Mark W. Meehan, PhD

Associate Vice President for Global Engagement

Assistant Professor of Global Studies

Rivier University, Nashua, New Hampshire, USA.

mmeehan@rivier.edu

Traditional Islamic Philosophy and Art, Liminality, and Effective Cultural Engagement.

> "When the Qutb Mosque in Delhi was being planned, no one knew what the first mosque in India would look like. But if you visit the Qutb Mosque, you will see that it is clearly a mosque and that it is clearly Indian."
>
> Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, in an interview with the researcher.

Introduction to the research:

This paper is an excerpt of a comprehensive study that investigates the development and function of the Institute of Traditional Islamic Art and Architecture in Amman, Jordan. Based on a vertical case study using grounded theory methodology, the research attempted to create a rich and holistic understanding of the Institute. Specific areas of study include the creative factors involved in the founding of the Institute within the context of Arab and Jordanian higher education, the view of creativity in traditional Islamic philosophy and its function in the Institute, and the role of the anthropological concept of liminality in the creative process and the resulting clarification of students' values during the academic program.

The research included a three-week pilot study trip to Amman in May, 2011, followed by a four week visit in September of 2011. Data for the study came from twenty hours of interviews completed with over thirty individuals, a twenty item survey completed by sixty-five students, classroom observations, and analysis of an array of documents from the League of Arab States, the Jordanian Ministry of Higher Education and Research, the Jordanian Accreditation Association, the World Islamic Science and Education University, and the Institute for Traditional Islamic Art and Architecture.

The study found that a creative institution like ITIAA exists despite the prevailing political and economic environment. The relentless push to replicate Western approaches in Arab-Muslim higher education has created a pervasive environment that resists creative approaches, such as traditional Islamic topics and forms of education. Such an environment has made the development of alternative institutions, such as ITIAA, very difficult, potentially diminishing the creative use of alternatives to modernist education. It was found that the founding of ITIAA required a unique combination of support from the Jordanian royal family, international attention, and serendipity.

In regard to the role of traditional Islamic philosophy, the paper delineates how the combination of theological/philosophical commitments to creativity of founders, faculty, curriculum, and students combined to create a deep and pervasive role of traditional Islamic philosophy, evidenced in classroom, interviews, and documents. Student, faculty and staff interviews consistently reflected a vital commitment to Islamic understandings of education, art, and beauty.

Finally, the concept of liminal emerged as a vivid and persistent force in the students' creative assessment and commitment to value system that sought to combine Arab-Muslim and

Western values in a new, cohesive form. It was observed that the curriculum itself propelled students to deep and reflective experiences that were "betwixt and between," from which they would emerge with a clearer sense of self and other. Students were eager to discuss the creative products of their liminal experiences, typically artistic artifacts that combined value systems in unique and creative ways.

The paper concludes by noting the vital importance of such institutions as ITIAA in providing the space and means for Arab-Muslims to understand their own culture, assess others, and form new, creative versions of Arab-Muslim culture that are viable and productive in the current age. In light of the need for new means of cultural diplomacy, it is noted that transnational organizations, such as the World Bank, could help facilitate healthier value environments by fostering the development of a second level of creative, traditionally focused institutions which reinforce traditional values, provide liminal experiences, and facilitate creation of artifacts of liminality which reflect the ability to combine modern and traditional value systems.

The definition and role of "liminal:"

A key concept in the study was the anthropological understanding of "liminal." Developed originally by the anthropologist Victor Turner though the observation of religious rituals, the concept has been elegantly expanded over time, applied to a wide variety of human interactions and spaces. Turner saw ritual as a key component of liminality, as ritual facilitated entry to liminal space because of its connection to metaphysical platforms that contained the inherent authority to allow society to change existing social structure. Turner noted that "ritual is the preeminent means by which the human species grows, while social structure is the means by

which it conserves" (1974, p. 298). In the case of ITIAA, rituals were founded on the authority of the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, and the sayings of the Prophet (Hadith). Traditional techniques used in the creation of Islamic art (which is steeped in the metaphysics of traditional Islam) functioned as rituals, opening up liminal spaces for students.

Once entered through metaphysically-based rituals, liminal spaces are understood to be temporary, with the label of deviance applied to those who remain in a liminal space for too long. Because people in liminal spaces are considered outside of normal cultural expectations, liminal space "is crucial to assigning or innovating new social status and identity" (Alexander, 1991, p. 17). Turner used the term "communitas" to define the role and process within the liminal space, as communitas "un-masques the arbitrary distinctions inherent to social structure" (Turner, 1975, p. 16).

At the Institute of Traditional Islamic Art and Architecture, a clear process emerged that demonstrated the consistent role of the liminal in facilitating students' capacity and ability to step outside of their preconceived cultural boundaries, critically assess modernist and Arab-Muslim value systems, and create synergy between the apparently divergent systems. The use of traditional technique was often vocalized as the metaphysically-based ritual that propelled students into communitas. Evidence of the liminal aspect of the students' experiences emerged through interviews and in the production and function of liminal artifacts of art.

The liminal process at the Institute of Traditional Islamic Art and Architecture includes the following elements:

- Metaphysics: Traditional Islamic philosophy has agreed upon authority above the current cultural dialogue between Arab-Muslim values and modern values.

- Ritual in the form of traditional art technique: For example, creating specific colors of paint through the crushing and mixing of minerals; using OOOO brushes (the width of a needle) to do outline work in a biomorphic design.

- Communitas: Students executing the traditional techniques were solitary and focused, having entered a liminal space of contemplation. They often described a sense of being away from the normal, in a place that was distinct from their physical presence, and they described emerging comforted and peaceful.

- Synthesis: Produced through communitas in the liminal space, students were able to combine Western and Arab-Muslim value systems and express new forms of values in their work and speech. They spoke of combining art forms and producing artifacts such as an Islamic Pixar film and a clothing design based on traditional Islamic geometry, made with Western synthetic materials.

- Role of liminal products: Faculty and students expressed specific vision for how the products of liminal experiences would affect others. The artifacts were expected to provoke liminal encounters in those who engaged the artifacts, creating a "liminal chain reaction."

- Beauty: Understood throughout the research as something that had force, capacity, and agency in liminality, beauty was also expected to engage others who encountered the liminal artifacts. A section at the end of the paper will review some of the specific discussions about beauty, attempting to understand how ITIAA defines beauty and its role in the liminal process.

