nothing in it. It's empty.

This sense of regret about past religious experiences was shared among most of my interlocutors. When I asked about their religiosity before immigrating to the U.S. my interviewees showcased a range of emotions regarding their past religious lives. In the following, I will further discuss the process of undoing Islam.

Modesty is a requirement in Islam, and for some Muslims this takes the form of the headscarf. Today, however, *hijab* has become more than a form of modesty; it has become more political. For numerous Muslim women, the *hijab* has become a symbol of religious and cultural identity, while for others it is a demonizing symbol of oppression of women. Half of my participants were women who were either married or single, and none of them wore *hijabs*. Mahbuba is a single mother who was separated from her husband a few years after their arrival in the U.S. She holds an MS in Civil Engineering from Afghanistan where she also met her husband. I met her in a coffee shop; she wore a pair of tattered light blue jeans, a charcoal t-shirt, tennis shoes and blonde highlights in her hair. I could have mistaken her for any other women in the coffee shop had I not known her. When I asked her about *hijab*, she said:

> In Afghanistan, if you wear *hijab*, you are less harassed in public. I was told that *hijab* saves you. But when I came here, I noticed that no one looks at you. I was

> told that if you wear *hijab*, you are protected from impure eyes, and you are like a pearl inside a shell. But for six months that I wore *hijab* here, I realized that no one looked at me, no one cared whether I was existed. I asked myself: what does it mean to wear *hijab*? Why am I making myself uncomfortable? I threw away my headscarf, and then gradually my skirt shortened from under knee to above the knee. After a month, I started wearing jeans. Now, I wear shorts and a short sleeve t-shirt.

However, this transition was not easy for Mahbuba. She told me that her female friends always commented on her clothing choice and often in a scathing way.

> After a while, I stopped praying. My friends who were wearing *hijab* made sneering comments about my appearance. I felt guilty and impure. I felt weak. But now, two years after, I think how stupid I was to wear *hijab*. Now, I'm thinking whether I need religion at all, or should I look for a religion other than Islam. I was born in an Islamic country where I was forced to believe [in the faith] and follow its principles. Now, I think that Islam was not the right religion to follow.

When she first arrived in the U.S., Mahbuba lived in a different Afghan immigrant community where members were mostly Sunni Muslims. (The Hazara immigrants do not like to use the word Afghan; they would rather use Hazara and be recognized as Hazara-Americans. I will explore this further when I discuss the Hazara identity.) These were people she knew from other Afghan immigrant communities. There were several Afghan immigrant communities that settled in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area, and the Hazara community to which Mahbuba and all the other participants belonged was one of them. Unlike other communities, the Hazara is relatively small, and its social cohesion is based on cultural and ethnic identity rather than the national tradition of the country of birth.

During my fieldwork, the practice of wearing a *hijab* was one of the most debated and contentious topics among my participants. What I understood from my conversations with Hazara women was that the controversy was not as much about the *hijab*'s religious

importance as it was about applicability. Several of these women told me that they wore *hijab*s in Afghanistan because it was culturally and religiously appropriate and required. It was also a form of protection from street harassment, but they saw it as a hindrance and a social obstacle not only in the American culture, but also in their own community. Five of my female participants told me that they do not socialize with women who wear headscarves. I was told that these women formed an informal advocacy group to talk to newly immigrated Muslim women to convince them to take off their headscarves. They looked at the *hijab* as a symbol of backwardness and old-fashioned ideals. In a different context, this may be construed as judgmental and intrusive or even discriminatory and prejudiced, but in this small community and from the perspective of these women, taking off the veil is perceived as progressive and modern.

