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Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Women  
Searching for Common Ground: Exploring  
Religious Identities in the American Interfaith  
Book Groups, the Daughters of Abraham

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Doctor of Philosophy Thesis in Religious Studies  
School of Divinity  
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## **Thesis Declaration Form**

This thesis is being submitted for the degree of PhD at the University of Edinburgh. I hereby declare that this PhD thesis is solely my own work and I am responsible for its contents. I confirm that this work has not previously been submitted for any other degree. This thesis is the result of my own independent research, except where stated. Other sources used are properly acknowledged.

Louise Koelner Gramstrup

July 2017, Edinburgh, U.K.

## LAY SUMMARY

This thesis is an in-depth case study of the women's interfaith book groups, the Daughters of Abraham, located in the Greater Boston Area. It examines how Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women explore their religious identity and other religious worldviews through participating in interreligious dialogue. My thesis illuminates that engaging with issues of sameness and difference of religion, gender, and sociopolitical values generates complex and fluid understandings of self and the "other." Moreover, I explore the power dynamics of Daughters of Abraham. It involves a consideration of the tensions arising when members of this women's interfaith book group draw boundaries for who can be included. A fundamental tension arises because the Daughters of Abraham emphasizes commonalities to encourage its members to engage with the group's religious diversity. Whilst this collective emphasis on commonalities can facilitate nuanced understandings of what it means to be Jewish, Christian, or Muslim in contemporary America, it can also highlight differences detrimental to generating such understanding. This thesis is significant because it advances knowledge about women's interreligious dialogue and uses ethnographic methods to do so. Explicitly, it provides insight into the following interlinked areas: Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, formalized interreligious dialogue, interreligious encounters on the grassroots level, women's interreligious dialogue, a book group approach to engaging with religious diversity, and interreligious encounters in the American context post-September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how women negotiate their identification within and as a group when engaging in interreligious dialogue. It is an in-depth case study of the women's interfaith book groups, the Daughters of Abraham, located in the Greater Boston Area. This focus facilitates an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of relationships within one group, between different groups, and as situated in the American sociocultural context. I explore the tensions arising from religious diversity, and the consequences of participating in an interreligious dialogue group for understandings of religious self and others. Categories such as boundary, power, sameness, difference, self and other serve to explore the complexities and fluidity of identity constructions. I answer the following questions: *How do members of the Daughters of Abraham engage with the group's religious diversity? How does their participation in the Daughters of Abraham affect their self-understanding and understanding of the "other?" What can we learn about power dynamics and boundary drawing from the women's accounts of their participation in the Daughters of Abraham and from their group interactions?*

Two interrelated arguments guide this thesis. One, I show that Daughters members arrive at complex and fluid understandings of what it means to identify as an American Jewish, Christian, and Muslim woman by negotiating various power dynamics arising from ideas of sameness and difference of religion, gender, and sociopolitical values. Two, I contend that the collective emphasis on commonalities in the Daughters of Abraham is a double-edged sword. Explicitly, this stress intends to encourage engagement with the group's religious diversity by excluding those deemed too different. However, whilst this emphasis can generate nuanced understandings of religious identity categories, at times it highlights differences

detrimental to facilitating such understanding. Moreover, this stress on commonalities illuminates the power dynamics and tensions characterizing this women's interfaith book group.

Scholarship has by and large overlooked women's interreligious engagements with explicit ethnographic studies of such being virtually non-existent. This thesis addresses this gap by using ethnographic methods to advance knowledge about women's interreligious dialogue. Furthermore, it pushes disciplinary discourses by speaking to the following interlinked areas: Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, formalized interreligious dialogue, interreligious encounters on the grassroots level, women's interreligious dialogue, a book group approach to engaging with religious diversity, and interreligious encounters in the American context post-September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

## **INTRODUCTION: An In-Depth Case Study of the American Women’s Interfaith Book Groups, the Daughters of Abraham**

“Tell me, what was your impression of the Annual Gathering? Did it live up to your expectations?” Grace was giving me a lift home after the closing of the annual meeting of the women’s interfaith book groups, the Daughters of Abraham.<sup>1</sup> This springtime event had brought together women from thirteen different Daughters chapters, all of which are located in the Greater Boston Area.<sup>2</sup> For the Daughters members, the Annual Gathering presents an expanded version of their monthly subgroup meetings. At these meetings, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women discuss texts about the “Abrahamic religions” centered on their personal experiences with these traditions.<sup>3</sup> The fact that I had spent eight months in the field with the Daughters of Abraham meant that I was no longer taken aback by comments like Grace’s prompting value judgments. However, initially, such delicate situations illuminating that fieldwork was a give and take, and not solely a take on my part, had come as a surprise. That is, my informants also had an agenda for agreeing to be interviewed and for letting me observe their group meetings. They could use the privileged knowledge that I held about their interreligious encounter to further their own aims and standing in the group. As I wavered in my response, Grace began answering her own question:

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<sup>1</sup> The terms “interreligious” and “interfaith” encounter, dialogue, engagement etc. are used interchangeably to signify “exchanges among religious practitioners and communities on matters of doctrine and issues of mutual concern” (Berkley Center 2016a).

<sup>2</sup> As elaborated on in chapter 5 about gender performances in the Daughters of Abraham, members refer to each other as “daughters” and to their individual subgroups as “the Daughters.” I use this emic term accordingly.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term “Abrahamic religions” to collectively refer to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I recognize that the historical accuracy and consequent validity of using this term is greatly debated within the Academy. However, this ecumenical paradigm is part of Daughters of Abraham’s self-understanding and, therefore, despite it being a theologically loaded and problematic term, I employ it in this thesis. Chapter 1 elaborates on this debate over terminology.

I wasn't that impressed to be honest. They kept talking about the need for numerically expanding the Daughters of Abraham, instead of the quality of the interreligious relations we form, or the importance of realizing just how much we have in common as Christians, Jews, and Muslims. It felt as if my group is the only one focused on the people, on forming close bonds...but obviously I can't know for sure whether this is this case, I haven't participated in other Daughters meetings...What do you think? Is our group special compared to the other Daughters chapters?

Continuing to avert her questions was not an option. I had to offer something at least generic about Daughters of Abraham's intergroup dynamics. "From my observations, I would say that the various Daughters chapters all have their unique traits," I began, carefully weighing my words,

Some are more focused on literary analysis, others more on personal interactions. It really depends on the exact demography of the group, the specific book read that month, the amount of trust, the leadership style...but my impression of your Daughters chapter was that you focus on building close interfaith relationships.

My response seemed to reassure Grace. "If only all the groups stressed the personal connections," she thought out loud, "the Daughters of Abraham has such potential when it comes to advancing interreligious understanding." I could but smile and nod.

This thesis is an in-depth case study of the American women's interfaith book groups, the Daughters of Abraham. In the Daughters of Abraham, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women meet monthly to discuss their personal experiences with the "Abrahamic religions" through the medium of texts, fiction and non-fiction. Their aim is gaining interreligious understanding and building interreligious relationships. This key goal situates the Daughters of Abraham within a mosaic of interfaith engagement that has been purposely chosen so as to expand understanding about religious self and others. As chapter 1 elaborates, the original Daughters chapter was founded in Cambridge, Massachusetts in the aftermath of the attacks on New York and Virginia

on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. This grassroots level initiative has grown in numbers since then. Now every month thirty-six Daughters groups located across the United States each bring between 11-20 Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women together to learn about each other's religious practices and beliefs. Still, it is worth noting that the Daughters of Abraham was founded in Cambridge, MA, one of Boston's intellectual suburbs. This location speaks to the self-selection taking place in terms of membership. Massachusetts is a state known for its politically progressive demographic in the sense that an overwhelming majority support what in the American context would be considered "liberal" policies like abortion rights and same-sex marriage.<sup>4</sup> In fact, seventy-one percent of adults in Massachusetts self-define as politically "liberal" or "moderate" (Pew Forum 2014b). Members range in

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<sup>4</sup> According to Joseph Massad, a professor of Modern Arab politics and intellectual history, "liberalism" is the key ideology and identity defining the contemporary West (understood as Europe and North America); this identity manifests by the West being positioned as the antithesis of Islam (2015: 1 & 11). "Islam" in this connection carries a diffuse understanding. "Islam" refers to the religion, but can also refer to the history of Muslim states; the philosophical, theological, and scientific works produced in this part of the world; or the various everyday practices Muslims engage in like cooking, working, studying, and so on (Massad 2015: 4). What is important is that Islam is the "wrong referent" when held up in relation to claimed intrinsic Western – Christian – "liberal" (and hence positive) ideals like democracy, individualism, tolerance, rationalism, human rights, women's rights, sexual rights, freedom, secularism; these ideals stand in contrast to claimed "Islamic" concepts like oppression, injustice, homophobia, misogyny, intolerance etc. (Massad 2015: 5-6). Thus, the West stands for progress and modernity, Islam for the opposite. Consequently, Massad claims, American and European "missionaries of liberalism" seek to "save and rescue" Muslims by converting Muslims and Islam to Western liberalism and its value system viewed in the liberalist ideology as "the only just and sane system" (2015: 3). In other words, Massad states, citing Talal Asad, "the liberal mission is to have the Islamic tradition 'remade in the image of liberal Protestant Christianity'" (2015: 3). Thus, the notion of "liberalism" serves to define a collective Western identity that carries social, political, and religious connotations. Accordingly, when employing the term liberalism, it inevitably speaks to macro-level power dynamics that influence interactions between individuals and communities including perceptions of what defines a "Jew," "Christian," or "Muslim" as well as "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations." I agree with Massad's analysis that the term "liberal" carries ideological value-based connotations that are invoked in national, communal, and individual discourses for various purposes, but ultimately as part of an identification process. Whilst bearing in mind the macro-level power dynamics framing "liberalism," unless otherwise noted, when I use the term "liberal" in this thesis, I use it as an emic term to denote the kinds of sociopolitical values like tolerance, freedom, and human rights that Massad contends are ascribed to it in the Western – American – context because it captures the way in which the term is used by the Daughters of Abraham and its members. For instance, chapter 8 highlights references to sociopolitical "liberal" values as an important dimension of the way in which individual members define Daughters of Abraham's collective identity. It highlights that concepts applied to making sense of the world and one's place within it are context-dependent; likewise, interactions between individuals identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim are impacted by numerous local conditions, making such relations situational, dynamic, and multivalent.

the ages from 25-85, but are predominantly retired, (upper-) middle-class, well-educated women.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis examines how women negotiate their identification within and as a group when engaging in interreligious dialogue. The focus on the Daughters of Abraham book groups facilitates an in-depth understanding of the dynamics of relationships within one group, between different groups, and as situated in the American sociocultural context. Specifically, I explore how members engage with the group's religious diversity. I also examine how participation in the Daughters of Abraham affects members' self-understanding and the understanding of the "other." Furthermore, I analyze issues of power dynamics and boundary drawing highlighted at group meetings and in the women's accounts of their participation in the Daughters of Abraham.

My analysis of the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups is guided by two interrelated arguments. One, I contend that Daughters members arrive at complex and fluid understandings of what it means to identify as an American Jewish, Christian, or Muslim woman by negotiating various power dynamics arising from ideas of sameness and difference of religion, gender, and sociopolitical values. Two, the ability to point to collectively perceived commonalities in the Daughters of Abraham is important for encouraging engagement with the group's religious diversity, and resulting interreligious understanding. Still, this emphasis on commonalities of gender, religion, or sociopolitical values can also highlight differences occasioning several tensions that challenge interreligious relationship building. My examination brings out the nuance, variance, and complexity with which individuals negotiate their religious self-understanding and understanding of other

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<sup>5</sup> Chapter 2 elaborates on Daughters of Abraham's demography.

religious worldviews as prompted by a chosen recurring interaction with intra- and inter-religious “others” in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups. These multi-layered, personal, and, occasionally, contradictory religious self-understandings upset any simple definition of the categories “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim.” They also highlight that relations between individuals and communities identifying with these religious identity categories are context-dependent, intricate, and dynamic.

My thesis is of scholarly importance in two main respects. First, it makes an original and significant ethnographic contribution to scholarship on women’s interreligious encounter as it relates to the category “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” through its in-depth case study of the women’s interfaith book groups, the Daughters of Abraham. This study is situated within the broad theoretical field of interfaith and community relations as they pertain to religion. This broad field can for analytical purposes be divided into two, albeit overlapping, main categories – one: informal interfaith and intercommunity interactions as a result of living and negotiating daily identities in a more or less multi-religious and multi-ethnic environment, and two: the actively chosen engagement in dialogue between individuals identifying with different religious traditions. As a women’s interfaith book group, the Daughters of Abraham sits within this latter tradition of “formalized interfaith dialogue,” but at the same time, its existence is a result of everyday encounters with the religious and ethnic diversity characterizing the Greater Boston Area.<sup>6</sup> This diversity additionally influences the group’s relational dynamics. This

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<sup>6</sup> When I use the term “formalized interreligious dialogue, encounter, relations” etc., I refer to conversations about issues of religion between individuals from different religious traditions who have actively chosen to engage in dialogue so as to advance interreligious understanding. Formalized interreligious dialogue differs in format and purpose from socially situated informal interreligious meetings. Explicitly, participants in formalized interfaith encounters have purposely chosen to engage in conversation, scriptural analysis, cooperation on social justice issues, to name but a few possible formats, with a view to developing interreligious understanding of religious self and others. In contrast, in informal interfaith relations, the individuals involved do not interact explicitly to learn about each

thesis, thus, offers in-depth insight into one example of interfaith encounter situated within this wider framework and history of interfaith and intercommunity relations, which chapter 1 explores in depth.

Secondly, this thesis makes a theoretical contribution to the debate about definitions and applications of the analytical framework of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” to the study of interfaith and intercommunity encounters by identifying that the categories at play in studying “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” cannot adequately account for the lived experiences of such interfaith relations or the associated religious identity categories. Specifically, this thesis makes a theoretical contribution by problematizing the analytical categories at play in studying “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” in two interrelated manners through its ethnographic study of the identification processes and the engagement with issues of religious difference and sameness taking place in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups. One, this examination demonstrates the diverse and multiple meanings applied to the religious identity categories “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim” by the Daughters members; thus, highlighting that no uniform definition can be applied to these categories for analysis. Two, by illustrating the intricacy of defining the inter-religious and intra-religious relations in the Daughters of Abraham and the various outcomes of navigating these relations for interreligious understanding, this thesis demonstrates that “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” is an umbrella term that fails

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other’s religious worldviews and have not actively chosen to engage across religious differences; rather, such relations express lived experiences of multi-religious and multicultural environments. Accordingly, informal interfaith encounters tend to concern practical everyday issues and take place in everyday settings like schools, cafes, workplaces etc. Interreligious understanding might happen from such informal encounters, but the key difference from formalized interfaith dialogue lies in the intention behind such. Finally, when I refer to interreligious dialogue between theologians, religious leaders, and academics, it indicates a particular version of formalized interfaith engagement that involves scriptural analyses and exchanges. It is pertinent to account for this dialogue format because, as chapter 1 elucidates, the Daughters of Abraham situates itself as a women’s interfaith book group in contrast to this particular version of formalized interfaith encounter.

to adequately capture the nuance and diversity defining lived experiences of such interfaith relations. Explicitly, engaging in “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” in the Daughters of Abraham influences religious self-understanding and perceptions of the “other” in numerous individual manners: for some members, it affirms such understandings; for many, engaging with the “other” disrupts previously held ideas of what it means to be Jewish, Christian, or Muslim; and for most members, actively engaging in interfaith dialogue in the Daughters of Abraham complicates and advances understanding of religious self and other. Thus, complexity and variety define the interfaith relations navigated in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups. The intricacy of defining the categories at play in the study of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” does not invalidate the use of this theoretical framework; but it does underscore the importance of recognizing both macro- and micro-level dynamics specific to the setting in which studies of interfaith and intercommunity relations are carried out because, as this thesis continuously demonstrates, relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims are influenced by numerous contextual factors, irrespective of whether such interactions take place in everyday settings or a space dedicated to learning about religious worldviews.

The Daughters of Abraham presents an interesting case study of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” because of its book group approach to engaging with religious diversity, the fact that membership is reserved for women, its limitation to the “Abrahamic religions,” and the emphasis on sharing personal experiences with religion. Other important dimensions are the group’s location in Boston, Massachusetts and its founding history in the wake of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Taken together these key characteristics define the power dynamics that individual members navigate when they engage with their religious “others” in the

Daughters of Abraham. That is, they prescribe the conditions for Daughters of Abraham's group dynamics and so the identification processes taking place in this encounter. At the same time, the women's dynamic performances of their religious identities and fluid approach to the "other" affirm, upset, and ultimately redefine meanings applied to the categories "Jewish," "Christian," "Muslim," and "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations." My ethnographic study, thus, illuminates how participation in one type of formalized interfaith dialogue can disrupt, deconstruct, and ultimately do away with rigid understandings of religious identities.

Within the broad theoretical field of interfaith and intercommunity relations, the Daughters interfaith encounter differs from informal everyday engagement of people from different religions because members of the Daughters of Abraham explicitly meet in order to advance interreligious understanding. That does not mean that lived experiences of interfaith relations does not facilitate such understanding, but the difference lies in the intention behind meeting in the first place. By extension, Daughters members have actively chosen to engage in interfaith conversation about the "Abrahamic religions" and are, therefore, committed to enhancing understanding of religious self and others.

The Daughters of Abraham interfaith encounter also differs from other types of purposely chosen interfaith engagements, for example collaboration around social justice issues and theological exegesis, which are principal interfaith forums.<sup>7</sup> Explicitly, the Daughters of Abraham does not focus on primary religious texts, as would be the case for theological exegesis; rather, the group discusses different texts,

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<sup>7</sup> Chapter 8 elucidates that members are aware of the numerous forums where interfaith connections can take place whether it be in everyday settings, through cooperation in communal activities, by way of participation in interfaith prayer, or other such engagements.

fiction and non-fiction, so as to gain knowledge about the “Abrahamic religions.”<sup>8</sup> Moreover, interfaith dialogue with basis in scriptural analysis requires theological knowledge, but in the Daughters of Abraham conversation revolves around personal experiences with religion. As for social justice causes, the Daughters of Abraham refrains from participating in social or political action causes as a group. In fact, the group has a no-politics rule for their book group discussions.<sup>9</sup> Chapter 1 situates the Daughters of Abraham as a women’s interreligious book group within this wider framework of lived experiences of interfaith and intercommunity relations as they pertain to the “Abrahamic religions.”

Existing scholarship has by and large overlooked interreligious engagements between women with explicit ethnographic studies of such being virtually non-existent. This thesis addresses this gap by using ethnographic methods to advance knowledge about women’s interreligious dialogue by focusing on one example of a formalized interfaith encounter between women self-identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. Moreover, my thesis pushes disciplinary discourses by speaking to the following interlinked areas: Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, formalized interreligious dialogue, interreligious encounters on the grassroots level, women’s interreligious dialogue, a book group approach to engaging with religious diversity, and interreligious encounters in the American context post-September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

The next section reviews the existing literature related to interreligious dialogue between women identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim so as to situate

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<sup>8</sup> Examples of books read in the Daughters of Abraham include *The Red Tent* by Anita Diamant, *Things Seen and Unseen* by Nora Gallagher, *Believing Women in Islam* by Asma Barlas, *People of the Book* by Geraldine Brooks. Daughters of Abraham’s sample book list with descriptions of content is included in Appendix B.

<sup>9</sup> This thesis challenges the organization’s apolitical character in chapters 4 and 8 especially.

my ethnographic case study of the women's interfaith book groups, the Daughters of Abraham.

***Literature Review: Gaps in Scholarship on Interreligious Dialogue Between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Women***

Women's interreligious encounters have proliferated in the American context since the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. However, whilst this tragic event stressed the need for interreligious understanding and therefore engendered research into various types of interreligious encounters, the majority of this research marginalizes and excludes women's particular engagement (Jakobsh 2006: 186).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, one can find proof for women's invisibility "in every single book on interfaith dialogue, religious pluralism, the theology of religions, or the 'wider ecumenism' of global interfaith encounter" (King 2004: 48). Writing about the challenges of interreligious dialogue, Maura O'Neill claims,

[A key] deficiency in today's dialogue is the shortage of women participants and the dearth of women's issues as subjects of conversations. While there have been scattered meetings of religious women throughout the world, their presence and their concerns in the large global interfaith organizations are sparse or marginal (2007: 5).

This neglect of women's voices and issues of gender in large global forums for interfaith dialogue makes it all the more pertinent for scholars to consider the grassroots level where women's interreligious dialogue is flourishing.

