

## Dynamic Syntheses

### *Rebellion, Absolute and Spiritual*

It was just as big a deal as coming out gay! It completely blew up in my face. My father threatened to pull me out of school. He wanted me to quit my job. He would talk to my sisters about disowning me. Eventually he cooled down. I learned really quick I had to pretend to give religion a chance. But, there's a point of no return—where once you've separated yourself from it, you're not gonna go back.

Ibrahim [pseudonym] was twenty-four years old when we met. Within the first moments of our conversation, he impressed upon me that he was an atheist. Within the Islamizing ethos of the suburbs, to be a good person was to be a good Muslim as defined within the terms of reformist orthopraxy. But Ibrahim increasingly resisted being molded within this piety. The justifications for it made no sense to him. He especially questioned how an omnipotent, omniscient, yet just God could punish human beings. “I asked my mom if God has predetermined what I’m gonna do then why do I get punished for it?” he said. “She’s like, ‘Oh no, God gives you choices, you choose,’ but I was like, he knows what I’m gonna choose. That was the first time I thought God is unfair.” His mother recited Qur’anic passages and stories from the lives of the prophets but “eventually, you’re sick of hearing stories and you let it go, and after that, you can’t trust this whole thing.”

#### SYNCRETIC REBELLIONS

This chapter continues the discussion of syncretic secularity by focusing on trajectories that, in my data, originated in the religious milieu but then arced into nonsectarian outlooks. I characterize these arcs as “rebellion.” The individuals I profile, including Ibrahim, resist and reject the Islamized or Christianized milieu. Their rebellion entails a search for alternative orientations within or beyond those spaces. This search ends in “secular religiosity,” a type of syncretic secularity

enacted in an abandonment of reformist piety and of sectarian identity. This syncretic form retains religion, the idea of it, and religiosity in certain modified ways, however, as part of an alternative, “polytheistic,” or pluralized sense of self.

Rebellion manifests in my data in two subforms: absolute rejection and spiritualization. Absolute rejection leads to atheism. Religion—the idea of it—ironically persists in this stance. It stamps this atheism with its particular character by providing the background and specific points of contrast against which the act of rejection occurs. To the extent the contrasting relation is maintained, the atheism to which absolute rejection leads marks the furthest extreme of the secular religiosities I describe.

The second form of rebellion, spiritualization, embraces religious pluralism and individual “spirituality.” Its validation of the polytheism of values (pluralism) in which deinstitutionalized, highly individual, and selective religious sensibilities become possible constitutes its secularity. This stance, too, bears the marks of the Islamized or Christianized milieu. Its secularity gains its coherence through the rejection of the orthodoxies/orthopraxes that define these milieus as well as through its embrace of individualized religiosity and cultural pluralism as the contrasting option.<sup>1</sup>

Class, generation, and gender as well as alternative moral-cultural and leisure spaces within the wider urban zone of Chicago shape these two trajectories (absolute rejection and spiritualization) in various ways. Rebellion against the religious milieu, for example, can have its impetus in a woman’s traumatic experience of religion as an enforcement mechanism of gendered inequalities during childhood. The impetus can also lie in generational upheavals, such as the two Intifadas, that open up possibilities for individual self-assertion within and against the religious sectarian milieu. A related conditioning factor is the encounter with social spheres offering different moralities and identity possibilities. These possibilities provide a critical contrast with the Islamized/Christianized milieu. By embracing the alternatives, an individual gives form to the rejection stance not merely as the negation of a particular set of norms but also as an affirmation of a distinct, competing value orientation.

I document and analyze these dynamics in detail in the profiles to follow. Whether the profiles represent general tendencies in the wider immigrant community is beyond the scope of my discussion in this chapter. The goal of the profiles rather is to identify and elaborate the range of identity trajectories—in this case, rebellion leading to atheism or spiritualization—as they emerge typologically in the narratives of my interlocutors. Further research can and should test the validity of the typologies beyond my data. The profiles also serve a second goal: to substantiate my argument that the dynamics of the religious shift in Palestinian Chicago, as they manifest in the narratives of my interlocutors, ironically generate disenchantment leading to new, unanticipated forms of secularity and secularism.

## ABSOLUTE REJECTION

My first profile, of Ibrahim, illustrates absolute rejection leading to atheism. The narrative reveals two intertwining acts of rebellion; alongside rejection of the religious milieu, there is a discarding of Palestinian national identity in favor of an “American” one. Atheism and Americanism form a single trajectory in this case. As in the other profiles I present, there is a spatial-social displacement: the journey to a godless America is also an exodus from the immigrant enclave to the city beyond. Still, the enclave remains present in this narrative, albeit at a remove. Family ties are not entirely severed. Further, narratively, religion, which is rejected, provides the negative term that defines and imparts coherence to the resulting atheism.

*Atheism in the City Beyond: Ibrahim*  
Origins of the Heresy

Born and raised in the southwest suburbs, Ibrahim had recently graduated from college with a major in finance when we met for our conversation. His parents had grown up in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. He mentioned that his father had served in “the resistance”—a reference to membership in a PLO faction. After the expulsion of the PLO and its militias from Lebanon in 1982, Palestinians remaining in the camps confronted dire circumstances, including revenge attacks and massacres carried out by Lebanese militias that had opposed the Lebanese National Movement, which the PLO had supported. The deteriorating conditions drove his parents to immigrate.

Despite the direct political heritage of his father, Ibrahim conveyed a strong sense of alienation from Palestinian politics and identity. He, in fact, refused to identify himself as a Palestinian altogether, insisting instead, in reply to my questions, that he was an American above all else. One reason for his alienation seemed to reside in the fact that he had had very little contact with Palestinian life in the Middle East. Ibrahim recounted a single trip with his mother to visit his aunt in Lebanon when he was ten years old. He remembered little of the visit other than his shock at the conditions of the camp in which his aunt continued to live. He never returned to Lebanon and had never been to Palestine itself.

The local diaspora mechanisms for instilling nationalist sentiment had also failed in Ibrahim’s case. Ibrahim described going to several protest actions when he was young, but stated categorically that he would have nothing to do with those sorts of events now, or with any other similar nationalist ritual. For Ibrahim, attendance at political events carried the demand for unquestioning loyalty and communal conformity. “My mom and sister would get mad and guilt me when I said I didn’t wanna go,” he recalled. “They’d tell me: ‘you don’t really care that people are dying over there.’ I told them I do care, but that this protest is not going to change anything.”<sup>2</sup> Ibrahim reacted to the pressure to conform politically by

rejecting identification as a Palestinian entirely. Desiring to pass as “American,” he avoided all discussion of politics in his daily life beyond the family.

Later in his interview, Ibrahim described feeling tension whenever colleagues at work, especially Jewish colleagues, asked about his ethnicity.

They'd see the name and ask where I'm from and for the first few months I'd say, 'Lebanon,' just 'cause I didn't wanna get into the whole conversation, but then I'd tell them Palestine and Lebanon were where my parents were from and then the Palestine talk would start and I'd try to brush it off [ . . . ]. It's not something that's pleasant to talk about.

The experience of having to contend with Jewish colleagues and their desire to debate the Palestine question was not unique to Ibrahim. Other Palestinians related similar stories. In Ibrahim's narrative, however, the desire to derail uncomfortable discussion at work connected, as his description of forced attendance at protests indicated, to a deeper estrangement from public identification as a Palestinian generally.

This estrangement extended to religion, too. Ibrahim's atheism developed gradually. Islamic piety had not been a dominant feature of family life when his older sister was growing up. This sister did not wear a hijab scarf or pray, Ibrahim told me. She never learned these disciplines in the home and never became integrated into Islamic communal structures. By the early 1990s, however, when Ibrahim and his younger sisters were toddlers, the Mosque Foundation had become established and its associated schools had launched. The ethos of the suburban enclave began to register the impact of these organizations as community members embraced the practices they instituted. Like their neighbors, Ibrahim's mother began wearing the hijab and his father started attending Friday prayers. She also began to feel during this time that her child-rearing methods had fallen short and that piety was necessary to raising disciplined, moral children—these two qualifiers, disciplined and moral, being intimately linked for Ibrahim in his recounting of this transitional period: “With four kids, it was a way to keep us in line, to instill morals, I guess,” he said. “I think she had a picture in her head that Muslims are, like, peaceful, loving, very accepting. She really wanted that with us.” Ibrahim resisted the new discipline nonetheless: “The justifications for it just didn't make sense to me, but I was being rebellious, too.”

