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### Jinn Discourses in America

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Jinn Discourses in America

Gwen Kaliszewski

A DEPARTMENT HONORS THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE  
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY AT TRINITY UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR GRADUATION WITH  
DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

DATE 4/14/23

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## Abstract

The scholarly literature shows that jinn are important in the analysis of the formation of Islam in Muslim diasporas in the West. Jinn discourses in America reveal how American Muslims negotiate their religious beliefs in relation to American conceptions of modernity and secularism, as well as highlights competing Islamic epistemologies that result from these negotiations. Imams emphasize the Qur'an and the Sunnah as the only sources of legitimate knowledge, while lay American Muslims and scholars of Islam see personal experience as a way to approach Islam.

## Acknowledgments

I would first like to acknowledge Anand Vivek Taneja's book *Jinnealogy: Time, Islam, and Ecological Thought in the Medieval Ruins of Delhi*, which was the reason that I wrote this thesis. *Jinnealogy* inspired my interest in jinn and showed me how beautiful anthropological writing can be. Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Naqvi, who always encouraged me to find what I was passionate about and was there for me every step of the way of my research with excitement and enthusiasm. Thank you to my advisor, Dr. Jalalzai, who introduced me to my informants who I wrote about in Chapter Three, who pushed me to make my thesis the best it could be, and who gave me key insights that allowed me to make my argument what it is. Thank you to my informants, Sh. Said, Sanin Rahman, Dr. Najam Haider, and Dr. Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst, for giving me the opportunity to learn from you. Finally, thank you to Culin. I could not have done this without you.

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## Chapter One: Introduction

In this thesis, I demonstrate the diverse ways that American Muslims engage with and discuss the concept of jinn. In Islamic cosmology, jinn are beings made out of smokeless fire, fashioned by God before he created humans (Taneja 2018: 23). Jinn are mortal, like humans, but have much longer life spans. They are invisible to humans but have the ability to shape-shift, and they are much physically stronger than humans, and are able to travel great distances (Taneja 2018: 23-24). Belief in the existence of jinn is one of the primary tenets of faith in Islam, along with belief in angels, so much so that Khan writes, “to disbelieve in them would be heretical” (2006: 238). Unlike angels in Islamic cosmology, however, jinn possess free will, and are thus similar to humans in their ability to choose between obedience and disobedience to God’s will, and they will likewise eventually face God’s judgment.

Rothenberg argues that based on her research among Palestinian Muslim immigrants in Toronto, jinn stories are categorized as “un-Islamic” (2011: 367). Rothenberg argues that “the objectification of Islam,” provides an explanation for the absence of discourse about jinn in Canadian Muslim communities (2011: 366, 367). The “objectification of Islam” places “local village beliefs” in opposition to normative Islamic practices meaning that “jinn stories and local village practices are placed in opposition to universal, learned Islamic belief... implicitly [suggesting] that the village exists in opposition to Western cities, and is thus backward/ ignorant rather than modern/informed” (Rothenberg 2011: 367). By “local village beliefs” Rothenberg means beliefs that come from what she calls the “villages” of, in the case of her research, Palestine. Dein et al found in their interviews of East London Bangladeshi Muslims that discourses related to jinn are “articulated around the dichotomy ‘traditional–modern’... and ideas of what constituted ‘correct’ Islam and how those beliefs of the older generation [not born in the

UK and viewed by second or third generation Bangladeshis as “superstitious,” “traditional,” or “un-Islamic”] were not based upon ‘proper’ Islamic teachings” (2008: 2). While there is some scholarship on jinn in Canada and Britain in terms of their relation to the formation of Islam in these locations, there is not much scholarship on this topic centered in the United States.

My thesis fills this gap in scholarly literature through an examination of discourses about jinn in the United States, both on the part of religious leaders, or imams, and lay Muslims and scholars of Islam, and considers how these discourses relate to the American formation of Islam. I focus on jinn because the literature shows that they are important in an analysis of the formation of Islam in Muslim diasporas in the West. Broadly, my analysis of Muslims in America is significant because my research on jinn speaks to what some argue is an alleged tension between modernity, secularism and Islam, a tension that some argue is not present with Christianity. I analyze how a diverse group of American Muslims attempt to negotiate this alleged tension between Islam and modernity and secularism through jinn, as well as explore the tension between different kinds of epistemologies and vocabularies.

Taylor defines secularism not as “the absence of religion,” which it is often used to denote, but instead argues that within a secular framework, “religion occupies a different place, compatible with the sense that all social action takes place in profane time,” meaning social action is no longer structured by or related to the sacred or the divine (2004: 194). He argues that modernity is secular in this sense of the word (2004: 194).

In what follows I show some how some scholars have characterized Christianity as being uniquely compatible with modernity and secularism in order to show the significance of Islam being seen by some as incompatible. To be clear, I am not arguing this position, rather I am revealing how some scholars have written about it. Anidjar writes that “Christianity (that is...



Western Christendom) judged and named itself, it reincarnated itself as secular” (2006: 60). Siedentop argues that “Christianity... is connected to its secular successor by the values of equality, freedom of choice, and conscience— values that in different ways also underlie the rise of liberal society” (Asad 2018: 14). Asad contends that the effect of “self-described secularists” of claiming Christian heritage is “the political exclusion of all those who cannot claim that heritage” (2018: 14).

An example of how scholars have written about an alleged tension between Islam, modernity and secularism is seen in the comments of Jurgen Habermas, a German philosopher who wrote extensively on secularism. Habermas argues that the religious language of Judeo-Christianity is the only one that “is believed to have developed the quality of abstraction necessary for modern knowledge, universal morality, and a truly cosmopolitan order” (Asad 2018: 49). Habermas sees Islam as unable to “be a source of inspiration for the modern world” because he “sees it as the quintessential example of a religious tradition that hasn’t been able to adjust to modernity, exemplified, he says, in the terrorist attack of 9/11” (Asad 2018: 49-50). Habermas defines modernity as “a secular world dominated by tamed capitalism... and modern science and technology, and of course the liberal state” (Asad 2018: 50). Asad, when considering the anxiety of Western Europeans regarding Muslim communities in Europe, writes that “it is their attachment to Islam that many believe commits Muslims to values that are an affront to the modern, secular, state” (2018: 160). While Christianity is seen as compatible with modernity by some, Islam is seen as incompatible by some. Once again, I am not arguing that it is true that Islam is incompatible with secularism and modernity, but rather pointing to how scholars have characterized it as such in order to emphasize the significance of my argument which discusses

the translatability of the concept of jinn into the empirical scientific epistemologies according to American Muslims.

Jinn are implicated in various projects of translation; as I will explore in more detail later, as a category of being, jinn predate the birth of Islam. Pre-Islamic understandings of jinn were therefore translated into Islamic cosmology via the Qur’anic revelation. In Chapter Two I analyze how imams translate Qur’anic portrayals of jinn into the modern American context, and attempt to form subjects who take the existence and abilities of jinn seriously but who do not see jinn as present in their everyday life, and who approach unexplainable events with logical explanations. In Chapter Three I analyze how lay American Muslims and scholars of Islam understand jinn, revealing their apparent “untranslatability” into the scientific and empirical epistemologies associated with modernity. I also explore their wariness towards using jinn to explain bizarre experiences coupled with an openness to seeing jinn in everyday life. Moreover, my research on jinn speaks to what sources of knowledge are considered authoritative within Islam in America. I argue that American Muslim discourses on jinn reveal that translating Islam to modern American culture and society requires American Muslims, both imams and lay people, to grapple with American conceptions of modernity and secularism, and that there exists a tension between approaching Islam solely through the text of the Qur’an, or through personal experience.

### **Translation of jinn from Pre-Islamic Arabia to the Qur’anic narrative**

As a category of being, jinn predate Islam in Arabia; according to Olomi, “at the Dawn of Islam... belief in jinn was ubiquitous” (2021: 145). At this time, jinn were associated with the desert, and acted as intermediaries between soothsayers and their deity – the jinn conveyed messages from the divine (Olomi 2021: 146). However, “in the Qur’anic narrative, the jinn are

created beings that either deceived humans into worshipping them, or humans themselves made the mistake of elevating the jinn beyond their allotted station” (Olomi 2021: 146-147). This idea is emphasized in the Qur’an in Surah 37 line 158: “They have invented kinship between God and the jinn, but the jinn know that they have to appear before God” (Olomi 2021: 146-147).

As I mentioned in the introduction, like humans, jinn have the capacity to choose between being obedient or disobedient to God’s will, will eventually face God’s judgment, and will be sent to either heaven or hell. In this vein, some medieval Muslim scholars wrote about the place of jinn in the afterlife. El-Zein writes that “the majority of Muslim scholars believe Muslim jinn will enter paradise together with Muslim humans” (2009: 20). The Muslim scholar Abu al-’Ala’ al-Ma’arri (d. 1057) thought that in heaven, “humans become free from any dread of evil jinn, now that they have transcended the terrestrial realm” (El-Zein 2009: 21). Additionally, “Muslim medieval scholarship insisted God would not allow the jinn to see him or come close to him in the afterlife—not even the very pious among them” (El-Zein 2009: 21). Some medieval Muslim scholarship also argued that in heaven humans would be able to see jinn but jinn would not be able to see them, reversing how it was on Earth (El-Zein 2009: 21). Finally, according to some medieval Muslim scholarship, “heretic humans will undergo a demeaning process and will be transformed into jinn in the afterlife as a chastisement for their evil deeds” (El-Zein 2009: 21).