The following paper will present data from a student survey, a series of interviews, and three student focus groups to document the defined liminal process of value synthesis at ITIAA.

Previous research by the author has already established traditional Islam as the metaphysical platform of ITIAA, and defined the role of traditional technique in the production of traditional Islamic art at ITIAA. This paper will focus on specific attention to a general understanding of the role of contemplation in the academic program, followed by interviews that highlight ritual, communitas, synthesis, and the anticipated role of liminal products.

A general understanding of the role of contemplation in the curriculum of ITIAA:

A survey of sixty-five ITIAA students was conducted as part of the research process. Students were found to anticipate and to engage in spiritual and contemplative experiences as part of the ITIAA curriculum. The first set of items centered on the word, "expect." Students were assessed to see if they anticipated the basic tenets that could lead into a liminal experience. The second set looked at how students valued the contemplative aspect of the program, and the third assessed if they actually engaged in contemplative practices.

The first item regarding expectation asked students to respond on a five-point likard scale to the statement, "My professors expect me to grow spiritually during my coursework." 90% of students selected "agree/strongly agree." Students clearly anticipate that professors are looking for more than technique when assessing students. When responses were broken into male and female categories, there was very little difference found between the two.

16) My professors expect me to grow spiritually during my coursework.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree
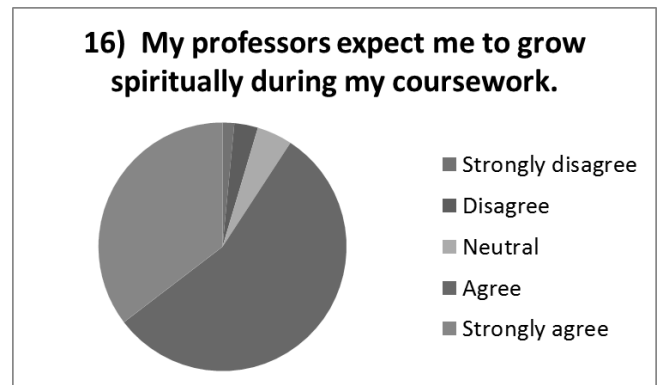
It was also interesting to note that when responses were placed into categories by time of attendance (new students and students who had attended ITIAA for two or more semesters), there was also very little difference. The only meaningful change was a higher percentage of new students selecting neutral (9%), pointing toward a lack of experience in the academic program.


Professors expect me to grow spiritually during my coursework.

- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree
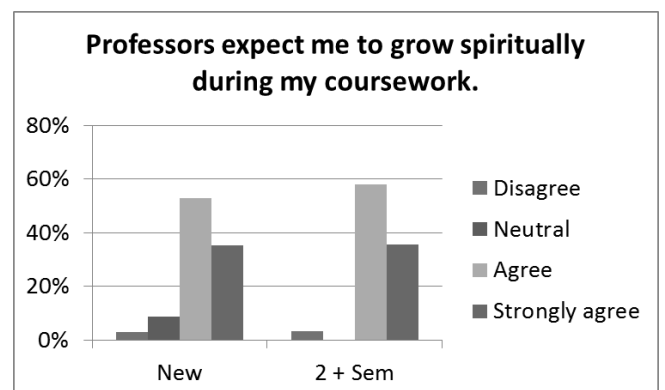
The second item assessing student's potential engagement with contemplative aspects of the curriculum asked them to respond to the statement, "Contemplation is a very important part of my program." The word "very" was added to the statement after some discussion, to better define how strongly students considered contemplation. Of all student responses, 64% of the students selected "strongly agree." When combined with "agree," responses, 91% of the students "agreed/strongly agreed" to the very important role of contemplation.

17) Contemplation is a very important part of my program.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree
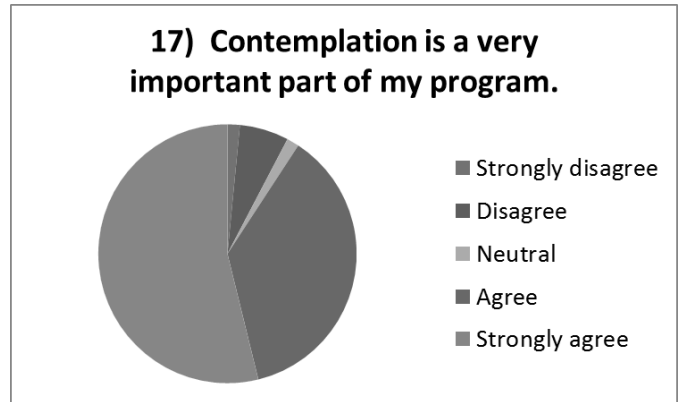
When broken into male and female responses, a trend emerged that would be carried into other items. Females responded more strongly to items regarding contemplation, including the current item. 64% of females selected "strongly agree," compared to 38% of males.

Contemplation is a very important part of my program.

- Male
- Female
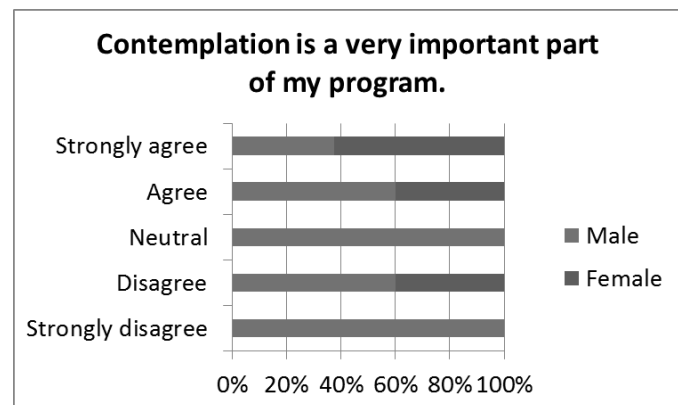
When responses were divided into the categories of new and two or more semesters, it was interesting to note that new students responded more strongly than students of two semesters of more. 59% of new students selected "strongly agree," compared to 48% of students for two or more

Contemplation is a very important part of my program.

- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree

semesters, perhaps pointing toward high levels of anticipation among the new students.