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<sup>10</sup> Chapter 1 elucidates the significance of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 for the proliferation of interreligious engagement including women's interreligious dialogue.

Several reasons appear to explain the limited studies about women's interreligious encounter. First, seeing as the majority of women's interreligious initiatives have been formed in the wake of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, undertaking much research into this area will not have been possible practically speaking. Second, academic writing on interreligious dialogue mainly features within the discipline of Theology. Perhaps it is only to be expected, then, that existing literature on interreligious dialogue mainly concerns formalized interfaith interactions where theological knowledge legitimizes the presence of its participants. Specifically, the existing literature consists of theological exegeses confined to one of the three "Abrahamic religions" (Berger, 1990), models for constructive interreligious dialogue (Keaten and Soukup, 2009; O'Neill, 2007), and practical guides or reflections primarily based in a Christian faith perspective concerning how to advance interreligious dialogue (Friday, Merrigan (eds.), 2017; Latinovic, Mannion, Phan (eds.), 2016; Smith, 2007). It may be that theologians are beginning to venture beyond the study of religious texts in dealing with issues pertaining to religious diversity, though. For example, the Christian theologian, Mara Brecht, has conducted an ethnographic study of a women's interfaith group (2014). Still, its purpose is providing a guide for Christians based in theological exegesis concerning how to stay grounded within one's religion when engaging with religious "others." Consequently, despite using ethnographic methods in her study, Brecht still adheres to the parameters of earlier theological work on the matter. Similarly, an edited volume concerning participating in the rituals of another religious tradition as a kind of interreligious encounter offers reflection on the limitations of such interfaith sharing and deliberations over best practice (Moyaert, Geldhof (eds.), 2015).

The shortage of writing on interfaith relations in Religious Studies in contrast

to Theology is surprising given the topic's obvious potential as a research focus. A reason might be the theological connotations of "faith." However, "faith" is part of the religious language used by practitioners and so of the wider religious framework that is at the heart of Religious Studies as a discipline. Therefore, Religious Studies scholars should not neglect studying interfaith dialogue because of mere semantics.

Moreover, it is necessary to recognize the interplay between the disciplines of Religious Studies and Theology, and so the degrees to which rigid disciplinary lines between the two are constructed. Theology is considered a normative discipline because it starts from a – typically Christian – confessional perspective and is focused on advancing religious truths. In contrast, Religious Studies is viewed as a non-normative or scientific approach to the study of religion focused on advancing knowledge of different religious traditions (Cornille 2014: 1). Comparative theology can be situated somewhere in-between as it typically brings Christianity into dialogue with one other religious tradition (Cornille 2014: 1-2). Comparative theology can, therefore, be viewed as a more "systematic way of doing interreligious dialogue" in contrast to social action, communal, or grassroots level dialogues (Cornille 2014: 2). Thus, different types of interreligious dialogue have different sets of conditions for prompting engagement across religious lines (Cornille 2013: 20). Finally, it should be acknowledged that, like Religious Studies scholars, theologians approach issues of religious diversity for various – potentially non-normative – reasons and in different forums such as conference settings, organized local discussion groups, informal conversation between university colleagues, journal articles and so on (Hick 1995: 2).

A key difference between religious studies and theological approaches to examining issues of religious diversity is the premise for such analyses. The multi-religious contemporary landscape is, according to the Christian theologian, John Hick,

experienced “as both a practical and intellectual problem” by individuals self-identifying as Christians (1995: 1). This is the case because the plurality of religious “truths” upsets religious absolute truth claims and so ideas of Christianity as unique (Hick and Knitter 1987: *vii*). Hick and fellow theologian, Paul Knitter, argue a need to address this intellectual conundrum and practical reality through a “pluralistic theology of religions” (1987: *vii*). Pluralistic theologies are considered a “‘paradigm shift’ – in the efforts of Christian theologians, both past and present, to understand the world of other religions and Christianity’s place in that world” (Hick and Knitter 1987: *vii*). The pluralist position moves away from the “insistence on the superiority [of] Christianity toward a recognition of the independent validity of other ways” (Hick and Knitter 1987: *viii*). This approach is positioned in-between “conservative” exclusivist and “liberal” inclusivist attitudes to religious diversity (Hick and Knitter 1987: *viii*).

Whilst pluralist theologies are still on the margins, exchanges between theologians holding this attitude to religious diversity can be found globally, in numerous forums, and with basis in various premises. Specifically, Hick and Knitter identify three key “bridges” prompting a pluralist attitude to religious diversity: “relativity,” “mystery,” and “justice” (1987: *ix-xi*). The “relativity” paradigm recognizes the impossibility of judging the truth claims of another religion on the basis of one’s own because of the historical relativity of all religious traditions (Hick and Knitter 1987: *ix*). The “mystery” bridge acknowledges that God’s infinity and ineffability prevents any religious tradition from having the “final” word (Hick and Knitter 1987: *x*). Lastly, the “justice” bridge recognizes a need for all religions to work together to promote justice for all peoples irrespective of religious affiliation (Hick and Knitter 1987: *xi*). Some theologians, thus, engage in “interreligious

hermeneutics” (Cornille and Conway (eds.) 2010).<sup>11</sup> Interreligious hermeneutics comprise four major approaches. The first involves the hermeneutical retrieval of sources in a different religion to use for intra-religious dialogue in one’s own tradition; the second entails pursuing understanding of the “other;” the third approach is the appropriation and interpretation of the other within one’s own religious framework; and the final approach is the borrowing of hermeneutical principles from a different religion (Cornille and Conway 2010: ix-x). All of these four major approaches to interreligious hermeneutics take as their aim the promotion of “genuine understanding and collaboration between religions” (Cornille & Conway 2010: x).

On the other hand, the main focus for Religious Studies is not defining theologies with which to approach the religious “other” or as strategies for engaging with the lived reality of religious diversity. Rather, Religious Studies aims to elucidate the influence of such diversity for religious communities and individuals. In this respect, it relates to scholarship situated within the discipline of Sociology concerning the significance of interfaith dialogue for social cohesion in multi-religious settings (Banchoff (ed.), 2007; Eck, 2002; Wuthnov, 2005, 2007b). The emphasis on the wider social context leaves out individual practitioners’ viewpoints, though, which is an area that Religious Studies scholars can potentially disclose. At the same time, a focus on individual experiences could support the articulation and validation of pluralistic theologies because they demonstrate that religion is personal and so understood differently depending on the individual in question. Such nuance illuminates the “superfluity of religion itself” (Fletcher 2013: 179). Hence, such studies could underscore a need to abandon exclusive truth claims and oversimplified interpretations.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example: Cornille, C. and Christopher Conway (eds.). 2011. *Interreligious Hermeneutics*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books.

Finally, in contrast to Religious Studies scholars who, at least in theory, avoid making subjective judgments, some theologians claim that interfaith engagement has an ideal form or has to involve certain elements before it can be classified as “proper” interfaith dialogue. For instance, Catherine Cornille contends that the ideal of interfaith dialogue is “a conversation or exchange in which participants are willing to listen to and learn from one other” (2013: 20). Further Cornille argues,

It is the possibility of mutual learning which makes dialogue more than a luxury or benevolent pastime for the curious, and renders it a matter of internal religious necessity or opportunity [because] it is the very possibility that one may learn from the other which moves religious traditions from self-sufficiency to openness to the other (2013: 20).

Interfaith dialogue is, thus, considered inherently positive as well as something that Christians are, or should be, compelled to do. Another example is the Catholic theologian and professor of Interreligious Dialogue, Leonard Swidler, who posits ten commandments that all participants in interreligious dialogue must adhere to, for example entering into dialogue with sincerity and honesty, in order for this dialogue to achieve its stated aim: “to change and grow in the perception and understanding of reality and then to act accordingly” (1983: 1).<sup>12</sup>

I should disclose that whilst I am not compelled by any personal faith to engage in interfaith dialogue, I view meetings between individuals from different religious traditions and none as inherently positive. This personal bias is due to my

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that the Daughters of Abraham provides an adapted version of Swidler’s interreligious dialogue principles on its website. The stated reason for making this document available is that subgroups can use it to guide their monthly meetings. It shows that even though the organization situates itself outside the formalized interfaith dialogue model based on theological knowledge, at times, these different approaches to engaging with religious diversity overlap. Chapter 4 further examines Daughters of Abraham’s interreligious principles as they relate to the parameters set for this interfaith encounter. The organization’s list of interreligious dialogue principles is available online: <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbX0ZXN0ZG9mYXxneDoxYmI5ODAxMWY4NmNhNzY1> (Accessed: 23/11/2016).

belief that interfaith encounters can contribute to creating and/or maintaining peaceful coexistence in our contemporary multi-religious and multi-ethnic context. Moreover, such diversity, in my opinion, enriches communities and advances individual worldviews. My personal view on interreligious dialogue as fundamentally positive exemplifies that whilst differences exist between the disciplines of Theology and Religious Studies in terms of motivations and approaches to the study of interfaith relations, at times, the two also overlap. It suggests that interdisciplinary studies on interfaith encounters could be mutually beneficial.

Such potential interdisciplinary exchanges might also help counter the third possible reason for the limited research into women's interreligious encounters – the required method. Studies into women's interreligious encounter, which typically takes place on the grassroots level, necessitate a focus on lived experiences. Ethnographic studies of lived experience concern peoples' incoherent accounts of their self, which reveal the messiness of everyday life. As a result, these studies resist straightforward analysis or categorization in contrast to more clear-cut material like texts that provide "orderly" results (Fletcher 2013: 179). Consequently, besides being time-consuming, studies of lived experiences are complex in a different manner to textual analysis.

Lastly, since my thesis takes a feminist lens to the study of the Daughters of Abraham, a review of the limited feminist scholarship on interfaith dialogue is necessary. Feminist theologians have disputed patriarchal readings of gender within Jewish, Christian, and Islamic texts (Ahmed, 1999; Barlas, 2002, 2007; Loardes (ed.), 1990; Mernissi, 1991; Plaskow, 1990, 2005; Schüssler-Fiorenza, 1983, 2013; Stowasser, 1994; Wadud, 1999, 2006). Moreover, feminist scholars have reflected on personal interreligious engagements within the Academy (Baker, 2000; Christ and Plaskow (eds.), 1979; Fry, Montagu and Scholefield, 2005). Nevertheless, these

publications provide a limited account of particularly female experiences with religion because they neglect ordinary women's religious experiences, a task left to popular publications like *The Faith Club* (2006) to fulfill. While research into formalized interreligious encounters between women is limited, studies have been conducted into the lived experience of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women. Ethnographies concerning women's religious experiences within a single religious tradition (Brasher, 1998; Fader, 2009; Griffith, 1997; Kaufman, 1991), and ethnographies comparing women's agency within different religions exist (Brink and Mencher (eds.), 1997; Manning, 1999). Still, these studies examine a limited aspect of the religious landscape, namely "ultra-conservative" religious strands. Whilst such religiously conservative women might implicitly position themselves in an intra- or inter-religious conversation with more liberal religious denominations or within their specific sociocultural context, these dimensions go unrecognized. Accordingly, my ethnography of an example of interreligious encounter between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women contributes new dimensions to this anthropological scholarship focused on women's particular experiences with religion.

The above examination of existing scholarship related to women's interreligious encounter between individuals identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim has illuminated a great need for a more nuanced scholarship on interreligious dialogue. Achieving such nuance requires a rethinking of methods in the study of interfaith relations. Consequently, this thesis uses ethnographic methods to study women's interreligious dialogue. Explicitly, my analysis of the Daughters of Abraham is situated in the burgeoning field of ethnographic works in the study of women's interreligious encounter as it pertains to "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations." The next section elaborates on the method used.

## *Method: An Ethnographic Case Study of a Women's Interreligious Encounter*

My analysis of the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over the course of eight months between September 2014 and April 2015.<sup>13</sup> It includes forty-one semi-structured life story interviews.<sup>14</sup> I interviewed the six members of Daughters of Abraham's Steering Committee as well as group leaders and ordinary members from all of the "Abrahamic religions." Thirty-nine of these interviews were conducted with individual women. Two of these were group interviews, one with the three co-leaders of subgroup J, and the other with two leaders from subgroup D.<sup>15</sup> The forty-six interviewees belong to a cross-section of ten Daughters subgroups, all of which are located in the Greater Boston Area. I observed meetings with nine of these ten subgroups. Interviews were recorded using my iPhone.<sup>16</sup> I took notes during and immediately after conversations. To guide the interviews, I had made a questionnaire divided into three thematic headings, namely motivations for participation, religious worldview, and gender dynamics.<sup>17</sup> Unless otherwise noted, when I cite individual

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<sup>13</sup> My ethnographic fieldwork comprising interviews and participant observation was conducted in accordance with the University of Edinburgh's protocol for research ethics. Ethics approval was sought from the university by completing a "level one ethics (self-) assessment" of my proposed research project prior to undertaking fieldwork so as to ensure compliance with matters of consent, confidentiality, data protection, and transparency of method. Interview participants were provided with an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form. Further information about the University of Edinburgh's research ethics protocol is available from the following link: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/divinity/research/administration> (Accessed: 26/01/2017).

<sup>14</sup> Since the interviews were all in English, I made summaries of these myself. I deemed it too time-consuming to transcribe all of the forty-one interviews. Instead, I transcribed deemed relevant parts of these. Both interview transcripts and summaries are stored on my password protected hard drive. Moreover, they are backed up on my private, password protected Dropbox account.

<sup>15</sup> These group interviews were requested by my informants. I agreed to this format so as to get their perspective on the Daughters of Abraham, which would otherwise not have been obtained.

<sup>16</sup> These interview recordings have been backed up and are stored on my password protected hard drive. Moreover, they are backed up on my private, password protected Google drive. They can be provided upon request. Seven of the interviewees did not consent to having our conversation recorded. One interview took place over the phone and, therefore, could not be recorded. I rely on notes for these conversations.

<sup>17</sup> Please refer to Appendix A for a copy of my thematically guided questionnaire.

members, these quotations are taken from the formally conducted interviews. In order to protect the anonymity of my informants, all names have been changed.

As indicated, I also undertook participant observation of Daughters of Abraham subgroup meetings. All of the nine Daughters chapters that I observed were located in the Greater Boston Area. Each Daughters group is named according to the neighborhood in which they are located, but in order to protect the anonymity of my informants, when I refer to groups I use a randomly assigned letter. I observed the meetings of group A four times and of groups B, C, and D twice. I attended one meeting each with subgroups E, F, G, H, and I. Furthermore, I participated in Daughters of Abraham's Annual Gathering in April 2015, a semi-annual group leaders meeting in October 2014, a Daughters of Abraham mentor training in February 2015, as well as a few private events with an exclusive number of members such as *Shabbat*, casual conversation over coffee, or meals in their homes. These private events took place over the course of my fieldwork. I provide the context for the subgroup meeting or outside event in question when cited in this thesis. By using ethnographic methods to study women's interreligious encounter, issues related to both the individual and group level can be captured. Both aspects are relevant to understanding how women negotiate their identification within and as a group when engaging in interreligious dialogue.

Out of the range of potential qualitative interview methods available, I decided to employ a tailored version of the life story interview because of its emphasis on the informant's voice. This focus enables insight into individual meaning-making, which is crucial for understanding the negotiations of identification taking place in interreligious encounters. The life story interview is in-depth and open-ended and typically concerns significant aspects of an individual's life, but scholars also use this

method when looking to create a more complete biography of select individuals (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011: 190). Explicitly, the researcher aims to gain insight into “the personal experiences, interpersonal dynamics and cultural meanings of participants in their social worlds” (Heyl 2001: 372). Informants are selected based on being part of a specific social milieu, or are people from different backgrounds who have had certain types of experiences (Heyl 2001: 369).

The life story method is interdisciplinary, but has a consistent focus on everyday life experiences. It motivates a detailed exploration of complex connections between the individual and the social because it seeks to show how life documents help organize lives and vice versa (Stanley 2013: 4). Life documents are a researcher-generated form of data defined as oral or written texts that are everyday, representational, and significant in organizing and shaping lives (Stanley 2013: 4). Consequently, it is possible to tailor this method to a given research project.

What is unique about the life story method is it being a narrative of meaning-making, which in a sense makes it a condensed version of a biography. It is a version over which the individual woman has sole authority. It is her story, her voice. The basis of the life story method, then, is storytelling. The value of personal narratives is the very “tendency to go beyond mere facts” and “tap into the realms of meaning, subjectivity, imagination, and emotion” (Maynes et al. 2008: 148) by revealing “the very means by which individuals attempt to give meaning to their life experiences, identity, and world” (Chanfrault-Duchet 2000: 74). Consequently, “life stories serve as excellent means for understanding how people see their own experiences, their own lives, and their interactions with others” (Atkinson 2002: 137). When individuals engage in such a process of meaning-making of experiences and interactions with others during an interview, they are simultaneously making sense of their own

influence and position in such dynamics. The life story interview technique, therefore, illuminates processes of subjectivity negotiation and group dynamics. Consequently, it is a pertinent method towards gaining knowledge about the consequences of participating in an interreligious dialogue group for understandings of religious self and others.

Moreover, the life story methodology is a technique that allows for the expression of voice (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011: 149). It gives ordinary women an opportunity to express themselves as subjects and, consequently, contests a patriarchal objectification of women (Cosslett et al. 2000: 5-6). Specifically, the life story method gives agency to individual women because it facilitates a subject position from which women can make truth-claims. This subject-position is situated both in time and place with listeners who witness and judge the narrative (Gilmore 1994: 225). It, thereby, recovers a marginalized aspect of knowledge production, namely particularly female experiences. Using life stories as a method can, accordingly, be viewed as an aspect within the larger effort of Feminism to ensure a more inclusive conception of social reality (The Personal Narratives Group 1989: 3). In this sense, my thesis takes a feminist perspective. Through its focus on a women's interfaith book group, it gives voice to women's lived experiences of their interreligious engagement. The following section explains how I gained access to the Daughters of Abraham so that its members' stories could be told.

### ***Access: Discovering and Being Welcomed Inside the Daughters of Abraham***

A combination of tenacity and a good amount of luck led me to the Daughters of Abraham after searching and sorting through interfaith initiatives online. What

immediately caught my attention was the organization's book group approach to interreligious dialogue, the fact that the group was reserved for women, and that it was confined to practitioners of the "Abrahamic religions." A side benefit was that the group appeared relatively organized. It had a Steering Committee consisting of two Jewish, two Christian, and two Muslim members. Each of the thirty-six subgroups had at least one group leader. Each group had between 11-20 members. An equal representation of all three religions is always sought, but in reality rarely achieved.

The Daughters of Abraham website provides a generic email address, which I used to tentatively make a request to conduct research about members' experiences with participating in this interreligious encounter. Three days later, I received the first of many emails from Anna, a Christian Steering Committee member, who had written on behalf of the organization's leadership. The email was filled with apprehensive questions like, "What do you hope to learn about the Daughters of Abraham?" "How would you conduct your research?" "Will you follow protocols for protecting the identity of those you interview/question?" It was clear that at least some of the Daughters members knew about academic standards for research ethics, which my subsequent interactions confirmed. Daughters of Abraham's Steering Committee eventually accepted my request to conduct research with them, and I made arrangements to relocate to Boston.

Throughout my time in the field, I was indebted to the Steering Committee for their continual support of my request for access to subgroup meetings and their help in getting volunteers for individual interviews. Nevertheless, gaining access is not a one-off event. It should be viewed as an "access relationship" in the sense that "permission from a gatekeeper is necessarily renewable and renegotiable" (Denscombe 2007: 72). Access, then, is a continual process. Thus, remaining in good

standing with everyone was crucial. Whenever individual members chose to confide in me or asked for my opinion about group dynamics, I was put in a delicate position because I had to avoid taking sides yet give a response deemed satisfactory.

Accordingly, throughout the fieldwork process, I was walking a fine line between being accepted by Daughters of Abraham's leadership and its ordinary members.

My first face-to-face encounter with the Daughters was a lunch with two Steering Committee members, Anna and Rachel, both of whom are retired teachers. This lunch had been arranged via email. Its purpose was making sure that we were on the same page in terms of my research about the Daughters of Abraham. It also served as a way to organize my time with them. Anna and Rachel provided the email addresses of a handful of individual members who had agreed to be interviewed in advance. They had replied to my request for volunteers placed in a summer edition of Daughters of Abraham's monthly newsletter. Moreover, I got contact details for group leaders of the thirteen Daughters chapters located in the Greater Boston Area. Following my subsequent attendance at the semi-annual group leaders' meeting in October, nine groups invited me to observe one or more of their meetings. Attending these group meetings proved invaluable for getting individual members to volunteer for interviews, presumably prompted by the face-to-face interaction serving to demystify me and my research project.