Zahra was of these women who came to the United States five years ago. She taught philosophy at a university in Afghanistan and now works in the financial industry. She told me that she was born in a religious family, but she has now left Islam. In the workplace most of her customers think she is a Muslim because of her name, but she corrects them all the time because she is no longer Muslim. She told me that the first thing she would do upon receiving her citizenship would be to change her name. Countless of my male interlocutors also expressed dislike with their names that either start or end with "Muhammad," and also want to change their names. On one occasion, I joined Zahra and her husband and another couple for *fātiḥa,* which is a post-funeral reception of condolence and sympathy with the family of the deceased and often time accompanied with prayers and food. The *fātiḥa* was held in a community center rather than in a mosque. Later, when I asked Ahmad, one of the deceased relatives about this, he

told me that they are trying to stay away from mosques or religious centers, but they still want to retain certain practices for the sake of community cohesion because not everyone has rejected Islam. Ahmad himself is an atheist, but when it comes to community involvement, he keeps his beliefs private.

Upon entering the hall where *fātiḥa* was held, it looked like a familiar scene for me. Someone was reciting the Qur'an, while others were either saying prayers, reading the Qur'an, or chatting quietly. Men and women were sitting separately and women were wearing white flimsy headscarves, which is typically worn by Hazara women at times of grief and mourning. Surprisingly, all of the women wearing headscarves did not regularly wear them outside of the event. Yet, not everyone wore a headscarf; a few American women and Zahra were uncovered despite the religious nature of the ceremony. I asked Zahra if that is an issue for her and whether the bereaved host would react negatively. She said she did not wear a headscarf for her mother-in-law's *fātiḥa* either, and she does not want any more duplicity. Unlike other women who separated from their male companions and sat with a group of women, Zahra sat next to her husband at our table. When I asked her the reason, she replied: "segregation of men and women is one of the reasons I left Islam." However, when a person came to our table and offered a few chapters of the Qur'an to be read, Zahra was the first to pick and read it. She told me that reading the Qur'an has become a cultural practice and it is part of their community solidarity because other customs have yet to replace it. Zahra reads the Qur'an out of respect for her community. Among Shiʿas it is customary to read one *juz'* (part) of the Qur'an for the deceased one believing that it keeps their soul at peace. Zahra later told me that unlike her husband, she is not an atheist, but she rejects Islam.

At the post-funeral reception, not everyone at our table read the Qur'an. Jafar was one of them. After receiving his Master's degree in the U.S., he extended his stay and now works as an independent contractor. I asked him the reason why he did not read the Qur'an. He told me he is an atheist and reading the Qur'an would mean he is a hypocrite; he would not read at his own family's *fātiḥa* either. Ahmad, who is also an atheist, was displeased with this and posted a complaint on the Hazara-American Association Facebook wall and sent it via e-mail to members of the community. In his email, he scolded those who refused to read the Qur'an at the post-funeral reception.

> "Atheism does not mean to disrespect others' beliefs, the purpose of reading the Qur'an is not to convert you or make you believe in God or anything else, but paying respect to your friends and people in the community. Even if we don't believe in Islam and its God, we should practice it as a culture in order to strengthen our community because not everyone thinks the same."

For a lot of members of the community who know Ahmad openly claims atheism, this was unusual. Ahmad came to the U.S. for higher education more than forty years ago. On his Facebook wall, he usually shares posts from atheists and agnostic pages and sometimes reposts with comments, often as an object of ridicule and sarcasm. During our interview he explained that retention of certain Islamic traditions is necessary to promote communal harmony and help bring people together. He believes that Islam has become part of our culture and, despite what we personally believe, we must be accommodating to those who still practice Islam.

The more I spoke with my interlocutors, the more I realized that, although they have been successful undoing Islam individually, when they abandoned their comfort zone, they inescapably encountered other members of the community who still retained certain traditions of Islam. Generally, this happened in mass gatherings, such as *Eid*,

Nowruz (Persian new year) celebration, and communal picnics. The Hazara-American community in Washington D.C. metro area is diverse in terms of their beliefs and customs. I witnessed that there were some people who were religious, and some women still wore headscarves. However, in their private gatherings and parties where alcoholic beverages were served, I saw the same women without headscarves.