8
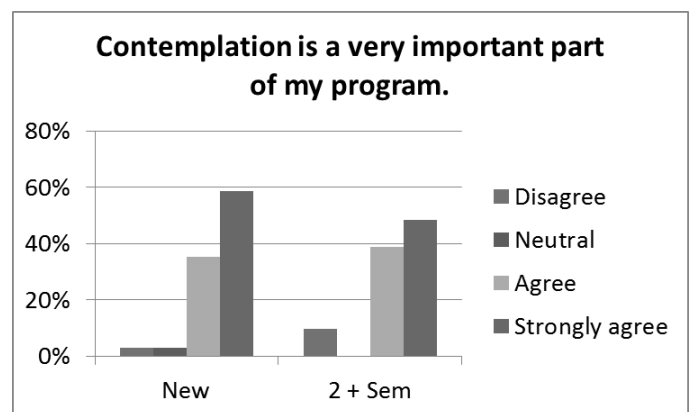
The next item asked students to respond to the statement, "I take time to be quiet, pray

and think when I'm working on a school

related project." The item was intended to

look beyond intention, towards actual

practice. The responses shifted back from the

strong responses in expectation items. 83%

18) I take time to be quiet, pray and think when I'm working on a school related project.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree
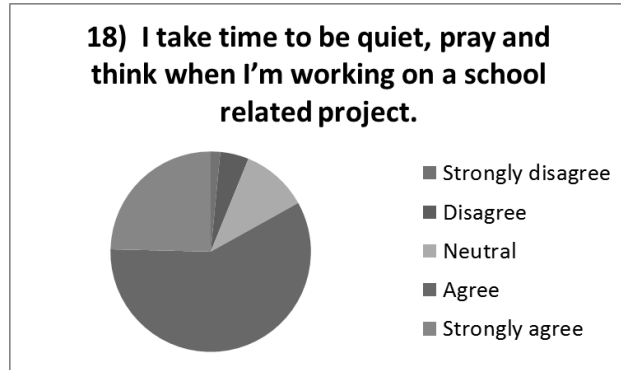
of students selected "agree/strongly agree," with 58% selecting "agree." Compared to the 91% of

students who selected "agree/strongly agree" in response to the perceived importance of

contemplation, the indication of action was less than expected.

When broken into length of

attendance, 35% of new students selected

"strongly agree," compared to only 13% of

two or more semesters of attendance. It

would appear that new students were

committed to acting in contemplative ways,

I take time to be quiet, pray and think when I'm working on a school related project.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
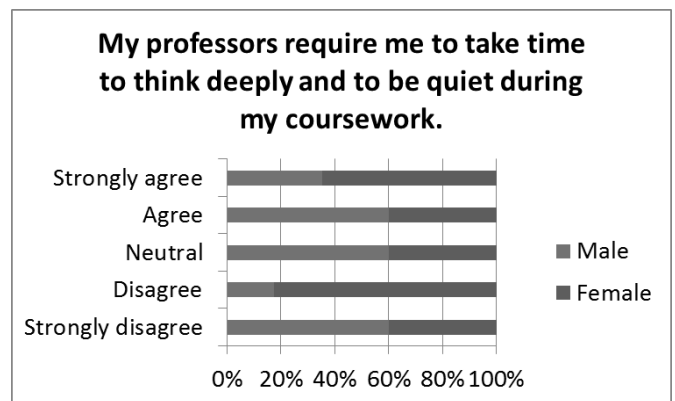- Neutral
- Agree
- Strongly agree
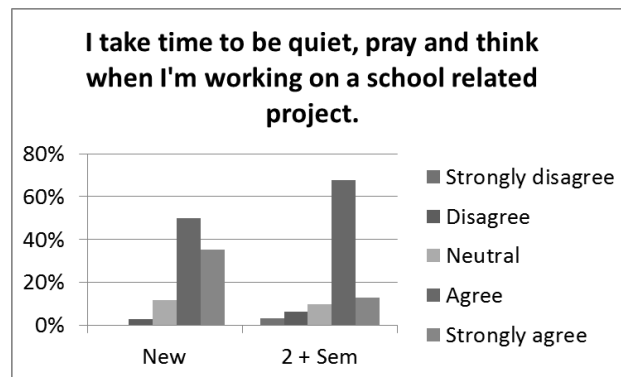
while more seasoned students were less confident in the role of contemplation.

The final item asked students to reply to a more specific statement that reflected on their

perception of faculty, responding to the statement, "My professors require me to take time to

think deeply and to be quiet during coursework." The item was written to reflect on the previous

student response to "My professors expect me to grow spiritually" (to which 90% of students

selected "agree/strongly agree").

The students responded less strongly than to any of the previous items. Only 60% of the students selected "agree/strongly agree." Only 23% of all students selected "strongly agree." 25% of students selected "neutral," the highest neutral response to any of the items.

19) My professors require me to take time to think deeply and to be quiet during my coursework.

■ Strongly disagree
■ Disagree
■ Neutral
■ Agree
■ Strongly agree
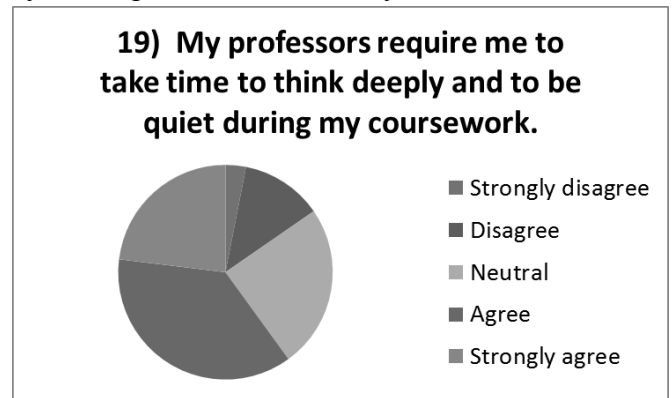
When assessed by gender, female students responded more strongly than male students, with 28% of female students having selected "strongly agree," compared to 15% of male students. This is consistent with previous items that resulted in female students selecting a stronger response than male students.

My professors require me to take time to think deeply and to be quiet during my coursework.

