An Oral History of the Islamic Center of Maine, Orono

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An Oral History of the Islamic Center of Maine, Orono

by

Kyle Franklin

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of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors
(Economics)

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Abstract

In January 2002, the first freestanding mosque in the state of Maine was built near the University of Maine campus. Called the Islamic Center of Maine (ICM), it was established to serve the growing Muslim population in the Orono area, in particular the student and faculty population at the University. The establishment of this Islamic Center was due to the efforts and hard work of Muslim faculty and students, as well as families in the area and generous contributions from Muslims around the United States and other countries.

A new, larger center was constructed in 2010, again to meet the need for a larger space for the growing Muslim population. An Islamic center is more than just a mosque; it is a focal point for the Muslim community to gather for celebrations, holidays, education, and much more. It serves many functions, which, in a Muslim majority country, may already be served outside the mosque, such as education, a meeting space, and outreach. This thesis uses oral interviews and documentary sources to tell the history of the ICM, how the Muslim community in Orono practices their religion, and how the ICM plays a role in the larger community through its Outreach Program.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Islamic Center of Maine community for welcoming me and trusting me to write their history. In particular, I would like to thank Eaman Attia, Jenan Jondy, Renae Al-Fdeilat, Najam, Nabeel, and Sajidah Hashmi, Asiya and Abdulraheem Sbayi, Dr. Mahmoud and Taghreed El-Begearmi, Omar Conteh, and Tameem Alsamsam for taking the time to be interviewed. There are others not named specifically but who helped enormously as well.

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Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Melissa Ladenheim for her guidance, meticulous editing, and dedication to her students. In 2007, she brought a class to the Islamic Center of Maine, the beginning of what is now an educational collaboration that I first experienced the spring semester of my first year which resulted in a complete change in my undergraduate studies and future.
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Introduction

In Orono, Maine, on the corner of Park and Washburn streets just off the University of Maine campus, is the first freestanding mosque built in the state of Maine. It was built in 2002 and provided a much-desired space for the local Muslim community. At the time, the Muslim community was mostly comprised of University of Maine students and professors, other local professionals and businesspeople. The Islamic Center of Maine (ICM) was originally built by Muslims affiliated with the University of Maine, but with the intention of serving and welcoming all Muslims in Maine (El-Begearmi, 2014). The Islamic Center is more than a place to pray; it is a place for the Muslim community to gather and it serves functions which, in other countries or areas that have a large Muslim population, may be served elsewhere. Mohammed Tabbah, former president of the ICM, described the functions of the ICM, “Our major mission and original one is to serve our community and provide it a place for prayer and religious observation and study. It is for worship, social gathering, and education” (Neff, 2010). Events at the ICM range from daily prayers to a monthly potluck dinner, from holiday celebrations to a Sunday school program teaching Muslim children the Quran, from outreach programs to Friday evening study circles.

Before the establishment of the ICM, Muslims at the University of Maine held Friday prayers in the Drummond Chapel on the third floor of the Memorial Union at the University of Maine. The first group to start Friday prayers in the early 1980s consisted of only three men, but the community’s roots were diverse from the start. One man was Egyptian, one Saudi Arabian, and one an American who accepted Islam (El-Begearmi,
2014). Soon after, there was a Pakistani family, a Gambian family, an Iraqi family, and others from around the United States, Canada, and other regions of the world.

Over time, the community grew in population until it needed a space of its own. The composition of the community evolved from being primarily students to families. Judy Harrison, a religion reporter who has written about the Muslim community for the Bangor Daily News (BDN) for nearly 20 years said, “Back in 1997, fewer than 10 families who were mosque members lived and worked in the community. The rest, between 25 and 75 people depending on the year, were foreign students at the University of Maine who intended to return to their home countries when they received their degrees” (2014). However, since then the Muslim community has grown significantly, particularly the number of Muslims who stay to live in Orono and surrounding communities.

The Muslim community is well established in the general Orono area. This may be in part due to extensive work on their behalf to host open houses at the ICM where the general public is welcomed to come and learn about Islam. The ICM has developed a strong Outreach Program, over time developing a relationship with the University of Maine Muslim Student Association and the Honors College at the University. The ICM hosts open houses with a guest speaker for the general public, and also presentations for University classes. It engages the community in many other ways to educate the public, such as hospital staff regarding care for Muslims, and the result is that the Muslim community is very well integrated into the general Orono community.

This thesis is a snapshot in time of the ICM, and it will describe the history and nature of the Islamic Center of Maine based on oral interviews and documentary sources.
It is written with the intention of shedding light on what it means to be Muslim in Orono, Maine and how the Muslim community has engaged with the larger community as a whole.

This history is not exhaustive, and many people have made important contributions to the ICM who are not mentioned in this thesis. In addition, the Outreach Coordinators and others whose tasks are to create and conduct outreach programs have provided a great deal of information for this thesis. There are many other leaders in the community who serve different capacities. This thesis does not provide full insight into the leadership of the ICM community. The history told here is as I have understood it based on my research, and it also does not reflect the views of the ICM, Honors College, or any other institution. In addition, I want to address the use of the word ‘American,’ when referring to U.S. citizens. I recognize that the use of the term ‘American’ to mean U.S. citizens is incorrect, but it is commonly used that way, and therefore I will use it to maintain consistency with common rhetoric and avoid confusion.

Before discussing the history of Muslims in Maine and the ICM, I will briefly discuss the current state of the American Muslim community to put into perspective experiences of Muslims in Orono, Maine. Afterwards, I will look at the specific history of the ICM in Orono, Maine, how Muslims in the area practice Islam, the development of the ICM’s Outreach Program, and the ICM in the local media.
Methods

My research for this thesis is based primarily on oral interviews of Muslims who have practiced or currently practice at the Islamic Center of Maine in Orono, and on articles about the ICM and local Muslim community published in the *Bangor Daily News*. I chose to do oral interviews because there was little documentation of the ICM’s history, and also because I am interested in stories and storytelling. As well, oral interviews could provide an understanding of the history of the ICM from the perspective of those who experienced it.

I was originally introduced to the ICM through a class in the Honors College in the spring semester of 2011 and have since attended many events and open houses, as well as getting to know people at the ICM, so I was not completely new to the community. On December 13, 2013, I presented my thesis research proposal to the ICM community at the Friday night study circle. Eaman Attia, a member of my thesis committee and ICM, facilitated my presentation, and Tameem Alsamsam, ICM President, introduced me. I left copies of the following letter for individuals to contact me for interviews or more information:

**Oral History of the Islamic Center of Maine, Orono**

Dear All,

I am a student of the University of Maine Honors College, and I will be conducting research on the history of the Islamic Center of Maine, Orono. Through interviewing members and founders of the ICMO, I hope to understand more about what it means to be Muslim in Orono, Maine. I understand this community is very diverse, and I will conduct these interviews and research with respect and careful consideration. In the end, I hope for this project to shed light on our community and contribute to mutual understanding, as well as contribute to the recorded history of this important community in Orono.
It is my hope that you will give this endeavor your blessing and if you wish to participate or have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

My best,
Kyle Franklin
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207-604-4320

Members of the ICM community facilitated my ability to conduct this oral history both in their willingness to be interviewed and by suggesting the names of people who they perceived as being important in the founding and establishment of the ICM. They helped put me in contact with previous members who had since moved away and vouched for me and my research project. For example, everyone said I must speak with Dr. Mahmoud and Taghreed El-Begearmi, who had major roles in the founding of the Islamic Center of Maine and I was able to interview them thanks to the help of many who contacted them on my behalf. Others with whom I spoke with had either official roles in the ICM or were individuals with particular experiences such as the Outreach Program or a convert to Islam. As well, some of my informants contacted me via email or expressed interest to me when I would attend the Friday study circle. Initially, more women than men reached out to me via email, but as the project continued and I began attending the Friday study circles, men began talking to me. Participant observation therefore played a major role in finding men to interview, and participants were self-selected.

All interviews were recorded using an audio recorder, with the exception of Mahmoud and Taghreed El-Begearmi, where I took notes. All interviews were conducted in person, with the exception of Jenan Jondy and Mahmoud and Taghreed El-Begearmi,
which were conducted over the phone. Each interview conducted was tailored to each individual. For example, questions asked of Mahmoud and Taghreed El-Begearmi were about the earliest group of Muslims praying together and the subsequent establishment of the ICM.

I interviewed six women: Renae Al-Fdeilat, Jenan Jondy, Eaman Attia, Sajidah Hashmi, Asiya Sbayi, and Taghreed El-Begearmi, and five men: Najam Hashmi, Omar Conteh, Abdulraheem Sbayi, Tameem Alsamsam, and, Mahmoud El-Begearmi. I also communicated with two non-Muslim women who have been involved with the ICM: Judy Harrison, a reporter for the Bangor Daily News, and Melissa Ladenheim, a Preceptor in the University of Maine’s Honors College. All recordings were deleted upon completion of the thesis. I only interviewed adults over the age of 18 as stipulated by the UM Institutional Review Board (IRB) regarding research involving human subjects (see appendix).

It is important to note that the goal of this thesis is to tell a history and paint a general picture of the ICM community and what it means to be Muslim in Orono. There are many more stories that could be told. I have made a conscious effort to present information that sheds light on the community as a whole. This thesis does not explore internal politics or conflict within the ICM. This does not mean that internal conflict does not exist, but that none was discovered from my participant observation or from interviews.
Chapter 1: Islam in the United States

Islam is not new to the United States. It is unknown how far back the first Muslims arrived in North America, but some speculate that it was pre-Columbus (Gallup, 2009). During the slave era of the United States, some North African slaves were Muslims, though it is unknown how many (Gallup, 2009).

Dr. Sulayman Nyang of Howard University characterized Muslim history in the United States as having six stages in a report done by Gallup titled *Muslim Americans: A National Portrait – An in-depth analysis of America’s most diverse religious community* (2009). The first stage, he wrote, is the suspected presence of African Muslims before the arrival of Columbus. The second stage is the age of slavery in pre- and post-Colonial America, and the general consensus among academics is that at least 10% of slaves were Muslims. The third stage was the immigration of Muslims after the Civil War to work in manufacturing. The fourth stage was the settling of South Asian immigrants, from the Punjab in India especially, in the west during the late 19th century. The fifth stage started in the Cold War era with a U.S. campaign against the Soviet Union to recruit university students from Muslim countries. This era resulted in the establishment of the Muslims in America Society, Muslim student organizations and Islamic societies. The coming of Muslim immigrants and migration of African-Americans from the south to the north resulted in the Nation of Islam as well. Lastly, the sixth stage is post 9/11, which has created fear and learning simultaneously.

Since 9/11, the discussion in the U.S. about Islam and the U.S. Muslim community erupted, and words previously unknown by the common American, such as *jihad*, became common, though misunderstood. This also happened after the Iranian
Revolution and hostage crisis in 1979. According to David Watt, Islamic
Fundamentalism was not part of standard vocabulary in the U.S. before 1979.
Fundamentalism was previously a word ascribed to Protestants in the early 20th century
(Watt, 2010). After major national events, terminology and misunderstandings spread
through the media and into the common household as people try to understand what is
going on. These terms and words end up being a source of confusion and can create fear
among the public, all based on misunderstanding. Over time, ideally, the
misunderstandings are corrected and the truth prevails. The national discussion on Islam
and American Muslims post 9/11 fostered an opportunity for the public to learn about and
understand Islam and the American Muslim community.

