Islam in America

Young members of this ethnically diverse community are trying to forge their own identity in the post-9/11 world

Like most American teenagers, 17-year-old Sana Haq enjoys hanging out with her friends and going to the movies. She just got her driver's license, and she's stressing over college applications. But Sana, a high school senior from Norwood, N.J., is an observant Muslim, and that makes her different from most of her friends.

She prays five times a day, as Islam requires. She wears only modest clothing—no shorts, no bathing suits, nothing too snug. Going to the mall for a pair of jeans can turn into a week-long quest because most are too tight or low-cut to meet her definition of “decent.”

Islam, she says, affects every aspect of her life. “If you ask me to describe myself in one word, that one word would be Muslim,” says Sana, who was born in the U.S. to Pakistani immigrants. “Not American, not Pakistani, not a teenager. Muslim. It’s the most important thing to me.”

Largely because of immigrant families like Sana’s, Islam is one of the fastest-growing religions in the U.S. Since the Census doesn’t track religious affiliations, the number of American Muslims is hard to pin down, but estimates range from 1.5 million to 9 million.

Whatever its size, the Muslim com-
munity in the U.S. is very diverse. According to a 2004 poll by Georgetown University and Zogby polling, South Asians (Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, etc.) are the largest group, followed by Arabs, and African-Americans. (Starting in the 1960s, a significant number of blacks in the U.S. converted to Islam.) Thirty-six percent of American Muslims were born in the U.S; the other 64 percent come from 80 different countries. (See graphs, p. 13.)

Trying to carve an American Muslim identity out of this diversity is one of the challenges facing young Muslims. "They are creating traditions and a culture that is particular to them and not imported from another majority-Muslim country," says Tayyibah Taylor, editor of Azzizah, a Muslim women's magazine published in Atlanta. "Something that blends their American way of thinking and their American way of living with Islamic guidelines."

**CONTRAST WITH EUROPE**

As a group, American Muslims have a higher median income than Americans as a whole, and they vote in higher

From Scout troops to rap groups, Muslims are contributing more to American culture.

In November, Muslims rioted in many French cities. In parts of the U.S. with large Muslim populations, Islam mingles with American traditions. At Dearborn High School in Dearborn, Mich., about one third of the students—and the football team—are Muslim. Because Ramadan (the Muslim holy month that requires dawn-to-dusk fasting) coincided with football season this year, Muslim players had to wake up at 4:30 for a predawn breakfast; go through their classes without eating or drinking; and start most Friday night games before darkness allowed them to break their fasts.

"When you start your day off fasting and you get to football at the end of the day, that's the challenge," says Hassan Cheaib, a 17-year-old senior. "You know you've worked hard. You know you've been faithful... After fasting all day, you feel like a warrior."

Because some of Islam's social tenets—modesty and chastity, for example—are so different from American norms, they can present a challenge for young Muslims. For Sana, adherence to Islam means she doesn't date. "Dating means going out with someone and spending intimate time with them, and for me, that's not allowed," she explains. "But it's not that I don't talk to guys. I have guy friends."

**IMPACT OF 9/11**

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, were a transformative moment for Muslims in America. On the one hand, there has been an increase in anti-Muslim feeling, discrimination, and hate crimes. On the other hand, many Muslims have responded by taking more interest in their religion and reaching out more to non-Muslims.

"September 11 exposed American Muslims for the first time to a large degree of hostility," says Ishan Bagby, a professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Kentucky. "So Muslims have come to the conclusion that isolation is a danger, because if people don't know you it's easy for them to accept the worst stereotypes."

According to one 2003 poll, 63 percent of Americans say they do not have a good understanding of Islam as a religion. Indeed, many young Muslims spend a lot of time correcting common misperceptions about Islam: that it condones terrorism (it doesn't); and that it denies women equal rights (it doesn't, though many majority-Muslim cultures and countries do). When Ibrahim Elshamy, 18, was growing up in Manchester, N.H., Islam was a regular part of his life. Every Friday he left school at lunch to attend services at a mosque. Now a fresham at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H., his religion remains important. Two days after his arrival on campus, he contacted the Muslim student group. And five times a day, he returns to his dorm room to say his prayers.

In college, Ibrahim has found for the first time a Muslim community in which he feels at home. The mosque he and his Egyptian father attended in Manchester attracted many Arab,

numbers. In addition, they are increasingly contributing to American culture, forming Muslim comedy groups, rap groups, Scout troops, magazines, and other media.

Their integration into American society and culture stands in contrast to Europe's Muslim communities, which have remained largely on the economic and political fringes.

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**MOSQUES, like this one outside Toledo, Ohio, are part of the American landscape.**

Asian, and the Middle Eastern cultures are now part of what they believe to be their primary American identity. "That's exactly what we are," says Sam, a 20-year-old Muslim in the Chicago area. "We're American." He uses the word "American" about Muslim and Islamic identity, and speaks of their shared American identity.
Asian, and African immigrants. The problem with that, he says, was that people melded their cultural traditions with their practice of Islam. As an American-born Muslim, he found that frustrating.

"Here at Dartmouth, it was extremely refreshing," he says, "because I was finally around Muslims who were exactly like me in that respect."

Professor Bagby says many young Muslims want to distinguish between Islam's teachings and the cultural traditions often associated with Islam, particularly the role of women. Stressing that nothing in the Koran itself prohibits women's full participation (in religion or in life), American women are increasingly demanding not only equal participation but leadership roles in the mosque. "It's definitely rocking some boats," says Tayyibah Taylor of Azzizah.

'MORE AMERICAN'

Samiyyah Ali, 17, grew up in Atlanta and describes herself as a practicing Muslim, rather than an observant one. She uses the principles of Islam to guide her, but doesn't worry about following every last tenet. Like 20 percent of American Muslims, she is African-American. Her parents converted to Islam before she was born.

Other than her name, there's not much about Samiyyah that would tell a stranger she is Muslim. She's a senior at Westminster Academy, a coed private school where she's a cheerleader, on the varsity track and field team, in the dance club, and on the school newspaper staff. And she does date.

She views the Koran as something that should not be followed literally, much like other historical documents that should be understood in context. "A lot of stuff is still applicable—honor and respect is always applicable," says Samiyyah. "But other things that are cultural—even ideas about sex—need to be taken in context. Back then people got married when they were 14...Maybe because my family is a convert family, we're just not so orthodox."

The Muslim community in America is currently undergoing a generational shift. Most American mosques were founded by first-generation immigrants, and as their American-born children take over, the norms are changing.

"Islam in America will feel a lot different in the next 40 years," Professor Bagby says. "It'll feel more American, that's for sure." 

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IN DEARBORN, Mich., McDonald's offers food that complies with Islamic standards (left) and the high school football team is one third Muslim.