■ Male
■ Female

While it was expected that new students might have weakened the responses due to inexperience at ITIAA, a comparison of new and continuing students showed that they did not. Instead, a breakdown of the responses showed the opposite. 76% of new students selected "agree/strongly agree," compared to only 42% of continuing students. While it was expected that new students might select "neutral," only 18% did, fewer than the continuing students, of whom 32%

Professors require me to take time to think deeply and to be quiet during my coursework.

■ Disagree
■ Neutral
■ Agree
■ Strongly agree

selected neutral. This might indicate a disconnection between courses and contemplation among some ITIAA faculty.
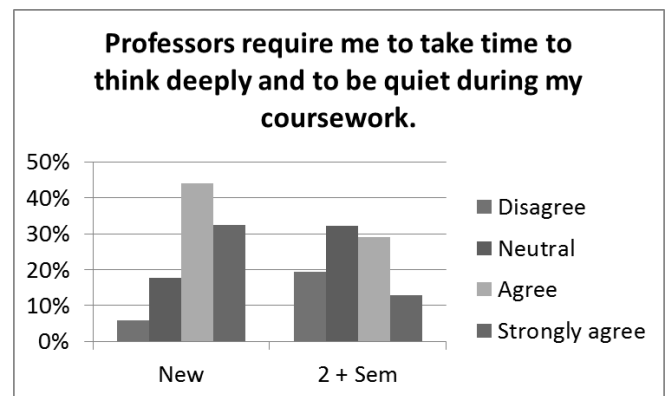
The role of ritual:

It would appear that students enter ITIAA with a strong sense of anticipation for a contemplative experience. While the role of contemplation, prayer, and quiet may shift during the academic program, continuing students expressed high levels of appreciation for each aspect. However, the following explains how students often noted they lived the early parts of their lives without a deep understanding of the history of Islamic culture, nor the ability to engage traditional Islamic philosophy.

In interviews, students expressed living with a deep sense of having lost their culture, then discovering what was lost through the foundational courses of the ITIAA academic program. As noted, the role of ritual requires a metaphysical authority that enables the ability to deeply assess personal values and competing value systems. It would appear that the foundational courses of History of Islamic Culture, Sacred Geometry, Calligraphy, and others, provide the students with a historical and metaphysical platform that creates the capacity to enter liminal space with the courage to engage value systems.

Students at ITIAA were keenly aware of the effect of colonialism and war on their culture. They often expressed a broad view when talking about why aspects of traditional Islamic culture had been lost. One student explained, "There has been so much trouble, when you think about our Grandparents, they want you to be an engineer, or a doctor. But they have seen war, they have seen so much conflict. They think about surviving. So now today you can talk to people in the street and ask them about patterns and they will not know. Like the Minbar of Saladin, it was lost." As traditional knowledge was being lost, students understood that a culture was being lost as well.

When discussing Arab-Muslim cultural history, students did not express a narrative consistent with the assessment of policy makers, one of embracing improved living conditions through the adoption of Western values. They tended to point to the disparity that was created over time when the Arab-Muslim people lost their identity, having replaced it with values from the West. With great passion, a student explained,

> "We are Arabs. We are Muslim people and our fathers and grandfathers gave us a tradition that we have to go on. We don't have to copy the Western world. When we started to take the West's values it mostly affected us as men. We lost our dignity. So there are ways that the Western values have been very negative. There are some very big problems in our copying the West."

The student equated the Arab-Muslim culture as one that provided dignity, expressing the great indignity of having his own culture replaced by the West. Another student echoed the thought, pointing toward the adoption of Western values as proof of the need to return to Arab-Muslim culture, "We are adopting something not from our culture and not from our tradition. So therefore we need to find what is our heritage, what is our culture and understand what is the essence of it." The fact that Western culture was being adopted by Arab-Muslims was understood to be proof of the need to engage traditional Arab-Muslim culture.

Another student expressed the shift in values as loss of identity, noting, "The loss of identity is very critical to us. People today are asking for modern, for Western designs. Islamic designs are used only in mosques and tombs." As Arab-Muslims adopt Western values, students were aware that one result was that Arab-Muslim culture was pushed toward historic rites and away from daily living. The relegation of Arab-Muslim culture to "mosques and tombs" was

seen as proof of the need to bring traditional values back into the mainstream of Arab-Muslim life.

Having understood the sense of cultural loss among students of the Institute, it became apparent that the academic program offered new perspectives and a deep sense of hope. Students spoke of having "found" their culture through the study of Islamic cultural history and the techniques of the traditional arts. As one student explained, "All my life I was interested in Islamic culture. Even through grade school I was interested in Arab history. But when I came here on a visit and I saw that it was an academic course, I was so excited to study the identity of the Arab. I was amazed." Students often expressed how surprised they were to be introduced to Arab-Muslim culture, as if it had been hidden from them through the relentless Western view pressed at them through fast food, television, and the drum beat of consumerism.

As they experienced a new vision of Arab-Muslim culture, they were eager to express how helpful it was for them. A faculty member noted, "People feel good because they learn something about their culture, about who they are. It is a source of empowerment for us and for Jordanians, because it is ours." The awakening to traditional culture was understood to be a part of the curriculum that propelled the students into further study and created new vision for them as they engaged daily life.

A student expressed the new vision she received and how she shared it with her family. Together, they were changed, as she explained, "They started to think, like me, they started to notice that this is related to Islamic art, that this is related to Islamic culture. They started to notice the beauty and the details and used to think it was from the West, but now they realize this is from Islamic culture. It makes us proud of our culture." Students articulated how learning

about Arab-Muslim culture connected them to something much deeper because of the traditional nature of the art. A student noted that, "Islamic art is not like any other art. It's history, it's culture. When you see pen and ink, when you see a line from a pen, it's more than pressure. It's also a reflection of your heart. It's very unique, it's the work of our grandfather. And the spirit of the very old stays." Part of the renewing capacity of traditional art was the echo of previous generations in what is produced today. The timeless element of traditional art is consistent with Islam's emphasis on community and the metaphysic that emphasizes the timelessness of truth.

Traditional Islamic art as a cultural expression was renewing to students and faculty alike. They expressed a deep sense of relief and enthusiasm as their collective eyes were opened to the values of the past. Students acutely felt the loss of dignity as their culture was replaced, and equal delight at the prospect of regaining it and spreading it to others.