Recently, national media has been featuring stories about Muslims in the United
States. The first Muslim college fraternity, Alpha Lambda Mu, began in 2013 at the
University of Texas in Dallas, to meet the desire of some young men who want to have a
fraternity, but want to avoid alcohol and some other cultural practices typically associated
with fraternity culture. Subsequently, chapters have been established at Cornell
University and University of California, San Diego. The founder, Ali Mahmoud, said in
an NPR interview, “We are American. We are American Muslims. Those two don’t
contradict each other at all. And so we're not hiding away ourselves, we're just living with
people who have the same beliefs that we do” (Frat of Their Own, 2014). This is
representative of the ways in which Muslim and American can merge into a cohesive
identity, because they are not giving up their own culture for a different one; rather
American Muslims are part of the fabric that is American culture. We are seeing all
throughout the nation Muslims and Muslim communities that are well established and developing their own niche.

Today, there is an estimated $170 billion for the American Muslim clothing market according to experts in a WBEZ interview by Mariam Sobh (2014). It is estimated that there are 8 million Muslims in the U.S., and modest fashion brands like Haute Hijab and Simply Zeena have taken on the task of meeting some of that demand (Sobh, 2014). The same thing is happening with halal food, which is food Islam permits Muslims to eat. Saffron Road is a whole foods brand and their CEO, Adnan Durrani, reported the company had $18 million in sales for 2013. Durrani had the idea for Saffron Road just after 9/11 saying, “I started thinking of ways to create a business model that was socially responsible, that could reflect the values that I felt were important to me in my faith, and not what I was seeing in the media” (Sobh, 2014).

The national discussion about Islam in the United States has created opportunities for the general public to learn about Islam and the rapidly growing U.S. Muslim population. Samuel Freedman of The New York Times wrote a piece on Elkader, Iowa, a town named after Abd el-Kader, a Muslim Algerian famous for his actions defending human rights, protecting non-Muslims from persecution, and most of all leading an inspiring revolution in the early 19th century against the French, which won him admiration from many Westerners (2013). The town was named after him in 1846 by Timothy Davis, who was a land developer and had read about el-Kader’s fight for independence. Today, the town and Algeria have an informal relationship, which has suffered some trouble since the revolution in Algeria and then the events of September 11, 2001 (Freedman, 2013). However, individuals in this small town have taken the
initiative to maintain the relationship, and when Elkader experienced a flood that
destroyed roughly 30 houses, the Algerian government sent $150,000 to help with
disaster relief (Freedman, 2013).

The relationship between Algeria and Elkader inspired an essay contest for the
local high school students, which revealed that the relationship has had effects on some
of the town’s youth. The 2011 contest winner, Bob Spielbauer, said after hearing some
college classmates making bigoted statements about Muslims “It felt personal. I felt like
they were attacking me. Because the project helped open my eyes. It helped give me a
positive opinion of Muslims. It was like filling in a blank” (Freedman, 2013). The
experience of Spielbauer changed his outlook, and this experience is not unique to
residents of Elkader, Iowa.

In Orono, Maine, a student wrote an article for the Bangor Daily News about his
experience with the Muslim community in Orono and lessons he learned that influenced
his outlook. Matthew McLaughlin of the University of Maine wrote in his article for the
BDN titled “Our responsibility to educate ourselves” that as a Roman Catholic he can
empathize with off-hand remarks generalizing his religion’s association with negative
events covered heavily by the national media, such as the child sex abuse scandals
(2012). He wrote, “There is a path that can be taken to avoid such animosity, and that is
education. It doesn’t have to be a college lecture or even an open house at the Islamic
Center. It can be a simple conversation between two people sharing ideas, thoughts,
concerns and questions and bridging the gap that could quite possibly lead to adverse
relations” (McLaughlin, 2012). Jenan Jondy, a former outreach coordinator at the Islamic
Center of Maine, in Orono, said to McLaughlin, “Freedom comes with a responsibility,
and that is education” (McLaughlin, 2012). Within the national narrative, we are seeing that as Muslims reach out and engage the community, individuals are becoming more acquainted and knowledgeable about the religion than before. This is the case in Orono, Maine. The national dialogue post 9/11 has compelled outreach efforts which have better familiarized people with Islam and Muslims, which is important in general but also because the U.S. Muslim population is increasing.

Largely, the role of Muslims and Islam in the American experience has been marginalized because of a misunderstanding by the general public about the history of Muslims in the U.S. Public opinion of American Muslims was at its highest just after 9/11 (Saylor, 2014). This may be due to sympathy towards hate crimes carried out in retaliation for 9/11. It is my opinion that some Americans have learned from mistakes made in the past, such as the internment of Japanese Americans after the bombing of Pearl Harbor (Saylor, 2014). The public could sympathize with innocent Muslims who are discriminated against because of the actions of a few extremists. However, the media framing of American Muslims has been polarizing, with some conservative programs fervently speaking against the community (Smith, 2013). The events of 9/11 have also resulted in a greater effort to do outreach and teach the public about Islam. This is especially convenient because Islam is the fastest growing religion in the U.S. With the controversy around some aspects of Islam in the U.S., such as sharia law, it is the perfect time for the public to learn more about Islam (Saylor, 2014).

Some controversies have done harm to public opinion regarding Muslims, such as the Park51 mosque, also called by the media the “Ground Zero mosque,” which in doing so instigated a negative public reaction. In 2000, there were 1,209 mosques in the U.S.
and by 2011 there were 2,106 (Pew, 2012). Around the country, there have been disputes over the construction of mosques. Some city planners have been taken to court for denying permission for the construction of mosques. Typical objections to the construction of mosques are claimed to be over traffic and environmental concerns, even when reports predict a better flow of traffic and the projects pass environmental tests (Pew, 2012).

There is some discourse in *The Islamic Monthly* calling into question whether there should even be a discussion about American Muslims regarding identity crises. Laila Alawa wrote that the identity of her generation “was formed amidst games of mosque hide and seek and dinners that both burnt and soothed my tongue. I grew up thinking that being Muslim in America was a natural thing, that our collective history and community were as ingrained in the cultural fabric of the United States as sliced bread” (2014). It was not until she grew older that she was exposed to dialogue suggesting there was a conflict between the identity of a Muslim and the identity of an American. In a response written the following day, Iram Ali defended the discourse as necessary because the Muslim community is so diverse and complicated (2014). A similar discussion evolved around a video that went viral on the internet called *Somewhere in America #Mipsterz*, which garnered support and opposition among the internet audience. The point of the film was to break down stereotypes by showing ‘hip’ Muslim women around the United States. Some felt the video was a shallow attempt to conform the *hijab* to American culture, rather than living what the *hijab* is truly about. Others felt it was good because it showed young Muslim girls and strong Muslim women in the media who can serve as role models. The conversation was complex and took many varying points of
view, but the point is that it called into question what it means to be Muslim in America and American Muslim. When we use the word ‘American’ referring to culture in the U.S., it is problematic because that word fails to encompass the same meaning for different people, and in fact may have radically different meanings for different people. For me, ‘American,’ when used to refer to U.S. culture, is not something to be defined in terms of one religion, one generation, or one political belief; it is diverse and constantly changing. It may have these basic tenets: respect for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. So, when we discuss the struggles of being Muslim in America, it does not mean that ‘American’ and ‘Muslim’ do not belong together; it means that American Muslims have some struggles being Muslim in America, and those struggles vary among different areas, generations, and backgrounds.

American Muslims are the most racially diverse religious group in the United States, and it would be erroneous to assume conflict has been exclusively between Muslims and non-Muslims in the United States. One controversial film, The Mosque in Morgantown, depicted an Islamic center conflicted over the acceptability of certain practices. There are many ways to interpret the film which I will not discuss, but one thing that it does show indirectly, but clearly, is that the Islamic Center in Morgantown has a very diverse community, with some members from Southeast Asia and some from the Middle East, and many other ethnicities including one woman who is a Caucasian American convert. Some of the controversy over the practice of Islam at this particular Islamic center likely stems from a vast difference in heritage and upbringing.

Overall, the American Muslim population has been growing and developing, establishing itself well and engaging in outreach to educate the public. The American
Muslim community is very diverse, and cannot be generalized in terms of belief, practice, or culture. Next, I will discuss the history of Muslims in Maine, and more specifically the history of the Islamic Center of Maine in Orono, Maine.
Chapter 2: History of Muslims in Maine

In the Woodlawn Cemetery in Biddeford, Maine, a section of gravestones all face Mecca. The York County Albania Society founded this cemetery in 1918, which may be the oldest Muslim cemetery in the U.S. according to Charlie Butler, a historian with the Biddeford Historical Society who researched Biddeford’s early Muslim community (MPBN, 2010). Butler recounted the history of Muslims for the Maine Public Broadcasting Network during a series they did titled Being Muslim in Maine. Butler states, “These people started coming here [in the] 1880s, first the Turks and then Albanians were recruited by the various mills.” He continued, “They are credited with starting the first mosque in America, and they used to actually meet in a coffee house on Franklin Street behind the storefront” (MPBN, 2010). The name of the group, Albania Society, leads Butler to suggest it was more of an ethnic gathering than a religious one. Butler is fairly certain that Muslim men would gather for prayers in 1915, most likely on the second floor of what used to be called the Pepperell Counting House, which was part of the mill complex and where different religious groups would start off over the years (MPBN, 2010).

Butler says many of the Albanian immigrants would work for a few years and then go back to Albania. Most didn’t own property or get married here, so it is unknown how many came, but we do have a sense of how many died and were buried here. The grave sites are mostly for those who died during a flu epidemic. Butler recalled, “A lot of them had a place fixed right up inside the Mill buildings so they never left…and that [is] probably one reason why, when the 1918 flu came through Biddeford, a lot of these stones read 1918, as they were living very close, they’re in that mill building, and it just
spread between them very quickly” (MPBN, 2010). Some of the gravestones are marked with a crescent moon and star, or say “Albanian Muhamedan” (Pluralism, 2014). Since the Spanish Flu epidemic in 1918 and then the Depression, the Maine Muslim community has been small.

In recent decades, there has been a reemergence of a Muslim community in Maine. Reza Jalali at the University of Southern Maine came to Maine 25 years ago and authored a children’s book about Ramadan. In Being Muslim in Maine, he said “I remember when I came to Maine we didn’t even have a single mosque. There wasn’t a community. I would go around looking for halal, kosher food, and I was miserable” (MPBN, 2010). Jalali knows what it is like coming to an area vastly different from what he is used to, and he has been advocating for Maine’s general immigrant community and has seen a dramatic change. Jalali notes that few people think about Muslims being in Maine, and many are surprised to hear the two mentioned together. However, he feels that the community is growing and it is important for Mainers to start learning about Muslims. “Islam is the second largest religion in the world and soon it’s going to be the second largest religion, after Christianity, in the United States, including in Maine,” he said. “So, it’s really important that we get to know this religion, its followers, who they are, what do they worship, understanding that there are fanatics and fundamentalists in almost every religion…and that there are Muslims that are fundamentalists, there are Muslims [that are] dangerous, but the mainstream, majority of Muslims are peace loving, law abiding Americans” (MPBN, 2012). A large portion of the Maine Muslim community is made up of Somalian and Sudanese refugees in the Portland and Lewiston areas, but Muslims in Maine are from all parts of the world and the United States. This
research focuses specifically on the Orono area. I do not claim that this community represents Muslims in other communities, but it is likely that Muslims in Orono struggle with some of the same public stereotypes.