#### *Crossing the Rubicon: Rejecting Faith and Nation*

Ibrahim's rejection of reformist piety—expressed as an inability to reconcile moral and logical contradictions—crested when he began attending a college on the North Side. In that space, well beyond the suburban enclave, he finally relinquished his identification with Islam: “Once my separation from God was done, Islam meant nothing to me.” But, since he continued living with his parents, he continued outwardly comporting with their expectations of piety to avoid conflict.

He drank water during our interview, held in a downtown café, despite the fact that it was Ramadan. At home, “I still put on this show for my parents and the rest of my family, more out of respect for my parents, but in the city I don’t care.”

Ibrahim’s reference to “the city” was significant. Access to its spaces beyond the enclave facilitated his ability to inhabit other non-Islamic, “secular” personas. However, within the enclave, in which he continued to live, he had to conform to the norms of piety. The price of not doing so became starkly clear when he “tried coming out as an atheist in 2009.” Faced with his father’s threat to disown him, Ibrahim learned to dissimulate. He cursorily read the books on faith and practice his father gave him, absorbing “just enough to talk to him so he would think, okay, this kid turned over a new leaf.” The most difficult time was Ramadan, when everyone was expected to fast and pray. “I think my mom has caught on that I don’t fast; I think it hurts their ego.” Ibrahim expressed empathy for his parents, stating: “I never expected them to say, okay, he’s an atheist, that’s cool; a big part of Islam is instilling the belief in your children—that’s part of what gets you to heaven—and it’s kind of a big deal to them.”

Ibrahim did not condemn his parents for their sharply negative reaction to his atheism, but the sense of estrangement from them was palpable in his narrative. Membership in the family required conformity to piety as much as it did to nationality. Ibrahim rejected both, placing his familial membership in question. Financially vulnerable, he tried to mute the dissonance, feigning repentance and piety. But the dissemblance barely disguised his persisting resistance, especially in moments like the Ramadan fast that demanded public adherence to convention.

Elsewhere in the city, however, Ibrahim could shed the pretense. He described having a girlfriend, a Palestinian university student who also had grown up in a newly pious family. Like Ibrahim, she resisted demands that she adopt reformist practice. She refused to fast, pray, or wear the hijab; she also rented her own apartment on the North Side. She and Ibrahim met for dates and long walks there. He had not expected to become romantically attached to an Arab woman. “I always had that picture in my mind of what I saw,” he commented, “you know, [Arab women] are really religious and you gotta like stay away ‘cause of what it means in the culture [to show a serious interest in a woman].”

Ibrahim was surprised to find someone within “the culture” who, like him, had rebelled against the strictures of piety. “She’s essentially in the same boat as me,” Ibrahim reflected. The city spaces beyond the enclave allowed them to sustain their shared nonconformity and to stake out independent lives as “Americans.” As Ibrahim put it: “We can’t go anywhere in the suburbs without worrying about being seen and rumors spreading quick [ . . . ]. If we were stuck in the suburbs and that was the only way, it wouldn’t work.”

This was true especially because of the gendered double standard his girlfriend faced in the suburbs. Men, even within the piety-minded milieu, were given unspoken latitude to engage in liaisons with women. Women, on the other hand,

faced public shaming, exclusion, and even violence if they ignored the norms governing courtship. This double standard, Ibrahim told me, was yet another reason for his alienation from the enclave and from the patriarchal norms it had instituted. Girls were “like prisoners in the home, especially in Islam,” he said, “[ . . . ] groomed to cater to their husbands—be obedient, don’t talk, don’t do this or that. I can’t support it. That’s probably also an American influence on me: women having all their rights, being independent.”

The “American influence,” which Ibrahim equated with egalitarian gender relations, re-emerged as a theme at the end of our interview. He elaborated on it in response to a question about his hierarchy of identity:

I’m American. [My family] wants me to say I’m Arabic-American with the Arabic first. But, no, I’m American and my family is Arabic. I was born in America. Arabic culture [ . . . ] doesn’t promote equality as well as the American [one]. If I ever tell my parents, hey, I’m gonna marry a black girl, they’re gonna be like, no you have to marry a girl of our culture and no one will ever understand our culture like that. I don’t want to raise my kids to think like that. I want them to be raised with an American style—like, hey, whatever is okay.

In Ibrahim’s narrative, “American” had ceased to function, in contrast with its usage in the discourse of many Palestinian immigrants I had interacted with, as a negative term against which an authentic “Arab” self was set in relief.<sup>3</sup> Rather, for Ibrahim, Americanness connoted an alternative set of values that one could adopt by virtue of living in Chicago or anywhere else in the United States. Those values and the identity they encoded constituted a point of moral contrast with, and critique of, “the Arabic culture, the Muslim culture” as well as a path out of that culture and its piety and patriarchy, as Ibrahim characterized it. The expectations of moral conformity; the moral contradictions of monotheism as expressed in the injustice of an omniscient and omnipotent deity who predetermined every event; and the gendered double standard—all of this could be transcended in the diaspora. In the exile, other possibilities existed for the trajectory of one’s life. Those possibilities lay beyond the enclave, within the majority culture that one could join simply by declaring one’s Americanness—so long, at least, as one was able to dodge uncomfortable questions at the office or at home about one’s suppressed yet ever present alterity. Ibrahim had secularized this alterity, abandoning its distinctive markings.

Yet, in his narration of his transformation, and in his continuing relations with the immigrant milieu he had rejected, Arabness and Islam persisted as the defining negative image of the American identity he had embraced. At times, too, when back in the suburbs, piety imposed itself on him, and, in his desire to avoid conflict, Ibrahim simulated assent by participating grudgingly in its forms. It was in these ways that his atheism came within the compass, albeit at its extreme edge, of what I am calling secular religiosity. His atheism rejected yet perpetuated, through

the very act of negation or in moments of pragmatic capitulation, the piety it purported to have left behind.

### SPIRITUALIZATION

In contrast with Ibrahim's absolute rejection of the reformist, piety-minded milieu, the next three profiles map forms of secular religiosity that I characterize as "spiritualization." Spiritualization, like absolute rejection, rebels against the orthopraxy/orthodoxy of the religious milieu. Rather than leading to atheism, however, spiritualization generates a highly idiosyncratic form of religiosity comporting with an embrace of pluralism beyond the immigrant enclave.

#### *Rejecting Sect and Patriarchy, Embracing Pluralistic Alterity*

The next profile focuses on the Christian context. Sawsan (pseudonym), an artist, described her confrontation with the mechanisms of patriarchal control within the religious-sectarian milieu in which she grew up. This confrontation produced disenchantment with Christianity and a subsequent search for an alternative moral community and identity. The process began in Palestine, where Islam and nationalism, both of which intertwined during the Second Intifada (2000–05), provided these other possibilities. The embrace of these options led to a series of transformations that ended in the assertion of a highly individualized spirituality and in an affirmation of pluralism on the margins of the Islamized/Christianized milieu in the Chicago diaspora.

#### *Familial and Political Matrices of a Religious Rebel*

Sawsan grew up in an Orthodox-Catholic community in the West Bank town of Beit Jala. She immigrated with her family to Chicago in 2002, when she was a university student. Her father, whose bakery business had collapsed during the Second Intifada, desired to take advantage of his brother's invitation to help launch a restaurant in the city. Economic reasons were not the only motives for the move. The family also worried about the political and religious paths that Sawsan had begun to travel during her teenage years.