The importance of others understanding Arab-Muslim culture was often noted. Having grown in personal understanding, student had a great desire to spread the knowledge of the Arab-Muslim heritage. One student explained, "It's important for us to take our religion and our identity as Arabs to the West, to help them understand it more. This art can show it to people by its design, the geometry, the decoration. We can use this in the West and help them understand who we are. They need to know about us, it's our duty."

Another student explained that knowledge of Arab-Muslim culture would remind people of who they really were, getting past the consumerism of the West. She stated, "I think you know, this is the first college of Islamic art. It's not well known! So we do outreach, we teach people, we talk about it. It reminds people of who they are, that they are not just getting things." It would appear that students were given a clear understanding of Arab-Muslim culture through

Islamic cultural history, and courage to assess their personal values through a traditional Islamic metaphysical platform. As the next section will demonstrate, the clarity and courage they possessed allowed them to enter liminal space, assess their personal values, and see for the first time the cultural options which were open to them.

The function of "communitas:"

After living with a sense of loss over the diminishment of culture, then gaining the strength of having found their heritage when introduced to the history of traditional Islamic culture, ITIAA students had established a personal, metaphysical, and cultural platform that allowed them to step into liminal space through the ritual of traditional Islamic artistic techniques. Students repeatedly described a profound experience, using analogies such as swimming in the ocean, to describe the reflective space they entered during the exercise of traditional Islamic art techniques. While in the experience, students described being changed, refreshed, and given peace. They also were able to assess their own values, Western values, and Arab-Muslim values. They described processes of assessment that often resulted in the selective picking of some Western values, then consciously assimilating the values into their Arab-Muslim identity.

During one interview, the student spoke deeply about the process of traditional Islamic art technique and entering liminal space. She explained,

> "You draw, you make the lines, maybe you start with the circle. Then you move from
> that further. If you are working from the plan, like the Dome of the Rock, it all begins
> with a circle. Then you see new elements, you find the geometry. It is like swimming,
> when you first see the sea you think you know, but you have to step into it, maybe it's

warm, maybe it's cold. You step in and you begin to feel it. If you choose to keep going you feel it more deeply, more strongly. Is it really warm? Too cold? You feel it and you keep going. You feel all of it!"

The student described a profoundly comprehensive experience, which would be echoed by others.

Another student mentioned traditional techniques as the introduction to a reflective space. "Even the processes that we use in the art are a spiritual journey. You are sitting on the floor doing very small circles, or grinding the gold leaf into powder before using it in a painting, you are thinking of Allah." The process of grinding gold is an especially long one, as students take gold leaf and grind it by hand under a stone pestle, until the pieces are fine enough to be mixed with other ingredients and made into paint. If the gold is too rough, it will not appear smooth, but if too fine, it will not hold additional layers of paint used to outline designs. The process is long, requires exact skill, and if not correct, can ruin a painting. The process was also one that connected deeply to the definition of liminal, in which a soul and gold were both being changed simultaneously.

The vivid sense of entering, being within, and feeling the entire process profoundly defined the liminal process of stepping out of the current and into something between. While within the space, the student explained that there was also a sense of discovery, noting, "And this if you go into the water you see new things in the water.   There are fish in there, there is coral, it's so beautiful inside the water. The geometry is the same way. You go deeper and deeper and you feel it more and more. You are amazed, you feel the beauty! You swim in the geometry and

16

the beauty as you study and as you draw. Just like swimming" The experience is one of being submerged, carried away from the physical present, and discovering something new.

During an interview with another student, the analogy of swimming was mentioned. The student immediately agreed, responding, "Yes! I feel it very strongly. And it is only me and my work. You can come in and I don't even hear you. Very deep in my painting, it goes so very deep for me. Yes that is true. It takes you to another place, somewhere very far, you had never went there but you wished you could go there. This work takes me to wherever I have in my imagination." The liminal space is again explained as a deep feeling, a sense of being far away, and disconnected from the physical present.

A faculty member described a profound sense of give and take during traditional art techniques, explaining that within the liminal space there is something of a dialogue. She stated (with the researcher's questions in italics),

> "I feel that I can give and receive from doing the art of illumination. As I give to the work, the work gives to me. As it changes, I also change. *Change? How do you mean? In what way?* I can make things that are beautiful, and that changes me. *What is it like when you are doing the work? When you are being changed?* I forget everything else. Everything is gone, even my kids. It is just me and the work. *What is that like? Is it a prayerful time?* This time is just for me. Something that is just me and I think of nothing else."

The pattern is repeated: the ritual of a traditional Islamic art technique, which is based on a metaphysical authority, the entering of a deeply private and personal liminal space that is distant from the physical present, and a time of deep personal reflection.

In discussing the liminal experience, another faculty member readily agreed with the observed process, explaining its function in her own life, "Whenever I feel that I am taking something for granted I have to go to that place and review the values in my life. The community, the person, the art in my life. I have to stop and observe what's happening to me. And I see that I get used to things, and I lose patience. Am I missing something? Living an unbalanced life? And I do comparisons and see what is happening." The liminal space is a place to reflect deeply. By stepping out of the present, faculty and students seemed to gain perspective by looking back into their lives from a more objective standpoint, with authority to change based on the Islamic metaphysic. When asked about the liminal experience, a faculty member noted, "Contemplation gives me space to assess and to think. To put things in perspective. To understand what's going on."

Faculty and students also expressed a new sense of peace when they returned from the liminal space. One student expressed the comfort she received while in the liminal place. When asked if she was different when she came back, she replied, "Yes, like I feel comfortable. I have so many emotions inside and I'm relieved. I'm calm. Peace. It can be hard to take a break, I don't want to stop. I want to keep going." The liminal experience facilitates personal reflection that results in a newly found sense of peace.

A fourth-year student explained that the liminal experience was clearly reflected in her work, and had a further purpose in her art, "I feel very calm, very peaceful. And that calmness and peacefulness is expressed in my artwork when I create. That helps people to see and love the good. As I progress in my painting I feel like I'm also progressing spiritually. My paintings and my artwork lift me up and nourish me, in order to be a better person and in dealing with other

people." The liminal experience is expressed in her art, which then goes on to affect others who view the art.