As of 2010, there were seven mosques in Maine, and the Islamic Center of Maine (ICM) in Orono is the only free standing mosque in the state (MPBN, 2012). When you walk into the ICM, you will not just one single skin color or style of dress. Instead, you will see a community characterized by diversity. People of all races, ethnicities, and cultures, who came from Michigan to Canada to Pakistan and everywhere in-between can be found at the ICM. The ICM is like a flowing river; the river is the same but it is also changing all the time. For example, the University of Maine (UM) attracts students from throughout the state, the country, and the world, and then the students leave. The university faculty is also drawn from various nations and states. This ICM was built to meet the demand by Muslims who were in the area as students, professors, and various professionals. Before the construction of the first mosque in 2002, the small Muslim community would pray on the third floor of the Memorial Union on the UM campus, or at the homes of friends nearby.

In the Orono area, there are two religious centers on College Avenue, which runs along the west side of the university campus. One is the Newman Center, which was established in 1946 for Catholic students, faculty, and staff at the university, and the other is the Wilson Center which is an interfaith, Christian based community center founded in 1950. The Islamic Center of Maine is on Park Street, which runs along the south side of campus, and is built on a two-acre parcel purchased in 1995 on the corner of Park and Washburn streets (Harrison, Larger mosque). Plans were to build a traditional mosque,
with an external dome and minaret, that would cost almost $1 million, but instead a doublewide, prefabricated building was finished in January 2002 for $125,000 with only 1,680 square feet (see photograph 1) (Harrison, Larger mosque; The Journey, ICM).

Photograph 1 – The first ICM building constructed in 2002

The planning, fundraising, and establishment of the ICM was carried out by a small group of Muslims in the Orono area. In July, 1981, Dr. Mahmoud El-Begearmi joined the University of Maine’s Department of Animal and Veterinary Sciences as a professor (El-Begearmi, 2014). He and his wife, Taghreed, are regarded by the ICM community as one of the founding families and leaders of the establishment of the ICM. Today he is generally referred to at the ICM as Dr. Mahmoud, which is how I will address him in this thesis. He said in an interview with me, “When I first came to the campus, I looked for Muslim students and faculty to see if we could have a Friday prayer. Up to that point, I had never been in a place where I couldn’t get people together for a Friday prayer.” According to Dr. Mahmoud, it is necessary to have at least three Muslims
for a Friday prayer, called *Salat al-Jumaa*. There must be one to call the prayer, one to lead the prayer, and one to follow. It is an obligation for Muslim men to attend *Salat al-Jumaa*.

Katherine Musgrave, a professor who has taught and researched nutrition at the University of Maine for over forty years, helped Dr. Mahmoud find a group for the Friday prayer. She got him the names of Muslims on campus and within the wider community and Dr. Mahmoud invited them to his house. He contacted the University of Maine administration for a place to pray, and the Drummond Chapel on the third floor of the Memorial Union was the place designated for religious practice of any religion. They were able to use the chapel from 12:00-1:00pm every Friday. The three who attended at first were Dr. Mahmoud, who is Egyptian, a student from Saudi Arabia, and an American who accepted Islam (El-Begearmi, 2014).

Over time, the number of Muslims who attended Friday prayer increased and outgrew the space in the Drummond Chapel, so Dr. Mahmoud and other Muslims looked for a new location but could not find a suitable one. That was the time when the practicing Muslim community decided they needed a place of their own, but it had to be close enough to campus so Muslim students and faculty could quickly get there and back to campus. They found the land where the ICM is today on the corner of Park and Washburn streets, bought it, and organized a group to raise the funds necessary to build the center there. Dr. Mahmoud said they always intended for it to be a center, not just a mosque (El-Begearmi, 2014). A center is for the whole community to use for weddings, celebrations, and much more than only prayer. Najam Hashmi and Outhman Conteh were
members of the first committee appointed to manage the center; both are still at the ICM today and are permanent members of the executive board.

Eventually, they raised the funds to build the pre-fabricated building and named it the Islamic Center of Maine. They chose the name Islamic Center of Maine very specifically, said Dr. Mahmoud, because it was the first Islamic center in the state of Maine. The practicing Muslim community was comprised of Muslims coming from all over the state, which is why they did not call it the Islamic Center of the University of Maine. This is important because they decided the center belongs to the whole state of Maine, not just the university community. The original plan was to build a traditional mosque, but that changed for two reasons: 1) difficulty raising the necessary funds, and, 2) the Muslim community wanted it to be more than just a place for prayer. They wanted it to be a focal point for the whole community to study, host meetings and celebrations, or other events (El-Begearmi, 2014).

Dr. Mahmoud was also a faculty advisor to Muslim students at the University of Maine, and students coming to the University would ask if there was a place for prayer, so he knew there was interest and demand for a mosque. “I always felt it would probably grow enough to sustain a viable center,” said El-Begearmi (2014). Having a place for prayer was essential, and some students had families they were bringing as well, so the center needed to be a place for children to learn about Islam and Arabic, the language of the Quran.

When it came to establishing the ICM, the Muslim community did not face much opposition. Dr. Mahmoud said, “The people of Orono, and I forever am proud that I was part of that community, welcomed the establishment of the mosque, welcomed us into the
community…I have to give due credit to the city council” (2014). There was some resistance to the establishment of the ICM from commercial establishments in the area that were worried because Muslims do not drink alcohol and they did not want the mosque to deter business. It was not a strong concern though, and it was explained at the hearing that Muslims would not try to convince other people to abstain from alcohol.

“The people of Orono by and large accepted that,” said El-Begearmi (2014). The call to prayer, or adhan, was also not a concern because there were never any loudspeakers on the building and the call to prayer is done inside at the ICM. The purpose of the call to prayer in general is to let Muslims in the surrounding area know that it is time for prayer. In Orono, the Muslim community is so small and dispersed there is no need for that (El-Beigearmi, 2014).

On the matter of financing the ICM, the funding came primarily from donations. Dr. Mahmoud said “It’s something we keep dear to our hearts. It was funds from individuals so we didn’t have any strings or conditions” (2014). The Muslim community was adamant about keeping the ICM a place of worship and community gathering, and was careful to avoid any funding obligations that would compromise that mission. One time when El-Begearmi was in California, a royal family member from Saudi Arabia offered a donation but with conditions, but he immediately turned down the offer, and the Muslim community continued seeking individual donations. Dr. Mahmoud recalls, “We did everything we could possibly do. We had bake sales, we had garage sales…the ladies of the community did a tremendous help… they participated in every function alongside the men” (2014).
Taghreed El-Begearmi, Mahmoud’s wife, noted that an important individual who contributed enormously was Mohammed Nassir, originally from Iraq and one of the early attendants of the Friday prayers at the Drummond Chapel. He travelled around the U.S. to give talks and tell people about the project. He went to mosques in Michigan, California, Texas, Florida, and many other states. Taghreed said “he was extremely active and constructive in making this happen.” His wife, a Mainer who accepted Islam, was also highly instrumental in the establishment of the ICM according to Taghreed. She organized sales and sent letters across the U.S. asking for donations.

In addition to those efforts and wide spread contributions, Dr. Mahmoud noted that it was always a struggle to raise funds at that time, and a huge push for the fundraising efforts came from the father of a Muslim student. “[He] came to visit and found out about the project. He really did a tremendous push for the fund raising because he went back to Saudi Arabia and talked to his friends and people he knew,” and spread the word to help garner donations.

The ICM could not be financed using any loans because charging certain interests, or usury as it is known in Islam, is forbidden in Islam. What constitutes usury is complicated, but the ICM was not financed using any loans and its subsequent bank accounts cannot earn interest either. Ali Shareef, a former graduate student in the College of Engineering at UMaine, wrote for the BDN on the matter of usury, citing the Quran which takes a clear stance (2009):

Those who devour usury will not stand except as stand one whom the Evil one by his touch hath driven to madness. That is because they say: ‘Trade is like usury,’ but God hath permitted trade and forbidden usury. Those who after receiving direction from their Lord, desist, shall be pardoned for the past; their case is for God (to judge); but those who repeat (the offense) are companions of the Fire: They will abide therein (for ever).
Allah will deprive usury of all blessing, but will give increase for deeds of charity: for He does not love ungrateful and wicked creatures (Chapter 2, 275-276. Al-Baqara or The Heifer).

Shareef also noted that the Old Testament says (2009):

If he has not exacted usury nor taken any increase, but has withdrawn his hand from iniquity … And executed true judgment between man and man; If he has walked in My statutes and kept My judgments faithfully — He is just; He shall surely live!’ says the Lord GOD (Ezekiel 18:7-9)

So, the community could not build an Islamic center by taking out a loan, but had to acquire all the financing before-hand. Even today, the ICM has a bank account that does not earn interest (Alsamsam, 2014).

The El-Begearmis are regarded by the ICM community as one of the families that drove the establishment of the first ICM, along with the Conths, Hashmis, and others who worked hard to complete the ICM. Sajidah Hashmi described Taghreed as a great speaker, and very strong woman who did wonders for the Muslim community (2014). Taghreed said during my interview with her, “you do all you can when you believe in something, and that’s what we both did here, and so did everyone else” (El-Begearmi, 2014). In the end, Taghreed herself said it was the will of God that this mosque be established, and that is how they overcame the difficult challenges, such as raising the funds, and established a center for the Muslim community to pray and gather. Dr. Mahmoud and Taghreed left after he retired so they could live closer to their eldest son. Dr. Mahmoud said, “Orono and the ICM and Muslim community always have a place in my heart” (2014).

The work to make the ICM better continued on, and more Muslims moved to the area. As the Muslim community expanded, the ICM, which had 1,680 square feet of
space, could not accommodate the growing community and its expanding needs. (Harrison, Larger mosque). There was not room for religious education, something that became more important as more Muslims families with young children came to the area. In 2008, the Muslim community celebrated Eid al-Fitr, an important holiday and celebration party at the end of Ramadan, at the Isaac Farrar Mansion in Bangor because there was not enough room at the ICM (Harrison, 2008). There was clearly a need to build a larger center.

After Dr. Mahmoud left, Mohammed Tabbah took on his role as the organizer of the ICM. Tabbah’s mission was to build a larger center that could accommodate the growing community and host more activities. Najam Hashmi said, “With his efforts, with his contacts and relations, he collected enough money [for] the bigger place” (N. Hashmi, 2014). Hashmi says they can now have 300 or more people fit into the *musallah*, or prayer room, a large, open room which is used for prayers and public gatherings such as the annual Open House.