Whilst the largest snowfall in Boston since 1872 made it necessary to reschedule interviews and group observations more often than I cared for, a bigger challenge was getting Muslim members to volunteer their time. I can only make guesses as to why this was the case. An explanation could be that some Muslim members are non-native English speakers; another that most Muslim participants work fulltime and have childcare responsibilities in contrast to the majority of the

Jewish and Christian members who are retired; therefore, spending 1-1½ hours on an interview might have seemed unfeasible. The fact that Muslim members are fewer in numbers compared with the Jewish and Christian members did not make the situation any easier. Nevertheless, immediately after a Muslim interview participant posted on the group's Facebook wall that I was struggling to get the Muslim perspective, numerous Muslim women volunteered. I ended up interviewing eleven Muslim women, nineteen Jewish members, fifteen Christians, and one Daughters member identifying as both Jewish and Christian. This distribution reflects the general division of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim members in the nine subgroups that I observed during the eight months I spent in the field with the Daughters of Abraham.

***Chapter Outline: Exploring Religious Identities in the Women's Interfaith Book Groups, the Daughters of Abraham***

In the remainder of this thesis, I seek to address the key questions about how Daughters members engage with the group's religious diversity, how participation in the Daughters of Abraham is reflected in members' self-understanding and the understanding of the "other," and what we learn about power dynamics and boundary drawing from the women's accounts and interactions at Daughters meetings. My engagement with these questions seeks to make an original and significant contribution to the broad theoretical field of interfaith and intercommunity relations by advancing knowledge about women's interreligious dialogue between individuals identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim.

My thesis is structured in the following manner: chapters 1 and 2 provide the background for the Daughters of Abraham women's interfaith book groups. Specifically, chapter 1 contextualizes Daughters of Abraham's interreligious encounter within the history of interfaith and intercommunity relations between the "Abrahamic religions" whilst chapter 2 situates this women's interfaith book group in its sociocultural context by examining the developing presence of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in Boston, Massachusetts as well as their relations in the past and present. Thereafter, chapters 3-8 explore key themes and questions emerging from my ethnographic study of this interreligious encounter as situated within the broad theoretical field of interfaith and intercommunity relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Specifically, chapter 3 introduces the two key elements of food and books that structure Daughters of Abraham's intra-group dynamics by providing "safe space." It also considers the implications for individual and collective engagements with religious diversity and the tensions arising from markers of difference. Chapter 4 continues the focus on Daughters of Abraham as a book group by focusing on the centrality of texts for this interreligious encounter in terms of nuancing understanding of religious self and "others." It involves a consideration of how engaging with textual "others" influences ideas about identifying as "Jewish," "Christian," or "Muslim" as well as the impact on the parameters set for this particular interfaith encounter. Accordingly, this chapter also explores issues of boundary drawing and power dynamics arising from engagement with such texts. Chapter 5 turns the focus to the gender performances taking place in the Daughters of Abraham. It illuminates how members' shared identity as women contributes to downplaying the group's religious diversity because members can find common ground by pointing to particularly female roles shared as daughters, mothers, wives,

and sisters. Chapter 6 also examines engagement with ideas of sameness and difference, but with a view to the complex ways in which individual members explore, question, and affirm their religious self-understanding within the inter-religious and intra-religious relations formed in this women's interfaith book group. I show how such engagement nuances and complicates understandings of what it means to identify as "Jewish," "Christian," or "Muslim." Doing so also serves to de-essentialize the analytical categories at play in the study of "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations." Additionally, I consider a tension between the inter-religious and intra-religious levels hinging on the organizational stress on commonalities. Chapter 7 continues the analysis of interreligious relations by focusing on a fundamental dynamic that positions Muslims vis-à-vis non-Muslims. Specifically, it analyzes the tension between the leadership's rigid positioning of Muslims as different and individual members' more creative approaches to engaging with issues of sameness and difference. This analysis also problematizes the theoretical framework "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations" by illuminating the varied approaches taken to engaging with the religious "other;" consequently indicating that no singular definition can account for the lived experiences of interfaith encounters. Chapter 8 then further complicates this seemingly rigid positioning of Muslims as "different" by exploring the "mapping" of Daughters of Abraham's collective identity, which involves a consideration of the parameters set for inclusion into this interfaith community. The boundary work done in this group is shown to be paradoxical and multilayered. Finally, the conclusion recapitulates the insights gained about the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups and discusses the wider ramifications of such. It also reflects on the questions arising from this study so as to indicate potential areas for

future scholarship related to women's interreligious encounter and "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations."

**CHAPTER 1: Engaging with Religious Diversity: Situating the  
Daughters of Abraham as an American Women's Interfaith Book  
Group within the History of "Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations"**

**Still I Rise**

You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may trod me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.  
(...)

Did you want to see me broken?  
Bowed head and lowered eyes?  
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,  
Weakened by my soulful cries?  
(...)

You may shoot me with your words,  
You may cut me with your eyes,  
You may kill me with your hatefulness,  
But still, like air, I'll rise.  
(...)

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear  
I rise  
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear  
I rise  
(...)  
I rise  
I rise  
I rise.

(Maya Angelou 1978: 41-2).

Whilst originally written to express and contest the oppression of African-Americans, Maya Angelou's poem "Still I Rise" also captures the response of the American general public to the terrorist attacks in New York and Virginia on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Specifically, the sentiment of answering hatred with resistance and the impulse to rise again encapsulates the response of a nation determined not to

be beaten. The tragic event on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 came to define a new era in the history of the United States of America. One American who quickly responded to that day was Edie Howe (1947-2008), the founder of the women's interfaith book groups, the Daughters of Abraham. On the eve of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, like many of her fellow Americans, Edie sought comfort in her religious community. She went to a spontaneous multi-faith gathering at the First Church Cambridge, a United Church of Christ community in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Sitting between a Muslim and a Jewish woman, she wondered how to reach out to them and how to bring together women holding different religious worldviews. How could she respond in a constructive manner to the national tragedy that had unfolded just hours earlier? In Edie's own words:

I was deeply moved by the events of the day and by the service, and I asked myself, what can I do to make a difference in the light of the horror of this day? And I thought of Abraham and the fact that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are essentially children of Abraham. And I thought, well, I've been running a book group for ten years. I could run a women's book group that would be composed of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Maybe that would make a difference (...) if you look in the world today, there is profound misunderstanding. There's an enormous amount of prejudice, and this book group is my undertaking to try to reduce that to the extent that I am able (PBS 2006).

Edie, a lawyer by training who began studying theology in her fifties, thought it possible to build more peaceful interreligious relations by bringing together practitioners from across the "Abrahamic religions" to learn about their different religious traditions. The attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 claimed to have been done in the name of Islam made her recognize a need for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to come together as an interfaith community in order to stand up to religious extremism and unfounded hatred.

A Christian member, Emily, considers the Daughters of Abraham “a very idealistic and quintessentially American response” to these terrorist attacks. She explains,

9/11 was an event that fundamentally changed the American psyche (...) it was a major disruption (...) in your sense of what it means to be American. It was sort of ‘us versus them’ (...) Churches were just filled in those days with people looking for some sort of meaning, looking for some sort of comfort and community. And I think this [Daughters of Abraham] comes out of that. It is a positive way to make sense of those events, by strengthening our community rather than falling to pieces. I think that’s part of the American soul (...) the idea that we are not going to let other people divide us (Emily).

The Daughters of Abraham, then, was born in response to September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. In fact, this women’s interfaith book group is one of a wealth of interreligious initiatives on the grassroots level, which arose in the wake of that event. Before then, formalized interfaith dialogue in America and Europe had been largely reserved for theologians, academics, and religious leaders. However, the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 generated fears and suspicions amongst people and religious communities, which could have caused deep social division. Seeking to prevent this outcome, many Americans stressed “the need for relationship building, both formal and informal” (Lohre 2006: 4-5). Across the country, Americans, therefore, came together to share their experiences of tensions between religious communities so that “appropriate advocacy and action could take place” (Lohre 2006: 5). Participation in interreligious dialogue was a common response towards combating the misrepresentations of religion in general, and of Islam in particular, that followed in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Notably, interreligious encounters reserved for women flourished (Lohre 2006: 1). These grassroots level initiatives worked to bring together ordinary religious practitioners from different religions.

Women's interreligious encounters can be divided into two main types: "dialogue" and "action." The dialogue model approaches interreligious understanding through storytelling about lived religious experiences (Fletcher 2013: 172). The Daughters of Abraham exemplifies this type of interfaith engagement since members speak from personal experience when discussing books about the "Abrahamic religions." The action model sees participants focus on social justice and with basis in their respective religions envision a way forward towards peaceful coexistence (Fletcher 2013: 175-6). As an organization, the Daughters of Abraham explicitly refrains from discussing politics or doing social outreach work. Consequently, it cannot be included under this bracket, at least not on first glance.<sup>18</sup> Some interfaith initiatives combine the two modes. In all cases, what connects these approaches to interreligious understanding is the goal to build peaceful coexistence on a local and global scale. In summary, the aftermath of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 prompted ordinary Americans like Edie Howe to engage in interreligious dialogue with a hope to dispel religious stereotypes and ensure peaceful interfaith and intercommunal relations.

This chapter examines the history of interfaith and intercommunity relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It serves to situate the Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith book group for women who identify as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim within this history and in its contemporary American context. It does so by first analyzing dialogue initiatives that grew in popularity in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Thereafter, I explore several examples of lived experiences of "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations" situated within and outside the American setting. Since the Daughters of Abraham differentiates itself as a women's interfaith book group by

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<sup>18</sup> Chapters 4 and 8 show that Daughters of Abraham's apolitical self-image can be challenged.

referencing the dialogue model that involves intellectual exchanges about theological issues, this chapter also considers the history of formalized bi- and trilateral dialogue between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians and religious leaders. Finally, because my thesis' case study concerns a women's interreligious encounter, I examine past and present interfaith exchanges between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim feminist theologians, which also situates the contemporary flourishing of women's interreligious dialogue.

Before exploring the history of interfaith and intercommunity relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, it should be noted that lived experiences of interfaith relations can involve more or other religions and spiritualities than Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Similarly, interfaith dialogue based in theological knowledge can involve more or other traditions than the "Abrahamic religions." However, since the Daughters of Abraham is limited to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women, this chapter's examination of interfaith exchanges focuses on "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations."

### ***Situating the Daughters of Abraham as a Women's Triologue Initiative in the Post-9/11 American Context***

The foundation of the Daughters of Abraham can be considered to express a practical response to the flourishing of interfaith initiatives that appeared in the wake of the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. The aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 saw the American Muslim community gaining greater public visibility and suffering discrimination because these attacks were claimed done in the name of Islam (Tingondan 2001: 75). On national and communal levels, efforts were made to unite

Muslims and non-Muslims and ensure social cohesion by downplaying religious differences, for instance religious grassroots organizations and the American government emphasized Islam as a “religion of peace” in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (Gimino 2013: 341). Moreover, various educational programs and interfaith exchanges encouraging mutual understanding and respect between Muslims and non-Muslims appeared (Firestone 2013: 236). The independent grassroots organization “NewGround: A Muslim-Jewish Partnership for Change” that encourages interreligious understanding and harmonious Muslim-Jewish community relations through educational programs provides an example of a grassroots level initiative established post-September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (NewGround 2014). Within the Academy, the 2008 statement, “An Open Letter: Call to Dialogue and Understanding between Muslims and Jews” initiated by Muslim scholars at Cambridge University and signed by Muslim dignitaries, affirmed a Muslim intellectual commitment to furthering Jewish-Muslim dialogue (The Woolf Institute 2008). Official religious organizations also sought to advance interfaith dialogue. For example, the Jewish Union for Reform Judaism (URI) invited the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) to address its forty-fourth annual conference in 2007, an invitation reciprocated later that same year. The two organizations have since developed a series of interfaith programs (Firestone 2013: 232-3).

Nevertheless, relations between Muslims and non-Muslims in the post-9/11 American context have sometimes proved more challenging. An example of a problematic interchange between America’s Christian majority and its Muslim minority is the Evangelical Christian discourse on Islam that followed in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. This national tragedy triggered a greater “cultural awareness” and a growing “symbolic influence” of Muslims in American society (Gimino 2013:

341).<sup>19</sup> Religious grassroots initiatives and the American President, George W. Bush, publically supported the American Muslim community (Gimino 2013: 341).

Evangelicals viewed this drive to include Muslims in American society as a threat to their Protestant identity, which involves a vision of America as a Christian nation (Gimino 2013: 349-50). They responded with a “pattern of anti-Islamic polemics,” which claimed that Muslims worship a “false God distinctly different from Judaism and Christianity” and asserted Islam’s “inherent violent nature” (Gimino 2013: 341-4). Contrary to the general public discourse, Evangelicals, thereby, failed to recognize Muslims as fellow monotheists. These few examples of the different – opposing – responses to the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 indicate the complex ways in which sociopolitical events influence interfaith and intercommunity relations.

An outcome of the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 was the proliferation of “trialogue” initiatives defined as interreligious exchanges between Jews, Christians, and Muslims.<sup>20</sup> Explicitly, this national tragedy prompted Jewish and Christian community leaders to work to include Muslims in the long-established tradition of formalized interfaith exchanges between members of these two religious communities. Their aim was to counteract anti-Muslim discourses like those voiced by the Evangelical Christian community (Gimino 2013: 341). A key aspect of such

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<sup>19</sup> Chapter 7 analyzes the implications of the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks on the positions taken by Muslim and non-Muslim Daughters members to each other as well as the differences in motivations for participating in Daughters of Abraham’s interreligious encounter.

<sup>20</sup> Trialogue had sporadically been taking place in the U.S. and Europe since the 1970s (Fisher 1982: 197 & Braybrooke 1980: 127). Institutionalized trialogue in Europe was born in response to the Middle East unrest that followed in the aftermath of the 1967 war. It prompted religious leaders and university students in Berlin to form the loose organization, “The Standing Conference of Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Europe” (Braybrooke 1980: 147). In 1972 the organization held its first annual European conference in London prompting the creation of national branches (Braybrooke 1980: 127). In the U.S., the “Kennedy Institute Jewish-Christian-Muslim Trialogue” founded in 1978 was the first trialogue initiative to gather regularly. Its overarching objective was to rearticulate Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in a way that is “authentic to each, yet religiously affirmative of the other two” traditions (Fisher 1982: 197). Trialogue initiatives tend to be anchored in the local community (Kessler 2010: 3). An example is the Three Faiths Forum founded in 1997 focused on bettering communal relations through education, action, and engagement programs. More information about the Three Faiths Forum can be found on the organization’s website: <http://www.3ff.org.uk/about-us/history.php> (Accessed: 21/05/2016).

trialogue initiatives formed in response to the post-9/11 American context has been referencing the “Abrahamic religions” paradigm. In fact, since September 11<sup>th</sup> adopting the term “Abrahamic religions” considered to emphasize perceived religious commonalities over differences has been a key strategy used by triologue initiatives to bring together Jews, Christians, and Muslims (Gimino 2013: 349). The term “Abrahamic religions” first appeared in the 1990s in an attempt to propagate triologue (Hughes 2012: 83). The term refers to the figure of Abraham considered to be the spiritual ancestor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Kessler 2010: 6). As such, the reference is predicated on the “perceived shared heritage of the three monotheistic religions” (Hughes 2012: 83). It replaces theological references made to a “Judeo-Christian” tradition to be able to include Islam for the purpose of bettering interfaith relations (Hughes 2012: 98). Thus, an ecumenical agenda explains its use.<sup>21</sup>

The national effort to prevent an anti-Muslim backlash in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 is likely to have influenced the choice to use the “Abrahamic religions” paradigm in Daughters of Abraham’s group name. On its website, the organization explains its name in the following manner:

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<sup>21</sup> Edward Kessler, the founder of the Woolf Institute dedicated to the study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, argues that the use of Abraham as a “model of faith” can be contradictory to its ecumenical purpose because the three monotheistic religions all lay exclusive claim to this figure considered the “paradigm of the human-divine relationship” (2010: 6). Jews interpret Abraham’s encounters with God mainly in terms of God’s promises about continuity of family and inheritance of the land of Israel; their political uses make these promises a source of contemporary controversy (Kessler 2010: 6). Christians acknowledge that Jesus descends from the “seed of Abraham,” but dispute Judaism’s claim that such ancestry is sufficient to “avoid divine wrath;” consequently, it establishes a division between “spiritual Christians” and Jews (Kessler 2010: 6). The Qur’an depicts Abraham as the first monotheist whose example the Prophet Muhammad follows (Kessler 2010: 6). Thus, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all lay claim to the figure of Abraham, a fact that begs the question whether Abraham can belong to each individual religious tradition simultaneously (Kessler 2010: 7-8). However, whilst such theological differences might be detrimental to interfaith dialogue focused on issues of theology, for grassroots level initiatives that take alternative approaches to gaining interreligious understanding, such doctrinal issues do not necessarily play a big role. Daughters members do not mention having had theological clashes during their book discussions, and I did not observe any such conflicts either. The reason might be that the group focuses on learning about each other’s religious worldviews using a plurality of books instead of *the* religious texts. Thus, I find it detrimental to disregard the use of the figure of Abraham altogether for interfaith purposes because this figure and the concomitant term “Abrahamic religions” fulfill their ecumenical promise by encouraging Jews, Christians, and Muslims to engage in triologue. The Daughters of Abraham exemplifies this more optimistic view.

Abraham is considered by many to be the first monotheist. Since Jews, Christians and Muslims are all inheritors of the faith of Abraham, we claim him as our father. We could have named ourselves after our mothers, Sarah and Hagar, but that would highlight our differences. Instead, we have chosen our common father and by naming ourselves after Abraham we are saying that there is more holding us together than dividing us (Daughters of Abraham 2016c).

This reason invokes the Abrahamic discourse including the emphasis on religious commonalities. Whilst it could seem ironic that an all-women's group mentions a patriarch in its name, this key reference to Abraham should be viewed as a response to the group's contemporary American context where an emphasis on the benefits of religious diversity has become mainstream after September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.<sup>22</sup>

This emphasis on religious diversity as inherently positive also supports Massad's claim that the "Abrahamic religions" framework is a contemporary expression of Western dominance. Explicitly, Massad considers the recent drive to equalize Islam with Christianity and Judaism under the umbrella term "Abrahamic religions" merely an expression of the "liberal ruse of inclusion that yet again sidesteps the question of imperial power" (2015: 13). Hence, the use of this ecumenical paradigm is a covert way in which to impose the ideology of "liberalism" and its associated sociopolitical values (Massad 2015: 13). Seeing as the "Abrahamic religions" framework is part of Daughters of Abraham's self-understanding, it is important to bear in mind its relation to this macro-level power struggle between so-deemed "liberal" and "illiberal" nations, communities, groups, and individuals that was explored at length in the introduction (Massad 2015). Additionally, that Daughters of Abraham's collective self-understanding is bound up with the "Abrahamic religions" framework underscores that this interfaith encounter is influenced by the ideological discourses found in the United States – the "liberal"

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion of the implications of gender in relation to Daughters of Abraham's group name, please refer to chapter 5. Refer to chapter 8 for a discussion of the group name in relation to the construction of Daughters of Abraham's collective identity.

West. It highlights interfaith relations as context-dependent and so the importance of recognizing the influence of local conditions when examining such interfaith engagement.

Grassroots level initiatives that bring together individuals who claim belonging to different religious traditions do not necessarily highlight their interfaith character, however. While the Daughters of Abraham can be defined as a type of formalized interfaith encounter due to the self-selected monthly engagement of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women in interreligious dialogue, the group's official self-representation defines itself as "other" to a primary version of formalized interfaith encounter, namely the dialogue model between theologians, academics, and religious leaders where scriptural analysis forms the basis for developing understanding of religious self and others. The Daughters of Abraham explains,

We see ourselves not as a dialogue group but as a book group focused on discussions of books that touch upon our respective religions. We engage with the books and poetry we read to explore the meanings, shape and practice of our own and one another's religious experience. We are not an academic study group nor are we official representatives of our religious tradition or theological opinions (...) our goal is to offer one another a window into our living experience of faith (2016f).