While jinn are mentioned throughout the Qur’an, they also have an entire surah dedicated to them, Surah al-Jinn. This surah includes many core themes, but one of the more important and widely discussed sections of this surah regards the “demoting” of the jinn; while jinn were once able to overhear the affairs of humans by eavesdropping on angels, the revelation of the Qur’an resulted in the guarding of the heavens. Subsequently, eavesdropping jinn were met with “shooting stars,” (surah 72 line 8), which Olomi explains “stripped [jinn] of their powers of

foresight and intervention, and the prophecies of [soothsayers] are dismissed as lies. Pre-Islamic religious practices are reinterpreted in the Qur’anic narrative, affirming the existence of the jinn but rejecting their elevated status as spiritual intermediaries” (2021: 146). These “shooting stars” were weapons used to keep jinn away from the heavens. Overall, the Qur’an warns not to take jinn as associates of God and discourages people from putting trust in them (Doostdar 2018: 53).

Based on the literature and the imams I write about in Chapter Two, much ambiguity exists around what jinn can actually do in terms of their involvement in the lives of humans. In the Qur’an, the only “weapon” that disobedient jinn/shaytan have against humans are “whispers.” Shaytan is “a cursed devil,” there are many of them, including Iblis, and it is another word for disobedient jinn (El-Zein 2009: 44). The shaytan “whisper” to humans to try and tempt them to go against their faith. This is relayed in Surah al-Nas: “Say, I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, the King of mankind, the God of mankind, from the evil of the stealthy whisperer, who whisper into the breasts of mankind, from jinn and mankind” (Nasr 2015: 1584). According to Olomi, “this crafty, invisible sway is likely a pre-Islamic feature of Iblis [the devil] and the rest of the jinn. They were believed to have the power to drive a person insane with their whispers... The evil jinn, the elemental semidivinities of Late Antique Arabia, are transformed and represented as the tempting and whispering [shaytan]” (2021: 149). Here, we can see how pre-Islamic jinn were translated into the Islamic shaytan.

Finally, jinn possession, often manifested as madness, is a much-discussed potential ability of jinn. According to Islam and Campbell, in medieval Muslim society, “the belief in the supernatural origins [such as jinn, evil eye, and black magic] of madness was...common” (2012:232). Further, the word in Arabic for “mad” or “crazy” is *majnun*, which means “one who

is a doer of jinn or one possessed by a jinn” (Islam and Campbell 2012: 235). Seeing jinn associated with possession and madness still remains today.

### **Islam in America: Mosques and Imams**

In this short section I provide background on Islam in America and the place of mosques and imams in American Muslim society. The role of imams in Muslim majority countries mainly entails leading prayers at the mosque (Askar 2021: 96). Imams in America on the other hand have a much more all-encompassing role, one that resembles American pastors or rabbis (Abuelezz 2011: 4). They “...[convey] the message of Islam and try to tailor it to be appropriate for the contemporary time without compromising the major aspects of the religion” (Abuelezz 2011: 4). The role of imams in America includes leading prayer, preaching on Fridays, acting as a religious teacher, issuing legal rulings, counseling or arbitrating for his community, and imams may also serve as a spokesperson about Islam to the greater community (Abuelezz 2011: 5).

The current context of mosques and imams in America is connected to post-1965 immigration following the Hart-Celler Act, which increased immigration from Asia for professional immigrants (Grewal 2014: 131). Prior to 1965, “most Muslims in the US were African Americans, and only a small fraction were African American Sunnis. The majority of Muslim immigrants... were Shias and Ahmadis” (Grewal 2014: 129). After 1965, American mosques became primarily Sunni (Grewal 2014: 129) and “the majority of American Muslims today are post-1965 immigrants or their children” (Moore 2014: 140). According to Bagby, one of the most important functions of mosques in the United States for Muslim Americans is to “[pass] on the legacy of Islam to their children” (2014: 225). Immediately following the Hart-Celler Act and currently, Muslim leadership in the United States “was and continues to be

dominated by individuals with college degrees from secular universities rather than Islamic madrasas and seminaries” (Grewal 2014: 132).

### **Islam on the Internet**

As two of my sources are YouTube videos, I will briefly discuss Islam on the internet. There is a massive amount of online information about Islam, including lectures given by imams on a variety of topics. Whyte points to the way that the internet and digital technologies have led “to the rapid and unprecedented level at which ideas and interpretations of Islam are readily available and contested...[in the] new public sphere” (Eickelman and Anderson 2003, p. 16 quoted in Whyte 2022: 1-2). Moreover, Zaman argues that following 9/11 Muslim American hermeneutics increased and led to a proliferation of new resources such as the Internet, popular scholars, and pamphlets so Muslim Americans could “fashion a religious identity based on a hermeneutic approach” (2008: 465-466). Whyte argues that the impact that online platforms have on religious authority is that it “it enlarges the Muslim public space to allow different religious actors to engage online about Islam, thus increasing the multiplicity of voices and enriching public debate,” it allows religious content to reach wider audiences, and “it helps connect various Muslim groups, particularly those who feel alienated or marginalised, who seek religious authorities online” (Whyte 2022: 13-14). Using YouTube videos as part of my research allowed me to search for varying lectures on jinn due to the immense amount of differing content available. Moreover, it seems that the imams who were posting their lectures on YouTube were trying to instruct a large audience about how to think about jinn. In other words, it appears they were trying to address something that they thought a large audience could benefit from.

## **Chapter Two: Imam jinn discourses and normative, textual Islam**

### **Introduction**

I begin this chapter by framing my methodology and sources. Then, in Section One I supply a brief history of how the language of science, rationality and modernity has manifested in the Islamic tradition, and explore how two of the imams translate the Qur’anic jinn into the language of science. Instead of seeing jinn as challenging scientific epistemologies, the imams conclude that science actually helps us better understand jinn. In Section Two I explore how two of the imams I research see their audience as implicated in limiting the power of jinn, and I demonstrate how this framing keeps the jinn firmly within the bounds of their place in the Qur’an. Finally, in Section Three I analyze how two of the imams try to form subjects to approach unfortunate, unsatisfactory, or worrying experiences in “logical” ways, rather than thinking they are jinn. I illustrate how Muslim preachers want their audience to take the existence and abilities of jinn seriously due to its scriptural authority but not want them to see jinn as present in their everyday lives.

### **Methodology and Sources**

In this chapter, I analyze the discourses of three different imams on the subject jinn, based on two lectures/sermons available on YouTube, along with one interview I personally conducted with a local Muslim leader in San Antonio, Texas. An imam is “defined as a leader, prayer and spiritual leader, an example, teaching authority, and a standard (Wehr 1994 and Omar 2005 quoted in Askar 2021: 92). Analyzing the jinn discourses of imams is significant because as a religious “teaching authority,” I am able to see how they instruct their congregants to think about jinn. Analyzing YouTube videos of imams’ lectures is significant to my research because I examine how imams in America address an audience of American Muslims in regards to jinn.

That these lectures are publicly available on YouTube speak to the educational nature of imams' jinn discourse; they are intended to be circulated widely. Moreover, according to Rothenberg most participants in online Islam are diasporic Muslims (2011: 368). Finally, including an interview allows me to see how an imam discussed jinn in a different, yet still educational format. I was able to ask Sh. Said specific questions to get more of a well-rounded data set.

I analyze Shaykh Dr. Yasir Qadhi's YouTube video titled "The Reality of the Jinn in the Qur'an and the Sunnah" from 2014. Sh. Qadhi is a Pakistani American imam who holds two bachelor degrees, a Master's degree, and a doctorate, and he has been educated in both Saudi Arabia and the United States (EPIC Masjid website). Sh. Qadhi calls his lecture an "academic talk" in which he discusses the existence and the abilities of jinn. The other YouTube video I analyze in this paper is a workshop called "The World of Jinns" hosted by Shaykh Ammar Shahin at a mosque in Stockton, California in 2018. Sh. Shahin was born in Cairo and currently works as an imam at a mosque in Davis, California. He holds two bachelor degrees, as well as a Masters degree and has been educated in both Egypt and the United States (Zidni Islamic Institute website). In his workshop, Sh. Shahin discusses the characteristics of jinn, magic, and ruqya (Qur'anic healing for jinn problems). The final source I analyze in this chapter is an interview with Shaykh Said Atif. Sh. Said has a Bachelor's, Master's, and PhD in Shari'a from educational institutions in Morocco. He is the imam of the Muslim Children and Education and Civic Center (MCECC) in San Antonio, TX. In our interview he explained the existence of and abilities of jinn.

### **Section One: Rational and scientific explanations of jinn abilities**

My data shows how the language of science, rationality, and modernity is sometimes used by American imams to explain the concept of jinn to their congregations. Scholarship



shows a variety of ways this position has manifested in the Islamic tradition. Doostdar writes about “an intermediary rationalist position in regard to jinn” which “has been to accept their existence but to deny their reported empirical manifestations” (2018: 56). Doostdar relays an encounter with a psychiatrist in Tehran who after hearing about exorcisms that Doostdar witnessed, responded that “if they aren’t charlatans, what is happening is what we call dissociation” (2018: 55). Doostdar writes that “[the psychiatrist] added that he believed in jinn because God mentions them in the Qur’an, but he did not believe that jinn interacted with humans” (2018: 55). Similarly, Sax writes about a chief cleric of a mosque in England who told him that “as a believing Muslim, he acknowledged the existence of *jinn*, nevertheless nearly all the cases of *jinn*-affliction that he had seen could be attributed to ‘stress’ rather than supernatural affliction” (2020: 75).