But students and faculty were aware that the experience they treasured was not for every student. One student explained that, "I have tried to explain the ideas of Islamic art to others. The phases of spirituality that occur when doing art. Some of us love to come here to experience that feeling. But not all of the students. Some of them, but not all of them. But some do come and experience that feeling of connection between spirituality and action." This statement reflected previous observation that not every student is expected to experience the deeper elements of traditional Islamic art. In addition, it would appear that those with more mature spirituality and greater intellectual capacity might be able to engage in reflective, liminal experiences more often, or on a deeper level. It may be possible that a kind of "liminal momentum" occurs, adding additional strength to the artistic and personal growth process.

Value synthesis and effective cultural diplomacy:

Having a solid platform of confidence in the metaphysical authority of Islam and the Arab-Muslim culture, as well as traditional techniques to usher them into liminal spaces, students consistently expressed value synthesis as one of the products of the liminal space. Throughout the interview process, a range of value synthesis ideas were described, some in great detail.

For example, one student acknowledged that the Middle East had been positioned as the receiver of Western values, but then added that they no longer had to simply receive, but could now choose what they defined as the good in the values, joining them with their own. The result would not be Western nor Arab-Muslim, but something new and better. The student explained,

"So as a receiver, as the East receives these values, it depends on the approach of taking it. Some values are good. But I have to take the goodness of these values adding it to the goodness of my culture and bringing it out in something unique. Something different. *Ah, not East and not West, but something else?* Yes, yes, something that is even better. More than the two civilizations apart. So it is something new with an Islamic identity."

The idea that Arab-Muslims could stand apart and assess Western values, then consciously assimilate them into their own values to create something new with an Islamic identity, but that would be better, was repeated.

When asked about changing value systems, an undergraduate student explained,

"I think from a religious view we can't change much, because Islam has rules and we need to follow those rules. But it's not bad to look at other cultures and try to learn from them. A person can take what's good from a culture and grow his own culture more. He can benefit his culture by bringing new values in. *So it's not to accept or reject, but to select?* Yes! It can't kill our identity, but should help it grow. If it does not, we do not need to accept that value."

The idea of choosing values and creating something new was persistent in the interview process. In addition, many students had specific examples about how they would go about producing artifacts that represented the value synergy.

One student, with a background in graphic design, came to the Institute to engage her Arab-Muslim roots with the goal to create something new in film. She explained, "Someday I hope to also understand animation. I love to design and I want to combine these elements together. I was very good at animation when I studied graphic design, but put it aside when I

started to study here. Now that I have a good start, I hope to begin working on merging the three together." When asked to clarify, she defined the three as animation, graphic design, and traditional Islamic art. Her vision was to combine the three into one new thing, better than the three elements separated.

Another student designed furniture and came to the Institute for the Master's degree program in Islamic Art. When asked why he was studying at the Institute, he explained "As a furniture designer, I hear about Italian styles, Moorish styles, Spanish styles. All these styles. But not about Arabic style, Islamic style. I want to see an Arab, an Islamic identity. So why? To create something that is an Arab Islamic identity." As the discussion continued, the student expressed great passion in creating furniture that would be appreciated and purchased in the West, carrying Islamic beauty into people's homes and improving the quality of life of others.

Another student, who had been trained in contemporary art, entered the program at the Institute because of a desire to go deeper into the values that are represented in art. She noted that, "Before I came here, I was not that interested in Islamic design. I was trained in Modernist art. But after I came here and I began to learn, I now hope to mix the two together, to see something different." Her art, displayed in several prominent galleries in Amman, was considered a unique expression of Arab-Muslim cultural forms combined with the techniques of contemporary art, such as watercolor and abstraction. The same student was designing Islamic clothing for women, that retained the modesty and geometric patterns of traditional Islamic design, but combined with light materials and styles that would be considered Western.

An older MA student worked for a large advertising firm headquartered in Amman. He had enjoyed a very successful career as a graphic designer, including creating the ad series for

the Formula One Racing Series in Dubai, UAE. He was attending ITIAA because of his vision to combine techniques and design to create something new that would bridge the Western and Arab worlds. He said, "My undergraduate program was in graphic design. And I want to combine what I learned in modern graphic design schools with the knowledge of Islamic art. To bring something that combines the two in the field of graphic design. Something that is mixed, that is both."

A student who had been raised in Chechnya was studying at the Institute, drawn by the Institute's clear traditional Islamic approach to art. She explained her vision, "I want to make some kind of animated cartoon based on Islamic values. I mean a whole movie. Something that is like Toy Story, or something like that, a full movie based on Islamic values and made with Islamic proportions and design. It would be beautiful, compelling." The process at ITIAA was helping to enable a young Muslim woman from Chechnya to develop a vision to impact the world by creating a beautiful, computer animated film that reflected Islamic values.

The Institute of Traditional Islamic Art and Architecture had developed an academic program that solidified Arab-Muslim's students view of their own culture. The program also clarified and strengthened their understanding and confidence in the Islamic metaphysic. Traditional Islamic art techniques then facilitated reflection, based on their cultural and spiritual strength, which allowed them to assess their personal values, Arab-Muslim values, and the values of the West. As they assessed the value systems, they often discovered that they had freedom to choose values from the West, and to assimilate the Western values into their Arab-Muslim culture. They did not see this as weakening, but as a way to strengthen themselves and their culture. In addition, they could envision specific projects that would create artifacts that reflected the new cultural blend and would be understood by others.

Products of liminality and their anticipated role in Jordan (and cultural diplomacy):

The next and final step in the process is to understand how the faculty and students envisioned the impact of the process described. As they created artifacts, including film, art, and commercial ads, which were representative of the synthesis of values, what would happen? Many of the faculty and students had a very clear idea.

Several expressed the need to create such artifacts because of the unbalanced cultural role of the West. Western values, seen in commercialism, global brands like McDonalds, and styles of dress, were very apparent in Amman. While students would often embrace aspects of Western values, they were concerned about how much influence the West was having in Jordan. ITIAA students also were concerned about how they were perceived by the West, expressing concern regarding Western stereotypes of Arabs as terrorists. Students felt that the West needed to know the truth about Arabs and Islam, including how the two cultures had shared traditional arts and understanding centuries ago. As one student explained, "The West had a golden period in architecture. They used the sacred proportions and the geometry as well. But they have not kept it. Like us, we don't see the art as something for now, but something in history. There are very beautiful things in the West, but they did not work on it." Taking artifacts to the West was seen as an action that would communicate truth, reminding the West of a shared history and appreciation for traditional art.