The Daughters of Abraham takes a novel approach to the practice of interreligious dialogue due to its book group format, which chapters 3 and 4 discuss in depth. The organization's book group identity is highlighted because participation does not require being an expert in theology. Rather, members speak from personal experience of leading a life grounded in a religious framework. Thus, the personal is considered legitimate knowledge in contrast to dialogue between theologians, academics, and religious leaders that requires theological knowledge. Moreover, Daughters members discuss different books, fiction and non-fiction, concerning Judaism, Christianity, and/or Islam instead of discussing *the* books, that is the primary religious texts, which

are at the center of formalized interfaith engagement between theologians and scholars. These differences from one key type of interreligious dialogue between theologians might explain why the Daughters of Abraham does not situate itself as an interfaith group. Still, the Daughters of Abraham and formalized interfaith dialogue based in theological knowledge share a common aim of fostering interreligious understanding and relationships.

Many of the interreligious initiatives that were created in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 on the grassroots level are comprised of women only. Participants in such activities typically gather in informal spaces and conversations tend to focus on lived religious experiences (Lohre 2006: 1). Consequently, the starting point for conversation is “real-life” expertise in contrast to formalized dialogue between theologians who approach religions as objects available for commentary, explication, and comparison with basis in theological expertise (Fletcher 2013: 179 & 170). Interactions between feminist theologians within the Academy can, to some degree, be claimed responsible for this flourishing of women’s interreligious encounter on the grassroots level following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Even if the Daughters of Abraham differentiates itself from the dialogue model between theologians, as a women’s interfaith encounter, the organization, nevertheless, relates to the more recent history of theological exchanges between feminist scholars, which I explore here.

The 1893 Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago and the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh “opened the dam” for formalized interfaith dialogue between theologians and religious leaders due to their related timing and focus on coexistence (Swidler 2013: 6). However, seeing as women have historically been excluded from religious leadership, women were also largely absent in such

interfaith forums. For instance, only twenty-three out of 186 presenters at the 1893 Parliament of the World's Religions were women (Fletcher 2013: 171). That women were even present at this event was only due to the global women's movement emerging in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Fletcher 2013: 171). As a result, male perspectives on interfaith engagement have been privileged historically. However, as women gained access to higher education in the 1960s, feminist theology arose in response to social changes (Roded 2012: 213). In the U.S., feminist theology was an expression of two interacting social movements: Feminism and the Civil Rights Movement. Christian feminism first emerged in the context of Protestant theological seminaries where many Jewish women also trained (Radford-Ruether 2010: 5). As a result, Jewish feminism developed in close relation to Christian feminist theology in the 1970s (Radford-Ruether 2010: 14). Religious feminists challenged the status quo of their religious traditions. They focused the discussion on "the woman question" looking to negotiate and re-negotiate women's space and roles within their respective religious traditions (Trevett 2006: 178). Specifically, Anglo-American Jewish and Christian feminist theologians worked to change the status of women in religious leadership, learning, and ministry, and sought a more gender-inclusive language in liturgy and prayer books (Fry 2005b: 1). In fact, Jewish feminism was the starting point for seeking inclusive practice in various Jewish denominations through a re-interpretation of religious sources (Radford-Ruether 2010: 14). The interreligious dialogue between feminist theologians has affected ordinary women's engagement with Judaism and Christianity. Feminist theology trickled down to religious communities, bringing about innovative worship groups and liturgy with ordinary

female practitioners reclaiming old rituals for new circumstances and advocating for more gender-inclusive language (Trevett 2006: 180).<sup>23</sup>

Since the early 1980s, interfaith dialogue mainly between Jewish and Christian feminist scholars has taken place in the U.S. and Germany. This dialogue has had an impact on Jewish-Christian relations on a bigger scale. The cooperation between Jewish and Christian feminists provided a space where these women could empathize with each other's "struggle for change" against their religions' patriarchal structures and find support in developing their own religious feminist identities (Fry 2005a: 15). These interactions had far-reaching consequences for the emerging Christian feminist theological discourse because Jewish feminists highlighted forms of anti-Judaism in Christian feminists' reinterpretations of their scripture (Fry 2005a: 15-7). The second-wave feminist biblical scholars writing in the late 1970-80s critiqued patriarchy and women's exclusion from mainstream Christian leadership and ministry, but unintentionally blamed Judaism for this reality (Bowe 2002: 19). Specifically, Christian feminists charged Judaism with patriarchy by portraying Jesus as women's liberator from this social structure. The interaction between Jewish and Christian feminist theologians ensured the correction of this anti-Jewish sentiment; patriarchy is now considered to originate from "the cultural world of the Ancient Near East" (Fry 2005a: 18-9). Helen Fry, a scholar and participant in Jewish-Christian dialogue, contends that the recognition of the development of anti-Jewish sentiments is a "significant move," which is unlikely to have occurred in the wider Jewish-Christian dialogue because gender issues were not raised (2002: 267). Thus, interactions between Jewish and Christian female theologians have highlighted new theological issues influencing their religious communities at large.

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<sup>23</sup> Chapter 5 examines the discussion of specifically female experiences with religion within the Daughters of Abraham. It illuminates that innovative engagement with gender also takes place in this grassroots level interreligious encounter.

Within the Academy, Muslim feminists have increasingly engaged with Islamic texts and principles to create a space for women in the public sphere. They have, however, tended to remain secluded in their rejuvenation of Islam (Radford-Ruether 2010: 16). Islamic feminism arose in response to the rise in Islamic fundamentalism and in order to counteract its call for women's subordination (Roded 2012: 213). Muslim feminists work from an egalitarian vision of Islam. The religion is deemed in need of revision in order to realize Islam's "original potential;" such development is considered possible to be made in correspondence with contemporary sociocultural contexts (Radford-Ruether 2010: 16). By working from a religious perspective rather than a secular one, Islamic feminists have been able to facilitate greater proactive social roles for women as well as women's access to religious institutions (Kadayifci-Orellana 2014: 6).

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, religious feminist theology became a "global interfaith dialogue" centered on social justice and advocacy causes, which aims to improve women's social situation (Radford-Ruether 2010: 19). The feminists' global interfaith dialogue seeks first to reveal how conventional religious teachings contribute to women's subordination and then to counteract women's secondary status through more inclusive religious teachings. It further looks to diffuse violent hostilities based on religious exclusivism. Additionally, some feminists look to create interfaith cooperation around ensuring environmental sustainability (Radford-Ruether 2010: 19). Feminist theology rooted in the Academy has, thus, expanded in size and commitments. It took the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 before interfaith exchanges between feminist scholars trickled down to women's interfaith encounter on the grassroots level on a wide scale. This was especially true in the American context.

Following situating the Daughters of Abraham within the history of interfaith exchanges between feminist theologians and the post-9/11 American dialogue context, this chapter now turns to examine examples of lived experiences of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” with a particular view to the U.S. This analysis continues to situate the Daughters of Abraham within the broad theoretical field of interfaith and intercommunity relations.

### ***Past and Present Lived Experiences of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations”***

Intercommunity relations between America’s Christian majority and its Jewish minority have historically been the principal interfaith relation negotiated on a national, communal, and individual level. This primacy was especially the case before September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. To some extent, this priority had to do with America’s immigration laws, explored in chapter 2. Simply put, these laws only permitted immigration from the European continent until a legal change in 1965. As a result, the main religions in America were Christianity and Judaism; hence, everyday intercommunal encounters chiefly took place between members of these two religious communities.

The Christian-dominated general American public did not always consider Jews their equals, though. It took sociopolitical changes following the Second World War before the American Jewish community was considered to rightfully belong in the Christian-majority America; in other words, for Jews to be viewed as “proper” Americans in the general public. Specifically, the social and economic changes of the post-war years contributed to a more favorable view of Jews and Judaism by the Christian-dominated general public. Jews moved from working class neighborhoods

into middle-class suburbia that until then had been dominated by Christians. This change led to greater acceptance of Jews because a growing number of Christians came to perceive Jews as “ordinary, law-abiding middle-class citizens who were not to be blamed for America’s social, political, or economic problems” (Ariel 2006: 332). It occasioned an enlarged vision of who belongs to the American general public. Accordingly, the informal interreligious meetings that took place in the suburban neighborhoods between Jews and Christians in the post-war years broke down barriers between members of these two religious communities.

Aside from the informal mingling between some Jews and Christians engendered by the new economic prosperity, the Cold War influenced lived experiences of relations between Jews and Christians because it changed the status of the American Jewish community. Together with its Western allies, the U.S. was engaged in an ideological debate with Communism during the 1950s, and the political establishment, therefore, sought to distinguish Americans from the USSR. Participation in religious life posited against an irreligious communist regime became “the American way.” Explicitly, religion became a defining and differentiating element of being American whilst also symbolizing good citizenship (Kaplan 2005: 61-2). This ideological battle helped legitimize “middle-class religious expressions in all their varieties” (Ariel 2013: 211). President Eisenhower’s definition of a “good American” as a “church- or synagogue-goer” stresses the crucial role of religion in carving out a national identity over against the USSR (Ariel 2013: 211). Moreover, Eisenhower’s remark indicates the status of Judaism and Jews in the post-war American society. Explicitly, despite being a religious minority in the American context, the Jewish community had come to be accepted as equal to the Christian majority.

The changing perception of the American Jewish community in the general public demonstrates the shifting character of interfaith and intercommunity relations with the impact on individual experiences of belonging to mainstream society. As indicated, a key shift in this perception happened in post-war suburban America as a consequence of numerous interacting sociopolitical factors. Another important contributing factor to this change was that previously widely held theories of racial hierarchies that placed Jews as subordinate Semites to the superior Northwestern European race fell out of fashion due to the horrors of the Holocaust (Brodkin 1998b: 274-6). This shift ensured unrestricted access to higher education institutions for Jews for the first time, which together with the country's economic boom ensured that the majority of the American Jewish community gained middle-class status (Brodkin 1998b: 278). It meant that the national narrative changed: "instead of dirty and dangerous races who would destroy U.S. democracy, immigrants became ethnic groups whose children had successfully assimilated into the mainstream" (Brodkin 1998b: 278). "Jewish mobility became a new Horatio Alger story," and the U.S. was, thus, depicted as a nation with equal opportunity for all (Brodkin 1998b: 278). However, such "equality" was dependent on being perceived as white (Brodkin 1998b: 278). That is, the status of American Jews was defined depending on the level of their perceived "whiteness." "Intrawhite racialization" was abandoned with the postwar whitening of Jews as well as of Eastern and Southern Europeans; instead, a white/nonwhite racial distinction was enforced (Brodkin 1998b: 281). Jews came to be perceived as part of the majority white – Christian – America positioned against the "other" nonwhite or black communities. It meant that many American Jews gained a new sense of national and ethno-religious belonging; explicitly, it changed from "an experience of marginality vis-à-vis whiteness to an experience of whiteness

and belonging vis-à-vis blackness” (Brodkin 1998a: 2). This change indicates the importance of race and ethnicity in the American context for communal interrelations as well as individual identity negotiations.<sup>24</sup>

In *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (1998), Karen Brodtkin shows how her family members navigated larger issues of national, ethnic, and religious belonging. Brodtkin demonstrates the impact of this macro-level change in status for individuals identifying as American Jews by elucidating the distinctive meanings applied by three different generations to their Jewishness and ethno-racial assignment defined as “popularly held classifications and their deployment by those with national power to make them matter economically, politically, and socially to the individuals classified” (1998a: 3). Brodtkin depicts her own identity negotiations growing up in the following manner:

Trying to be ‘normal,’ that is, white, and Jewish presented a double bind. Neither was satisfactory by itself, and it seemed to me that each commented negatively on the other: to be ‘normal’ meant to reject the Jewishness of my family and our circle (...) to be Jewish meant to be a voluntary outsider at school. I wanted to embrace my family *and* to be an insider (1998a: 11).

Brodtkin’s inability to construct a coherent identity demonstrates that the ways in which we construct ourselves as social actors are shaped by larger “ethnoracial” assignments. Macro-level discourses about religion, race, ethnicity and so on, thus, influence individual and communal ideas about belonging. Furthermore, the changing public perception of the “whiteness” of American Jews highlights the dynamic and context-dependent character of relations between different religious and ethnic groups.

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<sup>24</sup> Please refer to chapter 2 for an elucidation of how changing ideas about race, ethnicity, and religion has influence intercommunity relations between the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in Boston, Massachusetts.

Sociopolitical factors specific to the American context have not only defined “Christian-Jewish relations,” but have also contributed to establishing the conditions for “Jewish-Muslim” relational dynamics in the past and present. The contrast in the “relative integration” of the Jewish and Muslim community into American society influences these parameters (Firestone 2013: 233). The Jewish community’s assimilation into American society began up to three generations prior to that of the American Muslim community, which means that the Jewish community enjoys a greater social and political standing than the Muslim community in the U.S. (Firestone 2013: 234-5). Specifically, before the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act that enabled immigration from Muslim-dominated countries, less than 500,000 Muslims resided in America, a number that has increased more than fivefold in the span of fifty years (Smith 1999: 52 & xiii). Accordingly, despite the fact that Jews and Muslims are both religious minorities in a predominantly Christian America, an unequal power relation exists between the two communities. Chapter 7 brings to light the influence of this macro-level power dynamic on the positions available to individual members in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith encounter depending on religious affiliation; hence, it illuminates the situated character of interreligious and intercommunity relations.

To elucidate further the complexity defining lived experiences of interfaith and intercommunity relations, Esra Özyürek’s ethnographic study, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* concerning issues of belonging faced by Muslim converts in Germany makes an interesting comparison to Brodtkin’s exploration of American Jewishness (2015). Similarly, Özyürek’s study highlights how national discourses influence relations between different religious and ethnic communities as well as individuals belonging to such

(2015). Specifically, Özyürek shows how indigenous German Muslim converts simultaneously deal with and contribute to the paradox that inclusion of Islam in Europe comes at the expense of a simultaneous exclusion of racialized Muslims from it (2015: 140). In short, Özyürek illustrates how converts to Islam redefine and advance ideas of being and becoming “Muslim,” “German,” “German Muslim,” and “Muslim German” (2015: 143). The fluidity of these religious, ethnic, and national identities accentuates the complexity of defining religious identity categories and how public perceptions of what defines Muslims, in this example, inform the parameters framing relations between religious minorities and the majority society. By highlighting the conditions for belonging specific to contemporary Germany negotiated by German Muslim converts in their search for a coherent narrative of national and religious identity, Özyürek’s ethnographical analysis underscores the influence of context for interfaith and community relations. Similarly, my ethnographic data chapters 3-8 advance a more nuanced understanding of religious identity categories by showing the varied ways in which individual women self-identifying as Jewish, Christians, or Muslim negotiate their religious self-understanding and understanding of religious “others” as influenced by their engagement in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith encounter. The following section elaborates on ways in which macro-level factors affect interfaith relations and perceptions of the “other.”

***The State of Israel as a Key Contextual Factor Influencing “Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations”***

An ongoing key point of contention in “Jewish-Christian-Muslim” relations is

the religious-political issue of the State of Israel. Here, I, therefore, continue illuminating the multifaceted and dynamic character of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” by examining this issue as it has played out in various settings.

With a specific view to “Jewish-Christian relations” in the American context, the subject matter of the State of Israel reveals a clash in perception of the symbolic significance of the – continued – existence of the State of Israel on the level of interaction between Jews and Christians as well as within both of these religious communities. Due to its history of exile and persecution, some members of different diasporic Jewish communities have “strong security concerns that hark back to the long and tragic history of anti-Jewish violence” (Egorova and Ahmed 2017: 295). Many members of the global Jewish community have, therefore, historically perceived the State of Israel as “inextricably linked to [their] spiritual and physical survival” (Berger 1990: 354). A threat against the State of Israel was, therefore, perceived to be a threat to Judaism and to the Jewish people (Berger 1990: 351-2). Most members of the American Jewish community used to take this view too. However, as professor in Israel and Jewish Studies, Dov Waxman argues in his recent book, *Trouble in the Tribe: the American Jewish Conflict over Israel*, the “age of unquestioning and unstinting support for Israel is over” (2016: 3). In fact, many American Jews have become “extremely wary” of mentioning the State of Israel because it has, according to Waxman, become a “toxic” subject matter in the community (2016: 117). His analysis of the current “internecine battle over Israel” among American Jews illuminates the diverse views held on Israel in the contemporary American Jewish community (Waxman 2016: 3). Specifically, Waxman shows the historical change that has taken place in the past two decades from an almost unified support for Israel, due to its centrality to American-Jewish

identity, to increasing diversity (2016: 4). The views held are said to range from “unconditional support to critical engagement” (Waxman 2016: 211). Waxman claims that the variety of views held by American Jews on the State of Israel is not simply a reaction to events taking place in Israel and Palestine (2016: 211). Rather, the reasons for this intra-communal conflict over Israel reflect broader shifts in the American Jewish community engendered by intra-communal changes, for instance the non-Orthodox younger Jewish generation feeling less attached to Israel generally speaking, as well as socio-political changes in American society at large (Waxman 2016: 211-3). Thus, Waxman begins to illuminate the complex interplay of macro-level, communal, and individual factors for informing ideas about “Jewishness” and, by extension, religious identity categories in general. It indicates that ideas of religious self influence perceptions held about others, whether that “other” is found within intra-religious or inter-religious encounters.

Similar to Waxman’s analysis of American Jewry, in *Uncivil War: The Israel Conflict in the Jewish Community*, the sociologist Keith Kahn-Harris uncovers the heterogeneous views held on Israel in the contemporary Anglo-Jewish community (2014). This diversity has increased following the second intifada in the year 2000. In fact, chapter 2 is dedicated to classifying British Jews into separate categories depending on their particular stance on Israel. Kahn-Harris identifies fourteen, necessarily arbitrary, positions taken by British Jews on this issue, namely public supporters; pro-Israel pluralists; pro-Israel, pro-peace left; Jewish radicals; the anti-Zionist left; the decent left; the neo-Conservative right; the Jewish religious right; the Haredi community; authoritarian Zionists; private engagers; Zionist youth movements; the apathetic; and non-Jewish supporters (2014).

Both Kahn-Harris and Waxman's examinations underscore the diversity defining intra-communal relations and show the influence of macro-level contextual factors on understandings of religious belonging. By elucidating the varied and occasionally oppositional attitudes taken to the religious-political issue of the State of Israel in Jewish diasporic communities, they indicate that meanings applied to being "Jewish" are multifaceted, and that belonging to the American or British Jewish community is defined differently depending on the individual. This diversity further implies that how individuals position themselves in intra-religious relations (and by extension interreligious encounters) is context-dependent and dynamic.

Similarly to the American Jewish community, the American Christian community is also divided on the religious-political issue of the State of Israel. The Christian community at large takes a close interest in the political developments between Israelis and Palestinians, because major Christian holy sites are located in the State of Israel. Both positive and negative reactions to such developments are voiced using religious and political language (Kessler et al. 2002: 4 & Berger 1990: 348). A key tension arises out of sympathy with Jews and simultaneous concern for Palestinians. The guilt felt due to the Holocaust led most Christians in North America and Europe to wholeheartedly support the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, but views have become more diversified since then (Berger 1990: 348). In the American context, many politically left-leaning or "liberal" Christians critique Israeli politics and argue for a peaceful solution between Israelis and Palestinians, thus framing responses in a political manner (Berger 1990: 350 & Ariel 2006: 336). American Evangelical Christians, on the other hand, view the establishment of the State of Israel as fulfilling the Biblical prophecy about a "glorious future" and as a step in the eventual creation of the Kingdom of God on Earth (Ariel 2006: 337). This more

politically conservative Christian community considers the Israeli victory in the 1967 Six-Day War to be proof of this purpose and have expressed this view through increasing financial and vocal support of the State of Israel since then (Ariel 2006: 337). The emotionally charged political-religious issues related to the State of Israel, thus, influence “Christian-Jewish relations.” The differing views demonstrate the complexity defining Christian attitudes to Jews and Judaism. It highlights a consequent diversity in lived experiences of “Jewish-Christian relations” as well as interdenominational relations between Christians. More generally, it emphasizes the nuance defining interfaith and intercommunity relations.

The subject matter of the State of Israel has also impacted lived experiences of “Jewish-Muslim relations.” The establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 created a dominant narrative that positions “Jews” and “Muslims” as polar opposites. Whilst the main narrative in diasporic Jewish communities was declaring the establishment of the State of Israel a “miracle” after the Holocaust, Palestinians view this event as commencing their “*Naqba*” – the catastrophe – because two-thirds of the predominantly Muslim population became refugees and Palestinians lost territorial control (Kessler 2010: 3). At the root of the problem is a “clash between two peoples laying claim to the same land” (Kessler 2010: 21). However, the dispute is often articulated in religious language (Firestone 2013: 227). The religious rhetoric over a national conflict has increased dramatically in the past decades, and the greater religious identification with the Israel-Palestine conflict negatively impacts Jewish-Muslim relations in various settings (Firestone 2013: 228).