Sawsan described her upbringing in Beit Jala as "tough." Alongside the violent political circumstances of the military occupation and the uprisings against it, her parents often fought bitterly with one another. "My mom and dad were not a happy couple," she said. "My mom could not stand up to my dad." In response to the pressure, her mother sought emotional shelter and support in her local Catholic parish church and its piety.

My mom's refuge was church and Jesus. I would always see her pray the rosary—pray and cry, pray and cry. My dad would complain about how religious she was and how she could not miss a mass. She forced us [the children] to go with her to Sunday school.

The refusal of Sawsan's father to attend mass with his wife, indeed, his resentment of his wife's piety, possibly indicated frustration with the intrusion of a superseding patriarchal authority in the home. Like Nawal (chapter 5), who also appealed to religious strictures to contest patriarchal norms, Sawsan's mother not only found consolation in saying the rosary and attending mass but also discovered, through the institutions of the church, the capacity to exercise a countervailing authority.<sup>4</sup> Church piety empowered her. It gave her autonomy. This autonomy entailed the assertion of the right to leave home and participate in public space (the church). It also endowed her with the capacity to assert a moral authority within the home. She took her children to weekly Sunday mass and, against her husband's resistance, enrolled them in Catholic grade schools.

Sawsan quickly began to resent her mother's attempts to impose Catholic discipline and identity. The priest at the church, she said, shamed her "for being chubby [ . . . ]. That was one of my earliest memories of being bullied, and it was by a priest, so, I hated going to Sunday school and being around that community." She also recalled the harshness of the nuns toward her if she were late for morning mass.

If I was late, even by a minute, the church doors would be locked and I would be punished. I would always run and join the Muslim girls. I always felt that their teacher was a lot more loving and peaceful looking than the nuns [ . . . ]. That was one of my earliest memories of being drawn to Islam.

Feeling "out of place in my church community, in my own community [ . . . ]," Islam appeared to Sawsan as a contrasting, open site of belonging, "which [was] crazy." Pressed on why it "was crazy" that Islam attracted her, Sawsan invoked the strong communal prohibitions against conversion: "Back there [in Palestine] you cannot even consider changing your religion [ . . . ]. You could die and it would be easier [to die than to convert] [ . . . ]. That's why [it was crazy]."

Sawsan's growing revulsion against the Christian sectarian milieu occurred just as the al-Aqsa Intifada (the Second Intifada) was beginning in the late summer of 2000. During this period of prolonged violence, Hamas increasingly claimed the status of sole remaining champion of uncompromising resistance to the Israeli occupation. The peace process, to which the PLO and Fatah, especially, had linked their fate, lay in ruins. Hamas seized the initiative, carrying out a series of suicide bombings in response to Israel's violence. These actions, which other groups like the al-Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade emulated, resonated with many Palestinians, who saw them as justifiable reactions.<sup>5</sup> Hamas now stood for principled refusal to surrender and in so doing linked Islam to national liberation for a new generation of activists. Sawsan's narrative reflected the impact of this development.

Sawsan described watching Muslim preachers on television during this time. She also began listening to Qur'an recitation on the radio at night—"it would help me sleep and make me feel better"—and started defending Islam to her family whenever the topic arose in discussion. Islam increasingly seemed to her to be the authentic core of Palestinian identity:

I always felt as a Palestinian that there was a relationship between being Palestinian and being Muslim [ . . . ]. In Islam, it is a duty to defend your land. I did not see that in Christianity. During the Second Intifada, as a teenager, it just made sense, that explanation [that to defend one's land was a God-given duty].

Sawsan described her political sympathies at the time as leaning toward secular-leftist factions that Christians in the Bethlehem and Beit Jala areas traditionally supported. She claimed, however, never to have formally joined any of these groups. Hamas also did not attract her as a vehicle for her politics. Still, the movement had made jihad a compelling way for her to imagine and justify resistance in the context of Israel's violent suppression of the Second Intifada.

Her budding nationalism and fascination with Islam coincided with and intensified in a romantic attraction that threw her family into crisis. Sawsan had discovered a talent for painting and sculpture and had begun to exhibit her work in galleries in Jerusalem and Ramallah. At one of these exhibits, she met a correspondent for a local TV station in Ramallah. "I fell in love with him [ . . . ]; he was my first love," she told me. She was eighteen years old; he was a Muslim. The relationship developed secretly. Sawsan feared the reaction of her father. He had refused to allow her to attend parties, even at church, at which boys were present. The restriction reflected a shared patriarchal ethos in Palestinian society generally. "You could not have a relationship with a young man back home," Sawsan reflected, "like, you know, go out with each other and go have coffee or whatever, unless you were engaged or married."

Endogamy, which reinforced sectarian, class, and familial distinctions, also powerfully constrained Sawsan:

As a teenager I heard all of these horrifying stories of honor killing, of Christians killing their women or girls, and Muslims killing their women, too. If they found out that I talked to a Muslim man, much less even having a relationship, I would have been finished in the Christian community. Such girls are labeled whores, sluts. I've heard stories of Christian families ringing the church bells to pronounce their daughter dead if she marries a Muslim man. One family put their daughter's picture in the newspaper, saying they disowned her.

Her family discovered her relationship with the journalist. Her brother read their email messages. Her mother found her personal diaries. The family's reaction was sharp. "My mom made me feel so much guilt for betraying Jesus," Sawsan recalled, "[telling me], I'm not good enough, I betrayed my family, I'm gonna bring shame to them, they're Muslims, they're garbage," this last in a suppressed voice. Her father never directly threatened her but said simply, "If you care about him, you should let him go, because he's worth only one bullet." She realized, "It's either I'm gonna get killed or he's gonna get killed."

Sawsan's parents increased their pressure on her. They confiscated her phone and computer and forced her to remain at home. As this was happening, the Second Intifada deepened. Sawsan's father shuttered his business and then decided to

take the family to Chicago. Sawsan remembered being made to feel as if she were the sole reason for the family's departure. She recounted her mother saying, "We are leaving because of you, before you bring shame to our family." Sawsan began weeping at this point during the interview. "I had to carry that burden of guilt that we immigrated," she said, "[that] we left the homeland because of me," even though her father's business problems were the primary motive for their departure.

*Exilic Transformations of Sawsan's Rebellion*

Immigration allowed Sawsan's father to recover financially. However, the buffer they hoped exile would afford against Sawsan's rebelliousness proved illusory. Sawsan described the move to Chicago as deeply traumatizing. In Chicago, she withdrew emotionally, sequestering herself in her room. "It was a very messy, dark time," she commented. And yet, in the midst of this difficult passage, rather than break from her past she immersed herself in it: "my connection to Islam continued [ . . . ], it intensified [ . . . ], and I finally converted in 2010," eight years after leaving Palestine.

The trajectory of Sawsan's conversion contrasted significantly with the reformist Islam that had taken root in the southwestern suburbs. The primary impetus for her transition was her encounter with an "American [white] professor" at a local university who had converted. Bosnian friends whom she met while working as a waitress on the city's North Side had invited her to one of the "spiritual talks" that this professor convened every Sunday in his apartment. She began attending the gatherings regularly. "It was amazing!" she commented. "I had never heard anything like it from any Arabic Muslim speaker [ . . . ], you know, giving us stories about the Prophet or the [Shi'i] Imams; just so much spirituality, and I fell in love with it and felt ready." The professor took the group on a trip to visit a large Shi'i mosque in Dearborn, Michigan. "That's where I declared myself a Muslim," Sawsan remembered.

Sawsan's idiosyncratic trajectory—in the Sunni-majority Palestinian context, Shi'ism was heterodoxy—reflected the depth of her alienation from both the Palestinian Christian and Muslim segments of the immigrant community. Her rejection of the city's Christian milieu stemmed from her refusal to abide the anti-Muslim, anti-nationalist sentiment of the community. The Christians she interacted with wanted, in her view, "to get rid of their Arabness and assimilate to white; their emphasis and focus [was] so much on religion and let's forget about our identity [as Palestinians and Arabs]." As well, at the church her mother had joined, the priest spoke in his homilies about "how our worst enemy was atheism and Islam and that we moved here [to the United States] as religious refugees, we were persecuted by Muslims." The comments enraged her: "I mean, are you kidding me! He never once mention[ed] the Israeli occupation. I just would get sick and would go home crying afterwards."