The new building, completed in January 2010, has plenty of space to host a large crowd. It was built about eight years after the first ICM and cost approximately $750,000 (see photograph 2) (Harrison, Larger mosque; Mosque, ICM).
Photograph 2 – The second ICM building constructed in 2010.

“We have a pretty steady flow of students who come and go, but they number about 100 at any one time,” said Mohammed Tabbah, former president of the ICM, in a 2010 interview (Harrison, Larger mosque). “More families like ourselves are moving here and settling down. We truly needed a larger space,” he reflected in 2010, after the new, larger center was built. He guessed there were around 150 Muslims at that time in the greater Bangor area.

The culture at the ICM has evolved over time, with a greater family atmosphere than it had. Renae Al-Fdeilat recalls that the ICM used to be geared more towards the university student population. Over time, the new center has shifted towards being more family oriented. She remembers “Each graduating year we would have a party for the students that would graduate…right when Dr. Mahmoud left that kind of ended. We used to buy them little plaques…I would really like to see it more centered on students. If you give them a place, I feel, to hangout, do homework, study, they’ll be more involved” (Al-
Fdeilat, 2014). Students come for the *salat alJumaa*, or Friday prayers, but are not as engaged as they once were (Al-Fdeilat, 2014).

Jenan Jondy, the former Outreach Coordinator of the ICM and wife of Tabbah, said “We want our children to identify as Muslims.” She continued, “This is their identity, and the larger building allows us to have a ‘camp’ program during February vacation and a Sunday school program for them” (Harrison, Larger mosque). The previous mosque had been mistaken by trick-or-treaters during Halloween as a residential home (Jondy, 2014).

The new Islamic center, like the old one, had to be paid for all at once because usury, or interest, is prohibited in Islam. Mohammed Tabbah said it was built by “the generosity of the [Muslim] community” (Harrison, Larger mosque). Dr. Mahmoud and Taghreed were able to visit the new ICM and Taghreed said “it was like the icing on the cake for us to see what we dreamed of was actually accomplished.” She continued, “I’m very, very proud of the efforts and the result today” (El-Begearmi, 2014).

The American Muslim community is the most diverse religious group in the United States, and the ICM definitely reflects that in the many cultures, races, and ethnicities which make up its community (Gallup, 2009). Sajidah Hashmi recalls when she first came to the ICM she was not accustomed to the dress that other Muslim women from different backgrounds wore. In Pakistan, where she is from, her culture is deeply influenced by Hindu culture and so she is very relaxed about dress, but she ended up making adjustments at the ICM (S. Hashmi, 2014). Najam Hashmi, Sajidah’s husband and a permanent board member of the ICM originally from Pakistan, recalls that he got to experience foods he never had before. “[Before] I came to Maine, I never had Saudi food.
I never had Egyptian food. I never had another county’s food” (N. Hashmi, 2014). Each month the ICM hosts a potluck which Muslims and non-Muslims are welcome to attend and where some get to experience new foods. Religion has galvanized this diverse community around their shared faith, and as such individuals at the ICM have experienced new cultures themselves. Muslims are not all the same; people at the ICM come from many different countries and thus also learn about new cultures and traditions.

However, a significant number of the younger generation at the ICM were born in or have grown up in North America. Abdulraheem Sbayi, a student at the University of Maine, was born in Homs, Syria but has lived in North America his whole life. He said that “Islam doesn’t say you have to be a certain culture… as long as you say there is no God but God, and the prophet [Mohammed] is his messenger, and the seal of the prophets, [and] you say that you accept all the other prophets that came before him… we call you a Muslim” (Ab. Sbayi, 2014). So, there is not one culture at the ICM, but many and what binds them together is being Muslim and the practice of Islam. In this small community Muslims cannot afford to separate by race, ethnicity, or nationality. Sbayi says the ICM is “a close knit community, and that’s better than some of the other mosques I’ve been to where it’s so large nobody knows anybody. Well here you’re among a little bit of people but you feel involved and people want to know who you are” (Ab. Sbayi, 2014).

One of the ways this community has grown in population is through converts as well. Renae Al-Fdeilat, a direct descendant of Chief Orono of the Penobscots who was born in Bangor, Maine, has been a Muslim for over twelve years. She said, “What drew me to Islam was reading the Quran. I had taken a world religions class at the university…
one of the suggested readings was the Quran, so I read [it] and it made sense [to me]” (Al-Fdeilat, 2014). When Renae accepted Islam, they were still praying in The Drummond Chapel. She declared her shahada, or profession of faith, on the phone with Muslims she befriended. Renae knows of at least six converts at the ICM who have come and gone over time, and they were all women.

El-Begearmi mentioned to me during our interviews that when the prophet Mohammed migrated from Mecca to Medina, the first thing he established was a mosque (2014). The cemetery in Biddeford refers to the Muslims as “Muhamedans,” but this is an incorrect term because it implies that Muslims worship Mohammed, which they do not. Muslims worship only God. Mohammed is believed to be the ideal Muslim, and thought of as the walking Quran. So, Muslims look to him as a model of the perfect Muslim. Understanding this is an important factor in how Muslims at the ICM practice Islam. In the next chapter, I will discuss how local Muslims integrate their faith into their daily lives, both personally and communally.
Chapter 3: Five Pillars of Islam at the ICM

In Islam, there are five pillars of action. These pillars are basically a guide for living a good and just life, and they are all meant to be put into action. There are also six articles of faith (see Appendix A) that practicing Muslims must believe, but I will not be discussing them here. The five pillars listed below are taken from a BDN article covering an Open House at the ICM (Harrison, 2012):

• **Shahada** – belief in and recitation of the profession of faith, “There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is the prophet of Allah.”

• **Salat** – prayer offered while facing Mecca five times a day — at sunrise, midday, midafternoon, sunset and before going to bed.

• **Sawm** – fasting during Ramadan, the month when the Quran was revealed to Mohammed.

• **Zakat** – contributing financially to the Muslim community, similar to tithing in some Christian denominations.

• **Hajj** – the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in each Muslim’s lifetime, if physically and financially possible.

The Muslim community in Orono faces some challenges in the practice of their faith, which might not be present in nations that have a majority Muslim population. For example, the weekend begins on Saturday in the U.S., but in Muslim countries it begins on Friday, which is the day Muslim men are supposed to gather at the mosque for *salat al-Jumaa*, or Friday prayer. Omar Conteh, current Outreach Coordinator of the ICM said, “We live in a place where Islam is not the order of the day” (2014). Here, I will explain how each of the five pillars of action takes form at the ICM.

The first pillar, **shahada**, meaning the belief and recitation that there is no God but the one God (Allah), and that Mohammed is the prophet of Allah, is uniform regardless
of location. The ICM website summarizes each pillar of action. It says this about
shahada: “After looking at all of the signs within oneself and in our universe – when the
individual who has been given free will (therefore, no compulsion in religion) – comes to
the conclusion that there is only One God, he/she states: There is only One God and
Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the Final Messenger of God” (Printout, 2014). This is
a necessary belief and declaration for all Muslims, and to be a Muslim you must publicly
declare this. shahada is also repeated daily during prayers. Living in one area versus
another does not necessarily have any effect on putting this pillar into action.

The second pillar is salat, meaning prayer five times a day. The explanation of the
five pillars on the ICM website says: “Muslims pray 5 times a day at certain times. The
set prayers are not just phrases to be spoken. Prayer for a Muslim involves uniting mind,
soul, and body in worship; so a Muslim carrying out these prayers will perform a whole
series of set movements that go with the words of the prayer. A Muslim prays as if
standing in the presence of Allah. In the ritual prayers each individual Muslim is in direct
contact with Allah. There is no need of an intermediary” (Printout, 2014). So, salat is
about a connection with God, achieved through the daily prayer.

The Islamic Center of Maine (ICM) has a revolving door, serving as a central
location where Muslims are free to pray. Before the construction of the Islamic center in
January 2002, the small Muslim community in Orono performed salat in the Memorial
Union on the University of Maine campus, and in their houses or houses of friends
(Conteh, 2014). The ICM was originally needed to serve the growing Muslim community
as a place large enough to accommodate Muslims during Friday prayer. Currently, on any
given day, there might be a few members present, as well as some non-members passing
through who need a place to pray. Prayer is a significant part of everyday life for a Muslim, and so living in an area without a mosque nearby presents a challenge. The mosque is conveniently located just off the University of Maine campus so students and faculty have an available place to gather and pray.

Throughout the day people are coming and going, a few people at a time, and praying together, though it is not necessary to pray with others like it is on Friday. Friday is the day that draws the largest crowd, similar to Sundays for Christians and the Sabbath on Saturday for Jews. In Muslim majority countries, the weekend begins on Friday, but that is a challenge for Muslims in America. “A significant amount of the community comes in here on Friday for the congregational prayer and study circles at night. But what is wonderful about this place is, it is open 24 hours a day and anyone can come from anywhere” said Conteh (2014). “For those who are just coming through, it’s been very convenient for them… Particularly people who are thinking about coming to school in the United States, and they hear about the place of Maine, the first thing their family asks is, is there a mosque over there? This is usually an attraction point for them to want to come here and study here” (2014).

Observing the Quran as the words of God, revealed to the prophet Mohammed through the angel Gabriel, is at the center of Islam. Muslims find guidance in the Quran for all problems of life, and if there is a question, the sayings and actions of the prophet Mohammed serve as the ideal example. For example, Omar Conteh, the Outreach Coordinator at the ICM, explained the reason men and women do not always pray with a wall between them here at the Orono mosque, which can be the case at other mosques in the United States and abroad, is because they follow the example of Mohammed at the
ICM. “If you go to a lot of Muslim communities, there will be separation between, literally a physical wall between, women and men when they pray. Here, they decided that we will not do that here. So, we are all in the same hall, although separate but there is no barrier between the two groups of the men and women” (2014). Conteh further elaborated that “some Muslim communities from other parts of Maine or the country, when they come here and see that they’ll be like you guys should really put a barrier here, and we say no, because that wasn’t something the prophet did in his mosque” (2014). The actions and examples of the prophet are a major influence on the Orono community’s decisions and practices.

More men attend the Friday prayers than women because it is an obligation for men to pray at the mosque on Fridays. However, women are often found praying in the musallah, or prayer room, as well. If men and women are praying at the same time, women will pray in the back. On the matter of women praying in the back, Jenan Jondy, former Outreach Coordinator, said:

You’re going to see the men are praying in the front and the women are praying in the back, and this is not what people think, [that] the women are second class citizens, absolutely not, we have equal rights in Islam, equal accountability. [The] first reason is that the prophet Mohammed peace be upon him, we don’t change the way he taught us the faith and this is the way he taught us to pray, and the second reason also is when the women are praying and prostrating, you can’t have the men… behind you while you’re doing that. (MPBN, 2010)

The position of women praying in the back has to do with modesty and the example of the prophet Mohammed. Modesty does not just apply to women; it applies to men as well. Men and women are supposed to dress and act modestly, and the practice of women praying behind the men also has to do with focusing on prayer and modesty.
Practicing Muslims of the local Islamic community are from very diverse cultural backgrounds, and thus individuals have different comfort concerns and cultural practices. Some women do not feel comfortable praying in the same hall as men because of how they grew up and what they are used to. There is a movable wall that exists in the musallah but it is for practicality reasons; it reduces the size of the prayer room between large gatherings, and it accommodates some women who choose to pray on the other side of this wall because they are more comfortable doing so. As with any widespread, multinational religion, there are differences between cultural and religious practices and customs from country to country, or even area to area. The Orono Muslim community consists of Muslims from Maine, Texas, Michigan and other U.S. states, from Canada to North Africa, the Middle East, Pakistan and everywhere between. It is reasonable that individuals will have different takes on what is appropriate and what is not in the practice of their faith. In a larger town or a city, members may have options and choose a mosque or Islamic center that conforms more to their customs. However, this is a small community and they have one option to make the best of. If disputes arise, the community finds that closely following the example of the prophet Mohammad is an excellent way to settle disputes and that is how salat takes form in Orono, Maine.