In Doostdar (2018)’s example of the psychiatrist in Tehran, someone who did not witness these exorcisms explains an empirical manifestation of a jinn in scientific terms. On the other hand, the practitioners and believers in exorcisms Doostdar encounters in his fieldwork also explain the phenomenon in a scientific manner, although differently. Doostdar writes that in his book “I show that the metaphysical inquiries of occult experimentalists and spiritual explorers like the Cosmic Mystics are best understood in terms of attempts to rationalize the “unseen” (gheyb)—that is, to grasp phenomena like sorcery and jinn possession in reasoned, scientific, nonsuperstitious terms” (2018: 4). Doostdar argues that rationalization occurs in connection to the “emergence and consolidation of the modern state” (2018: 5). Doostdar discusses a variety of reasons why “Muslim activists and intellectuals in Iran and elsewhere have drawn on modern scientific knowledge and notions of rationality and progress,” which include “countering charges of reaction and superstition; attacking materialist, secularist, and heterodox religious doctrines;

and criticizing the conditions of Muslim communities with the aim of advancing alternative reformist agendas” (2018: 113).

On a similar note, Moosa (2003) discusses the use of rationality among Muslim modernists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Similarly to Doostdar (2018)’s argument, one of the objectives was to “combat superstition,” although in this case it was “part of the onslaught against popular religious practices” (Moosa 2003: 118). Further, these modernists believed that “educated Muslims with a rational bent... could derive their inspiration and guidance directly from the Qur’an” (Moosa 2003: 118). Zadeh discusses how the process of modernization and Islamic reformism “has challenged and reconfigured an array of historically traditional practices, often viewing them as being based on ignorance and superstition,” including “exorcism, shrine devotion, and the preparation of amulets” (2015: 262). Additionally, the Muslim modernist Muhammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) when commenting on jinn in the Qur’an interpreted jinn “in a way that is acceptable to modern science” (Coruh 2020: 4). He argued that jinn are actually microbes (Coruh 2020: 4). Overall, he advocated for “the importance of reason and a positive approach to science in Islam,” and he “[attempted] to see the discoveries of modern science into the Qur’anic text” (Coruh 2020: 4).

In grappling with the American context that privileges scientific and empirical epistemologies, a context that I discussed in the introduction, Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said choose to use the language of these epistemologies to explain the existence and abilities of jinn. They attempt to assimilate jinn knowledge into the American context of science and rationality, rather than posing jinn and their abilities as a challenge to this context. I show how the imams attempt to translate the Qur’anic jinn into the “language of modernity,” and in doing so privilege a way of knowing jinn that is centered in the Qur’an but couched in the language of modernity. As

religious teaching authorities, their teachings form subjects who think about jinn as compatible with modernity but also centered in the Qur'an.

It is important to reiterate that Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said's explanations of jinn were directed at different audiences. Sh. Qadhi was speaking to an audience of Muslims who went to hear him give a lecture on the subject of jinn, which was filmed for YouTube so his message could be shared with a wider audience, while Sh. Said was speaking only to me, a non-Muslim, in an interview format. However, Sh. Said mentioned that he explained jinn to his congregation in the same way. Nevertheless, Sh. Said and Sh. Qadhi employed the same tactic of explaining jinn abilities in rational and scientific terms.

Eneborg in an article on a "contemporary form of Islamic healing" among Bangladeshi Muslims in East London known as *ruqya shariya* argues that the practice "claims legitimacy from both the secular and the religious by appropriating a scientific idiom with which it can distance itself from the 'superstitious' aspects of Islamic healing" (2013: 1083). *Ruqya shariya* is "a contemporary form of Islamic faith healing" and is translated to "lawful incantation" (Eneborg 2013: 1080). Eneborg argues that "ruqya shariya promotes itself as an acultural and ahistorical healing tradition by imitating the lofty claims of scientific objectivity, as well as the ideals of a puritan Islam absent of cultural trappings" (2013: 1083). He asserts that it is "scientific through its style rather than content," meaning that "rather than achieving the rigorous principles of a scientific method, there is only the symbolic coating of a scientific methodology over the practices performed and the simplistic usage of scientific idioms" (Eneborg 2013: 1083). This "symbolic coating of a scientific methodology" is the use of white robes which emulate "what is deemed fundamentally Islamic" as well as the white coats that doctors and scientists wear (Eneborg 2013: 1083). In what follows, I consider how Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said use the "symbolic

coating of scientific methodology” and “the simplistic usage of scientific idioms” to “prove” the attributes and abilities of jinn.

Sh. Qadhi begins his lecture by universalizing the belief in the supernatural, and by extension, jinn. He argues that every civilization has believed in beings beyond this physical world, and he suggests that the variety of supernatural beliefs are really just jinn. Then, he discusses interviews on the Syfy channel (a TV channel that has horror, science fiction, and fantasy content) of people who have had supernatural experiences. He says “these are very educated people, you listen to them, many of them say ‘I never believed in this stuff, I was...raised as a very modern, very educated person, I never believed this could happen, but what are you going to do when xyz begins to happen.’” He implies here that supernatural experiences can happen—even to modern, educated people. In this way, supernatural experiences, and by extension, the existence and abilities of jinn, are assimilated into modernity. In this comment, Sh. Qadhi suggests to his audience that they, as modern subjects, can take seriously the existence and abilities of jinn. He then goes on to use the language of science to explain the physical substance of jinn.

The Qur’an explains that jinn are made of “smokeless fire,” and Sh. Qadhi puts forth his interpretation that jinn are created from what “we and physicists call energy.” Thus, jinn are “on the energy spectrum,” which explains why ghost hunters can detect ghosts [which are actually jinn] on electromagnetic scales. He also references YouTube videos of unexplainable lights and claims they are actually capturing “a spectrum of energy which is light...a wandering jinn.” He calls these videos a “modern thing that we know of.” Sh. Qadhi argues that our understanding of energy explains the characteristics of jinn put forth in the Qur’an. He says “if you look at the characteristics of the Qur’an and Sunnah of the jinn, these are the characteristics of energy.

Going at the speed of light, not having a particular form, going through walls... This is energy. Our radio waves right now, our internet, our phone waves, they're coming through the walls here. There's a type of energy on the spectrum."

Sh. Qadhi also argues that the theorem  $e=mc^2$  explains jinns' ability to teleport objects. He asserts that jinn have the power to transform matter into energy, which is where  $e=mc^2$  comes into play. He says that jinn "obviously" would not carry objects through the sky – like the giant throne of the Queen of Sheba that a jinn transported across the entire Arabian peninsula – rather, they teleport the object by transforming it into energy, transporting it at the speed of light, then transforming it back into matter. He remarks "it is really amazing that we are living at a time when we understand how that is possible even though it is not humanly possible. Fifty years ago, one hundred years ago, this would have been bizarre, like how? What? Now, thanks to Mr. Einstein, it's actually very understandable... it is conceivable... We don't have the power to do that at will, but clearly, some of the jinn do."

Sh. Qadhi appropriates scientific language and theories to explain the substance and abilities of jinn. Moreover, he uses this language to explain attributes of jinn that are directly from the Qur'an, disclosing his attempt to make jinn and epistemology of jinn that stems from the Qur'an and the Sunnah align with scientific and rational ways of explaining the world. In other words, Sh. Qadhi translates the Qur'anic jinn into the "language of modernity," suggesting his attempt to form subjects who see the Qur'anic jinn as aligning with and explainable through scientific epistemologies.

Particularly in his discussion of  $e=mc^2$ , but also when talking about different types of energy, Sh. Qadhi concludes that rather than the jinn being at odds with the "modern world," the scientific knowledge of modernity actually helps us better understand jinn. He suggests that we

can understand the abilities of jinn, such as teleportation, better now that we know about  $e=mc^2$ , and technology like the radio and internet demonstrate the way that jinn move, as energy. Sh. Qadhi in his explanations attempts to reconcile the tension between the “supernatural” jinn and modern science. However, it is important to emphasize that Sh. Qadhi uses the “symbolic coating of scientific methodology” (Eneborg 2013: 1083) because he cannot actually empirically see or test if jinn abilities and attributes fit with these scientific theories.

Sh. Said similarly uses a “symbolic coating of science methodology” when explaining jinn “whispers.” He explains that the reason that we do not hear an actual whisper coming from a jinn is because jinn manipulate sound waves to get people to act in certain ways. He explains that we know for a fact that sound waves exist: when we talk we “don’t throw a cable to the other person to hear” but rather with “science and technology found there are [sound] waves.” He says that “today we know there’s waves we can manipulate,” mentioning that in the Vietnam War they controlled and manipulated sound waves to condition people to behave in certain ways. Here, like Sh. Qadhi, Sh. Said suggests that modern science actually allows us to understand the abilities of jinn better, and in this way, render jinn compatible with modernity and its epistemologies.

Moreover, Sh. Said explains that through “whispers” jinn program human beings, and store information in their brains that certain “code words” or “passwords” will release. He says that if he ran into me in five years and said “jinn, interview, office” these “code words” would force me to remember our interview whether I want to or not. He explains that this was an example of the way that “code words” force people to access memories; similarly, a jinn will “program” information into your memory, and that hearing this code word would compel a person to act in a particular way. Sh. Said even runs an experiment with me to demonstrate this

point; he tells me that he will count to three and to set my pen down on the paper on three, which I do. He says that this is an example of him programming me to behave in a certain way.

While Sh. Said had told me that if “you search the Qur’an and the authentic Sunnah [jinn have] one weapon only: whispering,” he still attempted to prove to me that the whispering was possible using an example and an “experiment.” Despite the fact that many Muslims view the Qur’an and Sunnah as the primary sources of “sacred knowledge,” Sh. Said still demonstrated the desire to explain the concept of jinn to me using the language of science, such as sound waves, and the practice of science, such as doing an experiment. However, unlike most scientific experiments, the activity he performed with me did not explore a hypothesis, but rather, underlined that which he already believed to be fact, thus exhibiting his employment of the “symbolic coating of scientific methodology” (Eneborg 2013: 1083). Sh. Said pronounced the existence and power of jinn, but also explained *how* their powers worked using scientific examples and experiments, thus, like Sh. Qadhi, Sh. Said translated the Qur’anic jinn into the language of science.