The Islamized suburban enclave also repulsed her. "I just did not like [the Mosque Foundation], how the *shaykh* was saying, oh, if you pray this way, it's

*haram* [forbidden], you should pray that way. I was, like, oh, for God's sake! The crowd is being talked to like cattle." The *shaykh's* refusal to talk with the women who came to worship also "insult[ed] my intelligence." She recalled sensing from the imam "this feeling of shame that I am a woman, like I should look down and away from men, be ashamed; and men, if they see a woman, they [should] run away." She explained further:

I'm a feminist. A woman should not feel ashamed, like she's a source of sin, you know, that Muslim male interpretation of women. I felt it in Bridgeview, I felt it in other Arabic mosques. But I didn't feel it in the Shi'i mosque or the Bosnian or Albanian mosques. There wasn't such a harsh division between male and female [in those mosques].

Her conversion in Michigan had failed to sustain itself, however. "Honestly," she said, "I haven't been to a mosque since, well, since that trip to Michigan." She also was reticent to tell other "Arabs that I'm a Muslim [because] they wouldn't believe me." They would likely point out that she didn't pray and that she had tattoos. But, she said, "at the end of the day, it's between me and God." She explained further:

To me, my interpretation of the faith would just be that connection and spirituality. I don't think I'll go to hell because I have tattoos. I don't think I have to fear God. So, I guess I can't even be a Muslim. But, still, every time I listen to the Qur'an, I feel at home, connected to Palestine.

The tattoos had caught my attention from the moment we met for our interview. I asked her about them at this point in our conversation. Her reaction provided further insight into the spiritualized trajectory that her rebellion had taken. "I have this [tattoo]," she said, as she angled her wrist toward me. "It's the first one I designed when I came here. It says, 'There are three things in my soul: Love, God, and Palestine.'" This triune declaration—a striking nationalist reconfiguration of the Christian conception of the divine—appeared in elaborate Arabic calligraphy. She pointed to another etching on her other wrist, also in Arabic. "This one is *ruh*," she said, "it means 'spirit.'" Again, the reference to the Third Person of the Christian notion of God was unmistakable. The same concept was central for Muslims, too: the *ruh* suffused "the night of power," during which, Muslims believe, Muhammad first recited the divine revelation. It was also the agent of Maryam's (Mary's) miraculous impregnation in the absence of a man.

She mentioned two other tattoos on her back. "I won't say what they are," she said, "but you can see one of them." She lifted the bottom of her shirt to reveal an image of an iconic leftist female resistance figure from the 1970s. "My father was afraid I would get into trouble for that one," she whispered, "but it's just a memory of the old times of the Palestinian revolution." Her father, she said, worried about her outspoken criticism of Israel's occupation: "He tells me it won't get me anywhere but prison and if I go back home it'll get me in trouble."

Sawsan's understanding of her nationalism reflected continuity with the PLO's original demand for a single democratic state in Palestine. "I am one of very few Palestinians who believes in a one-state solution," she said. "I don't agree with two states." She explained this commitment, however, not in ideological terms but rather in relational, cultural, and spiritual ones. She had developed friendships with Jewish activists in Chicago who opposed Israel's policies and advocated for Palestinian freedom. She also listened to the music of Jewish Israeli artists of Arab cultural background (Mizrahi Jews). These connections led her to see possibilities for a shared, binational life as Arabs and Jews and for a single society that affirmed diverse individualities. She commented further:

I do open my heart. I can see a human being in front of me and not a label or a flag. Part of my soul is just so tired of all this nationalism and blood. Maybe this is one blessing this country [the United States] gave to me. [It] is a blessing that I am not judged [here] for having the sides of my head shaved [which they were at the time of our interview] and that I can look at a human being and judge them by their character and not by what they are wearing, whether they are wearing hijab or covered in tattoos. Not everyone thinks the way I do, but this country, this city, gives me the room to do so, [the room] to be an individual.

Her skin tattooed, her head partially shaved, Sawsan embraced the exilic freedom to transcend religion, gender, and nation, transforming the questions of Palestine, patriarchy, and sectarian loyalty into a vision of pluralized religious-national fusion. This fusion received vivid expression in the trinity of "Love, God, and Palestine" inked into her skin. As a form of secular religiosity, Sawsan's idiosyncratic synthesis constituted a reaction against, and syncretic expansion beyond, the patriarchal ethos of Christian sectarianism and Islamic reformism. She had refused the dominant terms and hierarchal logic of sectarian belonging, instead articulating an alternative spiritualized individuality that fully affirmed the playful possibilities of a pluralized secular religiosity beyond the enclave.

#### *Leaving "Arabville," Finding a "Secular Islam"*

My second example of rebellion as spiritualization focuses on Muna (pseudonym), a twenty-five-year-old graduate student at a prominent university in Chicago when I first met her. Her story provides additional insight into the role of patriarchal authority as instituted within reformism in shaping the spiritualization trajectory. Muna's particular path arced from an initial, traumatizing immersion within the reformist milieu to an embrace of, in her terms, "secular Islam." This evolution indexes the disenchanting impact of the religious shift and the role of the pluralized, secular society beyond the immigrant enclave in facilitating the reorientation of values. At the center of this process is Muna's provocative notion of "leaving Arabville."

#### *Social Background*

Muna grew up in a mixed family. Her father, a Palestinian, had spent much of his life in the Arabian Gulf region. Soon after immigrating to the United States, he

met Muna's mother, a recent immigrant from Mexico, who quickly became pregnant with Muna. The couple married, settling briefly in Atlanta, Georgia, where they had met. They then moved to Nashville, Tennessee before finally transitioning to Chicago to be near the husband's family. Muna was uncomfortable describing what her father did for a living. "He told us, like, used car dealerships, but he did other activities, too," she said. "Some of it might have been traveling back and forth between here and the Middle East, getting goods and bringing them back, and who knows what else."

Muna's parents had a tempestuous relationship. They frequently fought, separated, reunited, and finally divorced. After the ending of the marriage, her mother moved Muna and her sister to Texas to be near the mother's sister and her family. Completing high school there, but also getting involved in the local party scene, Muna returned to Chicago to separate herself from her "bad influences." She enrolled at a suburban community college and then transferred to a public university in the city. During that time, she got married to Isma'il (pseudonym), who had grown up in the southwestern suburbs and served in the US Air Force during the first Gulf War.

After trying to live in the northwest suburbs—"away from 'Arabville'"—the couple returned to live near family in the Palestinian enclave. Traveling across the metropolitan expanse for family events had become too burdensome. Muna was also attempting to complete her graduate studies while holding down a part-time job. The couple did not have the resources to place their daughter in child-care. In the suburbs, at least, grandparents could watch her infant daughter. The move made practical sense, even if it meant having to contend with the pressures of conformity. Muna saw the move as temporary. She was determined to leave "Arabville" as soon as she finished her studies.

#### *The Pious Reformist Milieu and Confluences beyond It*

In contrast with Nawal (chapter 5), who embraced the reformist disciplines of the Mosque Foundation, the regimes of piety within the Islamizing milieu disenchanting and alienating Muna. Her parents had modeled an inconsistent adherence to religious strictures. Her mother, for example, had grown up as a Catholic. She converted to Islam to marry Muna's father. She often went to the Mosque Foundation to visit with women friends there. But, as Muna recalled, she would convert and un-convert whenever she reunited or separated from her husband.

Muna described her father as outwardly pious: he regularly attended Friday prayers at the Mosque Foundation and performed *salat*—the five mandated daily prayers—in the home. At the same time, however, "he had an alcohol problem even though he sent us to Islamic school, and we'd learn it's *haram* [forbidden in Islamic law] to drink, but I'd see him at home with a beer." Muna also remembered him as being "very adulterous" when she was growing up. Reflecting on these memories, she stated: "I'm still trying to figure it out, because I mean he still prays and he's more religious now than before [ . . . ]. My upbringing was one big contradiction."