Another student referred to the idea of reviving Arab-Muslim culture, a strongly held value at ITIAA, in light of the Institute's role in re-creating the Minbar of Saladin. The student also noted that there was a deep need for Arab identity to be understood around the world, as she stated, "I can translate what I'm studying here into the real world. Because, unfortunately, there

is very little of the Arab identity that has been translated to the wider world. I can study and help communicate our identity." The previously noted examples of artifacts that would communicate the synthesis of values would also speak to a broader culture in terms that it could understand. As another student explained, "Not all of the people understand what we are studying here. Even here in Amman, they don't know why we are working on this. But the point here is to give the people a right understanding. To reflect the truth of Islamic culture through ourselves. And we can pass on this heritage for one more generation."

A faculty member reflected on the idea of reviving Arab-Muslim culture through his specialty, architecture. After a long pause, he stated,

> "The opportunity of merging the modern and the Islamic should simply be. Because Islamic architecture has grown from nothing to what you see in Spain, but it stopped there. So our rule, our hope here is to study it, to know everything we can about it, and to start where it stopped. To begin it again, but in another way. We have modern designs around us, but we take it and adjust it to Islamic art principles, the proportions and the properties. We don't want the modern to affect us, but to affect the modern."

He spoke of using modern materials, but in Islamic styles. He mentioned the need to make buildings comfortable and efficient, and to use available Western technology, but within an Islamic design. Affecting modernism was a consistent hope among faculty and students, ultimately hoping to see Islamic values being imported into the West in the forms of beautiful design based on traditional technique.

Another faculty member emphasized the bigger picture as well, noting that the institute was founded to have a greater impact. She asserted, "It is not only the little stamp of our lives,

it's more. The goal of this place is not to keep the Islamic arts in this place, but to spread it all around. We have an outreach team that works with youth in Jordan. Sometimes we bring them to this place, sometimes we go to them. We visited in the South in Aqaba, more than 500 kids. We worked with them and taught them about Islamic art." The faculty member understood that by teaching children Islamic art, they would be doing all the steps previously noted, including helping children understand that they were part of a long and deep Arab-Muslim culture and that the arts were based on Islamic tenets with the potential to unify Arabs and non-Arabs.

The pervasive role of beauty:

The role of beauty emerged consistently in the research. When talking about the liminal processes engaged through traditional techniques, most of the faculty and students ended up discussing the role and power of beauty. The following statement from a fourth-year student is a vivid, summary explanation of traditional technique, liminal synthesis, and resulting beauty:

> "One of my projects from last term, it was inspired from Gothic architecture in the West, a rose window from a Christian cathedral. I did the analysis of the window and the motives that were used, then I created something new from it. You can see the Islamic motive, and you can see what was originally there, but the outcome is a mix between the two civilizations in a single painting. Anybody would see this painting and would find something different because it has Islamic motif, gold leaf forms, but all together it is something beautiful"

Beauty is understood to be a product of the process, but also what will engage others as they look at the liminal product. Beauty was mentioned repeatedly, as having a power and a force that could resonate with Arab-Muslims and people from the West.

When a faculty member was asked about the role of the Institute in Jordan, she mentioned both reviving and beauty in the same statement. She explained that ITIAA's purpose was "Reviving the values, the good, the virtues that we have in our culture. The vibration of the beauty. The intuitive vibration that is starting to diminish these days. So reviving this is going back to the roots and reviving the good and the virtues of the culture." When asked to clarify, she explained that she felt beauty in her heart, in an "intuitive vibration." She saw the modern styles of buildings and dress as diminishing the beauty that had been part of the Islamic culture, and hoped that the Institute's graduates would succeed in designing new approaches to the traditional values that would once again "vibrate with beauty."

A student, when asked about the arts potential effect in Jordan, responded in a similar fashion, "They will increase beauty. These days, wherever you go, the buildings, the designs, they are ugly. If you revive these arts you can see the beauty. Why? Because of the proportions, they are there and you will like it. The proportions are in you and then they are out there and you will like it." The student was referring to the traditional proportions defined by sacred Islamic geometry. An administrator reflected her thoughts, adding "The proportions that are in nature, in the art, are also inside of you as a human being, Allah's creation. So people can notice and feel relaxed, why? Because God is there and in the proportions. You can see them and you can feel them. That's how I see it." Both asserted that the reason traditional Islamic art could change culture was because of the inherent nature of beauty, that connected with something intuitive within people who could not help but to respond.

One fourth year student, when asked to describe beauty, also used very personal language, "It's hard to find words to describe beauty. Anything beautiful I can sense. I can see it in anything, even something that I think is ugly at first. I can find beauty in anything. I can look

at the beauty side of things, maybe because I'm a positive person." She expressed her idea in a very personal way, but also noted that beauty was pervasive, even though it was elusive. There seemed to be a dichotomy in some of the responses regarding beauty, as it was at the same time always present (as Allah is always present, beauty is also), but also elusive, as some people are not able to see it, or others have forgotten it.

A faculty member, when asked about the role of beauty, referred back to the ITIAA logo, stating,

"Allah is beautiful and He loves beauty. Therefore you are doing something here that God loves. And if God loves something and you are doing something that God loves, then God will love you and what you are doing. And He will be assisting you in everything you do, because you are always concentrating on God being beautiful and God loving beauty. So you have to think about the way you teach, because beauty is not just a physical thing, it's a subtle thing in every part of our lives."

Many faculty and students understood beauty to be so closely connected to Allah that he was literally present in the beauty. A student furthered the idea, when she explained "Whatever you see, the beauty you see, everything relates to Allah. He is beautiful, His creation is beautiful, so the art reflects Him." Beauty literally reflected Allah, the creator of beauty.

One administrator explained how when he first came to the Institute, he arrived with a Western understanding of aesthetics. But after working at the Institute, he began to change,

"None can describe beauty. Everyone has a different understanding of beauty. My view has changed along the way. It changes as my beliefs have changed. I used to look at modern buildings and be amazed. But as I have grown and studied, I started to change my

beliefs and my definition of beauty changed along the way. God is beautiful and he loves to see beauty. So I started to think of beauty in a different way. When something touches me and makes me feel different, comfortable, or happy, is when something is beautiful."