The third pillar, sawm, which is fasting during the holy month of Ramadan, revolves around the ICM. The ICM’s website page “Printout Muslim Beliefs” explains fasting:

A Muslim must fast every day from dawn until sunset for the lunar month of Ramadan, abstaining from food, water (anything ingested), marital sexual relations, bad manners. All those who are healthy, sane, and have reached the age of puberty are required to fast. It is the month when the Holy Quran was revealed to Muhammad (peace be upon him). In this month many Muslims read the whole Quran, pray more often and give a
lot of charity. If one is sick they may break their fast and make up the days after Ramadan. Chronically ill individuals do not fast, but rather pay a daily charity to feed the poor - if they can afford it. (2014)

The ICM is a gathering place for all Muslims in the area during this time, and they come here nightly to break sawm (end fasting). During the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar and month during which the first verses of the Quran were revealed to the prophet Mohammad, adult Muslims are supposed to fast from sunrise to sunset. Muslims who are sick or traveling and women who are pregnant or menstruating can postpone fasting until they are able.

The month of Ramadan begins with the crescent of the new moon and starts thirteen days earlier each year. During this month, Muslims try to gather nightly at the mosque, and pray more than five times a day. “As we gather here today, there are two feelings that are clearly uppermost in our hearts and minds — the feeling of joy and satisfaction on the completion of our religious duty, and the feeling of brotherhood, sisterhood and solidarity among ourselves” said Abdelmajeed, a teacher in Husson University’s School of Pharmacy, in his khutba (sermon) near the end of Ramadan in 2009 (Harrison). Ali Abedi, an assistant professor in electrical and computer engineering at UMaine at that time, explained the meaning of Ramadan in an article he wrote for the BDN in 2009. “This is the month in which the doors of heaven are kept open, the doors of hell are closed, and Satan is kept in chains…Ramadan is above all an opportunity to reorient oneself to the Creator and the natural path of goodness and consciousness of God” (2009).

Many experience a greater appreciation for life and all that God has given, and believe they learn patience and compassion from fasting. Britney Harris, a junior at the University of Maine in 2008 and convert to Islam from Christianity since 2006, said “It
slows me down…I find that when I’m thinking about being hungry, I look at what I have and I take the things I have and cherish them more than I take them for granted. I see the things that I have every day and I appreciate them” (Harrison, 2008). Studying in the afternoon is difficult she explained, but gathering with Muslims for the meal after sundown each night is a wonderful experience. The point of Ramadan and fasting is to reorient oneself, to focus on and connect deeper with Islam, to gather as a community with other Muslims, to be a time of peace and appreciation, and much more.

At the end of Ramadan, individuals give ten dollars per person, comparable to one healthy halal (similar to kosher) meal. Muslims also believe there is a duty to give to all those in need and those who are charitable will be rewarded in the afterlife. Good deeds done during the month of Ramadan are viewed more favorably by God (Harrison, 2009).

The fourth pillar, zakat, is the obligation for Muslims to give 2.5% of their accumulated extra wealth at the end of the year to the poor. So, at the year’s end, a Muslim will look in his or her bank account and see what he or she has, and give 2.5% of that to charity. The ICM website explains that zakat is about more than just giving money though:

It is not just a form of charity or alms-giving or tax or tithe. Nor is it simply an expression of kindness; it is all of these combined and much more. It is not merely a deduction of a certain percentage from one’s property, but an abundant enrichment and spiritual investment. It is a duty enjoined by God and undertaken by Muslims in the interest of society as a whole. If one does not have the wealth they are not required to give zakah; but, rather, if they are in need, the zakah is given to them. (2014)¹

In Orono, it is up to the individual to give zakat. Some people choose to pay it when they pay taxes, some pay on January 1st, and some at the beginning of the new-year

¹ Zakat and zakah are both commonly used transliterations. I use zakat to be consistent with the first quote.
according to the Islamic calendar. Some members of the ICM choose to give their zakat money to the ICM and then the ICM will choose the charity to which they send the money, while others choose their own charities. Since the ICM runs on donations, when an individual gives money to the treasurer, the treasurer will ask, “is this for the ICM or zakat?” The ICM chooses how to give the money by consulting a scholar. The Imam, meaning person who is in the front and leads prayers, of the ICM would be consulted to decide where the zakat money can be donated (Alsamsam, 2014).

The fifth pillar of action is hajj, which is the pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, that every Muslim who is financially and physically able to do so must complete during his or her lifetime. The pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the greatest experiences for many Muslims, and it symbolizes unity and solidarity among Muslims. I lived and studied in Amman, Jordan for a brief period of time, and Jordanian Muslims would often tell me that those returning from hajj were noticeably calmer and more peaceful. There is a cap on how many Muslims can travel from each country to Mecca for hajj because there are too many Muslims to accommodate everyone during Ramadan. hajj occurs within a specific time frame during the last month of the Islamic calendar, called Dhu al-Hijjah. In some Muslim majority countries, it is very difficult to get a pass to perform hajj. Their system is set up like a lottery with the eldest citizens having first priority to obtain a pass to enter Mecca during the season for hajj if they have not yet performed it in their lifetime. In the United States, it is not as difficult to obtain a pass to perform hajj if a Muslim wishes to. It is, however, very expensive, as the U.S. is quite far away from Mecca. In 2009, the season for hajj ended the day after Thanksgiving, so Muslims in Orono had two major holidays back to back that year.
Outside of the five pillars of action, there are other ways that local Muslims have had to adjust their practices since “Islam is not the order of the day” in Orono, Maine. When the first mosque was completed in 2002, the issue of bringing children to the mosque was hotly debated. Now those troubles are a memory which Omar Conteh relayed to me, chuckling to himself, “We cannot keep the kids at home, we have to make them familiar with the mosque, even if we have to put up with the fact that they’re going to run and scream and cause chaos” (2014). Conteh elaborated that many people at the ICM come from different parts of the world where there are strict rules and children would never be found “running around screaming and yelling and causing all kinds of havoc” in the mosque.

Churches and synagogues face this issue as well. In Muslim majority countries, it may not be necessary to bring children to the mosque to familiarize them with the religion and show them that they are part of a community. Sajidah Hashmi has lived in the area with her family since long before the construction of the first mosque. Initially, she taught her children about Islam at home, but after the construction of the mosque, it opened up the opportunity to raise them around the Muslim community in a mosque. “I [taught] them everything at home; basic Islamic knowledge, reading a Quran, Salat…but at one point I realized that I should introduce them to the masjid (mosque). When you go in the masjid, you have to know the etiquette” (2014). Sajidah went on to explain that their family has a diverse group of friends, but she wanted her children to be comfortable around a mosque and around Muslims.

The ICM serves functions that in some other countries may be already served outside of the mosque. The second mosque, built in 2010, solved most of the conflict
about children in the mosque. Outside of the musallah (prayer room) are rooms for children to play in and have Sunday school. Having a larger space to fit community activities greatly enhanced the ability to have the ICM be a place for people to raise their children around the religion. Renae Al-Fdeilat said the ICM is like a second home for her children. “My children love it,” she said. “If we don’t go to a Friday halaqa, they have a fit. It’s like a punishment” (2014). The Friday halaqa is the Quran study circle, and children are often playing in rooms outside the musallah.

The ICM community had to adapt in some ways to practice Islam in the Orono area. The Islamic Center itself was a solution to many problems, such as having a space large enough for prayers, breaking fast, and celebrations. It was also a solution for many parents who wanted to raise their children around other Muslims, and some adult Muslims had to adapt to the presence of children in the mosque. In the end, the struggle to practice Islam in the Orono area necessitated the establishment of an Islamic center, and having only one center in this area means that people have to make the best of the situation.
Chapter 4: Community Outreach

The ICM has over time developed a strong Outreach Program that actively engages the community and makes the ICM available to the general public that wants to learn about Islam. The ICM has a website with a page called Printable Muslim Beliefs that covers the six articles of faith and five pillars of action that all Muslims must believe and follow to be considered Muslim. This section of the website exists for a reason – the general public has questions about Islam and Muslims. Muslims know the six articles of faith and five pillars of Islam. These are written on the site for the public audience who might not know and who wonder what Islam is about. The ICM tries to make this information readily available. The Outreach Coordinator, Omar Conteh, is available to the larger community if there are any questions or media coverage of the ICM, the ICM annually hosts a large open house with a guest speaker, and hosts numerous groups who come to visit the ICM, such as classes from the University of Maine.

On the ICM website, a page is offered which explains their Outreach Program. Conteh, the current Outreach Coordinator and a graduate student at the University of Maine who has lived in Bangor for many years, described the purpose of outreach on the Outreach Committee page (2014):

The outreach committee was formed due to the increased interest and demand of the general public to understand the background of Muslims. As the organization consists of a broad diversity of individuals, it offers a greater understanding to those who come into contact with it.

Outreach has worked with:
1. Individuals (including ESL classes)
2. Universities
3. Public schools
4. Mental Health professionals & students
5. Medical Professionals
6. Media
7. Faith based organizations
8. Private organizations

Programs such as an annual open house, presentations to a wide range of institutions and organizations, interfaith dialogue, and other outreach activities such as serving guests at the BHS [Bangor Homeless Shelter] continue on a consistent basis. We strive to bring about education, awareness, understanding, and to give back to our greater community.

The ICM website also provides an archive of articles written by the BDN or other news outlets covering the ICM, as well as other coverage of the ICM on MPBN or other television broadcast networks. The purpose of creating the formal Outreach Program was to answer the community’s questions about Islam and Muslims in an organized fashion, and bring people to the Islamic center to learn first-hand about Muslims and Islam.

Especially after 9/11, Muslims have been the focus of news attention and pervasive stereotypes. Many non-Muslims in the area, after hearing or seeing something on the news, have turned to local Muslims to ask questions about Islam. The goal of the Outreach Program is to correct misunderstandings, and work towards building an environment where the general public has a greater understanding and appreciation of the faith.