As imams, Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said are Islamic teaching authorities, and thus their translation of the Qur’anic jinn into the language of modernity suggests that they see this as the most effective way to appeal to American Muslims when it comes to teaching something “supernatural.” Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said want their audience to know about jinn based on knowledge from the Qur’an and the Sunnah, but see that this knowledge is supported by modern science. Rather than seeing jinn as at odds with the language and epistemologies of modernity, they show their audience that scientific language actually helps us understand jinn better.

## **Section Two: The role of the subject in the power of jinn**

In this section, I explore how Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said limit the power of jinn and implicate their audience in this process. As I discussed earlier, the Qur’anic narrative explains how the jinn were “demoted” from their position as intermediaries between soothsayers and pre-Islamic deities. Doostdar writes “if anything, the Qur’an disparages belief in jinn in the sense of putting one’s trust in them or taking them as associates with God” (2018: 53). Not only are the jinn “demoted,” or stripped of their powers to eavesdrop in the heavens, but people are cautioned to not trust jinn or take them as associates of God; just as the jinn were being re-formed, people were as well. By this I mean that jinn were translated to fit the narrative of the Revelation – they were stripped of any powers that could make them seem to have knowledge or authority similar to God – and people were instructed by the Qur’anic narrative to no longer think of jinn as they had before, when they may have trusted them as having knowledge from the heavens. In this section I examine how Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said see the subject as implicated in the power jinn can have over them, and through their discourses form subjects who limit jinns’ power.

At the end of his lecture, Sh. Qadhi tells the audience that

The jinn is not something to be feared any more than you fear a physical harm. The jinn is not anything that you should be scared of supernaturally. Only [Allah] is the one who you are truly scared of and the more scared you are of the jinn the more power the jinn has over you. Listen to me carefully. The more terrified you are of the jinn the more you are handing over your power to the jinn. And the more that you are brave against the jinn, autonomically you will make the jinn weaker.

In this quotation, Sh. Qadhi informs the audience that they are implicated in the power of jinn, and warns his audience not to let jinn destabilize the power of God by telling them “only [Allah] is the one who you are truly scared of.” Limiting jinn is an aspect of Sh. Qadhi’s translation of



the Qur'anic jinn for his audience. His audience must not be afraid of jinn in order to keep them in the bounds of the Qur'anic narrative where they are nowhere near challenging the place of God.

When talking about how a jinn carried the throne of the Queen of Sheba, Sh. Qadhi brings the abilities of the jinn to the limits of human conception. He says,

The average jinn is physically stronger [than the average human]. Is he all powerful? No. Only Allah is all powerful. Can the jinn lift [everything]? No. The fact that this is being given, and the throne is a humanly conceivable weight. Perhaps fifty men, seventy men, it's not like the world. It's not like heaven and hell. This is a created object. Which is, realistically speaking, large, but large to us humans. It's not massively large.

In this quotation, Sh. Qadhi clearly differentiates the power of jinn from the power of God. Jinn are strong but not *that* strong. Sh. Qadhi displays an attempt to bring jinn onto the level of humans to some extent; jinn are different from humans but not *that* different. And importantly, they are limited to the bounds of human conception and possibility. Sh. Qadhi is once again careful not to let jinn challenge the place of God, speaking to jinns' ability to destabilize the hierarchy of Islam. The jinns' destabilizing potential in this regard emphasizes the centrality of the believing subject in limiting the destabilizing potential of jinn; the subject has to regulate their fear and awe of jinn. Whether it be to the power of jinn over you or to the power of jinn in general, humans are important actors that can both delimit the jinn and allow them to expand past their limits. Sh. Qadhi wants his audience to view jinn from within the bounds of human understanding to keep them in their place within the hierarchy of the Qur'anic narrative where they are below God.

The subject's role in the degree of jinns' power is seen in Sh. Said's interview as well. Despite Sh. Said's insistence that the only power jinn have are "whispers", and that anything else people say is nonsense, he suggests that people play an essential role in the power of the jinn. In the first half of our interview, Sh. Said told me that the only weapon that jinn have over humans is whispers. He said that if you search the Qur'an and the authentic hadiths you will find whispering is the only weapon jinn have. Jinn possession, he argues, is impossible. He says,

How does he possess human being? That is a lie. Jinns don't possess nobody. They don't. Okay. For example, there is a car parked outside. I have the key. And you go to the car, what can you do? You can't open it, you can't start it, you can't drive it, you can't park it, you can't do nothing, ... [if I give you the key] you are in full control. A jinn doesn't have any authority and all of the sudden he goes inside of me and do all the driving? How much power does he have? How much authority have we given him? All of it. Now when did we give them this... we cannot give them more than what Allah has given them. Allah said they only have whispers, then what do you see? He goes in and you start speaking [a] language. All this exorcism, this nonsense. All of it. With Muslims, with Christians, with Jews. It's all nonsense. [There is nothing to prove any of it]. From the Bible to the Torah to the Qur'an.

At the very end, he asserts that we choose to associate things with jinn. He told me that when he was a child living in Morocco, he and his siblings were afraid that there was a jinn in one of the rooms in their house. He said that one night he went in and saw a man sitting on the couch, and thought he was a jinn, but when his father went in to see the jinn was nowhere to be found. Sh. Said said that it was the shadow of the pillow: "I put that body in there. Before I went into the room I already assumed." He said "you wanted the jinn you're going to get the jinn doing stuff."

Sh. Said argues that if we associate someone speaking a language they do not know with jinn possession, we have given the jinn more authority, we have metaphorically given them the key “to the car.” This connects to his story about “putting the body there” and the quotation “you wanted the jinn you’re going to get the jinn doing stuff.” Here, he crafts a master argument – anything that could be jinn that does not fit in with his truth about jinn can be blamed on the person, i.e. that the person gave the jinn this power (metaphorically, not literally) by giving them more than what God has given them.

Furthermore, the role of the subject to the power of the jinn is present as well in the way that people could “put” a jinn somewhere, like how Sh. Said said that he “put that body there.” Although Sh. Said opines that this was just his brain playing tricks on him, he still had a real experience of seeing a jinn, whether it was “true” or not. Following this unnerving experience, Sh. Said had to figure out how to explain it. He also told me about a woman who came to him saying she heard someone walking around her house, and Sh. Said explained it as the house settling or the air conditioner.

All of this is to say that Sh. Said’s stories show how people have experiences, like him and this woman, and these experiences must be explained with a logical explanation. For Sh. Said, in regard to jinn, people must be formed in two ways. One, to not give jinn more power than God has given them, and two, to stop associating unnerving events with them, such as hearing noises or seeing a man on a couch.

Sh. Said asserts that the power of jinn must be limited to what is said in the Qur’an: that they only whisper. In the same vein, people must be limited to believing that jinn can only whisper. Sh. Said echoes Doostdar (2018)’s “intermediary rationalist position in regard to jinn” where people believe in jinn but deny any empirical manifestation of them. Sh. Said wants to

form subjects who only have rational explanations for unnerving events. For him, jinn are firmly rooted in the foundations of their Qur'anic description, and he wants his audience to see the world through Qur'anic knowledge; experiencing a jinn in any way other than through whispers is impossible because whispers are what is in the Qur'an.

Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said both contend that the subject is key to the power of the jinn and how the jinn acts. Both demonstrate a desire to form Muslim subjects who limit the jinn. Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said try to form subjects that limit the place of jinn as to not challenge the place of God, and in doing so keep the jinn in the bounds of their place in the hierarchy of the Qur'anic narrative. Sh. Said tries to form subjects who limit the powers of jinn to solely whispering as to have logical explanations for unnerving or unexplainable events, rather than jinn explanations. Sh. Said also explicitly privileges the Qur'an as the only legitimate way to know jinn.

### **Section Three: Jinn and explaining unfortunate, unsatisfactory, or worrying experiences**

In this section, I explore the relationship between jinn and unnerving experiences further, highlighting how Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Shahin express ambivalence towards labeling unsatisfactory, unfortunate, or worrying experiences as caused by jinn, and through their lectures try to form subjects who explain these experiences in logical and rational ways.

Sh. Shahin spends most of his lecture emphasizing the danger jinn, magicians, and fraud *raqis* pose to people. Then, towards the end of his lecture, he tells the audience:

Muslims today if you tell them “you have a headache, you might have jinn” he goes “Subhanallah I knew that.” No, you have a headache because you didn't sleep... We kind of like to have a hanger. We hang all our problems on it, where we don't say it's me not doing the salah good, it's me who's not coming to the masjid, it's me who's not holding onto the Qur'an, it's me who's not reading enough. We just like to say “oh, I'm

sure it's the jinn." My kid doesn't sleep at night, "I'm sure it's the jinn." My problem with my husband at the house, "I'm sure it's a jinn."

Sh. Shahin's examples of signs of jinn affliction that he discusses elsewhere in the lecture correspond somewhat to the examples he lists that are not jinn. He said that someone might say that their child does not sleep at night and blame it on jinn when it is not the case, but he also says that a child crying too much or uncharacteristically misbehaving is a sign of a jinn problem. He also said that a woman having a problem with her husband may blame it on jinn when it is not the case, but a relationship turning from love to hate or having doubts about a relationship are symptoms of a jinn affliction or possession. While these are not exactly the same, they are very similar. This points to ambivalence around categorizing a situation as jinn-related or not. There is not a clear or obvious criteria for what counts as jinn or what does not.

What all of these examples also have in common is that they are unsatisfactory, unfortunate, or worrying experiences. This ties back to the previous section where Sh. Said expresses the desire to form logical subjects who will account for unnerving experiences using rationality. The examples Sh. Shahin mentions are not quite unnerving, but they are certainly worrying or unfortunate. Like Sh. Said in the previous section, Sh. Shahin wants the audience to approach these situations in particular ways. On one hand, they should not blame everything on jinn. In fact, according to Sh. Shahin, this is a problem. On the other hand, there are a variety of situations that could also possibly be jinn that could just as easily not be.