The concurrence of these two juxtaposed social circumstances mapped an ambiguous and duplicitous picture which I found irreconcilable. I asked the reason, and they told me that in public gatherings, people take photos and post them on social media, in which they do not want to be seen without headscarves because their family members back in Afghanistan would not be happy. Furthermore, they told me that they never wear headscarves~~,~~ except when there is a community gathering. One of them suggested that it is a kind of respect for other members of the community who are still religious. As one of my interlocutors said, they need a space for their collective grief as well as their shared happiness. It may indicate that they might practice some degree of caution and prudence, not that they fear any kind of harm, but to respect the social space in their own community.

Undoing Islam in public gatherings may not be a sudden occurrence, but in private it has become a gradual reality. Unlike public gatherings where people from diverse backgrounds socialize according to cultural expectations, close-knit circles provide the opportunity to become free from these cultural constraints that they do not have in public. There were several cliques where members organized parties almost every weekend, and I was invited to several of them. These parties were in the form of potlucks, and participants brought food and alcohol, unless there was a birthday or an

anniversary in which the host provided everything. Participants are mostly young people, married, or newly married, and no participant had more than two children. Generally, in these kinds of parties, they played pop music, mostly Farsi, but they also played English and Latin music. Men and women danced together in fast tempo songs throughout the night. One of the popular songs that brought everyone on the floor was *Despacito,* meaning "slowly," a famous song by Puerto Rican singer Luis Fonsi. The lyrics (translated from Spanish) are riffed with sexual innuendo:

> Let me trespass your danger zones,
> until I make you scream
> and you forget your last name
> we will do it on the beach in Puerto Rico
> till the waves scream dear lord
> So that my seal remains with you. (Espinoza 2017)

Zahra and her husband, Chaman, were also there, while their young son was playing a game in another room with a few other kids. Zahra, who held onto her drink, approached me and said in a voice loud enough for me to hear her through the loud music in the room: "You asked me how I am not a Muslim. This is how. Look! I drink alcohol. I don't wear *hijab*. I dance with others. I enjoy myself. This is *haram* [forbidden] in Islam. This is how I got rid of Islam."

Drinking alcohol was not the only form of Islamic disobedience I observed; I also interacted with individuals who claimed to consume non-*halal* (non-kosher) food. Although I did not personally observe any of my participants eating pork, several of them bragged about eating pork, which is forbidden in Islam. However, I did observe almost all of my participants eating non-*halal* food, which is not permissible in Islam. Consumption of non-*halal* food was also common in public gatherings and picnics.

Chaman told me that he ate pork in Afghanistan when working with the American Army as a translator. Those who bragged about having no problem with eating pork or any food forbidden in Islam also registered themselves as modern, atheists, or someone who is not religious any longer. A person who is still religious and does not eat or drink forbidden foods is considered *ʿaqabmānda,* or backward and has problems with modernization.

Disregarding *ḥarām,* the forbidden law, is not only a convenient tool for undoing Islamic identity, but also for creating a new modern social identity. Individuals whom I talked to during my fieldwork told me that they do not socialize with everyone that are still religious or do not drink alcohol. Chaman told me that once he and his wife Zahra invited a couple who recently arrived in the U.S. to their home. His wife spent the whole afternoon cooking for the guests, and in the evening when the couple arrived, the wife asked whether the food was *halal* to which Zahra replied "no." Her husband ate but she refused to eat food that was not *halal.* Chaman told me that it was a humiliating event that he had never before experienced. Angry and humiliated by their guests, Chaman and his wife sent a text message to the couple politely telling them that their views were too different and they could not be friends with them anymore. They both told me in their interviews that since their arrival in the U.S. they have decided to live a normal life without hypocrisy, something that was impossible for them in Afghanistan under Islamic law. Their 10-year old son has been brought up with no religion. Last year at a Thanksgiving feast, which is celebrated in a communal form where several families get together and cook, their son requested to have roasted pork on the table. He read about eating pork at Thanksgiving in one of his story books and wanted to try it. Chaman and Zahra were first worried, but when they asked other families, they did not have a problem

with serving pork. These close-knit groups have constructed their own social niche within the larger community where they can be comfortable and reassured about their position and their opinions.