There are formal activities of the Outreach Program, such as the annual Open House held at the ICM, and there is outreach in general, such as a single person going to a public event and being available to speak, such as Eaman Attia, who makes an effort to travel Maine and speak about Islam. Outreach is the conscious act of going out and making oneself available to talk and answer questions. Jenan Jondy, a former member of the ICM, worked to develop the Outreach Program during her time in the area. During an interview with me about the Outreach Program, Jondy talked about how she came to the conclusion that a strong outreach effort by the Muslim community was necessary. She
said (2014):

I am covered head to toe. Generally speaking, people know that I’m Muslim. And growing up, that was something that for me was part of who I am, being an American Muslim. But I think as a whole, after September 11th, Muslims started to realize there needed to be more outreach…it had to be more of a mass outreach. But one thing I think was very important was … education is a two way street… I need people to reach out and say, we want to learn, we want to hear also.

The ICM Outreach Program has been very successful in drawing crowds from Orono and surrounding towns. From my own perspective as an attendant of the annual Open House, I believe that the ICM succeeds in focusing on teaching people what Islam is, rather than focusing on denouncing misconceptions.

Outreach is a proactive cause to spread awareness and understanding. There is a general stereotype about Muslims in America that Muslims are foreigners and they are mostly from Arab countries. Well intentioned people will speak to Jondy slowly, or say welcome to the United States, or we are glad to have you in America, not realizing she was born and raised in Michigan (Jondy, 2014). Women are the most easily identifiable Muslims because of the hijab. The image of a Muslim woman has been portrayed for so long in the United States as being “other” or foreign, individuals will just assume when they see a Muslim that he or she is foreign. To change public stereotypes and misunderstandings, “People have to be empowered” said Jondy. “We’re in a very politically correct society, so everybody is worried to offend somebody else. I think there has to be respect within dialogue, but I think we can’t be afraid to ask the questions. I always tell people: ask the questions. Because if you don’t ask, you are going to assume, and that’s a bigger problem.” Jondy encouraged people to come to the ICM, and ask the difficult questions.
Outreach at the ICM has included diversity training and visits to universities and health clinics, to teach people how to better serve Muslim clients and students. Jondy says that people cannot “reach their highest potential if they are not empowered,” and so the Outreach Program holds workshops where people can learn from real life interactions. The goal of these workshops and other programs is to promote understanding through dialogue and to make people more comfortable through positive interactions. “A lot of things, when it comes to education, is access,” said Jondy. Similar to universities and businesses she explains, “You want what you have to be as easily accessible to the person that they may use it” (Pers. Com., 2014). For example, the ICM made information available for social services staff about their Muslim clients, including book recommendations as well as offering for someone to train staff or students in the field. The ICM website was created with education in mind. Hospitals have reached out to the ICM with questions about hospice care, end of life concerns, mental health care, and general health service questions (Jondy, 2014).

The struggle to break down barriers and eliminate mystique around the mosque has had many successes. A nurse at a hospital in Portland reached out to the ICM, and occupational therapy students from UMaine went to the Center for a class project. Jondy recounted to me the conversation she had with a therapy student (2014):

Out of all the buildings you guys could’ve chosen, you didn’t pick libraries, businesses, why did you guys choose the mosque? She said, ‘I was here’ and I could tell two of the younger ladies were a bit nervous, and she said ‘I came to an open house before, I’ve already visited the mosque.’ [Through] her learning, she had the courage to bring others to come and visit too. So, when you build that comfort level, people are going to be more comfortable to ask questions. It’s no longer this mystique; the unknown…It’s that friendly environment, that people are more confident. So you’re empowering people.
That is what the Outreach Program is about at its core: eliminating any mystique around the ICM, and bridging people through education. Those who learned can then relay what they learned to others; education has a ripple effect.

Jenan Jondy has spent much of her life trying to fill the needs of other people, taking up community concerns of any matter. Regarding outreach, she said “As an American Muslim, my culture [is] American, my language is English, so I have that responsibility to speak for people who can’t speak for themselves.” Being a well-established, highly educated community, the ICM has served Muslims across the state. Jondy noted that “People were coming from areas where civil war was going on. People were going into public school systems, students, they didn’t know their civil liberties, they didn’t know what their rights were” (2014). As such, outreach does not have to be exclusively for non-Muslims. Outreach can be an effort overall to proactively help the whole community, both Muslim and non-Muslim alike.

The ICM began hosting an open class called Islamic 101 in 2010. “You don’t want places to have a mystique to them. People need to know that they are welcome,” said Jondy. “We want people to learn: who are Muslims, what is Islam? And some people after they learned, they actually wanted to accept Islam. And other people, they took that education and they shared that education with others” (2014). Both Muslims and non-Muslims attended the classes, which were held twice a week for a couple hours, over the course of several months. Some Muslims who did not grow up with any formal education on Islam, or who practiced the faith little or not at all, came with questions about certain practices wondering “is it culture [or] is it religion?” said Jondy (2014).

The Islamic 101 courses started after the construction of the new mosque in 2010.
The new mosque was deemed essential for the growth of the Muslim community as well as for the Outreach Program. “That was one of the reasons for the push…We could never have a decent open house in a modular home, even with just the few numbers we had at the time at the modular home.” Jondy recounts memories of people stepping over each other to move around the crowded room where prayers were held, and a lack of space to hold the Honors College faculty and students when they came. “We really wanted to share what Islam was and who Muslims are,” she said, and having the space to do so adequately became very important (2014).

Jenan Jondy has since left as the ICM Outreach Coordinator, stepping down when she moved back to Michigan. Perhaps anticipating her departure, Jenan began to cultivate her successor, Omar Conteh, a graduate student at the University of Maine, who took over for Jondy when she left. Conteh recalled, “Jenan would ask me to come along to help her out; I didn’t know she was preparing to make me the outreach person. So, I would say yes and I would come and listen, see how she does things and answer questions and interact with the people. So, when she got ready to leave she said well, it’s yours now” (2014).

Eaman Attia is also deeply involved with outreach efforts, and travels the state for presentations on Islam. One recent example of her outreach activities occurred close to home on March 19, 2014. Attia along with two other Muslim women, Renae Al-Fdeilat and Mariam Alam, gave a presentation on Islam at The Wilson Center, a Christian based interfaith organization on College Avenue in Orono. The Wilson Center is situated in an old brick home with an addition that serves as a gathering hall for events. The gathering began with a gluten-free meal prepared by The Wilson Center, and Attia began by saying
to the audience, which was mostly made up of students from the University, “there is so much we share…and even if we differ, we can differ with respect and understanding.” She explained the pillars of Islam, and how the pillars are guides for living a successful life. The pillars are not a complete guide; they support the structure of Islam, but there is much more to being a Muslim. The Wilson Center audience asked questions afterwards such as, “What if I’m not Muslim, what do Muslims think will happen to me?” and “What if I am good in my religion, what would come of me according to Islam?” Attia explained that it is not for Muslims to judge other people. God is the only one who can judge a person, and that the Quran says “you have your religion, and I have mine” (Attia, Wilson Center). People attending also asked questions about science, same sex marriage, about the Quran and why Muslims think it is more correct than the Bible. Attia explained that the pursuit of science is encouraged in Islam, which is why there are so many scientists at the ICM who are studying at the university. She stated that same sex relationships are a sin in Islam like drinking alcohol and adultery, but that Muslims are taught to dislike the sin but love the person. On the question of belief by Muslims in the Quran as the final message of God, Attia said that the Quran used today is exactly the same as the one revealed to Mohammed and is in its original language from fourteen hundred years ago, while other religious texts have been translated and changed, and so are no longer God’s direct words. This is a core belief in Islam and seen as the miracle of the Quran. Muslims believe Allah is protecting the Quran so that the text remains as it was spoken to Mohammed by the angel Gabriel, while the words of the previous prophets have been changed and the meaning potentially lost or altered.

Attia explained that Allah means God in Arabic and that Allah cannot be
gendered. In English, God can be Goddess, or vice versa, but in Islam God has no gender and the word Allah cannot be changed to indicate gender. The descriptions of Allah are non-gendered superlative adjectives, like ‘most merciful’, and ‘most compassionate,’ even though Arabic itself is a gendered language. Allah is not a mother or a father, but a creator.

One thing people are usually surprised to learn about Islam is how similar it is to the other Abrahamic faiths, i.e. Judaism and Christianity. At outreach events, Attia will mention how the Quran goes in-depth about the story of Mary, devoting a whole chapter or *surah* to Mary and how she was the best woman that ever lived. Likewise, there is much written in the Quran about Moses and his life. In fact, Muslims believe that Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Noah, Moses, and Jesus among others were all prophets and that Mohammed was the final prophet in this long line.

Students at the University of Maine have been attending events at the ICM since 2007. The seed was planted for collaboration when a class in the Honors College led by Preceptor Melissa Ladenheim went to the mosque for a special presentation about Islam. “Students know so little about the subject of Islam,” the BDN quoted Ladenheim “This is an opportunity for them to have a conversation with people who are experts in Islam and to break down stereotypes” said continued (Harrison, Speakers). Since its beginning, the relationship between the Honors College and the ICM has expanded and taken on a new form. Over the years, more and more Honors College faculty wanted to bring their classes to the ICM because students responded so positively to the learning experience. The next year, Mahmoud El-Begearmi and Eaman Attia were invited by the Honors College to lead the Honors 112 lecture on the Quran. Omar Conteh noted that in addition
to the building of the new mosque, the collaboration with the Honors College “was a significant turning point in the outreach efforts because the Honors College is able to open up a lot more doors in order for people to be able to come to the mosque…that was a very positive beginning, when that collaboration happened” (2014).

More recently, the Honors College joined with the ICM and the Muslim Student Association (MSA) to co-sponsor Islamic Awareness Weekend (IAW) in March of 2013 and 2014. In 2011, Mahmoud Sowe, the faculty representative of the MSA, approached the Honors College about an official collaboration for IAW (M. Ladenheim, pers. com.). Before that, IAW happened in February each year. The weekend moved to March because that is the time in the curriculum when students in the Honors College learn about the Quran.

In the first year of the co-sponsored Islamic Awareness Weekend, guest speaker Yassir Fazaga presented in the Wells Conference Center at the University of Maine, and then the next day at the ICM on the “Psychology of a Terrorist,” drawing a large crowd to both events. Nabeel Hashmi, then president of the MSA and an undergraduate student, said in the BDN, “In this country, terrorism is mainly associated with Islam,” and “we want to break that misconception…There is a lot of mixing between religion and culture. We want to be able to help students separate the religious from the cultural. It is also important to have a more intellectual discourse about Islam” (Harrison, Islamic Center open house).

The partnership with the Honors College was beneficial for IAW because it helped better bring in an audience of students to think critically about the content of the presentations and discussions around Islam in America. Melissa Ladenheim said that the
“Outreach Program [has] been for many Honors students a powerful, even transformative, learning experience that has done much to enhance their knowledge of Islam and to challenge pervasive stereotypes” (pers. com., 2014). I was influenced heavily by the relationship even before the official partnership for IAW, resulting in my study abroad in Amman, Jordan.

In the first year of the collaboration between the Honors College, ICM, and MSA, the Honors College had a film screening, showing *The Mosque in Morgantown*. Muslims and non-Muslims attended the film screening, and some of the Muslim community left feeling displeased with the film choice. Each participating organization and institution shares a common goal, which is to learn and educate people about Islam and Muslims, but the subject matter of the film and the agenda of the protagonist was particularly challenging. The film depicted conflict and tension among Muslims at the Islamic Center of Morgantown in Virginia, particularly on the matter of gender and appropriate practice of Islam. Some felt this was an inappropriate film choice to show students, and that it undermined the goals of the Outreach Program. The result was an open meeting at the ICM where individuals gathered to discuss the partnership and film screening. In the end, people walked away with a better understanding of the partnership and goals of the ICM, Honors College, and MSA. It was an obstacle in the relationship, but in the end it had a positive outcome (M. Ladenheim, 2014).