Sh. Shahin suggests that the audience ought to not treat jinn like a "hanger" to hang problems on while also being vigilant against jinn. After spending the entire lecture centered on jinn and magicians, Sh. Shahin brings it back to the subject. The audience does not only have to be warned about jinn, but they also have to be warned not to blame everything on jinn. The

power of jinn in one's life is ambiguous and where the line is drawn is colored with ambivalence. Sh. Shahin attempts to form subjects who take the existence and abilities of jinn seriously but also approach many everyday situations with logical explanations rather than jinn explanations.

Sh. Qadhi similarly warns the audience not to blame everything on jinn:

I have to point out here, ninety-nine percent of the time, if you hear some scraping noise or you hear some whatnot, it's your fridge that needs to be fixed or something. [Audience laughs]. Ninety-nine percent of the time it's the wind blowing or something. I speak from experience, if someone calls me up, this and that. Look, the jinn have something better to do than scratch their nails on your walls. They have something better to do than steal your pencil. You're like "where did my pencil go, the jinn must have taken it!" No, maybe it's your kid, maybe you forgot it. I'm telling you, the majority of the time it's your imagination.

Like Sh. Shahin, Sh. Qadhi mentions worrying or unfortunate events such as losing a pencil or hearing noises. Jinn are implicated in explaining these events, and both Sh. Shahin and Sh. Qadhi must form subjects who relate jinn to these events in the right ways.

Moreover, right before this quotation, Sh. Qadhi talks about how to protect yourself from jinn, which I quoted earlier in the chapter; he talks about the more afraid you are, the more power you give them, and the braver you are, the less power they will have over you. He then interrupts this to tell the audience the above quotation, in which tells his audience that ninety-nine percent of the time if you hear or see something out of the ordinary your fridge just needs to be fixed or it is your imagination; it is not a jinn. In that moment, Qadhi asserts the reality of jinn but at the same time distances jinn from peoples' lives by telling the audience that jinn have something better to do than scratch their nails on your walls or steal your pencil. He tells the audience to

search for a logical explanation in these everyday situations, like your fridge needs to be fixed, your kid did it, or even that it's your imagination. There is a murkiness to the place of jinn in peoples' lives. Qadhi spends the entire lecture emphasizing the reality of the jinn, explaining what they are like, and telling people how to protect themselves. But at the end, he also says that they are very rarely ever to blame. Like Sh. Shahin, Sh. Qadhi attempts to form subjects to take the existence and abilities of jinn seriously but do not use them to explain everyday worrying or unfortunate events.

Dein et al in their article about jinn and psychiatry among Bangladeshis in East London write that within this community there is an effort to “to divest religious practices from their cultural accretions, to replace low or folk Islam (based upon magic rather than rule learning) with high Islam, which is oriented towards scripturalism and puritanism, to deploy Gellner’s (1992) terms. This is reflected in efforts by religious authorities to arbitrate on what constitutes ‘genuine’ jinn influence” (2008: 15). Qadhi and Shahin’s efforts to regulate what constitutes a jinn experience and to not rely on jinn to explain unsatisfactory, unfortunate, or worrying events is similar to Dein et al’s finding that religious authorities in East London “arbitrate on what constitutes ‘genuine’ jinn influence” (2008: 15).

Both Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Shahin express ambivalence about the place of jinn in peoples' lives. The place of jinn in explaining unsatisfactory, unfortunate or worrying events is ambiguous; for Sh. Shahin, sometimes they are the culprit, but at the same time they should often not be blamed. Sh. Shahin and Sh. Qadhi both express the desire to have the audience take the existence and abilities of jinn seriously but at the same time distance the jinn from their lives; they want to form subjects who will more often explain unsatisfactory, unfortunate or worrying events in logical ways.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I showed how Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said see the Qur'anic concept of jinn as translatable into the language of science. I demonstrated how Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said want to form subjects who see limit jinn to their place in the hierarchy of the Qur'anic narrative. Finally, I illustrated how Sh. Shahin and Sh. Qadhi want to form subjects who approach unsatisfactory, unfortunate or worrying events in logical ways, rather than with jinn explanations. They want their audience to take the existence and abilities of jinn seriously but not see jinn as interfering with their everyday lives. This chapter points to how imams in America privilege the Qur'an and Sunnah as the only legitimate knowledge and want to form subjects who see their religious beliefs, such as jinn, as compatible with American modernity and secularism, and who see jinn as objects of religious knowledge rather than an actor in their life.



## **Chapter Three: Jinn discourses of lay American Muslims and scholars of Islam**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I examine how Muslim Americans and American scholars of Islam see the place of jinn in their epistemologies and in America. I begin by framing my sources and methodology. Then, in Section One I demonstrate how my informants consider jinn as “untranslatable” to epistemologies associated with secularism and modernity. In Section Two I show how according to my informants the presence of jinn in the United States is informed by its linguistic context. In Section Three I illustrate how the imams’ emphasis on knowing jinn only through the Qur’an and the Sunnah contrasts to my informants’ emphasis on personal and familial knowledge about jinn, revealing a tension within Islam in America between these different realms of knowledge. In Section Four I reflect on what is lost when the imams reject this rich epistemological realm of experiences and family stories.

### **Sources and Methodology**

This chapter relies on information collected via Zoom interviews with three informants: Sanin Rahman, Dr. Najam Haider, and Dr. Ilyse Morgenstein Fuerst. Sanin is a forty-something man born and raised in Bangladesh who moved to the United States for college, and has lived in the U.S. ever since. He was raised in a Muslim family, and describes his current worldview as in line “with a lot of the principles that [Islam is] founded on, and the vision and the intention [of the religion], but not necessarily sort of rote practice like you have to do XYZ right to be [identified as] a ‘good Muslim.’” Najam is a professor of religion at Barnard. He was born and raised in New York and his family is from Pakistan. He studied physics in college and has a masters in classical Arabic history and a PhD. He is 48 and he identifies as Muslim. Ilyse is a professor of religion at the University of Vermont and her work focuses on South Asian Islam.

She conducted much of her research in North India generally, and Delhi specifically. She seems to be in her forties and she identifies as Jewish. It is important to note the shared positionality of my informants as highly educated people who were largely educated in and live in the United States. Due to the fact that in the previous chapter I considered the jinn discourses of religious leaders, in this chapter I wanted to look at the jinn discourses of lay American Muslims or scholars of Islam to get a fuller picture of the jinn discourses of American Muslims.

Additionally, conducting Zoom interviews allowed me to connect with informants who did not live nearby.

### **Section One: Jinn as a challenge to empiricism**

Sanin, Najam and Ilyse point to jinn as challenging empirical, rational, or scientific explanations of experiences. They identify with empiricism and science, and suggest that jinn challenge this identity. In this section I explore how they voice this tension between jinn and empiricism/science, thus suggesting that they see jinn as “untranslatable” into the language of American modernity and secularism.

It is important to note how all three informants characterize the American context. Sanin says that “Western society in general seems more rooted in science and rationale [*sic.*]” and mentions that “most of this country is Christian.” Dr. Haider characterizes America as empirically-minded and Christian. Ilyse refers to “American culture” as “predominantly Christian and scientific.” When I discuss throughout this chapter how my informants relate their reflections to the American context, I am referring to the context they describe, one that privileges science, empiricism and Christianity.

My informants argue that religion is not absent in the United States (in line with Taylor (2004)’s definition of secularism) but empirical and scientific thinking, rather than religious

thinking, are privileged. Taylor defines modernity “in terms of certain institutional changes, such as the spread of the modern bureaucratic state, market economies, science and technology...” (2004: 195). He writes that “one of the central features of Western modernity, on just about any view, is the progress of disenchantment, the eclipse of the world of magic forces and spirits” (Taylor 2004: 50). My informants engage with this American context where science and empiricism is privileged and anything seen as “magical” is often scoffed at, and they negotiate the place of jinn in relation to this context.

For Sanin, it is difficult to know whether “strange” occurrences can be attributed to jinn. He says that labeling an experience as a jinn “encounter” challenges “scientific” explanations of the occurrence. Sanin has had what he calls “hallucinations,” during which he hears or sees something out of the ordinary in the state in between sleep and wakefulness. A night or two before our interview, he explains, he was dozing on the couch and he clearly heard his daughter say something to him, even though she was asleep in a different room and the only way he could have heard her was if she was yelling. His wife was sitting beside him and did not hear her. He muses that this experience may have been a dream state that filtered into conscious cognition. Sanin says these hallucinations happen only rarely, when he is sick or very tired. A couple of nights before he had the experience hearing his daughter, he had another hallucination. He woke up because he saw a shadowy box that looked like Wall-E (the robot from the movie Wall-E) near his bed that started coming towards him. He considers that this vision may have occurred because he knew he was going to have a conversation with me about jinn, and that anticipation of this event may have influenced his brain. He distinguishes this and other similar hallucinations from an experience he had in Bangladesh (detailed in Section Three), which he explained was

“something else.” For Sanin the experience in Bangladesh was the closest to a possible jinn experience than anything else. I will revisit this example later.

Sanin explains that he did not immediately associate his hallucinations with jinn, “maybe because that feels safer... It feels more rational. So, I’m a big believer in science and data and...I don't consider myself particularly superstitious. And so to me that makes more sense than something else.” Sanin defines superstition as being told to do something without data to back up why this action is effective or necessary. Instead of associating his hallucinations with jinn, he jumped to more rational explanations, hypothesizing that his dreams filtered into his conscious state or that his brain was influenced because he knew he was going to have a conversation about jinn.