Beyond the inconsistencies, Muna also experienced the piety instituted in the family and community as an instrument of coercive manipulation and forced female socialization. Muna perceived that her father's religiosity had less to do with honoring divine law than with reinforcing his power in the home. According to Muna, he attempted to restrict his wife's social circle, telling her that, as a Muslim, she could not leave the home without his permission. He was also very concerned that Muna and her sister learn proper female obedience as dictated in patriarchal understandings of Islamic practice. He enrolled them in the Mosque Foundation weekend school to instill this submissive orientation. She commented:

I remember very much believing everything I heard and trying to be a good Muslim girl, [ . . . ] doing what I was told, listening to elders, not talking back, observing religious fasting, putting on the scarf when it was appropriate [ . . . ], speaking Arabic fluently to this day, which I do [ . . . ]. I can still fool a lot of people today into thinking I'm a quote-unquote 'good girl' because of how good my Arabic is [ . . . ]. So pretty much the whole patriarchal bullshit [ . . . ], being told what to do [ . . . ].

Later, after the family moved—a frequent occurrence—Muna was placed in “Islamic school full time in [a northwestern suburb].” This institution, a Pakistani-run school, required that Muna wear the hijab scarf and long *jilbab* coat throughout the day. She described the curriculum as “a fundamentalist version of Islam.” She recalled, “My sister learned that if you use the bathroom and any of your urine dries on you, then those parts of you will burn in hell [ . . . ]. So, she's seven years old on the toilet and doesn't have any toilet paper and she's screaming, 'I'm gonna burn in hell, give me some toilet paper!'” She also described being told, “it's *haram* to sleep on your stomach 'cause on the Day of Judgment sinners will be dragged on a rope of fire on their stomach to hell or whatever [ . . . ], so, I remember waking up at night [on my stomach] and being so freaked out and being like, 'Oh my God! Oh my God!’”<sup>6</sup> She spoke of how such experiences resulted in the “unraveling of the whole version of Islam that was shoved down my throat [ . . . ]. I saw this stuff and it just didn't make sense [ . . . ].” In response to my question about whether she had tried talking to her parents about these feelings, she replied, “it seemed non-negotiable [ . . . ], so many aspects of it are still non-negotiable [ . . . ], like, for example, Ramadan is coming up and I haven't fasted since I was fourteen, when I started thinking about this stuff and what it means to me.” Because she and her husband lived with her husband's family, she had to “pretend to fast [ . . . ]. It's ridiculous how I can't tell them I'm not fasting without getting an outburst about how I'm gonna go to hell [ . . . ].”

Muna's schooling until age fourteen had occurred entirely within the Islamic confessional structures of the Palestinian and Pakistani immigrant contexts. These structures, geared toward reinforcing religio-communal norms and insulating individuals, especially girls and women, against the majority non-Muslim US society, had in Muna's case produced the exact opposite of the intended result.

By age fourteen or fifteen, she had begun to question the strictures the schools required her to embrace and embody. It was at this point that the family moved again. Unable to afford the private tuition for the Islamic school, her parents placed Muna and her sister in the public system. She described continuing to wear her hijab scarf during the first year, but then, freed of the disciplining norms of the Islamized milieu, she made the decision finally to remove it for good. She recalled how “I [talked] with my aunts who wore the scarf about taking it off [ . . . ]. They were, like, ‘No, you can’t! You already have put it on, you can’t take it off [ . . . ].’ But I decided it wasn’t for me [ . . . ].”

As with Nawal (chapter 5), immersion in a non-Islamic setting weakened the moral influence of the Islamic institutions that had constrained and oriented Muna earlier in her life. By removing the scarf, and also, at this time, deciding no longer to fast during Ramadan, she signaled the embrace of an alternative value structure made possible by her movement beyond the enclave’s disciplinary space and by her growing perception of moral contradiction within its piety-mindedness.

When Muna moved with her mother and sister to Texas, her break from the patriarchal-reformist norms that had been so central to her early upbringing deepened. She recalled:

When I left the community and saw other ways of life, had other influences, the whole ingraining started to leave me [ . . . ]. I mean, three or four years after leaving ‘Arabville,’ when I moved to Texas, I took my first sip of alcohol. I thought I was going to be struck by lightning [ . . . ]. Your whole life, it’s like, it’s so bad, you’re gonna go to hell, even though I saw my dad drinking [ . . . ]. I just remember that moment, like, ahh, so this is it, sinning.

Far from “Arabville,” in Texas, she began “to go wild,” she told me, drinking frequently and “smoking a lot of pot.” “Sinning” had become the means and the marker of her break with the religious patriarchal regime.

After returning to Chicago to pursue a college degree, consuming intoxicants still figured as a crucial differentiating practice and symbolic barrier with the immigrant community. This move back to Chicago followed an earlier decision, while she was still in Texas, not to enlist in the US Air Force, which had recruited her to serve as an Arabic language interpreter. After determining she didn’t want to “go to some shithole,” she thought she would “give Chicago a chance.” Her father had been encouraging her to return, offering to support her until she could get established. So she returned and lived with her father, attending a community college with a large population of Palestinian students from the suburbs.

Soon after her arrival, she began work at the college café. It was there, across the counter as he ordered an espresso, that she first met Isma‘il. She resisted his overtures for weeks but then relented. “I call him all my ‘nevers,’” she said:

[ . . . ] because I said I would never marry an Arab guy, never a Muslim, I didn’t think he’d accept me smoking weed, but he was okay with that, which kind of broke the

whole stereotype I had in my head [ . . . ]. And he drank, and he was open, and, you know, not conservative, not religious, even though when Ramadan comes, he's like, 'Okay, I'm gonna try to fast this year.' He goes one day and then quits [ . . . ]. And he was in the Air Force, which was weird, 'cause I almost signed up!

Isma'īl was a different kind of Palestinian, a different sort of Arab and Muslim. Through him she could cross into the Palestinian community without having to conform to the norms she had rejected. This led Muna to explore her identity as a Palestinian as an alternative to reformist Islam. Nationalism was never emphasized in her family during her childhood. She had not yet traveled to Palestine, and her father's family had long ago relocated to Jordan, the Gulf, and the United States. Through Isma'īl's family, however, she began to connect with Palestine even though Isma'īl did not seem to prioritize it in his life. "My husband, both his parents are Palestinian," she said. "They're the ones who experienced it; my mother-in-law grew up in refugee camps [ . . . ]. I heard their stories and learned [ . . . ]. I really didn't have any of this [growing up]."

As an expression of her incipient nationalist feelings, Muna began volunteering with a charity founded by a Palestinian businessman in Chicago that supported schools and clinics in the West Bank. She began attending fundraisers and meeting other activists through this network. Additionally, during her college studies, Muna took courses on the Middle East; when I met her, she was completing a master's degree in this field of study.

#### *"A Secular Muslim"*

In December 2013, Muna traveled to Palestine for the first time and discovered in urban centers like Haifa and Ramallah a culture far less concerned with piety and conformity than the Chicago suburbs in which she had grown up. The party scenes in those places were as active as any she had encountered in Texas and in Ramallah, surprisingly, she met individuals from Chicago's suburban enclave. Some of these fellow Chicagoans were "married men who put on a big show of being pious back home" but who, she said, indulged themselves in hashish, alcohol, and extramarital liaisons during their sojourns "back home." Her discovery of Palestine thereby heightened her perception of moral contradiction in the piety-minded Chicago enclave, but it also appeared to have opened a path for her beyond the suburban patriarchal ethos. In Haifa and Ramallah, she encountered a nation that, in certain urban locales, at least, seemed to be ignoring the religious revival altogether in its embrace of a hip party culture in which women and men could interact freely. Within these homeland spaces, one could "be Palestinian" without being Muslim, at least in the reformist, orthopraxical sense.