In the second year of the partnership, Corey Saylor from the Council on American-Islamic Relations was invited to speak about sharia law in the United States at the ICM (see photograph 3).
Asiya Sbayi, the current president of the MSA, said that each year a topic is chosen for IAW that has received a lot of news coverage or something the MSA wants to address, and they find a speaker who is appropriate for that topic. In 2013, the topic of interest was terrorism and so they brought a speaker whose talk was on “The Psychology of a Terrorist” (As. Sbayi, 2014). For 2014, Asiya said they wanted someone who could “effectively speak in English without an accent, so he can relate to the people in the
about the MSA, she said “The goal of the MSA is to bring awareness about Islam here in America, because as you see we are the minority here at the university, so we are the ambassadors of Islam. It is our duty to inform people of who we are and what we believe in so we don’t leave any gray area where they are afraid to approach us or ask us about Islam and specific things of that part” (2014). Many of the MSA members are part of families at the ICM, including Sbayi and Hashmi. The MSA had its own outreach effort, and partnering with the ICM and Honors College was logistically smart.

The Outreach Program of the ICM has been a long endeavor to educate the general public in the Orono area about Islam and Muslims. Outreach is necessary because, as Jenan Jondy said, it is important to eliminate any mystique surrounding a mosque or Islamic center. By reaching out to the community, those who are interested do show up at the ICM. The result has been full Open Houses, with hundreds from the Orono area attending. Many people who attend the Open House come with questions that they get from national media and global events. The next chapter will look at how popular media is influential at the ICM, and how the ICM engages with local media.
Chapter 5: Popular Media at the ICM

One of the realities that Muslim communities in the United States face is that they are often looked to as ambassadors for Islam, as Asiya Sbayi noted in the previous chapter, and for explanations of world events pertaining to Islam or the Middle East. Sajidah Hashmi, who owns and operates a motel in Veazie, Maine along with her husband Najam, can recall customers after 9/11 asking about Osama Bin Laden, and she had no idea who he was. This inspired her to do research so that she could answer the questions of her children’s teachers and the questions of customers at her business (2014). Omar Conteh, the ICM Outreach Coordinator, said “Having to explain world events from this little tiny community is challenging. A lot of people come through, they have a lot of genuine questions, a lot of good questions, and we try to answer them to the best that we can…. I think that presents a challenge and an opportunity at the same time, and I think that’s a wonderful thing” (2014). When people approach Muslims with questions about Islam or what they saw on the news, it creates an opportunity for Muslims to teach the public about Islam and what Muslims believe.

Media manipulates Islamic words to its own end, and all of Islam gets distilled in the misappropriation of one word, such as *jihad*. At a recent Outreach event at the ICM, Conteh said *jihad* was not a word that was part of his vocabulary growing up, which surprised the students in attendance (M. Ladenheim, pers. com.). In fact, Conteh recalls having to ask about what *jihad* meant after he heard it so much in the media post 9/11 (Outreach email, 2014). Non-Muslim students never thought of *jihad* meaning struggling to wake up in the morning to do prayers. We get this mixed image of the word, and other
words, because we only hear them in one context: extremism and terrorism. It then falls on the local Muslim community to answer the questions of the general public.

National events and depictions of Muslims affect this community. When the issue of building the Park51 mosque, called by the media the ‘Ground Zero mosque’ despite it being two blocks away from Ground Zero, was in the news in 2010, it sparked discussion in Orono. The *Bangor Daily News* interviewed Mohammed Tabbah, then president of the ICM, and Jenan Jondy, then Outreach Coordinator and wife of Tabbah, about the issue. In an article on August 20, 2010, Tabbah said, “When I first heard about it, my initial response was that it probably wasn’t a good idea at this time. It’s a sensitive issue.” He continued, “Speaking just for myself, after hearing all the debate, it goes down as that the U.S. is a free country and that is the essence of this country,” and “if we don’t allow it to be a free country for all, then it doesn’t go with the principles the United States was founded on: freedom and equality” (Neff). Interestingly though, this debate over the mosque in Lower Manhattan helped the outreach effort at the ICM. Tabbah added “We had an open house and really tried to educate people about our religion and bridge the obvious gaps between American Muslims and Americans, and this current debate does even more to help us do that” (Neff). In the end, the national discussion around the Islamic center being built in Manhattan actually brought more attention to the ICM, because it inspired the general community to go to the ICM and ask questions.

In a similar way, Terry Jones, a pastor from Florida who made national news for burning a Quran, had its ripple effect in Orono, Maine as well. Jondy said in the BDN that the controversy over Jones’ actions have helped in Maine, again bringing the non-Muslim community closer to the Muslim community. “We’ve actually had an outpouring
of support, which is very nice. This is not causing any tension whatsoever,” she said in a 2010 interview. “He has about 50 people in his congregation,” said Jondy. “He’s making this decision on his own and it’s not an educated decision. It’s very disrespectful” (Cousins, 2010). In the grand scheme of things, Terry Jones is a fringe figure without much support, but the ICM community still ends up having to deal with the repercussions of his actions. The outreach efforts of the ICM have been successful, and this is demonstrated when negative national events and media bring general attention to Islam and by extension the ICM, and the public shows support. After the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, the Muslim community in the area was not concerned about any backlash against them, and did not feel a need to increase outreach efforts. The BDN reported Eaman Attia saying, “I have had four or five emails in the last week from [non-Muslim] people who have said, ‘We know that this is not what your religion teaches’” (Harrison, Worshipers at Orono).

This is not to say that Muslims in the state of Maine have not been harassed. By 2007, the Maine Attorney General’s Office had seen 12 reports of hate crimes against Muslims (Harrison, 2007). Thomas Harnett, then the assistant attorney general for civil rights education and enforcement, said to BDN reporter Judy Harrison that “We rarely had any cases before September 11,” and “the number of incidents rose in the aftermath. On July 3, 2006, a frozen pig’s head was thrown into a mosque in Lewiston by a Lewiston man while Muslims were praying inside. Harrison, who reports on religion for the BDN and has covered the Muslim community in Orono for many years, said to me in an email, “I think what has made the interaction with the community here as opposed to some problems that have been reported in Lewiston and Portland is that the Muslims
living here are, for the most part, professionals -- doctors, pharmacists, professors, etc” (2014). The ICM’s highly active and affective Outreach Program has also gone a long way toward familiarizing the local community with the ICM.

One thing members of the ICM have succeeded in doing well is getting their message out to a wide audience. Eaman Attia has been very involved in outreach, giving presentations all over Maine for the past nine years. After U.S. Ambassador Christopher Stevens was killed at the embassy in Libya along with others, a photo went viral online that showed a Libyan boy holding a sign saying “Sorry people of America this is not the behavior of our [Islam and Prophet].” This inspired a gathering in Belfast, Maine to show support for the Libyan people and condemn the video degrading the prophet Mohammed that went viral and was suspected to have caused the outbreak of violence (Curtis, 2012). Attia made a point to travel to that demonstration and spoke on the matter of the film and subsequent violence.

Local Muslims have taken up the idea of contributing to the media themselves, writing articles for the Bangor Daily News explaining Islam in general or applying it to a specific problem. These articles have appeared in the Voices column of the BDN and have served more than one function: they acquainted non-Muslim readers with the ideas and practices of Muslims and the meaning of Islam, and they served as advice to all readers for overcoming or dealing with daily troubles and concerns that all Americans face. Leaders in the Muslim community write about mental and physical health, women’s issues, politics, religion, and culture. Muslims in Orono are not an isolated community; they are American Muslims as Jondy would say. Muslims face the same problems that non-Muslims in the U.S. face as well. Jondy wrote in the Living column of the BDN
about anxiety and depression in the United States, explaining how Islam approaches the matter. This partially functions as outreach, but it is really about community engagement. In Orono, the Muslim community is not so big that it is possible to isolate itself from broader community concerns and so, Jondy and others wrote occasionally for the BDN on issues that all people face. It says to the public, ‘Muslims are here, and we have the same problems as you do.’

In one article, Jondy explains Islam does not shy away from or pretend mental or psychological illness does not exist. When something is not addressed directly in the Quran, Muslims look to what the prophet said; “Make use of medical treatment, for God has not made a disease without appointing a remedy for it, with the exception of one disease, old age” (May 2009). Many Muslims at the ICM are professionals, doctors and scientists, and they do not shy away from medical treatment of any kind. In addition to that, Jondy says that prayer has healing effects as well and explains that she finds serenity in the five daily prayers and submission to God’s will. Regarding the body, Jondy believes that power to change who we are is in the soul and the senses. “We have been given honor and free will unlike any other creation in order to make choices and to think critically. Our senses were given to us to decode the world of information around us, to help us realize who God is and why we are here; not to suppress them with our addiction to our desires,” she wrote for the BDN (June 2009). For a healthy body she explained, remember that senses are there to lead us to make the right decisions. So, when we are shown advertisements for bad food, or want to buy on a whim, we need to remember this, and take control. In a 2010 article, she also cites a saying of the prophet Mohammed: “Do not be an imitator saying: If people do good we do good, and if they commit injustice we
commit injustice, but take control of yourselves: If people do good then you do good, and if they do bad then do not commit injustice.” Jondy, as with many Muslims in America, deals with using the principles learned from the Quran to find her way through cultural obstacles. In the United States, anxiety, depression, suicide, physical health and activity, diet, beauty standards, these are all problems that our collective community faces. So, being Muslim in America, or Muslim in Orono, Maine, might have some unique qualities, but clearly Muslims share the same problems with mind and body that all Americans face.

Many non-Muslim Americans in Orono have questions about women in Islam and the *hijab* which are the same questions that people have in other parts of the U.S. Part of U.S. culture is that we view appearance as a form of self-expression, including clothing and hair style. This is a complicated issue because difference in culture and religion can come into conflict here, both within Islam and beyond. In addition to that, U.S. media exposure usually focuses on negativity surrounding Islam, and so images of the *hijab* are tied to oppression in the minds of many Americans. Marwa Elkelani, a female leader in the ICM community, acknowledges this in an article she wrote for the BDN (2010):

“As I flip through CNN channels and watch different documentaries, I can’t help but cringe and become mortified by the sights of Muslim women in Afghanistan and other areas of the Middle East who are either sprawled on the floor begging for food and money, abused by their husbands, uneducated, illiterate, oppressed, and subjected to humiliation and degradation.

However, she explains, it is a fallacy to then blame Islam for this. “Many Muslims themselves, men and women, are still bound by the confines of traditions, rather than Islamic values. This is evident in countries in which women aren’t allowed to receive an education, drive, work or voice their opinions. It is in these countries that traditional
practices, instead of Islamic principles, continue to represent the model behavior.”