A few recent studies have examined the history of lived experiences of relations between Jews and Muslims in France (Mandel, 2014; Katz, 2015). These studies elucidate the polarizing influence of a prominent macro-level discourse about

Israel as a key point of conflict between Jews and Muslims for interactions between these two communities in contemporary France. At the same time, by illuminating the diversity defining lived experiences of inter-communal encounters between Jews and Muslims, these studies demonstrate that reducing “Muslim-Jewish relations” to a rigid binary is historically inaccurate.

Specifically, Maud Mandel’s work, *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict* (2014) traces the historical development of “Jewish-Muslim relations” in France from the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 until present-day. Mandel challenges the public and scholarly assumption that polarization between Jews and Muslims in the French context has consistently defined these relations by illuminating “Jewish-Muslim interactions” in late 20<sup>th</sup> century France to have been varied and dynamic (2014: 1 & 155). It demonstrates that the fact that “Muslim-Jewish relations” in contemporary France is tied up with a seemingly unresolvable conflict over the State of Israel was never an inevitable outcome; rather, this conflict serves as a “proxy for wider Muslim and Jewish political negotiations with the French state” that are informed by numerous historical contextual factors such as the processes of decolonialization and 1968 French radical politics (2014: 155). Thus, the relationship of the French state to its minority populations has affected relationships between Jews and Muslims in France. In other words, the tensions informing relations between these communities today are not simply a displacement of the Middle East conflict to France. The disclosed historically diverse character of “Muslim-Jewish relations” highlights the “complex social terrain” informing interfaith encounters and, additionally, emphasizes “the local” as central to understanding how individuals relate across religious differences (2014: 155). Mandel’s analysis, thus, raises questions

about what defines “Jewish-Muslim relations” and, by extension, how to understand these religious identity categories.

Ethan B. Katz’s historical examination of Jewish and Muslim immigration to France from North Africa in *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* (2015) elaborates on these analytical categories by illustrating the multidimensional ways in which Jews and Muslims have engaged with each other in France. Katz argues that Jews and Muslims related to each other through their respective relationships to the French state and society, and to definitions of French national and imperial belonging (2015: 3). Consequently, “competing understandings and institutional manifestations of ‘Frenchness’ inflected how Jews and Muslims saw one another and framed their every interaction” (Katz 2015: 3). Katz’s analysis focuses on individual oral history narratives about understandings of Muslim-Jewish relations. Listening to individual narratives about such interfaith encounters shows the category “Jewish-Muslim relations” to be “saturated by political divisions” (Katz 2015: 326). This is the case because they reveal that the contemporary primacy placed on using the terms “Jews” and “Muslims” as defining categories and boundaries between individuals and communities with a history of immigration to France from North Africa in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century is relatively recent (Katz 2015: 326). Specifically, the lived experiences of co-existence captured by these individual narratives including the sharing in experiences particular to North African culture such as regional cuisine and music challenge fixed notions about relations between Jews and Muslims in France as necessarily and inevitably oppositional (Katz 2015: 10). Hence, relations between individuals belonging to these two religious communities have historically been multivalent. It shows that “while the terms of [interfaith] interaction might be predetermined [by macro-level discourses,] their

meaning was not” (Katz 2015: 316). Both Mandel and Katz’s studies, thus, challenge definitions of “Muslim-Jewish relations.”

Yulia Egorova and Fiaz Ahmed’s ethnographic study of “Jewish-Muslim relations” in the British context also illuminates how these relations and perceptions of the “other” are co-constituted and co-produced by both historical and personal experiences of discrimination (2017: 287). Specifically, it shows that some members of the British Jewish constituency view Muslims with suspicion due to a “prior existing sense of insecurity, combined with exposure to public and mass-media discourses that construct Muslims as a security threat in general, and a threat to Jewish persons and organisations in particular,” whilst many Muslims in Europe, based on their post-colonial experiences, have come to expect discrimination and unlawful prosecution, especially after the event of 9/11 and the London bombings on 7/7 2007 (Egorova and Ahmed 2017: 295). These experiences combined with exposure to wider anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim discourses, for instance regarding the State of Israel, produce mistrust that influences the way in which British Jews and Muslims approach each other as well as inter-communal relations. Additionally, the character of “Muslim-Jewish relations” in Britain is influenced by individual reactions to public discourses that “other” both communities, but position Jews and Muslims differently, placing the latter “at the bottom of the British ‘hierarchy of minorities’” (Egorova and Ahmed 2017: 296). Thus, similar to the contemporary American setting, an unequal power dynamic exists between Jewish and Muslim individuals and communities in the British context. Egorova and Ahmed’s case study of “Muslim-Jewish relations” in Britain emphasizes how local conditions define interfaith relations and perceptions of the “other.” More widely, it demonstrates how

expectations and social fears impact inter-communal relations and experiences of belonging to the mainstream society (Egorova and Ahmed 2017: 296).

Overall, Egorova and Ahmed's ethnographic case study of "Jewish-Muslim relations" in Britain together with Mandel and Katz's examinations of such interactions in France highlight the intricate and context-dependent character of interfaith relations. They underscore the importance of taking into account local conditions when examining interfaith and intercommunity relations as well as issues of belonging. Additionally, the complexity showed to define "Jewish-Muslim relations" in both the French and the British settings indicates a need for more studies of interfaith encounters in different settings and between different communities so as to advance knowledge and develop the analytical framework used to examine examples of such.

The scholarship on lived experiences of interfaith and intercommunity engagement examined above illuminates the multifaceted character of "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations." It provides a point of comparison to Daughters of Abraham's formalized interfaith book group approach to engaging with religious diversity. Since my study of the Daughters of Abraham is situated in the post-9/11 American setting, it allows for an illumination of the specific contextual factors that set the terms for the ways in which the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Daughters members relate to each other. It, thus, adds to the scholarship on interfaith relations as they have played out in France and Britain. Additionally, my study brings out an important and often neglected dimension by focusing on women's particular experiences with interreligious dialogue. Finally, my study concerns a particular kind of interreligious encounter that is more formal in character to the lived experiences of interfaith and intercommunity interactions examined by Mandel, Katz, Egorova and

Ahmed (as well as Brodtkin, Waxman, Kahn-Harris, and Özyürek) in the sense that members of the Daughters of Abraham have all actively chosen to engage with their religious “others” at monthly book group meetings. My ethnographic case study of the Daughters of Abraham is, thus, situated within this recent body of literature on interfaith and intercommunity relations as they pertain to encounters between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. It responds to Katz’s contention that illuminating the constructedness of interfaith relations and the variety in individual negotiations of such is not only important for advancing knowledge about interreligious dynamics, but also essential for complicating and developing the analytical framework used to examine such relations (2015: 2).

***The History of Formalized Interfaith Dialogue Between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Community Leaders and Theologians***

Following the exploration of scholarship on lived experiences with interfaith and intercommunity relations between members of the “Abrahamic religions,” in this final section, I situate the Daughters of Abraham within the history of formalized interfaith dialogue based on theological knowledge. This brief examination of the history of theological exchanges as it pertains to “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations,” notably in the American context, enables understanding of the dialogue model from which the Daughters of Abraham differentiates itself in its self-representation as a women’s interfaith book group.

Dialogue between Jewish and Christian theologians and religious leaders tentatively began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with American Protestants initiating the

earliest attempt at improving Jewish-Christian community relations (Ariel 2013: 205-6). However, this early dialogue was set up to fail because of the Protestant triumphalist vision of Christianity as destined to become the world's all-encompassing religion by way of mission. Consequently, Christian missionaries attempted to evangelize Jews, which caused great resentment in the Jewish community at large that perceived the Christian missionary impulse as a manifestation of contempt towards Judaism. Indeed, some Jewish leaders responded with a similar triumphalist vision of Judaism, thus hindering any constructive dialogue until the aftermath of the First World War (Ariel 2013: 207).

The horrors of WWI dismantled notions of a progressive millennial triumphalist religion. It stirred American Protestants, Catholics, and Jews to consider each other's religions as being of equal worth. In particular, the rise in radical ethnic hatred in the 1920-40s prompted more systematic dialogue and interfaith activities. An example is the "Committee on Good Will" (1924), which aimed to combat hate groups and crimes of which religious groups were often the target (Ariel 2013: 208). Despite such cooperation, only a few Christian theologians like John Haynes Holmes and Reinhold Niebuhr propagated the recognition of Judaism as a legitimate religion. Until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, mainstream Christianity taught that Jews lost their covenant with God when they rejected Jesus as their Messiah; from then onwards, God's promises to Israel belonged to the Christian Church (Ariel 2013: 209-10). It took the horrors of WWII, notably the Holocaust, for Protestants to accept Holmes and Niebuhr's minority view as mainstream teaching (Ariel 2013: 210).

From 1945 onwards, dialogue between Christian and Jewish community leaders and theologians is intimately tied to the Holocaust. Following this tragedy that witnessed the murder of more than six million Jews, a need amongst Christians living

in Europe and North America was felt to reject antisemitism and morally condemn this genocide (Holtschneider 2001: 26). The Church recognized the immensity of the “burden of guilt” that it carried for failing to speak out publicly against the Nazi regime and importantly acknowledged its implicit responsibility for the Holocaust due to its “teaching of contempt” for Jews and Judaism (Kessler et al. 2002: 3).

Accordingly, the Holocaust engendered a Christian theological soul-searching that occasioned a reexamination and repudiation of all sources condemning Judaism (Kessler et al. 2002: 3). Specifically, antisemitism was denounced, missionary strategies were re-examined, teachings on deicide were revised, and interfaith dialogue was encouraged (Berger 1990: 328).

With this, North America quickly became the center of Jewish-Christian dialogue. Still, Britain was an important player in terms of improving Jewish-Christian dialogue because of the creation of “The Council of Christians and Jews” (CCJ) in 1942. The British CCJ inspired the creation of additional European branches, which all came together in 1947 at the first conference of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ). This conference was crucial for the re-evaluation of problematic Christian theological representations of Jews because guidelines were constituted that made changes to such; for instance, Christian theologians limited the culpability of Jews in the death of Jesus and indicated the Jewish origins of Christianity (Holtschneider 2001: 26). The overarching outcome was a theological proclamation of a “Judeo-Christian tradition,” which meant that Christians assumed a “common spiritual heritage” defined by the Covenant initially made between God and Jews and later between God and Christians (Holtschneider 2001: 29). This theological shift in thinking, thus, made Christianity dependent on Judaism and, therefore, represented Jews more favorably.

These reassessments of Christian theology amplified expectations of “theological reciprocity” from Jewish theologians to continue the dialogue (Berger 1990: 332). The Jewish statement “*Dabru Emet*” (Speak the Truth) issued in 2000 arguably meets this expectation. *Dabru Emet* is the first detailed modern cross-denominational Jewish statement about Christianity and the only existing document that expresses Jewish contemplation of contemporary Christian thought, including the developments made in terms of Christianity’s representation of Judaism (Kessler et al. 2002: 6). It calls upon the Jewish community at large to realize that Christian attitudes towards Judaism have changed considerably, and that Jews should adjust their approach towards Christians accordingly (Ariel 2013: 220). Thus, *Dabru Emet* can be considered a milestone in Jewish-Christian relations on an intellectual as well as community level (Kessler et al. 2002: 6).

Contrary to Christian teachings on the New Testament as the fulfillment of the earlier – Jewish – scriptural tradition within which and to which it speaks, Islam proclaims the Qur’an to be God’s final revelation independent from the Christian scripture (Madigan 2013: 244-5). In fact, the Islamic tradition presumes that the similarities found between the Bible and the Qur’an will prompt Christians to recognize the truth of Islam and subsequently convert. As a result, Christian-Muslim dialogue has historically been polemical with challenges made to each other’s theological commitments, ethics, and practice (Madigan 2013: 245). A key dilemma posed by Christians theologians is: how can one engage with a person who believes the Qur’an to be the Word of God when they themselves believe Jesus Christ is God’s Word? (Madigan 2013: 252-3). In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the Roman Catholic Church, nevertheless, began to encourage interfaith exchanges (Swidler 2013: 7). *Nostra Aetate* (Declaration of the Church to Non-

Christian Religions) is the crucial document to consider in this connection. *Nostra Aetate* recognizes the true and holy character of other religions and urges Catholics to enter into dialogue and cooperation with non-Catholics. The Vatican supported institutionally by creating secretariats for interfaith dialogue (Swidler 2013: 7-8). Moreover, it occasioned a shift in teachings at Catholic seminaries that went from encouraging proselytism to emphasizing interreligious dialogue with Muslims (Madigan 2013: 250-1).

Protestant-Muslim relations also developed from the late 1960s beginning with the World Council of Churches (WCC) and Muslims convening in Cartigny, Switzerland in 1968. Twenty-two religious leaders agreed on an end-statement that stressed the need for Christian-Muslim dialogue (Braybrooke 1980: 143). Annual meetings with an increasing number of participants have since followed, occasioning collaborations on social issues (Braybrooke 1980: 143-5). Another more recent initiative is the Archbishop of Canterbury's "Building Bridges" seminar that has engaged Muslim and Christian scholars engage in scriptural reasoning since 2002 (Berkley Center 2016b).

The 21<sup>st</sup> century sees Muslim leaders and academics begin to take some control of this dialogue with Christians. In 2007, 138 Muslim scholars and religious leaders from across the world issued the public letter, "A Common Word Between Us," inviting Christian leaders and scholars to join them in dialogue (Swidler 2013: 9). This letter has inspired other interfaith events, for example King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia launched a World Conference on Dialogue in 2008 and established the "King Abdullah Center for the Study of Contemporary Islam and the Dialogue of Civilizations" at Imam University, Riyadh (Swidler 2013: 9-10). Thereby, King Abdullah additionally signaled the political use of interreligious dialogue.

In the American context, the inclusion of representatives from the Muslim community in the established Jewish-Christian dialogue did not occur before the late 1960s (Firestone 2013: 228). This exclusion was in large part due to the relatively low Muslim population and concomitant public invisibility (Firestone 2013: 228-9). This situation changed with the increase in Muslim immigration occasioned by the Immigration and Nationality Act (1965) that permitted immigration from non-European countries to the U.S. (Firestone 2013: 229). This piece of legislation triggered a significant expansion of the American Muslim community in the late 1960s, which accordingly began to organize community centers, mosques, and local and national organizations like the “Muslim Student Association” (MSA). The umbrella organization “Islamic Society of North America” (ISNA) was founded in 1982 followed by two advocacy and public policy organizations, “Muslim Public Affairs Council” (MPAC) in 1986 and “the Council on American-Islamic Relations” (CAIR) in 1994. Through its organizational efforts, the American Muslim community positioned itself to support its internal growth and development, but also to “project a larger profile in American affairs generally” (Firestone 2013: 230). Consequently, representatives of the American Muslim community were sometimes invited to participate in the established Jewish-Christian dialogue occasioning a forum for religious leaders of these three communities to meet (Firestone 2013: 231). Such meetings brought about *ad hoc* congregational-level initiatives where, for instance, rabbis attempted to initiate contact with their neighboring imam. However, such connections proved difficult because of the lack of trained clergy in American mosques and the limited English language abilities of the Muslim leaders (Firestone 2013: 231).

The level of bilateral contact between Jewish and Muslim communities increased in the 1980s due to the hopeful political developments in Israeli-Palestinian relations occasioned by the 1979 Camp David Accords (Firestone 2013: 231). In the 1980s, the congregational and grassroots levels witnessed a flourishing of many interreligious activities, for instance, interreligious groups promoting peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians developed (Ariel 2006: 340-1). Within the Academy, Jewish, Muslim, and Christian scholars gathered at conferences; dedicated journals to explore interfaith relations; and founded centers concerning the study and enhancement of interreligious dialogue (Firestone 2013: 231). Finally, as examined earlier in this chapter, September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 was a turning point in prompting interfaith exchanges between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim individuals and communities, which involved an upsurge in formalized dialogue between theologians and religious community leaders.

***Conclusion: Situating the Daughters of Abraham Interfaith Book Groups within the History of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations”***

This chapter has situated the Daughters of Abraham’s interfaith encounter within the broad theoretical field of interfaith and intercommunity relations as they pertain to the “Abrahamic religions” by examining examples of lived experiences of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” in various settings. Moreover, it examined the history of interreligious dialogue between theologians and religious leaders because the Daughters of Abraham defines itself in relation to this model for interfaith dialogue based on theological knowledge. It situated the Daughters of Abraham as a women’s interreligious encounter in relation to the recent history of interfaith

exchanges between Jewish, Christian, and Muslim feminist theologians too. Finally, this chapter situated the Daughters of Abraham within the group's contemporary American context, where since the tragic event of 9/11, dialogue has become a primary format for "Jewish-Christian-Muslim encounters." These examinations elucidated the influence of sociopolitical contextual issues for the changing and multivalent character of "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations," irrespective of the forum or format of such engagement. It emphasizes interfaith and intercommunity relations as highly situational. Thus, this chapter has underscored that no singular definition can be applied to what constitutes "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations," neither as a practice nor as an analytical framework because such interfaith and intercommunity engagements involve endless kinds of objectives, settings, and participants.

The next chapter continues to provide the context for the identification negotiations taking place as a result of participating in the Daughters of Abraham by examining the developing presence and history of relations between the Jewish, Muslim, and Christian communities in the Daughters' local geographical setting: Boston, Massachusetts. It elucidates the contextual parameters that set the conditions for this particular interfaith encounter. Specifically, it clarifies relations, statuses, and lived experiences of identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim within the Greater Boston Area as entangled in issues of religion, ethnicity, and race.

## **CHAPTER 2: Embracing of Religious and Ethnic Diversity?**

### **Changing Experiences, Statuses, and Relations Between the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Communities in Boston, Massachusetts, USA**

When you walk into a Daughters meeting, the multi-religious and multi-ethnic makeup of this gathering of women is visibly apparent. If one extrapolates from the visual cues – necklaces with crosses, *Hamsa* symbols, *sarees*, different skin colors – a simple guess would be that this group is located in a multicultural setting. A calculated deduction would be that that context is the United States of America, known to be a nation of immigrants. To a great extent, Daughters of Abraham’s diverse demography resembles that of the United States in general. The religious diversity prompts other demographic differences. Irrespective of the exact Daughters subgroup, you will encounter a multi-ethnic group. Whilst the majority of the Jewish and Christian members can trace their American ancestry back by centuries, aside from a few white American-born converts, the Muslim members are first-generation immigrants from Pakistan, India, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Morocco, and South Africa. This also means that the Muslim Daughters members are typically younger than the Jewish and Christian women who tend to be retirees, although members span in the ages from 25-85. Whilst the Muslim Daughters as a group are ethnically diverse, aside from one Jewish woman identifying as black and two Christian members as Latina, the Jewish women are Ashkenazim and the Christian members are Caucasian. In terms of religious practice, the majority of the Jewish women identify as Reform, and all of them additionally identify as cultural Jews, one of them primarily so. I only learnt of one woman identifying as Orthodox Jewish and two as Conservative Jews. Most of the Christian members identify as Protestant or

Episcopalian, but I met four who were Catholic. I also encountered one Baptist member and one Greek Orthodox Christian in the subgroups that I observed. Aside from one Shiite Muslim member whom I interviewed, all of the Muslims whom I met at Daughters subgroup meetings were practicing Sunni Islam.

Irrespective of the particular religious or ethnic affiliation, most of the women are well educated. Groups are usually an eclectic mix of teachers, health professionals, real estate agents, engineers, doctors, academics, theologians, rabbis, psychologists, lawyers, social workers, university students, and journalists. Members, therefore, belong to America's upper-middle social strata. With the exemption of two Daughters members who are still studying, the remaining members are either married or have been previously. I learnt of two same-sex marriages. The majority of the women have children and many have grandchildren too. Thus, the Daughters of Abraham involves women with diverse religious and ethnic backgrounds who, nonetheless, belong to the same socioeconomic category and typically also to a nuclear family setup.

The multiplicity of religious worldviews, ethnicities, and generations found in the Daughters of Abraham speaks to the unique demographic diversity of the Greater Boston Area, which is a result of the nation's founding history and immigration waves. These histories can help explain the ways in which members position themselves in relation to each other in this interfaith encounter because the sociocultural context sets up conditions for individually held ideas about what it means to be "Jewish," "Christian," or "Muslim" and, therefore, influences the ways in which such identities are performed as well as the approach taken to the "other."