Perhaps part of beauty being elusive is that it is understood to be so deeply personal. If a person feels it, they know it. But a different person viewing the same object may not see beauty at all, and so it can be both powerful and elusive at the same time.

A faculty member was asked in a second interview to help define beauty. She described a process of finding beauty, that it was veiled in the world, but visible to those who could see it because of Islamic metaphysics. She explained, "All of the time I am looking for the beauty, for the perfection that is in things. Lines, colors, in this college they taught me to be organized and they taught me to find the beauty. Beauty on the highest level." So there was a process of looking for and finding beauty, and that beauty could be on different levels, with some forms of beauty more pure than others.

A faculty program director, when asked to clarify her view of beauty, spoke to its ability to act, that it had a force to it like a magnet. Her explanation referred back to the soul-shaping virtues described earlier and also connected the existence and power of beauty to Allah. She explained,

"I believe it is a magnet, because you will not see beauty unless you have beauty inside you. And you will not appreciate beauty unless you have it in there. And you will not create something beautiful unless you have it. The best reflection of any beautiful manner is to have it in yourself. How to have it, well installed in your system, is to work on

yourself. How can you work on yourself? There are many instructions in the Qur'an and also in the upraising system we have in our family. And so this has an effect also on the link between yourself and Allah, which effects the beauty installation in you. And so it's not a passive thing, nor is it a one-sided thing."

The faculty member's response encapsulated much of the content of this paper. The existence of beauty is based on the metaphysics of Islam, in which Allah is both beautiful and the source of all beauty. But there is a human role to cultivate the beauty inside of a person by engaging with Allah, following instructions for life from the Qur'an and living within the Islamic community of family and mosque. As these processes are engaged, people will be changed, made more beautiful by their increasingly close association with Allah. The beauty that results will be evident to any human, as all humans are made in the image of Allah.

At the Institute of Traditional Islamic Art and Architecture, a clear process emerged demonstrating the profound role of liminality in the synthesizing of Arab-Muslim and Modern values. Liminal space, facilitated by the traditional Islamic art techniques, enhanced the students' capacity and ability to step outside of their preconceived cultural boundaries, critically assess modernist and Arab-Muslim value systems, and create synergy between the apparently divergent systems. Evidence of the liminal aspects of the students' experiences emerged through interviews and in the production and function of liminal artifacts of art, from film to fashion design. Within the liminal process described, beauty played a central role, both as a motivating force, but also as a quality that had the power to represent the presence of Allah.

In an interview on the top floor of George Washington University's Melvin Gelvan Research Library, Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr was asked to describe traditional Islam's alternative

to modernist culture. Dr. Nasr responded by referring to the Qutb Mosque in Delhi, India. It was the first mosque built in India, and as it was being planned, no one was sure how it would look. People had not seen a combination of Islam and India before. But, Dr. Nasr explained, when it was finished, everyone who saw it knew that it was clearly a mosque and that it was clearly Indian.

When one considers what the traditional Islamic alternative to modernity might be, the answer may be found at the Institute of Traditional Islamic Art and Architecture. The liminal process based on Islamic metaphysics and facilitated through traditional Islamic art technique, produced in a wide range of students new ideas of how Arab-Muslim culture should engage Western culture. As Dr. Nasr explained with the Qutb Mosque, it is not for others to decide what the engagement between cultures should look like, but to allow the traditional principles to act within those who were doing the designing, and trusting that what they produced would be sincere, grounded, and beautiful. As students continue to enroll and graduate at ITIAA, many new forms of beauty will continue to emerge from their changed lives and souls.

Bibliography

Bartlett, Leslie & Frances Vavrus (2009). *Critical approaches to comparative education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Birks, Melanie & Mills, Jane (2011). *Grounded theory: A practical guide*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bryant, Antony & Charmaz, Kathy (Eds.) (2007). *The Sage handbook of grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Bryant, Antony & Kathy Charmaz (2007). Grounded theory in historical perspective: An epistemological account. In Antony Bryant (Ed.), *The Sage handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 31-58). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L Strauss (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldaine De Gruyer.

Hegel, George W. F. (trans. 2009). *The phenomenology of the spirit (The phenomenology of the mind)*. Retrieved January 13, 2011 from Digireads.com.

Hirsch, Edward (2006). *Poet's choice*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Inc.

Hodgson, Marshall G.S. (1993). *Rethinking world history*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Horkheimer, Max (2002). *Critical theory: Selected essays*. New York, NY: The Continuum Publishing Company.

Moosa, Ebrahim (2005). *Ghazali and the poetics of imagination*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

Moosa, Ebrahim (2006). Contrapuntal readings in Muslim thought: Translations and transitions. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 74 (1), 107-118.

Muhammad, Ali (2002). The culture and politics of human rights in the context of Islam. In A. Mohammad (Ed.), *Islam encountering globalization* (pp. 111-131). London, UK: Routledge Curzon.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (2002). *Islam and the plight of modern man*. Cambridge, UK: The Islamic Texts Society.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (2006). *Islamic philosophy from its origin to its present*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Nasr, Seyyed Hossein (2011). *Islam in the modern world: Challenged by the West, threatened by fundamentalism, keeping faith with tradition*. Harper Collins e-books, Kindle Edition.

Quraishi, Mazhar Mahmud (1989). The role of Islamic thought in the resolution of the present crisis in science and technology. In L. Al-Faruqi (Ed.), *Toward Islamization of disciplines* (pp. 93-111). Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought.

Rahman, Fazlur (1982). *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an intellectual tradition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Ramadan, Tariq (2009). *Radical reform: Islamic ethics and liberation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rush, Fred (2009). Conceptual foundations of early critical theory. In F. Rush (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to critical theory* (pp. 6-40). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Shwandt,Thomas A (2007). *The SAGE dictionary of qualitative inquiry, 3rd edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Smith, Philip (1999). The elementary forms of place and their transformations: A Durkheimian model. *Qualitative Sociology*, 22 (1), 13-36.

Tibawi, A. L. (1974). *Arabic and Islamic themes: Historical, educational, and literary studies*. London: Luzac and Company LTD.

Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt (2005). *Friction: An ethnography of global connection*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Turner, Victor (1977). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press.

Yin, Robert K. (2003a). *Applications of case study research, 2nd edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Yin, Robert K. (2003b). Case *study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.