Elkelani recognizes that there is some confusion in the United States about Islam because culture and religion often go unexplained in media and are simply lumped together, which is incorrect.

Marwa Elkelani expounded in another article written by her that women wearing the *hijab* do so gladly for the following reasons: it is a duty to God, and it identifies them as Muslim which they are proud of. In addition to that, she states: “I am also ecstatic about embracing this new freedom from trying to conform to and meet society’s standards of beauty. It is something that I worked hard at while growing up here in America. Young girls from a very early age are taught that their worth is proportional to their attractiveness” (2009). Negative body image is a serious cultural problem in the United States today. American Muslims grapple with the issue as well, and Muslim-women at the ICM find comfort wearing the *hijab*. Again, it is as much an “American” pursuit to approach problems with diverse solutions as any other. American Muslims in Orono face some unique challenges, but also the mutual challenges all Americans face.

Eaman Attia reflected on her own experience being judged because she was wearing the *hijab* in an article written in October 2009. Attia said her favorite quote in the Quran is chapter 49, verse 13: “O Mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is the most pious. Verily, Allah is All-Knowing, All-Aware” (Attia, Some Blinded). Attia posed the question “What makes one of us more beloved to God than the other? It is not our race, sex, creed, wealth or status. The criteria for judgment in the sight of Allah are: God consciousness, piety and righteousness. To
become most honored in the sight of our Creator, we must search for true piety and righteousness and act upon it.” The point is her interpretation of one individual judging another, and that we have no right to do so. “Therefore, as a Muslim, I believe that all humankind must be respected and honored. My faith demands that all people should be kind toward each other and should live in a society based on love and respect” (Attia, Some Blinded).

In another article in November of 2009, Attia took the opportunity of a Muslim holiday landing the day after Thanksgiving to explain the holidays in Islam. That year, Muslims celebrated the end of the Hajj season, which is also the same day as Eid ul-Udha. Hajj, as mentioned earlier, is the pilgrimage to Mecca and one of the five pillars of action, and it occurs during a specific time period each year. Eid ul-Udha is the holiday that when Abraham took Ishmael to sacrifice him, following God’s command, but Ishmael was spared and a ram was sacrificed instead. With Thanksgiving and Eid ul-Udha and the end of Hajj season back to back, Attia wrote “it will be an extra special weekend, when we come together with our friends in thanking God for all the blessings he has bestowed upon us, and we unite with Muslims all over the world in celebrating the end of the Hajj season and Eid ul-Udha” (Attia, Celebration).

Being Muslim in America can carry some unique challenges, but being an American Muslim is the same as being American; U.S. culture is defined by diversity and everyone shares in basic life struggles. It should not be surprising to learn that American Muslims contribute to their communities like anyone else. Jenan Jondy said diversity “should excite people; that we can learn from each other, and you pick up the good from

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2 In Islam it was Ishmael to be sacrificed, not Isaac.
every subculture.” In any group, some individuals are more outspoken and involved than others.
Conclusion

In this thesis, I have related the general history of the development of the Islamic Center of Maine. As well, I have discussed the work by various leaders among the ICM community to develop a relationship with the non-Muslim Orono community for the purpose of education and building relationships. The Islamic Center of Maine was established to meet the needs of the growing Muslim population in the Orono area. Its establishment also accelerated the growth of the Muslim community as Muslim students, faculty, and professionals looked to see if there was a mosque in the area before deciding to move here. In the earlier days of the community, Muslims at the University of Maine would meet at the Drummond Chapel of the Memorial Union for Friday prayer. The effort to bring together the Muslim community was largely led by Dr. Mahmoud El-Begearmi and his wife, Taghreed. In 1998, the celebration at the end of Ramadan was held in the Dexter Lounge of the Alfond Arena because there was insufficient space in the Drummond Chapel in the Memorial Union.

Four years later, the community completed the first freestanding mosque in Maine, a milestone in the community both as a place of worship and as a center for outreach and educational activities. “We have hundreds of people show up every year, come visit us and likewise we get invited to go visit other people and their places of worship” said Conteh (2014). The Muslim community in Orono now has a well-built and well-established Outreach Program that hosts classes from the University and community groups in addition to drawing hundreds to their Open House each year, where invited speakers offer insight on Islam as a faith and Muslims as its practitioners, and where the guests are treated to a delicious buffet of ethnic foods.
The national media attention on Islam post 9/11 has created opportunities for the ICM to engage the larger community and teach them about Islam and who Muslims really are. In an ideal world with perfect information, this outreach would be unnecessary. However, there are many incorrect stereotypes and misunderstandings about Islam and Muslims among the U.S. public. Jenan Jondy, former Outreach Coordinator at the ICM, feels that it is a responsibility to correct these misunderstandings through personal interaction and dialogue. She believed if people came to the mosque and learned from Muslims about Islam, it would go a long way toward dispelling stereotypes and the fear that comes from lack of information and experience. That is why she spent so much of her time at the ICM developing the Outreach Program before moving back to Michigan and handing it over to Omar Conteh. Others, like Eaman Attia, took the Outreach Program out of the ICM, travelling around the state to give presentations. A major development in the Outreach Program was when the ICM began hosting Honors College classes in 2007 to teach students about Islam. This later grew into the collaboration of the ICM, MSA and Honors College for Islamic Awareness Weekend (IAW) starting in 2013.

The community at the ICM is incredibly diverse. Muslims in the Orono area come from many parts of the world and across the United States. This reflects the national picture as the American Muslim community is the most diverse religious community in the U.S. Many are immigrants from North Africa, Southeast Asia, the Middle East, etc., but many at the ICM are born in the United States. However, those born in the U.S. still face misconceptions that they are foreign. According to Gallup, 35% of the American Muslim population is African American, 18% Asian American, 28% white American,
and 18% other (2009).

The hijab is still a controversial issue in the United States, and it is one of the most common topics of questions directed towards Muslim women. The hijab is something that has been portrayed as oppressive through media, and Americans have a generally difficult time understanding it. Asiya Sbayi remembers other students at her high school asking if she takes showers wearing her hijab (2014). Contrary to popular belief, many Muslim women in the U.S. feel liberated by the hijab from social standards of beauty according to an article for the BDN by Marwa Elkelani (2009).

Overall, the Muslim community in Orono has faced some challenges which Muslims in a Muslim majority country might not have to face. For example, the Islamic Center was needed not only as a place for prayer, but also because the community had needs which in a Muslim majority country may already be served outside the mosque. The ICM is a focal point for the local Muslim community with activities ranging from prayer to doing homework, from Friday night study circles and Sunday school where children are taught the Quran and Arabic to hosting university classes and Open Houses for the general public.

The Islamic Center of Maine is continuing to develop, and some families with children at the University who are nearing graduation will likely move away as others have before them, and new families will likely continue to arrive. The major developments of the ICM have mostly already happened, as the new building has the capacity to hold a very large group and has rooms outside the prayer hall for other activities. Looking to the future, current president Tameem Alsamsam said there is some interest in making a recreational area behind the ICM. The ICM community has
accomplished a great deal since the establishment of the first Center in 2002 and its replacement in 2010.

If I could continue my research, the next thing I would write about is the history of the Sunday school program. For parents, the role of the ICM as a place to raise their children around Islam and other Muslims is very important and this sentiment was repeatedly expressed to me in conversations and interviews. Sajidah Hashmi said that she did her best to teach her kids at home, but she wanted them to grow up and feel comfortable around other Muslims. Taghreed El-Begearmi, Dr. Mahmoud’s wife, said the same thing.

Another topic worth exploring is the transition of the ICM culture from a student-based one to a family-based one. It is possible that one of the major causes was the coming of Muslim doctors with their families to the Orono area to work at hospitals. It would be interesting to talk to students from when the ICM was first built and to current students about the ICM and what draws them to it and what does not.

With more time, it would be interesting to explore the internal tensions that could exist but which people might be hesitant to discuss. It would also be useful to look in-depth at other Islamic centers built near universities in other states to see if the experience in Orono has been similar or different and why this might be.

It is my hope that this thesis will open opportunities for more stories to be told by Muslims in Orono about their experiences living in Orono and elsewhere. I believe if I had more time to spend at the ICM, more personal stories would surface. This thesis has contributed to the overall documentation of the history of the Islamic Center of Maine.
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Appendices

Appendix A: 6 Articles of Faith from the ICM website (2014)

1. Belief in Allah/One God -

   A Muslim believes in ONE GOD, God has no father or mother, no son or
daughter. None is equal to Him. He is the God of all, the Creator, Lord, Sustainer,
and Master of all.

2. Belief in Messengers and Prophets of God -

   A Muslim believes in all the Messengers and Prophets of God without any
discrimination. All messengers were mortals, human beings - protected from sin,
edowed with Divine revelations and appointed by God to teach mankind. Some
prophets: include Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Moses, Jesus and
Muhammad, the last of the Prophets (peace be upon them all). The key message
they came with: believe in One God and not to associate partners with Him, to
stay away from sins, lead a life devoted to earning God’s pleasure and
accountability on the Day of Judgment.

3. Revelations -

   A Muslim believes in all scriptures and revelations of God, as they were complete
and in their original versions. Muslims believe in the original scriptures that were
given to previous messengers; for example David received the Zabur (Psalms),
Moses the Torah and Jesus the Injeel (Gospel). However, the previous scriptures
do not exist today in the original form in which they were revealed. The Quran is
the last testament in the series of divine revelations from God, and Muslims recite
and turn to for guidance in all aspects of their life.

4. The Angels -

Angels are a creation of God. They are purely spiritual and splendid beings that require no food or drink or sleep. They have no physical desires or material needs. Like other creations of God, Angels spend their time worshiping God. In contrast to human beings, Angels do not have free Will – they can only obey God and do not have the ability to disobey Him. Each Angel is charged with a certain duty. Angels cannot be seen by the naked eyes.

5. The Day of Judgment -

A Muslim believes in the Day of the Judgment. This world as we know it will come to an end, and the dead will rise to stand for their final and fair trial. On that day, all men and women from Adam to the last person will be resurrected from the state of death will be held accountable for their deeds. Muslims believe in Heaven and Hell.

6. Predestination -

A Muslim believes in the ultimate Knowledge and Power of God to plan and execute His plans. Allah (God) is Wise, Just, and Loving, and whatever He does is good, although we may fail sometimes to understand it fully. The believer should have strong faith in God, recognizing that their own knowledge is limited and their thinking is based on individual consideration. Humans should think, plan and make sound choices and put their trust in God. If things happen as they want they should praise God. If things do not happen as they want they should still praise God, recognizing that He knows best what is good for the affairs of
mankind.

**Appendix B**: Institutional Review Board Approval
Biography of the Author

Born December 1991, Kyle Franklin grew up in Guilford, Vermont, where his family settled in 1777. Throughout high school, he was a hockey goalie and discovered that he is most at home on anything with two wheels. After coming to the University of Maine and joining the Honors College, Kyle discovered Arabic through the Honors College and dedicated two summers at the Middlebury Arabic School and a semester in Amman, Jordan. After coming back, he began working on this thesis, resulting in the heightened blood pressure of Melissa Ladenheim. Kyle will be working at the Library of Congress in the African and Middle East Division over the summer.