With a view to situating the religious and ethnic demography of the Daughters of Abraham in its immediate environment, this chapter examines the developing

presence of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities to the Daughters' local geographical setting: the city of Boston. Boston is the capital of the state of Massachusetts, which is part of the New England region that makes up the northeastern part of the United States. This analysis illuminates a multi-religious and multi-ethnic sociocultural setting that enables and perhaps even necessitates the existence of this women's interfaith book group. Accordingly, this chapter provides the context for Daughters of Abraham's intragroup dynamics, inter- and intra-religious dynamics, and its collective self-understanding. All of these key issues will be explored in subsequent chapters. Finally, this chapter highlights that public and personal meanings applied to the categories "Jew," "Christian," and "Muslim" are context-dependent, dynamic, and varied; likewise, relations between individuals or communities identifying with these religious frameworks are fluid, diverse, and situational. I start by examining the founding history and four main waves of immigration to America because it helps contextualize why and how the starting point for individual Daughters members differs in terms of approaching "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations" depending on religious affiliation.

***Immigration Waves and Changing Understandings of "Freedom of Religion"  
Influence Interfaith and Intercommunity Relations in America***

Before focusing on the development of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in Boston, Massachusetts, it is necessary to provide an overview of the founding history of the United States of America because it has influenced the national ethos on religion and ethnicity and, therefore, informed past and present relations between America's Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. Moreover,

this history is directly linked to the New England region where the Daughters of Abraham is situated.

The founding history of America as a nation is connected to both Protestantism and the ideal of “freedom of religion.” This history has produced two conflicting views of the practice of religion in America. From the onset, the United States was considered a “haven of religious freedom,” a country accepting of all religions (Lambert 2003: 1). Simultaneously, however, a conflicting vision of America as a Christian nation exists (Lambert 2003:1). These opposing positions have caused a constant tension from the writing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776 until present-day where this cultural war is fought out on the political stage. This tension has informed the development of America’s religious communities historically and the different social standings of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in the contemporary context. Explicitly, this tension informed American immigration policies for centuries. It serves to explain the discrimination of specific ethnic groups and so also the relative exclusion of certain religious traditions from the U.S.

The root of this paradox lies in the first settlers’ ideas about their new country. Specifically, the founding of the United States is intimately linked to Christianity because the nation’s first settlers, the New England Puritans, were Protestants fleeing religious persecution in England where the Anglican tradition was enforced by the state. Arriving in Massachusetts, Daughters of Abraham’s local setting, from the year 1620 into the 1640s, the first settlers viewed their new home as a place where they were finally “free” to practice their particular type of Christianity. Adherence to any religious tradition was permitted, but Christianity and Protestantism in particular, held a privileged social status; for instance, one had to be Christian, and preferably Puritan,

to hold a governmental position (Lambert 2003: 1-2). The concept of “freedom of religion,” then, meant being able to practice the religion of one’s choosing.

150 years later, at the time of the writing of the Declaration of Independence (1776), the concept of religious freedom had changed. The gradual breaks with the Old World together with Britain’s disinterest in its American colonies occasioned the War of Independence (1775-1783), which was to have a defining influence on religious life in America because the colonists defeated the British government. This victory substantiated the implementation of the Declaration of Independence that officially founded the United States of America. In this period Protestantism held a near monopoly. Particularly English-speaking Protestants played the most visible role in the American Revolution and subsequently in forming a national American identity (Marty 2006: 497).

Whilst the American Constitution (1787) avoided the problem of religion by silencing it – a problem resulting from the multitude of competing religious sects present in Colonial America who were unable to agree on a common understanding of religion – the Bill of Rights (1789) addresses this issue (Marty 2006: 510-14).<sup>25</sup> The First Amendment provides, “that Congress make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise” (The Bill of Rights Institute 2017). Aside from Christianity, a critical inspiration for the leaders of the American Revolution and drafters of the American Constitution known as “The Founding Fathers” was the Enlightenment, notably its emphasis on individual reason as critical to understanding the world. Consequently, The Founding Fathers trusted all individuals to arrive at the

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<sup>25</sup> The fourth president of the United States, James Madison, introduced ten amendments to the American Constitution at the First Congress. These amendments are known as The Bill of Rights (1789). The document is a crucial addition to the American Constitution because it contains basic rights like freedom of religion, which are fundamental to the national self-understanding. The complete Bill of Rights can be found on the website of the Bill Of Rights Institute: <https://www.billofrightsinstitute.org/founding-documents/bill-of-rights/> (Accessed: 28/01/2017).

religion that seemed “true” to them by way of reasoning. It is this sentiment that informs the ideal of “freedom of religion” outlined in the Bill of Rights (1789).

From the time that elapsed between the New England Puritans and The Founding Fathers, the meaning of freedom in the concept “freedom of religion,” then, changed from implying freedom to practice religion to the freedom of individual reasoning to find one’s “true” religion (Lambert 2003: 3). In contrast to the European societies left behind, in accordance with the First Amendment, a separation of church and state exists, and the United States has no official religion. The “freedom of religion” protected by the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights (1789) is, therefore, a relative freedom, which helps explain the contemporary multi-religious and multi-ethnic composition of the United States of America.

Whilst the founding documents of the United States legally legitimized the creation of a religiously diverse nation, the practical reason for America’s multi-religious and multi-ethnic composition lies in its history of being a nation of immigrants. Since Colonial times, four massive waves of voluntary migration to the U.S. have taken place. These have all been characterized by a specific religious and ethnic makeup, which to a significant degree were all informed by national immigration laws that were repeatedly altered depending on the level of racism found in American society. Accordingly, the precise composition of America’s population has been repeatedly reconfigured.

From the beginnings of Colonial America to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, mainly white Protestants from Northwestern Europe immigrated to the United States and the New England region in particular. The country’s immigration policy was liberal because the country was perceived to be rich in resources and, therefore, limitless in its potential as long as enough people took advantage of these opportunities (Gerber

2011: 17). Nevertheless, the 1790 “Naturalization Act” prescribed that only whites could become full citizens. The second massive wave of immigration to the U.S. occurred in the 1840-50s when millions of mainly Roman Catholic Europeans, but also many German Jews, came in search of a better life and material security; many of whom settled on America’s East coast (Gerber 2011: 2; 20). The third wave took place from the late 1890s until WWI during America’s transition from a rural agrarian society to an urban industrial nation (Gerber 2011: 2). This saw more Catholics arrive along with Jews and Orthodox Christians from Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe (Gerber 2011: 35). This massive influx of non-Protestants caused worries amongst the established Protestant majority who feared that the new religious groups would be incapable of cultural assimilation (Gerber 2011: 36). The “Emergency Quota Act” and the “Johnson-Reed Act” put in place between 1921-24 express this fear. These laws curtailed European immigration through national quotas and created a hierarchy of people divided according to religion and ethnicity. As a result, new immigrants from Protestant-dominated Northern and Western Europe were given preference over immigrants from the Catholic-dominated Southern and Eastern Europe (Gerber 2011: 36-7). In total, fifty million Europeans had arrived in America by 1920.

The national quota system meant that America evolved from being a nation that welcomed immigrants to one that had a “carefully, constructed system that controlled and prioritized potential entrants largely based on race” (Gerber 2011: 2; 43). Seeing as different ethnic groups primarily belong to specific religious traditions, the curbed immigration of particular ethnicities also excluded the proliferation of certain religious traditions in the U.S. like Islam. Not before the 1965 “Immigration and Nationality Act” was the system of national origins abolished, and with it, the national discrimination of potential immigrants (King 2002: 294-7). Social changes

largely brought about by the Civil Rights Movement engendered this law, which has changed America's contemporary religious and ethnic character (Gerber 2011: 12). Before the 1965 legislation, the majority of America's population originated from Europe, Protestantism held an undisputed privileged place in society, and a majority of Americans identified as Christians. The 1965 law greatly diversified the national origins and religious affiliations of the American general public because it rapidly increased the total number of immigrants to the U.S. Since 1965, immigration has mainly come from Muslim-dominated countries, Asia, and Catholic-dominated Latin America (Gerber 2011: 53). Accordingly, America's contemporary religious and ethnic landscape is more multifaceted than it has ever been. This most recent influx of immigrants is referred to as the fourth wave.

Religious traditions are not considered equal in the American context, though. A result of the nation's founding history is that white Protestants originating from Northern and Western Europe have held a privileged place in American society for centuries.<sup>26</sup> "There has long been a *sub rosa* association that made 'white Christian American' the baseline, default cultural understanding of this nation [U.S.]" (Williams 2013: 243).<sup>27</sup> Consequently, its founding history forms the basis for understanding America's social hierarchy as tied up with religion and ethnicity, which informs the positions available in interreligious encounters like the Daughters of Abraham.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Chapter 7 explains how publically held ideas about what it means to be "American" influence the Daughters' interfaith relations; explicitly, it examines a fundamental interreligious dynamic in the Daughters of Abraham that positions Muslims as "other" vis-à-vis Jews and Christians who are considered the norm partly due to their perceived "whiteness."

<sup>27</sup> Please refer to chapter 1 for an examination of how the changing public impression of the perceived "whiteness" of Jews has impacted the social standing of the American Jewish community.

<sup>28</sup> In fact, a recent survey done by Pew Research Center shows that the notion that being American equals being Christian is still a prevalent national discourse, especially amongst individuals on the political right (Stokes 2017). Explicitly, forty-three percent of the surveyed individuals who vote Republican prescribe to this idea and twenty-nine percent of Democrats do (Stokes 2017). Further

A distinction between “religious diversity” and “religious pluralism” helps clarify the sociocultural and political undercurrents of America’s religious landscape that informs the character of informal and formalized interfaith encounters. The sociologist James Beckford usefully defines religious diversity as “the co-existence of several distinct religious collectivities in a country” (2003: 79). Accordingly, religious diversity is a social phenomenon, which the U.S. epitomizes through its multi-religious demography. Religious pluralism, on the other hand, according to Beckford, is an ideological belief in the inherent goodness of religious diversity, especially if the interrelations between different religious communities are harmonious (2003: 79). Religious diversity is, thus, a “positive value” within the ideology of religious pluralism (Beckford 2003: 80). Furthermore, an essential component of religious pluralism is the individual’s freedom to choose which religion or none one wishes to practice out of the countless available options. This ideology, therefore, clashes with the idea of America as a Christian nation (Beckford 2003: 79). With its aim of interreligious understanding and peaceful coexistence, the Daughters of Abraham is without question an organization that subscribes to the religious pluralist paradigm. America’s religious diversity has perhaps necessitated and undoubtedly enabled the founding of the Daughters of Abraham, but its character is religious pluralist.

Following this brief examination of America’s founding history in relation to the waves of immigration that saw Christians, Jews, and Muslims arrive under different conditions and at different times to the United States, the next section turns its attention to the evolving presence of various Christian, Jewish, and Muslim communities in Boston, Massachusetts as well as local initiatives that actively seek to connect members from these and other religious traditions. It also points to the

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information about this survey can be found online: <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/02/01/what-it-takes-to-truly-be-one-of-us/> (Accessed: 19/06/2017).

increasing religious and ethnic diversification of the city of Boston in recent decades; thus, illustrating the wide range of religious and ethnic groups found outside the bounded space of the Daughters of Abraham. This analysis serves to situate Daughters of Abraham's religious demography within the group's local sociocultural setting and additionally elucidates the dynamic development of interfaith and intercommunity relations in this area.

***The Developing Presence of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim Communities in Boston, Massachusetts***

The religious and social landscape of Boston, Massachusetts has developed dynamically according to the four waves of immigration to America that have been defined by different ethnic and religious makeups. Boston was founded in 1630 and its 645,000 inhabitants are extremely proud of their local history because of its centrality to the founding of the United States. In fact, the city is known for its "Freedom Trail," a three-mile urban hike leading visitors through the city's rich connections to the American Revolutionary War period (Harvard Pluralism Project 2017a). Moreover, Massachusetts is one of the original thirteen colonies and is known for being the landing place of the first settlers who came to America with the Mayflower (History.com 2009). Countless people from around the world have since followed in their footsteps. Thus, the geography of the Daughters of Abraham speaks to the general history of America as an immigrant nation that has seen the arrival of numerous religious communities. With only nineteen percent of the total American population, New England – the North Eastern part of America where Boston is located – has the fewest inhabitants of any region in the country. Nevertheless, it is

home to the largest concentration of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants as well as the second biggest Muslim community (Pew Forum 2014c). Thus, it provides a pertinent location for exploring interreligious encounters.

Adding to this pertinence is the fact that initiatives promoting interreligious understanding have been in existence in Boston for decades, long before September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 that engendered a great flourishing of interfaith initiatives throughout America. Boston's oldest interfaith alliance, "Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries" (CMM) was founded in 1966 to address poverty, housing, and racial justice in the city by way of religious communities working together (Harvard Pluralism Project 2017a).<sup>29</sup> Such organized interfaith cooperation was furthered with the founding of the "Greater Boston Interfaith Organization" (GBIO) in 1996 by forty-five clergy and community leaders "to coalesce, train, and organize the communities of Greater Boston across religious, racial, ethnic, class, and neighborhood lines for the public good;" the organization's primary goal is to "develop local leadership and organized power to fight for social justice" (GBIO 2017).<sup>30</sup>

Another long running local interfaith initiative is the "Weston-Wayland Interfaith Action Group" that was begun in 1988 by individuals from the neighborhood's local Christian and Jewish communities who were seeking to counteract rising episodes of antisemitism; these incidents were considered to be an expression of the Weston-Wayland neighborhoods becoming increasingly diverse both in terms of religion and ethnicity (Harvard Pluralism Project 2017g). This grassroots interfaith initiative has grown more religiously diverse and now counts Muslim and Hindu members as well. The mission of the Weston-Wayland Interfaith

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<sup>29</sup> Additional information about the Cooperative Metropolitan Ministries is available online: <http://coopmet.org/about-us/> (Accessed: 19/06/2017).

<sup>30</sup> More information about the GBIO can be found on the organization's website: <http://gbio.org/about-gbio> (Accessed: 30/06/2017).

Action Group is “to build community by developing a better understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of our individual, cultural, and religious differences through education, dialogue, and action” (2017)<sup>31</sup>. It involves a wide array of activities and formats such as film screenings and potlucks, or working together to prevent important school events from taking place on the religious holidays of minority students. In Sudbury, another suburb to Boston, women from one Jewish, one Catholic, and one United Methodist congregation founded the youth program, “Students Together Opposing Prejudice” (S.T.O.P.) in 1991 in response to an antisemitic incident at a local elementary school. The goal was, and continues to be, teaching local students about discrimination and providing them with skills to become “agents of change” in their community (S.T.O.P. 2017). Sudbury’s biggest Muslim community and additional Jewish and Christian congregations have since joined the initiative (S.T.O.P. 2017).<sup>32</sup>

These examples of formalized interfaith and intercommunity relations in Boston demonstrate the various types of interfaith activities taking place in this area; all actively seek to ensure harmonious intercommunity relations between different religious groups. These initiatives were all formed as a result of living in a religiously and ethnically diverse setting. Thus, the examples of the CMM, the GBIO, the Weston-Wayland Interfaith Action Group, and the S.T.O.P. program demonstrate how informal everyday community relations can occasion formalized interfaith encounters between different religious communities and actors. They also indicate that the city of Boston provides a unique setting for interfaith activities. That is, Daughters of Abraham’s local geographical context speaks to the self-selective element of interfaith

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<sup>31</sup> Information about the Weston-Wayland Interfaith Action Group is available online: <http://www.wwiag.org> (Accessed: 05/07/2017).

<sup>32</sup> More information about the S.T.O.P. program can be found on the initiatives official website: <http://stoptheprejudice.net/about-us/> (Accessed: 24/06/2017).

engagement, which is a dimension explored throughout this thesis. Explicitly the state of Massachusetts is generally known as a liberal, progressive, and well-educated part of America.<sup>33</sup> Cambridge, the suburb to Boston where the original Daughters group was founded, encapsulates this spirit with its numerous universities including Harvard University, the oldest higher education institution in the United States. Many of the area's universities also have dedicated interfaith initiatives, for example Wellesley College's Multifaith Center, which is home to educational programs on interfaith understanding, dialogue, and conflict resolution. The Multifaith Center also supports interfaith gatherings between college students belonging to the numerous religious communities represented at the college including Baha'i, Buddhist, Christian (Protestant, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Evangelical), Hindu, Humanist, Jain, Jewish, Muslim, Native American, Indigenous African, Quaker, Sikh, and Unitarian Universalist groups (Wellesley College 2017).<sup>34</sup> Overall, then, the fact that the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups came into existence in Boston, Massachusetts is unsurprising considering the wealth and longstanding history of formalized interfaith activities that take place in this area.

The contemporary generic perception of Massachusetts as a progressive state whose inhabitants hold liberal attitudes to religious diversity has not always characterized the conditions for religious life in this part of America, however. In the 1630s, thousands of America's earliest settlers, the Puritans, arrived in Boston establishing their first "Old South Church" in 1669. This denomination now known as

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<sup>33</sup> Chapter 8 highlights the importance of the liberal sociopolitical attitudes held in Daughters of Abraham's local geographical setting when it comes to negotiating identification in this interfaith encounter. Specifically, it shows how being able to point to perceived shared sociopolitical liberal values and contrasting these to perceived opposite ideals is a key element of the way in which individual members construct and maintain Daughters of Abraham's collective identity.

<sup>34</sup> More information about the Multifaith Center and its activities can be found on Wellesley College's website: <http://www.wellesley.edu/religiouslife/houghton#mdPqCqkcRL4YKz5I.99> (Accessed: 24/06/2017).

the United Church of Christ (UCC) comprises the largest Protestant denomination in Boston (Harvard Pluralism Project 2014). As mentioned, the dominant status of the Anglican state church in England had prevented the Puritans from reforming the social structures of their homeland (Noll 2006: 394). In their new geographical context, the first settlers, therefore, took the opportunity to implement their vision of society, which was based on a combination of personal belief, ecclesiastical purity, and a godly social order (Noll 2006: 397; 400). In other words, they became “the Christian establishment” (Harvard Pluralism Project 2017d). The Puritans considered their migration to America as a “commission from God,” a view that meant pledging themselves to the ideal of pure religious communities or “holy commonwealths” that would be protected as long as piety and morality defined community relations (Corrigam 2003). The Puritans, therefore, restricted religious freedom as much as possible and punished dissidents; in the worst cases, they executed people for being heretics or witches. Jews, Catholics, Baptists, and Quakers were primary targets of the Puritan establishment (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a). Thus, dialogue and cooperation did not characterize the earliest expression of inter-communal and interreligious relations in the Greater Boston Area.

In Massachusetts, the Puritan version of Christianity was later replaced with Congregationalism. This shift was largely due to the Salem witch trials that took place between 1692-3; orchestrated by church authorities, these led to the executions of at least twenty-five people (Corrigam 2003). Following admissions of error by the clergy, their authority was significantly diminished, and so a shift in Christian denominational power could happen. This change was aided by the diversification of religious viewpoints, social stratification, less vigorous piety in the second generation

of Puritan settlers, and frictions that came with the escalation of the Atlantic trade (Corrigam 2003).

Prior to the implementation of the American Constitution with its “freedom of religion” principle, in nine out of the thirteen original colonies, Massachusetts included, citizens paid some kind of church tax, irrespective of whether people identified as Christians or belonged to a church (Marty 2014: 500). However, out of the original thirteen colonies only Massachusetts and Connecticut struggled to accept and implement the First Amendment prescribing religious freedom (Marty 2014: 511). In fact, in Massachusetts, the power of established Congregationalism was so great that Congress and The Founding Fathers debated how to ensure the ratification of the Constitution in this state so as to assure the rights of religious minorities (Marty 2014: 511). For instance, Baptists founded their first church in 1665, but did not witness much growth until the 1740s due to severe persecution. Similarly, the Episcopal Church, today one of the largest Protestant denominations in Boston, started to increase its membership around the time of the implementation of the “freedom of religion” constitutional principle (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a). Thus, until the American Constitution put a stop to such discrimination, interdenominational diversity was not willingly tolerated in Massachusetts and interreligious diversity less so.

Despite initial resistance, Massachusetts eventually implemented the American Constitution, however, which resulted in a dynamic development of Christian communities in Boston. The first Unitarian Church in America was founded in Boston in 1785, and several independent African-American Churches began to emerge at this time too. The Christian Science Church was founded in Boston in 1875, and at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Boston welcomed Lutherans as well as

Eastern and Oriental Orthodox immigrant communities from Greece, Ukraine, the Middle East, Russia, Albania, and Eastern Europe. Recent Orthodox expressions of Christianity include Indian, Ethiopian, and Coptic Churches (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a). In line with a global trend, the fastest growing Protestant community in contemporary Boston is Pentecostalism; the city hosts Brazilian, Hispanic, West Indian, and African-American congregations (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a). Likewise Evangelical and Charismatic churches have experienced a dramatic growth in recent decades. These churches cater mainly to new immigrant communities, for instance the Seventh Day Adventist Church comprises Korean, Cape Verdean, and Hispanic congregations (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a). Moreover, Boston has witnessed a proliferation of ethnic congregations known as “micro-churches” due to their small membership. These “micro-churches” provide a link to the culture of their members’ homeland, emphasized by members worshipping in their native language. The fact that more than twenty languages are now used for Sunday services in the Greater Boston Area demonstrates the great ethnic diversification of the Christian community that followed in the wake of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a).