Disaffiliation and Retention

Despite their rejection of Islam and its principles, there are occasions and practices that belie that opposition. Whether observing *fatiha* or reading the Qur'an unintentionally as a form of respect to support the grieving members of the community, many participants placed great importance on retaining certain Islamic traditions as part of their cultural values. Jamila, who does not recognize herself as a Muslim any longer, emphasized the importance of keeping some traditions alive, but she has also nostalgia, longing for a previous life that is no longer possible.

> I still like to hear the *azan* [the Muslim call to prayer] that I heard from the Radio during Ramadan. As a kid, I remember, we were counting minutes to hear the *azan* in order to break our fast. It takes me to that moment, it connects me with my family and my childhood. It's nostalgic.

Jamila herself has not fasted since she returned from Iran. In Afghanistan, she lived with her husband who was a non-believer. In a dinner meeting, when discussing religious disaffiliation, several of my interlocutors expressed similar feelings when I addressed traditions attributed to Islam that are still practiced by members of the community. Jamila told me that she cannot deny their past, it is part of their experience, they are changed now, but her experience is part of her and her identity. Everyone agreed with her, except Jafar who told me that rejecting Islam completely is impossible because there is nothing to replace it with.

Not everyone agreed, but Jafar's suggestion that Islam is a cultural phenomenon and the denial of it is impossible, which brought a new dimension to our discourse of disaffiliation. He argued that Islam itself is an idea and a doctrine that is 1400 years old, but culture and people have existed for millennia, and thus it is culture and people who have accepted Islam, not the other way around. One of the guests asked if they are still Muslim despite not practicing it. Jafar explained: "Islam has five pillars, I don't believe in them and never observe them, therefore, technically I am not a Muslim, but I'm affiliated with it culturally." Several of my interviews took place towards the end of Islam's holy month of Ramadan, which is one of the pillars of the faith. None of my participants were fasting or praying (even those who claimed to be religious) and when I asked if they knew what day of Ramadan it was, only a few of them were able to remember.

While several of my participants identified themselves as atheists and agnostics, there were some who still considered themselves religious even though they have not prayed or observed Islamic rituals since being in the U.S. Among them were individuals whom I have seen in private parties drinking alcohol, frequenting bars and clubs, but when I asked them about their religiosity, they told me they keep religion private. Habiba, who is in her 20s, holds a B.S. and works for a non-profit organization in Washington D.C. In my interview with her she stated:

> I am still a Muslim, but religion doesn't have much role in my life. We should use our intellect and reason, we should not let religion interfere with our personal life. For example, from Islamic perspective, we can't drink, we (women) should wear *hijab*, we should not hang out with strangers, so religion has no role in my life. I believe in God, some people say, there is no God, I believe there is one. I want to have my religion private, I don't want it to be my identity. I want to have a relationship with God.

Habiba clearly identifies herself as a Muslim, but treats her faith as a private matter. Drinking alcohol is forbidden in Islam and can cause severe punishment; however, she does not consider that to be problematic if she keeps her faith separate from her personal life. She argues that one should use reason to determine whether wearing *hijab* or drinking alcohol is appropriate given the social context. A question might arise here: How is it possible to be religious but not adhere to the principles of her religion? This is puzzling because individuals like Habiba do not adhere to the principles of Islam but at the same time claim ownership of Islamic values. Generally, the individuals who do not observe Islam but still have membership in Muslim communities due to their family background or historical and social ties are considered by social scholars to be cultural Muslims, similar to cultural Christians. In fact, even those who identify as atheists or non-believers could fall under this category.

Although religious disaffiliation can be liberating, it can also impact individuals' social relations both emotionally and relationally. Disaffiliation can put a strain on people who can experience grief, helplessness, depression, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms (Knight, Wilson, Ward, & Nice 2019). Ahmad told me that his wife is always worried about his controversial posts on Facebook because people react bitterly and leave unpleasant, often menacing, comments. Despite his wife's concerns, Ahmad keeps posting atheistic ideas and often visual materials (video, cartoons, and memes) criticizing and ridiculing Islam. He told me that he has often decided to stop writing about religion on Facebook; however, he sees himself as a person who is liberated from

religion, and it is his duty to illuminate others even though it often materializes negatively.