Sanin suggests in his reflection that the “irrationality” of interpreting these experiences as jinn encounters makes him feel unsafe, given the modern assumption that the world should be viewed through the lens of rationality. He also identifies as “a big believer in science and data,” rather than “superstition.” Acknowledging the existence and involvement of jinn in his own everyday life, does not make sense to him, and contradicts the foundations of his stated identity as a modern, rational subject. He does not see the concept of jinn as translatable into the language of science, or explainable by scientific language and theories as the imams in Chapter Two do, rather he sees the concept of jinn as at odds with the scientific epistemologies.

However, that does not mean that he does not believe in jinn nor that he is not open to jinn explanations, as he contends that he had a possible jinn experience in Bangladesh, and also mentions that an uncle of his was said to talk to jinn. He says, “some people say [my uncle] was possessed... From a scientific perspective he's considered having schizophrenia right, so he hears voices... He talks to other beings [jinn] a lot right... I think he's quote unquote better now, but he

used to talk to things all the time. All the time. Entirely possible that was very real.” Instead of rejecting empirical manifestations of jinn entirely, he voices a tension between scientific and rational epistemologies and jinn epistemologies, suggesting that they are two entirely different ways of explaining phenomena. This differs from the imams I analyzed in Chapter One who translated jinn into the language of modernity, and suggested that science actually allows us to understand jinn better.

Najam also expresses that jinn explanations challenge scientific epistemologies. He told me about his aunt in Pakistan who claimed that she was friends with jinn. He said that she knew things she should not have been able to know, such as when someone was going to die. Additionally, in spite of the fact that she did not receive an education, she knew how to read Arabic, claiming that her jinn friends taught her. Najam said, “she was pretty transparent that the things that she knew and how she knew them...she ascribed them completely to the jinn. And then she could and was able to do things that she shouldn't have been able to do. And in that situation, she would ascribe them to jinn. And I have no explanation.” Najam characterizes his aunt's abilities as challenging his typical worldview; he says “she could and was able to do things that she shouldn't have been able to do.” These abilities, associated with jinn, challenge what Najam thinks he knows about how the world works, as he suggests that the world works in a particular way, and her abilities go against what she should have been able to do based on these conventions. Importantly, Najam does not try to come up with a scientific or logical explanation for her abilities, but rather says “I have no explanation.” While he suggests that her jinn explanation challenges his typical epistemological framework, he is also open to it.

Najam continues, “it just is what it is, and you know I'm an empiricist. I'm a trained physicist. I don't know about things that I can't identify...I'm skeptical by nature. But I mean

some things you can't explain. So you're like, okay. She was strange, and I don't know why and how, and she says it was jinn. Maybe it was jinn." Later on he says: "Oftentimes those people [who are different] can do things that you can't fully explain. I can't explain that to you... I don't believe in a lot of stuff that people believe in. I mean, [I studied science, I'm a scientist]... I might teach religion. But my mentality is in physics... That's where I go towards."

In these comments, Najam implies that his typical approach to understanding phenomena, rooted in science, failed to provide a sufficient explanation by which to understand his aunt's experiences. As was the case for Sanin, the jinn destabilize Najam's identity as an empiricist, physicist, and skeptic. In other words, Najam suggests that there are limits to scientific, rational ways of knowing and understanding the world. Jinn experiences are not translatable into these epistemologies, but rather stand at odds with them. Najam remarks that "she was strange, and I don't know why and how, and she says it was jinn. Maybe it was jinn." The jinn explanation becomes a possibility when his scientific and empirical ways of explaining the world fall short. Furthermore, while Najam is more comfortable with scientific epistemologies, he still sees jinn explanations as possible.

Ilyse, a scholar of Islam in South Asia, also suggests that jinn challenge her identity as someone whose identity is rooted in science and rationality. She explained:

I don't know if I believe in ghosts. I'm an academic with a PhD. I have some mixed feels, but I'm also someone who knows that there's a lot of shit that goes on in the world that I don't understand... There's a lot that I don't know, but I think I've had enough bizarre experiences, both in India, where the language of the bizarre experience is like, yeah, this is jinn, and in the States, where I'm not mad when people bring me their ghostly ethereal stories, and then attribute it to jinn. So, I've never received those stories or participated in

those conversations from a place of suspicion, but it seems plausible to, you know. Like, I have an anthropological, sociological, historical explanation, and I think that I'm receptive to those kinds of stories being shared with me...

Ilyse voices the same tension that Sanin and Najam do between identifying with science and rationality and also being open to jinn experiences. Moreover, considering jinn as an explanation allows her to be open to multiple possibilities. She says there could be an anthropological, sociological, historical *or* ghostly (jinn) explanation to stories she has heard.

Sanin and Najam also demonstrate the multiple possibilities opened up by considering the possibility of the existence of jinn as forces at play in human life. While the category of jinn as “supernatural” beings challenges their identities and worldviews as modern, rational subjects, they acknowledge the possibility that jinn offer potential explanations to the unexplainable in their lives. Jinn, by challenging their scientific and rational identities and worldviews, open them up beyond these kind of explanations to consider explanations related to jinn. While my informants tend to gravitate towards rational and scientific explanations, they are still open to jinn explanations. Thus, they are open to being affected by possible empirical manifestations of jinn; they are not bound to understanding the world only through scientific epistemologies. My informants' perspective differs from Sh. Said's “intermediary rationalist position in regard to jinn” meaning he believes in jinn but denies any empirical manifestation of them (Doostdar 2018: 56). My informants believe in jinn and while they are wary to empirical manifestations of them, they are open to them.

Scholar Naveeda Khan writes about a family in Pakistan who had a jinn that briefly lived with them, and voices how jinn push you to exist in new ways. She writes that a member of the family, Farooq Sahib's “wry acknowledgement of being a bit different in” the days that the jinn

lived with his family “speaks to the possibility of a generous relationship to himself, of allowing himself to be a multiplicity, as well as allowing the same of Maryam [his daughter],” demonstrating how jinn open up different ways of being and understanding the world (Khan 2006: 251).

The tension between identifying with rationality and science but also acknowledging the possibility of jinn expressed by my informants points to the way that they must grapple with the American context of modernity and secularism that they were educated in and live in when considering jinn. Taylor argues that “one of the central features of Western modernity, on just about any view, is the progress of disenchantment, the eclipse of the world of magic forces and spirits” (2004: 50). He writes that “this was one of the products of the reform movement in Latin Christendom, which issued in the Protestant Reformation but also transformed the Catholic Church” (2004: 50). He writes that this reform movement attempted to remake society, and

The newly remade society was to embody unequivocally the demands of the Gospel in a stable and, as it was increasingly understood, rational order. This society had no place for the ambivalent complementarities of the older enchanted world: between worldly life and monastic renunciation, between proper order and its periodic suspension in Carnival, between the acknowledged power of spirits and forces and their relegation by divine power. The new order was coherent, uncompromising, all of a piece. (2004: 50)

In a context of modernity and secularism, where the power of spirits and forces are gone, and the world has a rational order, experiences or stories associated with jinn are seen as disrupting this way of knowing the world that privileges scientific and empirical knowledge. My informants’ view of jinn as challenging these modern and secular epistemologies and their identification with them shows that they view the concept of jinn as “untranslatable” into the language of modernity.



As I discussed in Chapter Two, Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said assimilate jinn into the American context of science and rationality through the “symbolic coating of a scientific methodology” (Eneborg 2013: 1083). Both the imams and Sanin, Najam and Ilyse struggle with American secularism and modernity when considering the relation of jinn to this context. Can jinn be translated into it or not? The imams and my interviewees go down different paths.

This need to situate their discussion of jinn in relation to the American context of modernity and secularism points to firstly, that this context shapes the way that the imams and my informants, all but one who are Muslims living in America, consider and explain jinn. Secondly, the American context of modernity and secularism gives rise to two different methods of negotiating jinn. Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said translate jinn into the language of science while Sanin, Najam and Ilyse see jinn as a challenge to scientific epistemologies and thus “untranslatable” into these epistemologies, but also hold all explanations as possibilities, including jinn ones, even if they identify more with scientific and rational ones. This suggests that translating Islam to America brings about differing perspectives on its “translatability” and different strategies to deal with American modernity and secularism.

### **Section Two: The language of bizarre experiences**

Sanin, Najam, and Ilyse suggest that jinn are everywhere and jinn experiences are universal, but the language used to describe these experiences varies according to the context. They suggest that language is forged in a certain context and reflects certain values, and that there are “universal” bizarre experiences that do not fit within a modern, rational framework that are voiced differently depending on the place. My informants argue that jinn are part of a vocabulary of bizarre or unexplainable experiences or behavior, rather than an object of religious knowledge.

I asked Sanin if he thinks there are simply less jinn in the United States and he responded by saying that he does not think that jinn can only inhabit certain parts of the world. He argues instead that “I would attribute the absence of jinn in the U.S. more to the words that are being used to describe experiences rather than the absence of jinn themselves.” He continues: “Most of this country is Christian right? So I don't know that jinn appear in the Bible or in the Torah, or any of those. And so, it's just not part of the vernacular. I think that's part of it, is that the word is just not part of the common vernacular to use and explain things, whereas it is in other cultures.” Sanin explains while jinn may very well exist in the United States, *discourses* about jinn do not, solely due to different frameworks and “vocabularies” of understanding the supernatural.

Najam also discusses the lack of jinn in the US. He argues that there are not less jinn, but there may be less jinn stories. He says that something that in the past may have been called an interaction with a jinn now may be called mental illness. Like Sanin, Dr. Haider asserts that there are not less jinn in the U.S., but rather people use different words to describe jinn experiences, like mental illness. Like Sanin, he describes ambiguous, universal jinn experiences that are just labeled differently depending on the cultural and linguistic context. Jinn is not so much an object as a referent.