After returning from Palestine to "Arabville," Muna's sense of alienation from the piety-minded milieu persisted. At the same time, however, she indicated in subsequent conversations that she had not given up religion entirely, even if she felt deep ambivalence about it. She acknowledged how alienated from orthopraxy

she had become but expressed a continuing sense of spirituality. She stated: “Sometimes, I don’t consider myself Muslim at all [ . . . ]. When I look at the fundamental things, I’m like, ‘Well I really don’t believe in that.’” She refused to wear the scarf and did not consider it necessary for the prayers (*salat*). Moreover, she argued, the prayer itself actually did not matter; and it certainly did not matter that one pray as a Muslim. There were multiple ways to pray, and not praying at all was fine. Muna even expressed a desire not to have a Muslim burial:

I don’t wanna be buried in a Muslim cemetery because I feel like my whole life I’ve struggled against that and to be right next to everybody I’ve tried to distinguish myself from? [ . . . ] I wanna be cremated; and I want my ashes to be strewn over somewhere beautiful.

At the same time, however, she had not fully rejected Islam. She said she continued to think of herself as a “cultural Muslim” who shared patterns of speech—you know, the way we’ll go into Arabic or say ‘*hamdulillah*’ [Praise be to God!], ‘*masha’allah*’ [God wills it!], or ‘*subhan allah*’ [Glory be to God!] just as part of how we speak.” There was also the shared food culture that she considered “Muslim.”

Muna viewed Islam as a strategic resource, too. In follow-up conversations, she described how she had started using Islamic legal provisions to resist her retired parents-in-law, who, she said, were pressuring her husband to help defray their monthly expenses. “I went to the *shaykh* at the Mosque Foundation at one point,” she told me, “and told him about this, and he said that my husband had to see to our family expenses and needs first and then, if there was anything left over, he could contribute to his parents’ needs. Also, he told me that in Islamic law I had the right to control the income I earned from my work.” Her parents-in-law were unhappy with the fact that she had sought outside intervention, but, because they accepted the moral parameters of the Islamized milieu, they could not argue with the *shaykh*’s authority. Thus, even if she did not adhere to Islamic strictures in her daily life, she deployed Islamic norms, like Nawal (in chapter 5) did, to defend and expand her autonomy. She also wondered whether Islamic prohibitions on alcohol might actually be good for her and her husband. “I have given up alcohol and am cutting back on pot and I wish my husband would do the same,” she told me.

Muna’s ambivalence toward Islam and its social forms as enacted in the suburban enclave led her to oscillate between adaptation and refusal. Reflecting on this seeming irresolution, she stated again that she thought of herself as a “secular Muslim.” This secularity did not exclude “spirituality.” She explained:

I still consider myself a spiritual person. I would be interested in a mystical form of Islam, I think. Islam has been a victim of politics. There are very many versions practiced and suppressed and even the Qur’an itself might even be a different version because it didn’t have dots [diacritical vowel markings] or anything whenever they wrote it. I think maybe if it was just the Qur’an, maybe that would be okay; but

whenever Muslims start throwing in the *hadith* and *sunna* [the Prophet Muhammad's remembered practices] and everything, it's very much to me a human project, not of God. I still sometimes think, 'Oh, the Qur'an is the word of God.' But other days, I'm like, 'Oh, [religious texts] are all just man-made written books or metaphorical ways of dealing with phenomena.'

For Muna, the seeming equivocation of her secular Muslim identity found a consistency in an inner "connection with God." Within this inner realm, she carved out an autonomous spirituality. She was a secular Muslim inasmuch as she did not "really show[ . . . ] typical Islamic features [like] not wearing the hijab, not praying, not fasting." But she was not an atheist, which she said was "different from secularism." Rather, she expressed a type of secular religiosity that allowed her to retain a relationship to the immigrant community on her own terms. Since returning to Chicago, she had been "meeting other Palestinians and Muslims and Arabs" and through that experience "learning the different ranges of being Muslim [ . . . ]. It's not like the one formula I was raised with [ . . . ]." These different ways were similar to "how you meet Jews and they drink and eat pork and everything, so I think it's through the influence of being in America [ . . . ]. I know so many Arabs and Muslims like me who drink alcohol [ . . . ], the ones I went clubbing with [before she got married]." Muna also had found alternative spaces—she was part of a feminist reading group at her university, for example—in which women collaborated to challenge the patriarchal norms that imposed female subordination. Crossing between these zones and the immigrant enclave, she found a way to remain connected to "Arabville" as a skeptical, "secular Muslim" who refused to abide the orthopraxical reform.

#### *A Secular Sufi amidst the Suburban Jahl*

A similar type of spiritualized autonomy characterizes the secular religiosity of the individual who is the focus of my final profile. As with Muna, the Islamized suburban milieu generated disenchantment and a search for moral alternatives. The process here, however, did not stem from the felt inequities of the patriarchal gender hierarchy of reformism but rather from a reaction against reformist doctrines that deem certain artistic expressions, music, specifically, to be *haram*. Ultimately, a Sufi-inspired spiritual cosmopolitanism that affirms the polytheism of values offered an alternative to this prohibition, but its discovery required leaving the piety-minded suburbs for the multicultural artistic spaces of Chicago's near North Side.

#### *Social Background and Identity Formation*

Born in the late 1970s, Jubran [pseudonym] grew up in the rapidly expanding and Islamizing Palestinian suburban enclave. The inner culture (ethos) of Jubran's family was at odds with this turn toward reformist piety. Jubran's father was a musician

who had taught his sons to play the instruments used in classical and contemporary Middle Eastern musical styles. He led various ensembles that toured cities in the Midwest, and his sons played in those groups. In high school, Jubran expanded his repertoire, exploring heavy metal as well as classical Andalusian (Middle Eastern) music. He eventually formed his own musical groups devoted to resurrecting Andalusian traditions and fusing them with jazz and other musical styles in Chicago's multicultural music scene.

The musical arts became "an escape" or "shelter" from the surrounding piety-mindedness for Jubran and his brothers and father. They provided alternative possibilities for leisure, identity, and participation in the urban space beyond the enclave. These possibilities enabled and sustained the family's distinct microculture in the midst of the reformist shift.

The family diverged from the piety-minded enclave in another way, too. It was part of the established core of Beitunian families that had provided the original impetus for the Mosque Foundation. These families envisioned the new mosque as a center for communal gathering and worship and not as the instrument of an ideological program that viewed Islam as an all-encompassing identity structure. Jubran, who lived with his grandparents for a period after his mother and father divorced, took part in this communal culture. He characterized the religiosity of this culture as open and accepting. His grandparents exemplified its characteristics:

My grandparents didn't mind [the fact that his father was a musician] at all. My grandfather [. . .] wasn't very strict about religion. '*Al-din yusr, mish 'usr*' ['religion is ease, not hardship'], is the way he would talk about it, you know, you wanna come to the religion. You do it of your own accord; we're not gonna force you. But, you know, I'd see him pray, I'd take him to the mosque, and I remember when he helped build the mosque, you know, in Bridgeview, with his friends.

Jubran participated in the activities of the Mosque Foundation during its early years. His description of these activities emphasized the mosque's role as a center for a "secular" community life. He studied Arabic at the mosque. His teacher did not wear a hijab scarf and "her husband was a chef at the Berghoff downtown and, in fact, his picture was on the bottle of one their beers." The language lessons, moreover, were not tied to the Qur'an: "It wasn't about religion at all. It was more like, *dar, dur,*" that is, learning to decline nouns and other grammatical tasks. The secularity of the mosque manifested, too, in Jubran's memory, in the fact that the original imam's daughters "were not *muhajjabat* (scarf-wearing) whatsoever, but they were very educated [. . .]; there was this notion that our daughters and our sons needed to be educated before [taking up] religion. There was no indoctrination."

The reformist ascendancy on the Mosque Foundation board, and the implementation of reformist piety that followed during the 1980s, alienated Jubran and his father and brothers. Not only had Jubran grown up with a notion of Islam as *yusr* (ease), not *'usr* (hardship), and thus accepting of diverse lifestyles, he was

also the son of a mother who possessed an urbane outlook. Jubran attributed his mother's cosmopolitanism to her childhood in West Jerusalem during the 1930s and 1940s. She had grown up with Jewish neighbors, including "Moshe Dayan's nephew [who was] living in one of their apartments after World War Two and the arrival of all the Jewish refugees!"<sup>7</sup> His grandfather, moreover, had "employed Iranian Jews" at the quarry he owned near the current location of the Israeli Knesset (Parliament) building.