While most of my participants indicated they have no affiliation with other religions after leaving Islam, there were a few participants who were enthusiastic about Christianity. Arzu, 22 years old, who is in her senior year in college, told me that since her arrival in the U.S. she has been going to a Catholic church with her friends. “I am not a Christian, though I prefer it over Islam, but I am not a religious person either,” she demurred when I ask whether she identified as a Christian. However, she still frequents churches with her American friends, and when I asked Arzu to explain why she does not consider herself religious and yet attends churches, she said that she goes there for socialization. Such a secular outlook ipso facto should be regarded as a corollary of a secularization process. Several other participants like Arzu have attended churches; however, none of them identified as or described themselves as Christians.

Once, in the home of a young Muslim couple who just immigrated from Afghanistan, I noticed a Bible on their bookshelf. “So,” I facetiously asked, “where is the Qur’an?” The husband approached me with his finger pointed in mock-accusation: “Don’t!” he said, as if I had just invoked a curse upon them. “Don’t mention that book in our house!” He said it with humor in his voice, but even so, his joking revealed a profound change, especially coupled with another fact I noticed. Not only did the home lack the Islamic holy book, it contained the Christian one. This Muslim family had a Bible, right there on their bookshelf. The couple was a poignant reminder of new religious disaffiliation that I had begun to see among Muslim immigrants in Washington D.C. metro area, particularly Shiʿa Muslims from Afghanistan.

In Islam, conversion or abandoning the faith is not only forbidden but marked with stigma. Apostasy in Islam is called *irtidād:* someone who rejects Islam in favor of converting to another religion. Under *sharia* law, apostasy demands the death penalty, which in certain circumstances could be enacted by religious authorities; especially in countries with dysfunctional judicial systems such as the one in Afghanistan. The simple accusation of calling someone *murtad* (apostate) can sometimes lead to unexpected consequences. Islam is considered an immutable eternal religion and anyone who is born to Muslim parents is naturally expected to be a Muslim. Leaving Islam is stigmatized and those who choose to leave Islam are marked as unworthy and their family and relatives tend to face social ostracism. Being aware of such severe consequences, Arzu and several of my participants who frequented churches and kept the Bible on their bookshelves were cautious enough not to be identified as a Christian convert. Thus, it is more convenient for them to be identified as atheists or non-believers rather than Christians because converting into another religion is deemed an existential threat for Islam's longevity. Once an Egyptian Islamic theologian told on Al-Jazeera:

> If they had gotten rid of the apostasy punishment, Islam wouldn't exist today; Islam would have ended since the death of the Prophet, peace be upon him. So, opposing apostasy is what kept Islam to this day. (Schauki, F. 2013).

CONCLUSION

Religious disaffiliation among Muslim immigrations is a growing phenomenon which has received a little research attention. Islam, like Christianity, is losing its followers either through disaffiliation, rejection of the faith, or leaving Islam to join other religions. Departure from Islam is significant, however small, since its restrictive laws limit people from leaving the faith. Though abandoning the faith under the Islamic laws is not possible, immigrants who live in democratic societies and where freedom of religion is guaranteed, do not feel obligated to practice Islam. When most of my participants explained the reason behind their decision to break away from Islam they highlighted the limited space and lack of freedom to choose that they faced. They further explained that they have decided to leave Islam because of its coercive and intolerant nature, something that they have experienced in their home country.

Increases in educational levels are strongly tied to religious disaffiliation among the Hazara immigrants. Contrary to those Afghan refugees who came to the U.S. in the 1980s and 90s, the Hazara immigrants are highly educated. Most of my participants held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to previous generations who lacked basic literacy (Lipson and Omidian 1992). The majority of my participants were professionals in their fields who previously worked for NGOs or as contractors for the U.S. government in Afghanistan. After their arrival, some of them have opened small businesses, which is an important element of incorporation and integration into the fabric of social and economic American society. For previous Afghan immigrants, one of the

most central day-to-day difficulties was related to understanding the English language, in contrast, all of my participants were fluent in English and a few of my interviewees preferred to speak in English.