Ilyse also considers the use of the word “jinn” to reflect universal experiences. She says  
 And again I really would put it, or the way I talk about it when I teach my classes is, I would put it in the like, the way Americans say “a chill down my spine,” “I got goose bumps,” “It felt like deja vu,” “It felt like I had experienced this before,” “My gut was turned on”... all of those idioms that we have about something clued me in, and I don't know what it is, and I'm not trying to put a value on it. I'm just saying it happened. All of those idioms in North India leave room for jinn in a way that in the States they don't.

She also calls jinn “the language of bizarre experiences” in India. Like Sanin and Najam, Ilyse refers to the concept of jinn as a part of the vocabulary of Islam or culture that does not carry over to the United States, and experiences that they themselves would possibly see as jinn are voiced by non-Muslims in America through different vocabularies, forged in the context of American modernity and secularism. For Najam an example is mental illness, part of the vocabulary of psychiatry. For Ilyse an example is “a chill down my spine.”

Sanin’s possible jinn experience in Bangladesh allows us to consider the role of place in whether or not jinn is invoked as an explanation. One night, while he was visiting Bangladesh after having recently moved to America, his childhood friend was staying over and in the middle of the night Sanin woke up screaming and waving his hands around trying to deflect projectiles. Sanin explains what he saw:

It was actually not a shadow figure. This was a very menacing sort of almost bestial, monstrous. There were horns... so I think of some mix of depictions of a dragon crossed between... how the devil is typically portrayed right? So some mix of just a lot of sharp teeth and evil eyes. And you know, scaly... I almost want to say that there was a greenish tint to the skin, or the scales, or whatever it was. But this thing was, it felt like this thing was throwing things at me like these bright blue and red, or whatever sort of light projectiles. I forget now, and I was trying to fend those off, and I was yelling while I was doing it. I was obviously freaked out. What's interesting to me is that my friend woke up. Obviously, because, you know, I was making a ruckus. He tried to, he tried to recite a sura like one of the surahs that we have grown up with. We know this like [makes snapping motion with hand]. He got like a quarter or third way through, and he couldn't

remember the rest, like he just could not finish reciting the surah. And of the whole thing that probably freaked me out the most.

Sanin suggests that this experience was different from his hallucinations because the figure was not shadowy; rather, its features were very clear. Also, his friend who was with him was also affected by the possible jinn, as he was not able to finish reciting a surah that he knew by heart. The surah that his friend recited was the Ayat al-Kursi, which is often recited to protect against shaytan (evil jinn). That the possible jinn was able to strip Sanin of the protection his friend was trying to give him is what “freaked” Sanin out the most, suggesting that the presence of his friend and that he too was affected was a factor in Sanin attributing this experience to jinn.

I asked Sanin if he had a possible theory of why this had happened. He says that he has not thought about it, though he did at the time think of it as something that was supernatural, or beyond our experience of reality. He considers it, and mentions that Bangladesh has a very “superstitious” culture, and then begins telling me a possible theory.

Sanin says that the apartment in which this experience occurred was steeped in a lot of familial conflict. He says “I feel like the contention, and the energy, maybe that that had come out of those familial conflicts maybe somehow really rooted itself in that space.” He also mentions that his uncle used to live on the bottom floor and was said to talk to jinn, which from “from a scientific perspective he's considered having schizophrenia.” Sanin muses “you know, those things came in – not that all of them were malicious, but maybe one of them was, or a few – and came in and found me.” Sanin implicitly roots this theory in the “superstitious culture of Bangladesh,” where jinn are “the language of bizarre experiences,” a phrase Ilyse employed when talking about the invocation of jinn explanations in India. Moreover, he also speculates that his uncle may have been a cause. The description of the uncle as talking to jinn is rooted in a

different perspective than what he calls a “scientific perspective,” which would claim the uncle has schizophrenia.

That jinn was part of the “language of bizarre experiences” in Bangladesh allowed jinn to be used to explain this experience, just as it allowed for his uncle to be seen as jinn-possessed, rather than schizophrenic. Moreover, Sanin’s experience in Bangladesh allowed for explanations that his hallucinations in the United States do not: his house in the United States does not seem to have familial conflict, nor does he have an uncle who used to live there who was possessed by jinn. Sanin rather leans towards explaining his hallucinations with more rational, scientific understandings, as I discussed earlier. His theory on his experience in Bangladesh is one that is centered in the cultural context of Bangladesh – it is part of the “language of bizarre experiences” there – supporting my informants’ claims that the context affects if jinn is invoked as an explanation for an experience. Furthermore, Sanin’s theory for this possible jinn experience is situated in family and place – family conflict, a family member, and a specific house – in a way that scientific and empirical explanations are not.

The scholar Bambi Schieffelin writes that “we all tend to think in “received categories,” what Sapir (1958 [1929]:162) called “language habits” or what Whorf (1956) described as “fashions of speaking” (2014: 228). This concept means experience is interpreted through language, or in other words, language can be conceptualized as a verbal activity that can guide worldviews, or any interpretive practice” (Schieffelin 2014: 228). My informants frame the concept of jinn as part of a linguistic practice, or part of “the language of bizarre experiences,” and thereby the concept of jinn also functions as an interpreter of experience. There is an (jinn) experience “out there” that is interpreted through different kinds of language depending on the

context, which supports and indexes a particular worldview, whether that be secular, religious, or as Sanin says, “superstitious.”

I will now explore the indexical power of the word “jinn” in the United States. According to Najam and Ilyse, the lack of the word jinn in the United States is not just a function of jinn not being a culturally or linguistically unpopular expression, but also a function of what the word indexes about the speaker. Najam said, “[in the U.S.] if you say that you believe in something that you can't empirically show, and it's not associated with Christianity... you are probably often stigmatized by that association.” Ilyse similarly discussed the indexical power of the word “jinn” in America. She said “It's hard to sound smart, and then also talk about things that sound like ghosts. There's a lot of judgment for saying that kind of crap in an American culture that's predominantly Christian and scientific. Yeah, like scientific thinking [rules out] everything else.”

When my informants grapple with the lack of jinn encounters in the United States their response is that this is due to the linguistic and relational context of America where the word “jinn” is simply not part of the vocabulary. Najam and Ilyse also point to the stigma against people not seen as scientific or empirically-minded that reduces the use of the word “jinn.” My informants once again include American modernity and secularism in their reflection on jinn. In other words, the concept of jinn raises questions about their translatability into the terms of modernity. My informants argue that they are not translated, but rather a different vocabulary for “bizarre experiences” exists that fits the framework of modern rationality.

I will now consider the referent of the word “jinn.” The scholar Lila Abu-Lughod emphasizes how the kind of language we use to express something is forged in certain contexts and reflects certain values, an example of this being a “dialect of rights” (2009: 84). Schieffelin

highlights how a certain process, in her example, Christian missionization, can change how Bosavi people in Papua New Guinea conceive of and talk about space (2014: 231).

Abu-Lughod's "dialect of rights" and Schieffelin's discussion of shifting ways of talking about space highlights the way that an idea or object can be talked about with different vocabularies that reflect certain values. Like Abu-Lughod and Schieffelin, my informants voice that "something out there" can be apprehended and voiced in a variety of ways, and these ways are influenced by context and reflect the values and norms of that context. In the case of my interviewees the "thing out there" is not an idea or concept such as rights and space, but an experience. This experience (which is referred to as *jinn* in certain contexts and as "a chill down my spine" in others) can be a variety of different things, such as possession, mental illness, whispers, a bizarre experience, or seeing a demon looking figure in the middle of the night.

A *jinn* experience that my interviewees argue can be voiced by a variety of different expressions is ambiguous and multiple. Sanin says that in Bangladesh, "jinn almost has a very broad definition of anything that's not considered normal in the normal space. He said that people commonly use a term that means "'oh, a jinn [has] come and got, you know, possessed you, or gotten you,' and people apply that to almost anything where somebody is behaving in a way that they cannot explain." Najam voices a similar definition of *jinn*, saying "I think... that [jinn] become sort of proxies for anything that is almost unexplainable, or that is difficult to explain, and become vessels for that."

Najam also notes that *jinn* are often associated with people who are weird or slightly off. He says

What I mean by slightly off is like, not like diagnosed in any particular way. But it's just like, you know. There's that strange person in your family, who had a thing about her, or

him, and then people will be like well, that was because they kinda, they spoke to jinn. Now, those voices, is that mental illness? I mean nowadays people will be like that person was mentally ill, but that's kind of not how it seems in the community. People are like that person is off in some way, and maybe that's because they spend a little too much time hanging out with jinn.

Sanin and Najam have two categories for what jinn refer to: people who are behaving in unexplainable ways, and unexplainable events or experiences.

We can see how the referent of the word “jinn” or other expressions such as “a chill down my spine” is open, multiple, and ambiguous. It can refer to people, behavior, and experiences. Thinking about jinn as part of a vocabulary that can refer to people, behavior and experiences as my informants do allows them to be open to multiple manifestations of jinn events. Moreover, it allows them to be open to people, behavior, or experiences that may destabilize the way they typically see the world, as they characterize these as abnormal or unexplainable. Rather than just seeing jinn as an object of religious knowledge that can only be one specific way, by seeing jinn in relation to an experience or behavior that is various and multiple they open themselves up to seeing and being affected by these abnormal or unexplainable events.

### **Section Three: The epistemological jinn**

The imams that I wrote about in Chapter Two all emphasize that the Qur’an and the Sunnah are the only legitimate sources of knowledge when it comes to jinn. However, Sanin and Najam both say that their knowledge of jinn comes from family stories, and explicitly say it does not come from the Qur’an. In this section, I consider these two different realms of knowledge and show how they point to a tension between approaching Islam solely through the Qur’an or through personal experience.