His mother's openness to intersectorian and interethnic coexistence and cooperation continued in Chicago, too. The support of non-Arab, non-Muslim women had been especially important for Jubran's mother after her divorce from Jubran's father. Needing to support herself, his mother found work in a local factory that employed women from a broad range of ethnic backgrounds. "[There were women from] the Polish tradition, Indian, Hispanic, etc., Arab, as well. She became kind of adopted by this one Polish woman, who took her under her wing for the next five years, became like her mother, helped my mom, encouraged her, told her, look these are things that happen in people's lives, save your money."

His father, through music, also modeled an embrace of cultural diversity that spanned the Middle Eastern immigrant community:

Through the music, I saw the insides of many more churches—Arab churches—than I did mosques. Our singer was Jordanian Christian, there were Iraqi Armenian Christians, Arab Jews who were *iraqiyin* [Iraqis], you know, who we ended up playing with, you know, Tunisians, North Africans. So the scope of the Arab world really started to broaden for us through music, solely through music, not any other route. That's when I knew that music held a universal truth that I wanted to really latch on to.

Jubran commented that he would never have encountered this diversity had he grown up in Palestine. The US diaspora had thrown all of these individuals together, and through music they had found one another.

### *Confronting the Suburban Jahl*

The openness to, and reliance on, cross-cultural solidarities that Jubran's parents modeled oriented Jubran toward multiculturalism and pluralist secularity. In the suburbs, however, the cultural trajectory was moving increasingly toward orthopraxic uniformity. Jubran referred vividly to this shift as "the emergence of *jahl* [narrow-mindedness]." His choice of terms was striking for its resonance with a core concept in the Salafi-Islamist moral and political lexicon. During the 1960s, Sayyid Qutb, one of the foremost theorists of the Muslim Brotherhood, claimed that modern Arab states and societies comprised a new *jahiliya*, an age of ignorance. The original *jahiliya* traditionally referred to the period in the Arabian Hijaz before the arrival of Islam. Qutb's use of the concept effectively cast contemporary Muslim-majority societies as apostate and thus as legitimate targets of jihad (violence with sacred intent).<sup>8</sup> Jubran's invoking of the term unwittingly inverted Qutb's polemical

formulation: the real *jahiliya*, as Jubran saw it, was not secularized modern societies but rather the narrowness that had resulted from the reformist shift.<sup>9</sup>

One characteristic of this narrow piety-mindedness, as Jubran experienced it, was the refusal to affirm the multireligious pluralism of Arab societies. When Jubran mentioned that he had played in Arab churches, the reaction among some of those who had embraced reformism was hostile: “They said things like, don’t affiliate with those *kuffar* [heretics]; I heard these things at the *masjid* [mosque] and from people who went to the *masjid*!” Jubran saw this hostility stemming from the fusion of ethnic and religious identity. In the suburbs, the unspoken assumption had become that if one were Palestinian one was also a Muslim in the narrow reformist style. The problem with this merging of sect and ethnicity, Jubran observed, was that it ignored the existence of non-Muslim Arabs and Palestinians. These groups included not only Christians but also Druze, Jews (the “Mizrahim,” or Arab Jews, especially), atheists, agnostics, secularists, and so on.

Jubran was careful to say that the turn toward a narrow orthopraxy was not a type of political Islam, or “Islamism,” but rather a matter of “taking Islam [simplistically] at face value.” To approach Islam in this way was to embrace a type of strict, exclusionary view—he used the term “*al-ta’assub*,” “intolerance” or “chauvinism”—and not necessarily to shift toward Islam as political ideology.<sup>10</sup> This intolerance was defensive, he said. It was a reaction to the derogation of Islam in the wider US society. But it was also a deeply limiting attitude that demanded unquestioning conformity. “I have to ask questions,” he told me, “I can’t simply accept what the *shaykh* says on authority.” But in the suburbs today, this non-questioning attitude had become entrenched. “There is no awareness that this style of Islam, this *muta’assibi* [intolerant, chauvinistic] attitude, is just one possible approach to Islam,” he commented.

Jubran especially refused to accept the hostility to music and musicians that had accompanied the embrace of “intolerant” orthopraxic reformism.<sup>11</sup> Jubran told a humorous story about his brother that illustrated this hostility. For a brief moment, his brother flirted with becoming more pious. The brother approached the Mosque Foundation *shaykh* to tell him of his interest in Islam. The *shaykh* promised his support and then asked him what he did for a living. “I’m a musician,” the brother replied, “I play in the nightclubs around here.” The *shaykh*, in Jubran’s recounting, shook his head gravely and replied: “We must find something else for you to do.” Jubran laughed at the memory, saying, “This is precisely what I’m getting at: as a musician, I felt unwelcome in this environment.”<sup>12</sup>

The characterizing of music as *haram* by the guardians of the new orthopraxy effectively meant that Jubran had no place to exist as an artist within the suburban enclave as it had come to constitute itself since the late 1980s. The negative attitude was pervasive in the community. He stated:

I had people coming up to me, telling me that what I believed in, what I espoused to be my religion, secretly, of music, telling me this is *haram*! You’re telling me the one

thing that religion wasn't able to do for me, which is expose me to the world and love people for who they are, not for what they are, you're telling me that's *haram*?

No longer able to abide the narrowness, Jubran decided to move to a trendy near North Side neighborhood near Chicago's world music scene. Recently divorced—his first marriage, arranged through his family with a Palestinian woman, had fallen apart relatively soon after the wedding—he began to date individuals from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

My first girlfriend was Italian, after my divorce. Then I dated a woman who was an ordained witch in the Wiccan tradition. Very spiritual, very pagan, she was my yoga instructor. I thought, okay, I wanna start studying new kinds of things and open up to bigger cultures.

Jubran eventually remarried. His new wife was from a Croatian Catholic family. He had met her through music-making circles. She was now managing his performances and recording activities.

#### *Beyond the Jahl: A Multi-Cultural Sufi Secularity*

Jubran's move to the North Side not only symbolically marked his break from the Islamizing enclave in the southwest suburbs but also initiated a spiritual search leading to a type of secular religiosity. He had, by this point, ceased strict adherence to the norms of Islamic ritual practice—the five mandated daily prayers, fasting during Ramadan, etc.—and had started to read Buddhist sutras and Hindu texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. He also discovered Sufism.

The discovery occurred during a concert tour in Spain—a journey that exposed him to an entirely new Islamic milieu. “[In Spain] I discovered a lot of North African folks who practiced Sunni Islam but a very different version of it,” he said, “including Sufism.” Unlike the reformists in Chicago, these Sufis embraced music:

I started doing recordings with them. There was a Sufi group that came from Sudan. They mixed with some Algerian Sufis. We went to a studio and recorded a bunch of Sufi *anashid* [hymns]. I was also really into the Turkish Sufi groups, as well. After returning to Chicago, I sat in with the Jerrahi order, extensively. I didn't start praying with them but became musically involved with them [. . .]. Their form of Islam, though Sunni, was *very* open and Sufi oriented and very spiritual and accepting. I didn't find the same prejudices I saw sprawling up in the Palestinian community and in the Muslim community, generally. The Sufi path really started to appeal to me, I found a lot more poetry in it, a lot more metaphors; it was very metaphorical, it spoke to life and one's connection to spirituality. And I saw it akin to the way I saw music. In fact it's the Sufism and that aspect of Islam that enhanced my understanding and appreciation of the music as a spiritual practice more than anything. So, I'll do *dhikr* [“remembrance” of God through chant, song, and dance]. I will fast, observe, but I'll do it on my own terms. So, this is really the path I think I found myself in; but again I

had to experiment with so many religions, and not to say I converted, I never did, I've always considered myself Muslim; but I consider myself a Muslim who doesn't have an aversion to Hinduism or polytheism or other people in the world who believe the way they do by circumstance.