The most significant development in terms of Boston’s Christian community began in 1788 with the establishment of a church for the initially small Roman Catholic community. The priest, Francis Matignon, arrived in Boston in 1792 to minister to the approximately 100 Catholics scattered across New England and to Native Americans who had been converted by French missionaries (Ryan 2017). The first Catholic cemetery was consecrated in 1818, which was a significant step in the Protestant-dominated Massachusetts; still, members of the Protestant community expressed their hostility towards the more visible Catholic presence, for instance, by

burning effigies of the pontiff every year on the “Pope’s Day” (Ryan 2017). “Pope’s Day” was an American variation of the English “Guy Fawkes Day” that commemorates the failed attempt to blow up Houses of Parliament in 1605 by the Catholic Guy Fawkes who was hoping to rid Britain of Protestant rule, an event known as the “Gunpowder Plot.” In Colonial America, and in Boston especially, this day turned into an “anti-Catholic ritual” (Pollak 2015). This anti-Catholic sentiment continued to inform interdenominational relations between Boston’s two Christian communities in the next centuries.

Nowadays, forty-eight percent of Boston’s 645,000 inhabitants identify as Catholic (Harvard Pluralism Project 2014). The arrival of hundreds of thousands of immigrants fleeing the Irish Potato Famine in the 1840s marks the beginning of the change from a Protestant majority to a Catholic-dominated Boston. Historical census records demonstrate this growth: in 1850 out of Boston’s total population of 136,881, roughly 35,000 were Irish-born; five years later that number had grown to 50,000 (Johnson 2015: 24). The established Protestant community did not take kindly to the relatively sudden change in the city’s religious landscape, though; consequently, an upsurge in religious racism and violence followed in the wake of this mass Catholic influx. Despite being met with religious prejudice, the Irish, nevertheless, settled in Boston building numerous churches including one of America’s biggest cathedrals, the Archdiocese of Boston, in 1875 (Harvard Pluralism Project 2014). The arrival of thousands of Italian immigrants in the latter part of the 1800s along with Portuguese and Eastern European immigrants advanced the Catholic presence in Boston. Since the 1965 Immigration law, immigrants from Puerto Rico, Mexico, Central and South America have increased the diversity of Boston’s Catholic population (Pew Forum 2014a).

The fast growth of the ethnically segregated Catholic communities around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century came to a halt with the national quotas imposed by the 1924 Johnson Reed Act (Harvard Pluralism Project 2014). Boston's Protestant community had been at the forefront of the nativist political organizing advocating for such immigration restrictions. "Powerful currents of anti-Catholicism, antisemitism, and antiradicalism" informed the resentment, hostility, and violence that defined the most common response of native-born Bostonians to the main immigrant groups – Irish and Italian Catholics as well as German, Russian, and Eastern European Jews – who came to settle from the 1830s through the 1920s (Johnson 2015: 37). ). For example, in 1834, angry Protestant laborers ransacked and burned the "Ursuline Convent" in Charlestown demonstrating their dissatisfaction with the influx of Irish Catholic immigrants (Ryan 2017). In fact, the city was host to a large share of job-seeking immigrants during the industrial revolution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that led to consequent economic rivalries (Johnson 2015: 37). Thus, intercommunity relations in Boston have historically been fraught with tension. Whilst such tension might partly be explained as an expression of religious and ethnic discrimination, struggles for power and socioeconomic status appear part of the reason too. As with America's Catholic population in general, Catholics residing in Boston would eventually gain sociocultural and political influence on a par with Protestants as epitomized by the election of J.F. Kennedy – a descendent of Boston's Catholic Irish immigrants (National Park Services 2016).<sup>35</sup>

Overall, the expression of Christianity in Boston has developed from white Puritans holding a near monopoly on religious life to a multi-denominational and ethnically diverse landscape where interdenominational cooperation and activities

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<sup>35</sup> For further information about the history of the Kennedy clan, please refer to the U.S. National Park Services' outline of the Boston-based John Fitzgerald Kennedy's National Historic Site: [https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/presidents/john\\_f\\_kennedy\\_birthplace.html](https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/presidents/john_f_kennedy_birthplace.html) (Accessed: 28/05/2016).

take place regularly (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a). Disagreements on theological and social issues amongst Boston's Christian communities are sought to be overcome by way of ecumenical dialogue, interdenominational cooperation, and collective outreach efforts (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a). For example, the "Massachusetts Council of Churches" brings together Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox religious leaders in dialogue; the "Commission for Christian Unity of the Council" works to overcome theological issues dividing Christian denominations; and many congregations collectively participate in charity events like "Walk for Hunger" (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a). Additionally, partnerships between different churches are becoming increasingly common with varying degrees of interdenominational encounter; some congregations even share worship (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009a).

Some members of Boston's Christian communities also engage in interfaith activities, for example with the Jewish community that is one of Boston's most prominent religious minorities due to the vast immigration from Germany, Russia, Poland, and Lithuania that occurred during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The city is currently home to approximately 200,000 Jews belonging to different strands of Judaism – Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, *Chabad/Lubavitch*, and unaffiliated (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009c). Two recently established congregations reflect a politically progressive attitude amongst parts of Boston's Jewish community. Founded in 1968, "Havurat Shalom" was one of the pioneers in the *Chavurah* movement, which conducts egalitarian services led by laymen. This movement emphasizes social justice and remains unaffiliated with established Jewish denominations. The latest Jewish center is "Mayyim Hayyim," a modern *mikvah* that practices ritual immersion of both women and men; hence, it is

not reserved for Jewish women as prescribed by tradition (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009c).

Aside from being defined by a varied blend of spiritual and ritual functions within a wide range of traditions and outlooks, the Jewish community in present-day Boston is also characterized by its many educational and social functions. The city hosts over 100 Jewish organizations including Jewish advocacy groups, synagogues, and university campus associations that inform the lived experience of contemporary Judaism in this area (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009c). Moreover, multiple Jewish organizations like the “Jewish Community Relations Council” (JCRC), “American Jewish Congress,” and schools like the Jewish-affiliated Brandeis University and Hebrew College promote interdenominational understanding and relations thereby creating a foundation for a more united Jewish community in Boston (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009c). It additionally establishes a basis for interfaith dialogue; for example, the JCRC is a member of the GBIO (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009c). Contemporary Jewish life in Boston is, thus, characterized by religious and ethnic diversity as well as an increasing drive to participate in interfaith activities.

Solomon Franco’s move from New York City to Massachusetts in 1649 marked the beginning Jewish presence in Boston. In 1720, an Italian Jew named Judah Monis settled in Boston. Monis published the first Hebrew grammar guide available in America in 1735 and went on to teach at Harvard, but only after he publicly converted to Christianity (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009c). The fact that Monis had to convert in order to be able to take up a lectureship indicates that the present-day general public acceptance of the American Jewish community, explored in the previous chapter, is relatively recent. It also suggests that an unequal power relation favoring the Protestant majority population and resulting in discrimination of

the city's religious minorities has historically characterized "Jewish-Christian relations" in the Greater Boston Area.

A pertinent example of such religious discrimination is the admission policies imposed in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century looking to exclude Jews from entering the "Ivy League" comprised of eight elite higher education institutions located on America's East coast (Dobbin 2006: 652). Entrance had been based on passing an exam testing academic aptitude, but Harvard, Princeton, Yale, and Columbia University became alarmed at the high number of Jews entering each year, for instance 20-30 percent of Harvard's freshman classes were Jewish. In order to deal with the claimed "Jewish problem," some of the Ivy League institutions, therefore, designed new admission policies meant to exclude Jews (Dobbin 2006: 652). Harvard University tried to impose explicit quotas for Jews; however, it resulted in bad publicity and, moreover, some alumni and faculty did not approve of this expression of antisemitism (Dobbin 2006: 654). Consequently, the exclusion of Jews became a "stealth operation" (Dobbin 2006: 652). For example, beginning in 1910, application forms started asking for the religion of the applicant and his family (Dobbin 2006: 652). Moreover, these higher education institutions began judging applicants on nonacademic criteria like "character" and "leadership" so as to mask the discrimination of religious groups (Dobbin 2006: 654). "Character," however, became the "euphemism for Protestant;" Catholics were also discriminated against institutionally (Dobbin 2006: 654). As the examined history of immigration to Massachusetts showed, the majority population had historically been Protestant. The discriminatory university admissions policies put in place as late as the 1960s demonstrate how the resulting Protestant privilege was institutionally enforced (Dobbin 2006: 652). Unequal power dynamics have, thus,

historically characterized “Jewish-Christian relations” as well as “Protestant-Catholic relations” in the Greater Boston Area.<sup>36</sup>

In Boston, the change from the presence of individuals like Judah Monis and Solomon Franco who happened to be Jews to the formation of a Jewish congregation did not happen before 1843. Boston’s first synagogue, “Temple Ohabei Shalom” was erected in 1852 in Brookline followed by “Temple Israel” in 1854 that was founded by a group of German Jews who broke away from Temple Ohabei Shalom. Both of these congregations have changed from practicing Orthodox to Reform Judaism. Temple Ohabei Shalom has a woman amongst its senior rabbis and now welcome convert Jews, interfaith families, and LGBT individuals and couples. Boston is also home to “Young Israel of Brookline,” one of the largest Orthodox congregations in New England. The “Mishkan Tefila” from 1858 is the oldest Conservative synagogue in Boston. Polish families, who also broke away from Temple Ohabei Shalom to form its own ethnic Jewish community in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood, established it (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009c). The diversification of Boston’s Jewish community in terms of ethnicity and religious practice, then, was largely fueled by immigration that saw more communities created based on country of origin similar to how Christianity in Boston has developed historically.

In fact, ethnic diversity and variety in religious practice have characterized Boston’s Jewish communities from the beginning of their developing presence in this area. In the 1880s, a wave of Jews arrived in Boston fleeing antisemitic laws,

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<sup>36</sup> When considered together with this recent history of institutionally supported religious bias at elite universities, the fact that intercommunity activities such as those examined earlier in this chapter have been viewed as a necessary response to address religious discrimination suggests that interfaith relations in the Greater Boston Area have continued to be influenced by changing public perceptions of religions, ethnicities, and race with resulting shifts in power dynamics. That is, the fact that interfaith initiatives seeking to bring people together across lines of religious difference came into being in Boston as early as 1966 indicates a recognized need for addressing fraught community relations at the time. It highlights the complexity defining past and present lived experiences of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” in the Boston area.

violence, and economic hardship in the Russian Empire that at the time included present-day Russia, Belarus, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine. They increased the Jewish presence in the city that until then had consisted of smaller populations of German and Polish Jews who had arrived in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst the early Jewish community had mainly settled scattered amongst the Protestant majority in the city's affluent South End, the Russian Jewry initially established a community in the poorer North End (Johnson 2015: 25-6). North End's Jewish community divided internally according to local village ties, Yiddish dialect, Hebrew pronunciation, and religious expression; intra-community relations were fuelled by prejudices and, therefore, largely avoided (Wieder 1962: 18). Similarly, Boston's Italian-Catholic immigrants also divided into "regional enclaves" when settling in the city's North and West Ends (Puleo 2007: 68). Thus, Boston's immigrant communities not only divided according to religious and ethnic lines, they also subdivided internally depending on the particular geographical affiliation with their former homelands.

The divisions in Boston's Jewish community were also found on the level of religious practice. Early on, the German Jewish community began practicing a Reform version of Judaism in contrast to the Orthodox tradition practiced by the Jewish immigrants from the Russian Empire. To begin with, North End's Jewish immigrants met in private homes for religious observance. They borrowed Torah scrolls from the established synagogues in the South End before their own "Congregation Beth Israel" opened in 1890 (Wieder 1962: 49). The North End's synagogue practices followed Eastern European patterns with prayers being said in Hebrew rather than English, and prayer books espousing Yiddish translations only (Wieder 1962: 51-2). Small temporary congregations were also formed to cater for different ethnic groups who wished to maintain their cultural specificities during their

religious holiday celebrations (Wieder 1962: 50). However, at the turn of the century, most of the approximately 6,200 Jews living in Boston's North End joined the earliest predominantly German Jewish community in moving to the city's South and West Ends. In fact, by 1920, the North End was ninety percent Italian-Catholic (Johnson 2015: 32). This geographical change encouraged a break away from the ethnically segregated, Orthodox religious practice with the second generation joining the Reform congregations to which the majority of Boston's established German-Jewish population belonged (Wieder 1962: 46-7).

Before the increasing merging of Boston's Jewish communities in the city's South and West End neighborhoods, the city's two main Jewish immigrant communities were viewed differently by non-Jews. A contemporary travel guide describes only the North End as a Jewish "ghetto," but fails to mention the presence of the German Jewry in the South End who lived scattered amongst the Christian majority (Wieder 1962: 19). This difference in the depiction of Boston's Jewish communities implies that the German Jewish population was considered less "other" than the Russian and Eastern European Jewish population living in the North End. This difference in the attitude taken to the religious "other" implies that lived experiences of interfaith and intercommunity relations in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Boston were multiple and diverse. Moreover, such experiences would have depended on the specific religious and ethnic group to which an individual belonged. However, class would also have been an important factor at play in these contrasting perceptions of Boston's Jewish communities. Specifically, whilst the South End, that was initially home to the German-Jewish population, was founded in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century by some wealthy families who wanted to escape the affluent, but by then, overcrowded Beacon Hill neighborhood, the North End was home to poor immigrant

groups, which aside from its Russian and Eastern European Jewish population included Italian, Irish, and Portuguese Catholics (BU Today Staff 2015 & Vadum 2017). The contrasting perceptions of “otherness” of Boston’s two biggest Jewish communities suggests that aside from differences in immigration histories and religious and ethnic identity factors, intercommunity relations in this city have been influenced by socioeconomic status.<sup>37</sup>

Whilst religiously and ethnically segregated communities have characterized Boston’s social landscape, socioeconomic factors have, thus, also informed intercommunity relations in the past and present. In fact, socioeconomic status has defined the shifts in the demographic makeup of Boston’s various neighborhoods. An example is that the affluent South End became one of Boston’s most diverse working-class immigrant neighborhoods in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Jews joined African-Americans as well as Syrian, Armenian, Irish, Italian, and Greek immigrants whilst native-born families retreated to the wealthier Back Bay and Roxbury neighborhoods (Johnson 2015: 33). The same immigrant families eventually “trickled out of the older ethnic core neighborhoods into (...) ‘the zone of emergence’ – the districts where the Americanized second generation first emerged from the older congested immigrant quarters” (Johnson 2015: 33). Boston’s religious and social landscape seems to have become less bounded in more recent times, though. Following WWII, many Jews and Irish Catholics, moved to the suburbs, signifying that their socioeconomic status had changed from working-class to middle-class (Johnson 2014: 35). In the 1960s, Muslim professionals as well as Chinese Americans joined the Christian and Jewish suburban population (Curtis 2010: 88 & Johnson 2014: 35). This religious and ethnic

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<sup>37</sup> Additionally, it complicates the study of interfaith and intercommunity relations by underlining that numerous local conditions inform the lived experiences of such encounters, and hence, that no singular definition capture the intricacy of the categories at play in studying “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations.”

diversity indicates that socioeconomic common denominators can downplay such differences and establish the potential for informal interfaith and intercommunity encounters.

Examining the history of Chinese immigration to Boston develops this impression of the ability of shared socioeconomic status to downplay religious and ethnic difference with the impact on lived experiences of intercommunity relations. The development of Boston's Chinese presence follows the same pattern of socioeconomic advance from working-class to middle-class status as that of the city's Jewish and Catholic communities. Moreover, similar to the ethnically segregated Jewish and Christian communities, the Chinese initially clustered together in Boston's "Chinatown." The first Chinese immigrants came to the Boston area in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to take the place of striking shoe factory workers in North Adams, many of whom later moved to downtown Boston to work on building the Pearl Street Telephone Exchange (Harvard Pluralism Project 2017c). The "Chinese Exclusion Act" barred all Chinese immigration from 1882 until 1965, however (Johnson 2015: 38-9). This law expressed the racism that the Chinese were met with on the local level. For instance, in 1903, fifty federal and local officers raided Boston's Chinatown and arrested 234 people of which fifty were deported (Johnson 2015: 39). Similar to Boston's Jewish community facing antisemitism and its Irish and Italian populations being confronted with anti-Catholic sentiments, nativist attitudes, thus, also prompted discrimination of the city's Chinese population in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Accordingly, a history of discrimination defines the development of several of Boston's religious and ethnic minority communities suggesting that intercommunity relations have been marked by tension in the past. The more recent ethnic and religious diversity defining Boston's middle-class suburbs suggests that

socioeconomic advances might have contributed to improving such relations, at least for parts of the population.

A more recent addition to Boston's religious and social landscape is its Muslim community that has expanded significantly following the 1965 change to immigration laws. Currently, around 70,000 Muslims live in Boston (Shane 2015). Originally composed mostly of African-American converts, the Muslim community now includes American-born converts; self-identified secular Muslims; as well as first, second, and third-generation immigrants from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009b). Boston's first Muslim immigrants came from the, then, Ottoman Empire in the early 1900s. In Worcester, west of Boston, small groups of Sunni and Shia Muslims settled forming an Arabic-speaking enclave together with Druze and Christians who had all immigrated from the same Lebanese village (Curtis 2010: 88). Thus, the Worcester community did not segregate according to religious lines, but emphasized a shared history, culture, and language in establishing an Arabic-speaking immigrant community. In downtown Boston, a predominantly Muslim community formed around Shawmut Avenue. They established coffeehouses and several Arab restaurants initially, but these disappeared with the subsequent move to the suburbs of this early Muslim community (Curtis 2010: 88). Thus, parts of Boston's Muslim community quickly gained middle-class status permitting a move to the wealthier, more ethnically and religiously diverse suburbs. However, some of the first Muslim immigrants also initially settled in lower income neighborhoods previously associated with other immigrant groups, for example many Syrian Muslims settled in the former Chinatown (Curtis 2010: 88).

Boston's contemporary Muslim community is said to have seven "founding families" because these families who came from Lebanon and Syria in the early 1900s seeking work in the shipbuilding industry established the city's first mosque in Quincy, south of Boston, in 1964 (Smith 1999: 60 & Curtis 2010: 89). Before acquiring their own space, the Muslim community in Quincy had prayed and met as a community in local churches, and they also borrowed the, otherwise, Irish-Catholic funeral home (Curtis 2010: 89). Thus, members of the Muslim community reached out to their Christian neighbors, their religious "others," so as to be able to maintain their distinct religious identity.

In 1965, Shakir Mahmoud, an African-American convert to Islam, came to the Quincy mosque to learn more about "orthodox" Islam having grown dissatisfied with the separatist teachings of the "Nation of Islam" that was founded in the 1930s to cater for African-American descendants of slaves (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009b). In 1977, Mahmoud became the imam of "Temple #11" that had previously been led by the Nation of Islam leader, Malcolm X. Under Mahmoud's leadership, "Temple #11" changed its name to "Masjid al-Qur'an" to express a shift in religious practice to the more mainstream Sunni Islam (Curtis 2010: 89). This change in religious practice is likely to have been influenced by the immense growth of Boston's Sunni Muslim population that took place in the 1970s and 1980s when Muslim professionals arrived for work. These newcomers tended to settle in Quincy too, and additional Islamic community centers were built like the "Islamic Center of Boston" in 1979 so as to meet the increasing needs and interests of the growing Muslim population (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009b). Adherents to Shi'a Islam also arrived in this period, especially following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, and various strands established their own worship centers. For instance, the *Ahmadiyya* movement

established a Boston chapter in 1997 after having gathered at local homes for prayers since the 1960s whilst the *Dawoodi Bohra* community that serves over 250 members completed its mosque in North Billerica in 2004 (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009b). Additionally, several Sufi orders have opened branches in Boston (Curtis 2010: 90).