Sh. Qadhi calls knowledge about jinn that comes from the Qur'an and the Sunnah facts, and everything else is folklore and legend. Sh. Shahin in his lecture stated that he will deal with every matter from the perspective of the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Sh. Said stressed this point the most, and spent the first couple of minutes of our interview explaining it to me. He said:

As Muslims, in order for us to talk about something unseen, and to be very firm, very confident, and very content when you talk that you're going to build your belief around it, it has to be one of the three things. This is a ruling... Either, you have seen it. Or, you have seen something like it. Or, you have received very credible news that you would not doubt. You would not doubt the news because you would not doubt the source.

He said because you cannot see jinn, the only thing we can use to inform our understanding of jinn are credible sources, these sources being the Qur'an and "the authentic hadith of the Prophet." The imams limit their audience to only knowing about jinn in this particular way. Jinn are fixed objects, and people are unable to learn more or new information about them through their experiences or stories they hear, because according to the imams, the characteristics of jinn are fixed and eternal. Thus, Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Said are very much against empiricism, as they reject experiences and stories as being a way to learn about jinn, and rather hold that knowledge from the Qur'an is the only legitimate source of knowledge.

When I ask Sanin if he had heard jinn discussed more in the context of stories or through textual theological explanations he answers:

Honestly speaking, growing up with sort of, I guess jinn in general or just talking about jinn, I have not until now necessarily thought of them as beings that fall within the Islamic framework at all. Within the supernatural framework, yes, but not within a religious one. [I was] brought up in a predominantly Islamic society. People talk about

jinn a lot, but not typically not usually in the context of “Well, the Quran says xyz” right? It's more that, oh, you know, jinn did something here, jinn did something that we can't explain... Something happened, or I saw something, or I saw shadow something walking in a building, it's abandoned, must be jinn. So it's more talked about in terms of experiences that can't be explained rather than oh, Qur'an says right, or Islam says.... I have not until today really thought about jinn and their part in a religion... It's just interesting because... I don't know that I've ever talked about jinn in the context of religion before, per say.

Sanin talks about how when he was growing up in Bangladesh people often mentioned jinn, but in terms of “experiences that can't be explained.” Jinn are part of a vocabulary of unexplainable experiences rather than a vocabulary of Qur'anic knowledge. In fact, jinn were so far out of the realm of Islamic knowledge that until our interview Sanin had never thought of them as falling within the Islamic framework. Sanin expresses jinn as being related to speech and everyday life, not an object within a realm of authoritative Islamic knowledge. In this way, he is open to a variety of invocations and manifestations of jinn, as their existence and abilities are not fixed.

Sanin also tells me that he learned about jinn from stories, his family, and social circles. He says “people tell stories, and you know. So, you just hear the word a lot. So, it's from family and social circles... Word of mouth... But the way [the Qur'an is] taught in Bangladesh, it's all Arabic right? So, you're literally reading the Arabic without understanding anything you're saying... So, then that's why I say, I definitely didn't pick up about jinn from the Qur'an.” Here, Sanin emphasizes that his knowledge of jinn is very much constructed around the familial and social; it comes from “word of mouth.” Moreover, during his time in Bangladesh, his Qur'anic education did not focus on comprehension of the text. This is very different from how the imams

I wrote about in Chapter Two discussed the Qur'an; they talked about the Qur'an as being the only source of legitimate knowledge. For them, stories and "word of mouth" are explicitly illegitimate knowledge.

Najam also heard about jinn mostly from family stories. He said that everybody reads about it in the Qur'an, but they don't take it that seriously. However, according to him, everybody has family stories about jinn. He says: "Their knowledge comes from lore and family, and it comes from people who they know, people who they might have had experiences with, who make those claims, so it's not...an intellectual thing. It's very much a cultural, familial kind of knowledge that is often what we're talking about here." Here we see Najam talk about jinn knowledge as more empirical; it comes from people who have made claims to seeing or experiencing jinn. Moreover, he argues that knowing about jinn as being something related to family and culture, rather than characterizing it as an object of religious knowledge that is known, as he said, "intellectually." Sanin similarly points to jinn as being part of the language of culture rather than religion, he did not even associate it with Islam due to the everyday, familial and relational nature in which it was used. Because Sanin and Najam's knowledge of jinn comes from stories and experiences, it is open to change. This is because their very schema of knowing jinn is open to revision as they get their knowledge from sources that are not fixed.

Najam said that jinn is "not an intellectual thing." However, Sh. Qadhi, Sh. Said and Sh. Shahin speak of jinn as something intellectual; even the form of their talks emphasizes it. They are lectures, intended to teach their audience. They give information about what the jinn is made out of, what its abilities are, and how to protect from them. For Sh. Qadhi, Sh. Said and Sh. Shahin, the jinn is made into an object of study. On the other hand, Sanin and Najam are open to believing and being affected by other people; their knowledge of jinn is ever-changing based on

stories and experience they hear from their families and social circles. Their epistemology of jinn centers the relational life of jinn.

#### **Section Four: Different realms of Islamic knowledge**

I wrote in Section One about how Sanin, Najam and Ilyse are open to the way jinn experiences destabilize their identification with science and empiricism, and in being open to this they are also open to multiple possibilities and explanations for experiences. Instead of stuffing all unexplainable or difficult to explain experiences or stories into a rational and logical explanation, they are open to other kinds of explanations and thus other ways of understanding the world.

Sh. Said, on the other hand, is not open to other ways of explaining “bizarre experiences.” Due to Sh. Said’s belief that all jinn can do is whisper, and because this knowledge comes from the Qur’an, the only source of legitimate knowledge about jinn according to him, he always has a rational explanation for unexplainable events, because due to his way of knowing jinn, it is impossible for them to do anything but whisper. Thus, he is not open to experiences or stories that could challenge his epistemology of jinn.

Sanin, Najam and Ilyse’s more expansive and ever-changing way of knowing jinn allows them to be open to multiple ways of experiencing and understanding the world, because although they have a tendency to gravitate towards rational and scientific explanations of events, they do not hold these to be the only ways of knowing the world. Because their knowledge of jinn does not come only from the Qur’an and Sunnah, like it does for the imams (in fact Sanin and Najam explicitly said that their knowledge of jinn does not come from the Qur’an and the Sunnah at all), they are open to jinn destabilizing their typical ways of understanding the world. Sh. Said on the other hand explains away anything that could destabilize his way of knowing jinn.

Thus, we can see a tension between what kinds of knowledge are legitimate. The imams draw a dichotomy between knowledge from the Qur'an and the Sunnah and knowledge from family, experiences, and stories. This difference in epistemologies, the imam's strong emphasis on knowledge from the texts as being the only knowledge that is legitimate, and that they are even trying to educate people about jinn at all and suggests that the imams are responding to what they see as a problem, of Muslims in America having knowledge about jinn from realms other than the Qur'an and the Sunnah. My informants on the other hand suggest that experience and stories are legitimate ways to encounter and learn about jinn. Thus, there appears to be a tension in Islam in America between knowing Islam through the Qur'an or through experience.

Sh. Said said that he is trying to teach the younger generation the truth about jinn, and they in turn may be able to teach their parents, who he argues are caught up in stories and myths centered in the country that they immigrated from. Sh. Qadhi and Sh. Shahin give lectures and post them on YouTube, suggesting that they have an intent to educate Muslims in America about jinn. And jinn are not an unknown thing; as I mentioned at the beginning of Chapter One, all Muslims are expected to believe in jinn because they are mentioned in the Qur'an. That is to say that the case is not that Muslims do not know about jinn at all, but rather the imams are trying to produce a certain way of knowing jinn in America.

What is lost in the imams' rejection of knowledge about jinn coming from stories and experiences is jinn as being constituted through relations between people and relations of people with the world. Jinn lose their role in connecting people together through storytelling and of allowing people new ways of experiencing and understanding the world. Just as jinn were "demoted" to fit the Revelation, as I discussed in Chapter One, the imams in trying to keep jinn

limited to the Qur'an and the Sunnah "demote" them from the role and life they had in the relational realm of stories and experiences.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I showed how my informants do not see the concept of jinn as translatable into scientific and empirical epistemologies. I also showed how they see jinn as part of a vocabulary of explaining bizarre or unexplainable experiences, and this vocabulary is different in the United States. I demonstrated how Sanin and Najam's knowledge of jinn stemmed from family stories and experiences, which differs from the imams' insistence that jinn must be known only from the Qur'an and the Sunnah. Finally, I illustrated that the imams in rejecting the realm of knowledge that comes from family stories and experiences lose jinn as being constituted relationally. This chapter points to how American Muslims and scholars of Islam do not see Islamic beliefs such as jinn translatable into the epistemologies associated with American modernity and secularism as jinn are part of religious and cultural vocabulary that is not present or accepted in the United States. However, they do accept the presence of jinn as possible, and this perspective comes from the way in which their knowledge of jinn is constituted through experiences and family stories.

## **Final Conclusion**

To conclude more broadly, through my research I found that American Muslims, both religious leaders and lay Muslims, in their consideration of the place of jinn in America grapple with American modernity and secularism, largely characterized by the privileging of scientific epistemologies. The imams see the concept of jinn as translatable into the language of science while my informants in Chapter Three do not. I found that part of the imams' project is forming particular subjects in relation to Islam, subjects who approach "bizarre experiences" with logical explanations, and who privilege only Qur'anic knowledge. My informants in Chapter Three on the other hand approach knowing about jinn solely through the realm of stories and experiences. Thus, I found a tension between different realms of knowledge within Islam in America. My informants in Chapter Three bring our attention to the realm of stories and experiences as being a part of Islamic knowledge.

My argument for this thesis was that American Muslim discourses on jinn reveal that translating Islam to America requires American Muslims, both imams and lay people, to grapple with American modernity and secularism, and that there exists a tension between approaching Islam solely through the text of the Qur'an, or through personal experience. Based on my research, I found a real negotiation between Islamic beliefs and modernity in regards to if and how jinn can be translated into American conceptions of secularism and modernity.

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