For the earlier generation of Afghan immigrants, preserving religious and cultural traditions, and Afghan-ness was at the center of their identity. However, Hazara immigrants do not consider themselves "Afghan," (which is historically associated with a dominant ethnic group, Pashtun) but call themselves Hazara-American to purge any association with Afghan-ness. The reason for such reluctance and dislike of the word "Afghan" has to do with their historical suffering at the hands of Afghans or Pashtuns.[3] In Afghanistan, people are identified based on their ethnic names, non-Pashtuns barely identify themselves as Afghan.

Through hard work, the Hazara immigrants want to achieve the American dream, if not for themselves, but for their children. However, they think their dream would not materialize without breaking away from Islam, which they see not only as a hindrance to their integration into the host society, but also as a symbol of backwardness. During my fieldwork, I heard the word *ʿaqabmānda* (backward) as in contrast to progressive and being modern. The values they see in the American Dream is living a modern live, in which rights, liberty, opportunity, freedom, and prosperity are embedded and Islam is considered not to be compatible with these values. This may sound antagonistic and even Islamophoic, especially in a time when prejudice and hatred against minorities are high, however, it is a social fact.

[3] Not because of American suspicion of "Afghans."

Undoing Islam is also a way to accept modernism as well as a response to backward Islamic identity. During my fieldwork, I was invited to several meetings and gatherings, in which I gained unique opportunities to not only observe the Hazara immigrant's behavior but also listen to their conversations. I noticed that some members of the community were discontent with some religious individuals, describing them as people who are stuck in the past and unwilling to accept modernism, or failing to adapt to American life. They partly blamed their social and cultural struggles on their failure to make lifestyle adjustments. They emphasized material values more than spiritual ones, arguing that they have had enough of religion, now it is time to accrue capital, and have a better life. Most of my participants who identified themselves as atheists or non-believers told me that they do not like to be recognized as Muslim, they rather prefer to be identified by Hazara ethnicity rather than religion. Some of them told me that they are going to modify their names, especially those individuals whose names consist of "Muhammad," not to thwart or preempt potentially anti-Muslim prejudice, but simply because they dislike popular Islamic names. Some of them have already chosen Western names for their children, the first generation of Hazara-Americans.

Undoing Islam is not a reversion or conversion, it is rather a gradual process of erasing or eradicating deep-rooted traditions and replacing them with modern values that the host society offers. The undoing has been promoted by embracing things that are forbidden under Islamic laws, such as drinking alcohol, consumption of non-*halal* food, especially eating pork. One of my participants explained to me that a way to disjoin or leave Islamic faith is to reject its laws: "If you don't follow its [Islamic] laws, then you are not a Muslim anymore." In their own words, some of my participants registered

themselves as atheists, agnostics, or non-believers, however, my direct observation and interviews with them suggest something different. They enjoyed and celebrated religious holidays, such as *Eid*, participated in post-funeral gatherings, said the prayers, and read the Qur'an. Not only this, some of them bewailed and bemoaned a lost past when they once gathered around the table listening to *azan* and breaking their fast. Their nostalgic sentiments of their religious life contradict their current beliefs and ideas, which seemingly may sound hypocritical or duplicitous.

I consider duplicity to be a side effect of break-away from Islam. Samuli Schielke discusses duplicity among Egyptian nonbelievers as a way to avoid provoking any kind of public disapproval that may not only result in one's public disgrace but also imprisonment and even execution (Schielke 2012). Though most of my participants are not willing to return to Afghanistan very soon, and they have no fear of imprisonment or any other threats, they have family members who are living there with worries and anxieties that stem from sectarian violence. For instance, certain members of the community did not want to have party photos with Western dress published on social media, fearing that they will be used against their family or relatives in Afghanistan as a stigmatic tool for derision and public disgrace. From outside, it may sound a fragmented or even disrupted life, however, for like-minded individuals in the community, duplicity is all too familiar and a reality of their everyday life that they cannot escape it.