Jubran's Islam was fully accepting of the polytheism of values that typified contemporary secularity in the wider cultural space of Chicago and globally. Significantly, this acceptance even extended to the *muta'assibi* (intolerant) reformism that had so strongly repulsed him in the suburbs. He declared his readiness to defend those who had chosen it even if he did not fully share its values. "You have the right to believe as you want," he said, commenting on piety-minded orientations. "All I ask is you give me the same."

Jubran's particular appropriation of Islam was highly idiosyncratic: it indicated the extent of his separation from the suburbs. He did not pray five times a day but rather did so "with every breath I take [ . . . ] and every step I take. I pray with every note I play."<sup>13</sup> He commented further, saying:

It took the arts to help me see that I could be Muslim in this way. It didn't take somebody indoctrinating me; it didn't take me discovering some document [such as the Qur'an]! It took an approach to life and a critical thought process to question my own existence. We are all sinners but we are all redeemable, as well. We have to help each other in that quest. This particular path was prevalent during the Islamic period in al-Andalus [Spain] from the eighth to the fifteenth century.

Jubran's discovery of an Islamic cosmopolitanism in Sufism coincided with his musical projects. These efforts focused on fusing Andalusian classical music with musical traditions from other parts of the world. He had begun to explore these connections in parallel with his move to the North Side and then deepened them in Spain. This musical and spiritual discovery process paralleled his rejection of orthopraxic-reformist constraints. It also coincided with a new, cosmopolitan perspective on Palestine and the national struggle with Israel:

You know, it was from being able to discover my own path like this that I began to find out these things also exist in Palestine. There are Sufis in Palestine doing the same work trying to bring people together. There's an amazing documentary I saw on Al Jazeera a couple of weeks ago about a Jewish scholar who moved to the mountains with his wife and discovered Rumi and began translating Rumi into Hebrew and started to do the whole whirling dervish thing to the point [where] he went to Turkey, to Konya, to seek out Rumi's teachings and meet some dervishes and learn how to do the *sama'* [a type of Sufi ritual practice involving musical instruments, chant, and dance] properly. So, they took him in. He was the first Israeli to find his way into the circle out there. He came back and is preaching Rumism, if you will, a version of Islam that's very tolerant as opposed to what people have perceived it to be. It showed him coming back to Israel and sitting in groups in al-Nasira [Nazareth] with the Sufi order that is Palestinian. I remember in Palestine [during a visit

following the trip to Spain] that I sat in [played music] with the Bahá'ís for some time who established themselves in 'Akka after being pushed out of Iran. I thought to myself, okay, this [Palestine and Israel] is a very multicultural and very multi-religious area. It's futile to think we are going to make it entirely Jewish or entirely Muslim or entirely Christian.

Jubran had grown up absorbing a basic nationalist outlook. His parents told stories of their lives in Palestine before 1948 and they took their children to events at the community centers in the Southwest Side immigrant enclave. As an adult, he performed at fundraisers for Palestinian and Arab nonprofit organizations. Jubran's evolving musical-spiritual cosmopolitanism, however, had led him to embrace a multicultural perspective that rendered relative the claims of any single ethnic, national, or religious group. Palestine was as diverse as Spain or the United States or any other society. If there was any viable solution to the Palestinian and Israeli predicament, it lay within an interethnic, interreligious solidarity that recognized the futility of attempts to impose exclusivity and dominance at the expense of other groups.

#### *A Jubran Postscript*

I interviewed Jubran—we completed two in-depth conversations in a two-year span—at his Near North Side apartment. When I arrived for our first conversation, I saw shoes neatly stacked at the top landing just before the entrance to the apartment. I removed mine and as I straightened, noticed a large skeleton key hanging on the doorframe. Such keys were the quintessential symbol among Palestinian refugees of their lost homes and of their desire to return. Inside the apartment, incense wafted. A Washburn steel-string sat propped in front of a blue-tiled fireplace. An *'ud*—ancestor to the European lute and staple of Middle Eastern music—leaned against the southeastern wall. In an adjoining room, electronic sound equipment, a second *'ud*, and another guitar filled every corner. “That’s my studio,” Jubran told me, as he showed me around the apartment. “The landlady downstairs is almost deaf and doesn’t care if we crank up the sound.”

We returned to the living room and began the interview. Ramadan had begun but Jubran offered me tea and poured himself a cup, too. Halfway through the four-hour conversation, Jubran asked to pause so that he could help his wife finish lunch preparations. Within minutes, he had brought out a chopped salad and a special dressing he had made along with the quiche that Marija (pseudonym), his wife, had baked. “We’ve been fasting,” Marija said. “Actually Jubran fasted all day yesterday.” I asked self-consciously if my visit had derailed their abstention from food and drink. “No, not at all,” Marija replied, “Jubran isn’t real strict about it.” I remembered then how right before our interview Jubran had excused himself so that he could finish his hand-rolled cigarette. He walked to the porch, where I noticed him and Marija smoking on their enclosed back porch. Like Intisar

(chapter 5), Jubran had retained a taste for tobacco during the daylight hours when Muslims are to fast.<sup>14</sup>

After lunch, I asked about a book on their shelf titled “Jubran and Marija Get Married!” The book contained their wedding pictures. Showing me the pages, Jubran recounted the story of their ceremony in Bali, a Hindu region of Indonesia. They had been spending a year traveling the world. Their Balinese hosts had learned of their plans to formalize their union at the end of their journey. The hosts insisted right there and then on giving them a “Hindi [sic] wedding.” In just four hours they drummed up suits and dresses and rounded up musicians. During the preparations, their hosts asked who should preside at the ceremony. Jubran was a Palestinian Muslim, Marija a Croatian Catholic. “It seemed to me we should split the difference and ask a Hindu to officiate!” Jubran laughed. The hosts promptly recruited a Brahmin priest to oversee their vows. They married, Marija said, “under the night sky,” a full moon lighting their ceremony, waves gently lapping the Balinese shore.

#### CONCLUSION

As manifested in my fieldwork data, the “rebellion” form of syncretic secularity led either to spiritualization or to atheism as types of secular religiosity. The primary matrix of both trajectories was the disenchanting effects of the religious shift. In Jubran’s case, the disenchantment stemmed from the reformist-orthopraxic devaluing of music, and specifically of its openness to diverse cultural influences and diverse cultural participants. For Ibrahim, the disenchantment process derived from a perception of the fundamental injustice of an all-powerful, all-knowing God condemning humans for their predetermined sinfulness. Muna and Sawsan reacted against the patriarchal control instituted within the religious-sectarian and reformist-orthoprax milieus in which they grew up. They experienced this control as coercive and traumatizing.

In each example, the countervailing response embraced a multisectarian, pluralist ethos. Interaction with diverse intersectarian and nonsectarian spaces beyond the immigrant enclave—North Side neighborhoods, musical circles, youth party cultures, and unconventional religious milieus—presented alternate possibilities for identity. These possibilities became the foundation for the secular religiosities that evolved in each instance of rebellion. These secular religiosities retained a certain adherence to religion within a broad pluralist outlook.

At the furthest extreme, Ibrahim’s atheism denied religion’s centrality entirely; nevertheless, he pragmatically simulated adherence to piety and held onto the idea of religion as the inverse image of the atheistic values he affirmed. By contrast, the spiritualization that characterized Muna, Sawsan, and Jubran’s outlooks replaced orthopraxic uniformity with an expansive universalism that rejected ethnic and

religious exclusivity. Muna spoke of a “secular Islam” that she attempted to affirm in the midst of the reformist orthopraxy that confronted her in the suburbs. Sawsan invoked a trinity of “love, God, and Palestine” that denied priority to any particular sectarian claim, Christian or Islamic. And Jubran embraced a Sufi universalism at home with polytheism in Chicago, Palestine, and globally. In each case, the secular and the religious had interacted to create new trajectories of syncretic identity beyond the sectarian milieu.