Another side effect of religious disaffiliation among Hazara immigrants is ambiguity. Changing one's social relationship is promoted, strengthened, and disciplined by religion and is a complex process. Even those who steadfastly identified themselves as atheists and non-believers could not refute the fact that they have not completely

detached themselves from Islam or in some cases could not reject certain religious practices entirely. Nowhere is this ambiguity more apparent than issues concerning death and mourning. Among my participants, there were always uncertainties about whether or not to wear headscarves, say prayers, or read the Qur'an during post-funeral gatherings. These individuals were concerned with maintaining communal solidarity while at the same time adhering to the ideologies of atheism or non-believers. Ambiguity makes itself more conspicuous when individuals identify themselves as religious but do not adhere to Islamic principles. This ambiguity is tied to the social and cultural environment in which Hazara immigrants are brought up, making a complete detachment from traditional cultural practices out of the ordinary if not impossible.

Finally, the purpose of this study was to search for an explanation as to why recent Afghanistan Hazara immigrants in the United States, particularly in the Washington D.C. area, choose not to affiliate themselves with Islam any longer. Throughout this research, I explained and highlighted several major reasons why members of the Hazara immigrant community uncouple from Islam. I also made it clear that some of my participants, despite identifying themselves as atheists or non-religious, participate in religious events and retain certain traditions, which they characterize as cultural. Traditionally, people in Afghanistan do not make difference between categories of "culture" and "religion." The capacity to distinguish between them is an aspect of "modernity." Drinking alcohol, consumption of foods forbidden by Islamic law--such as non-*halal* food and pork--is considered not only an erasure of Islamic identity but also signs of modernism, secularism, and the acceptance of modern western values. Being

placed within a new society and culture allowed these individuals to recreate and recontextualize their beliefs.

I have also argued that while we are witnessing a global resurgence of religion, secularization has not ceased; in fact, it is a pronounced response to religious resurgence. Recent surveys by the Pew Research Center (2019) and the Arab Barometer research network (2019) have indicated that Muslim individuals in the Middle East are increasingly disaffiliating themselves from Islam simply because they do not agree with Islamic principles. This study has also shown that submission or acceptance of any religion under political forces and social control is not immutable. After having experienced the constraint of religion, members of the Hazara immigrant community explained that they have had enough of Islam in their home country. The United States has given freedom of expression and freedom of choice, so they no longer want to be affiliated with Islam. While this project has attempted to expose the phenomenon of undoing Islam, more research needs to be done on this topic. Though the issue of religious disaffiliation among Muslim immigrants has been neglected in the past, it is important now more than ever to study this population in order to understand the wider political implications of undoing Islam.

Finally, I hope this study contributes to existing knowledge of secularism as well as the study of immigrants by providing an ethnographic analysis of a small community where several members have decided to leave Islam, the faith to which they were born. So far, the argument against secularism has been that secularization has failed and its global march has come to a halt with some states opting for religious over secular system Admittedly, the revitalization of religion has been a significant challenge to

secularization and that challenge has to do with the susceptibility of secularism because traditionally secularism has been built on the constitutional principle, which was a top-down affair imposed on populations. Instead, governments should let secularism be absorbed into societies and citizens should internalize the true nature of it (this is what Taylor explains how secularism had happened in Christendom, which took a long time). It is until then that we can see secular ideas burgeoning in societies. Secularization should come from a grassroots underpinning, in other words, a bottom-up process, which would have the support of civil societies, rather than a top-down approach, which is a coercive process. It is at this intersection that this study tries to illustrate that secularization is a civic matter and it occurs on an individual level when people's freedom is defended. This demonstrates that secularization is not primarily a political process operating at the level of institutions, but a social one operating at a community level.

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