The establishment of national groups to internally support and externally represent the American Muslim community in the late 1960s, like the trans-regional Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) also took place in Boston (Malik 2004: 178). Such groups flourished at the city's numerous universities where the Muslim Student Association (MSA) established Islamic societies that remain active to this day (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009b). During the 1980s, organizations were founded to develop the internal workings of Boston's Muslim community. For example, the "New England Muslim Sisters Association" (NEMSA) was created in 1985 to promote Muslim women's education and economic, political, and social rights whilst the "Islamic Council of New England" (ICNE) that makes decisions on Islamic legal matters, provides materials for Islamic education, and conducts youth programs for Muslims living in New England was founded in 1984 (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009b). In 1999, the "Muslim American Society" established a Boston chapter and has since become a key official representative of Islam in the area including on matters of interfaith and community relations.

The relatively recent development of numerous Islamic organizations in Boston reveals a maturation and diversification of the city's Muslim community. With its rising numbers, the Muslim community needed not only to ensure constructive internal development, but also to externally represent itself to non-Muslims in order to be able to participate in society on an equal footing with the city's more established Christian and Jewish communities. Interreligious dialogue provides such an

opportunity. The “New England Muslim Interfaith Council” runs various community events including film festivals and public lectures. Individual Islamic centers and Muslim student groups also contribute to such community outreach efforts by undertaking and developing various interreligious activities and programs; for example, it has become popular to host interfaith *iftars* inviting non-Muslims to share in the breaking of the fast during *Ramadan* (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009b). Moreover, the “Islamic Council of New England” regularly participates in interfaith dialogue events with the “Massachusetts Council of Churches” and the “National Conference of Christians and Jews” (Harvard Pluralism Project 2009b). Consequently, Boston’s increasingly diverse and numerically significant Muslim population has become progressively visible to non-Muslims.

The characteristics of the population that has immigrated to Boston following the 1965 Immigration Act are more diverse in terms of race, class, nationality, religion, and area of settlement than the previous waves of immigration (Johnson 2015: 16). Moreover, the dominant immigrant groups arriving to Boston in the last fifty years from the Middle East, Africa, China, Brazil, Vietnam, India, El Salvador, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic have come with a broader range of educational backgrounds and skills (Johnson 2015: 16). This reality expresses the “global economic restructuring” following WWII that meant a shift from a manufacturing economy to a service economy in the U.S. (Johnson 2015: 16). Boston, specifically, changed from an industrial city to a “center of the new knowledge economy,” and many of the immigrants arriving in the last fifty years, Boston’s Muslim population included, have been professionals in search of jobs in the service industry (Johnson 2015: 14). The conditions under which these new immigrants arrived were unlike the discrimination faced by the Russian, Eastern European, and German Jews as well as

Irish and Italian Catholics who arrived in Boston during the second and third wave. In fact, from the 1960s to the 1980s, federal and local policies were supportive of immigrants as evidenced by the elimination of discriminatory immigration quotas and policies promoting multiculturalism (Johnson 2015: 17). The fact that Boston's Muslim community expanded so rapidly indicates the supportive sociocultural context contributing to easing processes of assimilation as well as its more professional demographic makeup, meaning that most Muslim immigrants settled in middle-class neighborhoods from the onset. However, the general positive view of immigrants in the American context changed in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. This tragic event occasioned subsequent changes to federal and local policies that reflected an "anti-immigration backlash" (Johnson 2015: 17). In other words, the immigrant experience of Boston's newest communities has changed in recent decades.

This new post-9/11 reality also witnessed Boston's Muslim population being the target of Islamophobia.<sup>38</sup> The Boston Marathon Bombings in 2013 claimed done in the name of Islam augmented the general vilification of the American Muslim community in the Greater Boston Area (Shane 2015). For example, it occasioned recurring newspaper adverts and web postings claiming that Boston's Muslim institutions are led by extremists and terrorist sympathizers (Shane 2015). On a national level, in 2014, the Obama administration chose Boston as one of three cities for the "Countering Violent Extremist" pilot program that looks to find ways to combat recruitment by militants by placing Muslim communities under surveillance (Shane 2015). It caused intra-communal tension, with many community leaders expressing concern that this program could result in additional stigmatization of the

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<sup>38</sup> Please refer to chapter 1 for an examination of the impact of the national tragedy of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 for public perceptions of the American Muslim community and the rise in formalized interfaith and intercommunity initiatives as a result. The impact of the status of American Muslims on interfaith encounters is exemplified in chapter 7 that explores a fundamental interreligious dynamic in the Daughters of Abraham that positions Muslims as "different" to non-Muslim members.

community (Shane 2015). These reactions to Boston's Muslim community in the aftermath of the Marathon Bombings suggest that, as in the past, contextual factors impact perceptions of specific religious and ethnic communities, which in turn influence interfaith and intercommunity relations.

The latest immigration wave to the city of Boston not only developed the presence of its Muslim population; it increased the religious diversity of Daughters of Abraham's local geographical setting at large. Aside from the presence of various Muslim, Jewish, and Christian communities, Boston is home to over ninety Buddhist groups; almost forty Hindu temples; six gurdwaras, practitioners of Afro-Caribbean traditions; small communities of Jains, Zoroastrians, Baha'is, and Daoists; as well as centers for Pagans, Humanists, native American traditions, and New Religions (Harvard Pluralism Project 2017a & 2017b). Most of these religious traditions have been introduced with the fourth wave of recent immigration to Boston (Johnson 2015: 16). For example, the city's first Jain center was founded in 1973; likewise, the first evidence of a Zoroastrian community in Boston can be traced to the 1970s (Harvard Pluralism Project 2017f & 2017h). Other of these religions have gathered strength with the most recent immigration wave, but have been practiced in this area for longer; for instance, in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century there were reports of Hindus participating in Salem's Fourth of July Parade; however, the city's biggest Hindu temple, the "Sri Lakshmi Temple," was not consecrated before 1990 (Harvard Pluralism Project 2017e). Thus, contemporary Boston offers plenty of opportunities for informal and formalized intercommunity relations between numerous religious groups.

The fact that a wealth of different religious communities call Boston "home" indicates that the possibility of lived engagement with religious (and ethnic) diversity is far greater than what is conveyed by the bounded space of the Daughters of

Abraham interfaith encounter. It speaks to the parameters set for inclusion into this interfaith book group that influence group dynamics and perceptions of the “other.” Explicitly, it suggests that the limitation in the Daughters of Abraham to women identifying as “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim” is an artificially constructed restriction that does not reflect the wealth of religious traditions represented in the group’s local setting, but which, nevertheless, has multiple implications for the manner in which individual Daughters members negotiate their identification within and as a group. Moreover, it impacts the “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” navigated in this formalized interfaith encounter. The data chapters to follow elaborate on these issues so as to illuminate how Daughters members negotiate issues of religious difference and sameness with resulting interreligious understanding.

***Conclusion: How Changing Perceptions of Religions and Ethnicities have Impacted Experiences of Being Jewish, Christian, or Muslim in Boston, MA***

To conclude, this chapter has situated Daughters of Abraham’s religious demography within its sociocultural context. It considered the founding history of the United States of America with its relation to the concept of “freedom of religion.” The history of Protestantism holding a near monopoly on religious expression in the state of Massachusetts emphasizes how the contemporary drive to accommodate religious diversity in Daughters of Abraham’s local geographical setting did not always characterize the interfaith and intercommunity relations in this area. The history of the developing presence of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities in Boston, Massachusetts clarified their increasing diversity as well as dynamic interrelations. The exploration of the four main waves of immigration to the U.S. demonstrated how

issues of religion, ethnicity, and race informed changes made to the country's immigration laws. It indicated that intersections of these elements have influenced the public perception and social standing of these three religious communities in the past and present both on a national and local level. This thesis' case study of the Daughters of Abraham underlines that the issues of religion, ethnicity, and race impact individual understandings of what it means to be an American "Jew," "Christian," or "Muslim," and so additionally inform "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations."

Together with chapter 1 that concerned the history of formalized interreligious dialogue, this chapter has served to situate the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups. These chapters have provided the background for the data analysis about the ways in which Daughters members engage with the group's religious diversity, the impact of such participation for their self-understanding and understanding of others, and the power dynamics and boundary drawing done in this interreligious encounter. Chapter 3 commences this analysis by examining Daughters of Abraham's intra-group dynamics as tied up with the two key structural elements of food and books.

## **CHAPTER 3: How Food and Books Create “Safe Space” for Engaging with Religious Diversity**

Upon approaching the nondescript grey wooden house typical for Massachusetts, you would not immediately think that meaningful conversations about religion happen here once a month. This reality becomes even less imaginable as you enter the gated front door and carefully, so as not to miss your step, make your way down a dark narrow staircase towards the low-ceilinged basement where meetings are staged. However, whilst the physical surroundings might not be particularly inviting, the eleven Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women who fill this space for two hours once a month make up for it with their warm demeanor and thought-provoking conversations. These women comprise one of thirty-six Daughters subgroups that get together monthly to discuss books about one or all of the “Abrahamic religions.” Before commencing such conversations, the women congregate around food. In order to accommodate the group’s religious diversity, only food observing *kashrut/halal* dietary rules is permitted. The sight of a table abundantly filled with an assortment of dishes like crisp golden potato latkes, gooey chocolate brownie, pungent cheeses with seeded crackers, and burning hot jalapeño hummus lights up the room. Whilst enjoying the various nibbles, the women catch each other up on activities undertaken since their last meeting, but only after they have greeted each other with a warm embrace signifying the affectionate relations between the Daughters and the sense of belonging that they feel to their interfaith community.

Whilst Daughters of Abraham meetings officially last two hours, members often linger around at the end for 20-30 minutes to finish conversations cut short or to

catch up with people whom they did not manage to talk to during the initial socializing over food. This post-lingering denotes the close bond felt between most of the Daughters. This closeness became especially apparent when I visited a Daughters subgroup that is slowly disintegrating due to cited irreconcilable differences between some of its members. The women did not hug each other at any point during the meeting, and everyone left fifteen minutes early despite the assigned book being ripe for discussion. Moreover, a ubiquitous tension defined the book discussion: members would interrupt each other, make “right and wrong” statements, and generally seek to convince the others that their interpretation of Islam, Christianity, or Judaism was *the* version, even though Daughters of Abraham’s ground rules prohibit proselytizing. This group, then, did not display the open-mindedness and curiosity for learning about the “Abrahamic religions” that Daughters members tend to bring to their interreligious encounter. In other words, this strained atmosphere stands in contrast to the pleasant interpersonal dynamics felt in the eight other Daughters subgroups that I observed. Without fail members would express that time had gone by too quickly and would be deliberately slow to wrap up meetings indicating the warm relations that typically define the intragroup dynamics of these interfaith book groups.

This chapter elucidates Daughters of Abraham’s intragroup dynamics by examining the two key elements of food and books that frame this interreligious encounter. I argue that food and books are used as prompts to encourage engagement with the group’s religious diversity. By providing a guide for engaging with religious diversity, these two structural components help facilitate an impression of the Daughters’ setting as “safe” for exploring different understandings of what it means to identify as Christian, Muslim, or Jewish in contemporary America. This chapter first explores the role of food towards encouraging engagement with religious diversity. It

involves a consideration of how food used as a marker of religious and ethnic differences can spark conflict when such differences are not validated or accommodated in the group. Thereafter, I analyze the role of books in creating a sense of belonging to this interfaith community that provides a foundation for engaging with the group's religious diversity. Together these examinations nuance our understanding of Daughters of Abraham's intragroup dynamics. Before commencing this analysis, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the concept "safe space."

The notion of "safe space" originated within the feminist movement, which used the idea of "safe space" to refer to places where women were certain to be safe from corporeal harm (The Roestone Collective 2014: 1352). I contend that it is possible to extend a slightly altered version of this notion to interfaith spaces where individuals are revealing aspects of their religious identities. In order to share such pertinent pieces of their self-understanding, participants must trust that no one will harm them, not only in a physical sense, but moreover in an emotional sense. Space is contextually embedded, and safe spaces should, therefore, "be understood through the relations that produce them" (The Roestone Collective 2014: 1360-61). In the Daughters of Abraham, a sense of safety is created by repeatedly gathering over food and books. This structure provides a guide for engaging with religious diversity. It generates trust in the format for this interreligious encounter, which produces "safe space." Moreover, Daughters members get to know each other when they gather over food and books, which gradually builds trust and close relationships adding to this sentiment.

According to The Roestone Collective, the paradoxical nature of "safe space" is that it is simultaneously inclusive and exclusive, safe and unsafe (2014: 1352). This

appears to be the sentiment behind Laura’s answer when asked whether she meets up with members outside her Daughters meetings,

No, no, no! That, I think would change the dynamic. I really do. Unless it was like another Daughters chapter meeting or something (...) I’ve always felt that meetings outside meetings are dangerous because then the balance isn’t there. Somebody knows something more about something or someone’s life than others do.

Undesignated Daughters spaces are deemed “dangerous” because they do not provide a guide for engaging with religious diversity in contrast to the Daughters space that is clearly demarcated through the repeated gathering over food and books. Meeting outside the bounded context of Daughters meetings, then, might upset intragroup dynamics. It also risks hurting members’ self-understandings and understandings of the “other,” which are continuously developed in Daughters of Abraham’s “safe” interfaith setting. Thus, the clearly delineated framework for engaging with religious diversity provides “safe space” at Daughters meetings. The following section considers the role of food for prompting such engagement in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups.

### ***Using Food to Guide Engagement with Religious Diversity***

Food is a way that we show our love for each other. What kind of food people bring is not really that important. What matters is that once a month we all make an effort to bring something for us to enjoy together because that shows how much we all care for each other and for our group (Grace, Christian group leader).

The Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups come together over food. Grace expressed how important the shared eating practice is for Daughters of Abraham’s

intragroup dynamics whilst we were en route to one of her monthly subgroup meetings. Grace, a retired teacher, is someone who will consistently arrange or show up to community events that support a good cause. Any chance that she gets to live out her Christian understanding of God as love, she takes. The Daughters of Abraham is one such opportunity for her, and food is one of the ways in which she expresses her care for others. Taking up the backseat of her car that Thursday was a bag with cutlery and napkins, a second bag with non-alcoholic beverages, and crucially, a cooler filled with carefully selected food items – deviled eggs, vegan “crab” salad, an assortment of crackers and vegetarian spreads – that Grace had spent a significant part of the morning preparing. In order to comply with Daughters of Abraham’s regulations on permissible foods, members tend to bring vegetarian dishes like those Grace had opted for that month. Another strategy is to bring *kosher* certified food items, which are readily available in American supermarkets.<sup>39</sup>

Generally, the food served at Daughters meetings is not overly elaborate. As the majority of subgroup meetings take place between 7-9pm, most members will have eaten dinner beforehand so the need for food is not particularly great and is chosen accordingly. The ground rules concerning permissible foods also influence food choices, since the extent to which originality and creativity can prevail when it comes to vegetarian finger foods is limited. A typical assortment consists of variations of hummus with carrots, grapes, cheese, trail mix, and cake of some sort. It is

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<sup>39</sup> Newly established Daughters groups are provided with a document explaining the religiously based dietary laws to be adhered to in this interfaith book group. Aside from that initial explanation, though, members are not taught about religious food rules, and I did not experience group conversations about these either. Perhaps this reality has to do with the fact that the majority of the Jewish members identify as Reform and, therefore, do not keep *kosher*. Moreover, the Muslim dietary rules banning alcohol and pork and requiring meat to be *halal* are easily understood. Instead, it appears a “learning by doing” takes place concerning permissible/impermissible food items. Moreover, religious dietary laws can emphasize difference, but as an organization the Daughters of Abraham stresses similarities between the “Abrahamic religions.” This emphasis, then, might also help explain the limited education provided about food rules in the group.

interesting that food is available at all considering the timing of meetings. Clearly, it is not the basic need for survival that the food fulfills in this connection. Rather, the food plays a crucial role in bringing members together in a shared activity. A running joke in many groups is, “if all else fails, there will be hummus.” Through a shared understanding of the workings of Daughters meetings, this joke expresses a sense of belonging to this interfaith community. It elucidates that the shared eating practice connects members and, therefore, can support the formation and sustenance of interreligious relations. Thus, the social dimension arising from food being available at Daughters meetings is what matters, not the kind of food served, or even the fact that members might not be particularly hungry.

But what is so distinctive about food? Could other shared practices not serve exactly the same purposes of building community and connecting individuals across religious divides? Maybe. However, I would argue that food has a unique ability to bring together individuals because food is central to every human being, to every culture, to every religion. The sharing of a meal is an activity that connects people in all parts of the world. Everyone has memories of particularly enjoyable meals and those less so. Food, then, is an important social category that can facilitate belonging. At its most basic, food is essential for survival. On the other end of the scale, the sharing of food expresses hospitality, generosity, and care for others. By expressing a basic need, food can establish a sense of common ground. Such a display of commonality is vital in interreligious encounters because it can downplay ideas about religious “others” as wholly different. Because the sharing of food nourishes the individual, not simply with basic fuel for survival, but with a social dimension, a collective eating practice is a means to prompt engagement with religious diversity.

In fact, interreligious relations are often built and shaped around a collective eating practice. Examples at the national level are the annual hosting of a Passover *Seder* at The White House (Nosanchuk 2015) and its recurring *Iftar* dinner celebrating the end of Ramadan (Brayton 2015). Scholars have even provided guidelines on interfaith celebrations explaining the roles that food can play at such events. For example, in advising organizers of interfaith gatherings to serve vegetarian dishes, Patrice Brodeur writes that it is essential to acknowledge that food “is one of the most powerful symbols to which all human beings must relate in order to survive” (1997: 563). Accordingly, “special guidelines need to be followed” in order to avoid food becoming a divisive factor rather than a unifier when used “as a social postscript to an interfaith event” (Brodeur 1997: 563). Thus, consciously using food to include rather than exclude is stressed, which simultaneously highlights that food can be used for both of these purposes.

The use of food as a tool for building relationships and gluing together a community is also found within all three of the “Abrahamic religions.” Whether Ramadan, Easter, or Passover; Muslim, Christian, and Jewish holidays are associated with particular dishes. Every Friday, Jews gather around the Sabbath meal. The central ritual in Christianity, the Eucharist, uses bread and wine to depict the body and blood of Christ meaning Christian doctrine is nourished by food. Fasting, moreover, is a basic characteristic of all three “Abrahamic religions.” These few examples not only demonstrate that food is an important feature in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but imply that food can connect religious practitioners by serving as a reminder of their particular religious worldview and, by extension, of that which they are not. Similarly, the sharing of food in formalized interreligious encounters like the Daughters of Abraham can work to establish a sense of community. It gives participants a sense of

what they share by coming together at such repeated interfaith meetings as captured by the running joke about hummus. By extension, it illuminates how, as a group, they differ from outsiders.

To be clear, food creates community due to the relational nature of a shared practice and because food can evoke a sense of belonging. Writing about the role of the ubiquitous food in American Protestant congregations, Daniel Sack states, “while the actual food is important, it is eating that gives food meaning. Around the Communion table, bread and wine become a connection to God. In the social hall, coffee becomes community. In the soup kitchen, rice and beans become hospitality” (2000: 2). Thus, the act of sharing food imbues meanings to a social or religious activity, and thereby, creates sentiments of belonging to a given community. Further recognizing the importance of a shared eating practice for community building, Graham Harvey ascertains, “these seemingly mundane acts of consumption are integral to establishing and reinforcing community (...) by all these acts of sharing together people become a congregation or a community. They also become distinct from groups with whom they do not share” (2015: 38). Thus, sharing food signifies inclusion in a community as well as the exclusion of others irrespective of whether such sharing takes place within a specific religious community or an interfaith group like the Daughters of Abraham. Consequently, it can work to establish a sense of belonging to a group as well as imbuing it with a sense of distinctiveness, which shapes and nourishes a group’s identity. Whilst the Daughters of Abraham defines itself as an interfaith book group with a consequent emphasis on book discussions, it makes sense, then, that a central element of meetings is the initial half-hour dedicated to socializing over food.

The Daughters chapters take various approaches to ensuring that food is available at meetings. Most groups make up a food rota assigning this task to individuals or small clusters of members, but in some groups all participants strive to bring something to share. Meetings that take place around religious holidays commonly see members bring food associated with such events. For instance, Aida brought “Noah’s pudding” – a Turkish dessert served on the day of *Ashura* to commemorate the landing of Noah’s ark – to one of group D’s autumn meetings. Next to the dessert she had left copies of the recipe, which explained the significance of this dish in the Islamic tradition and in Turkish culture. By doing so, Aida, who had recently arrived in Boston to do a master’s degree, used this dish to articulate an aspect of her religious self-understanding and her ethnic difference from the other American-born group members. Importantly, she teaches her fellow group members about these aspects. Offered in this respect, food becomes an educational tool. It invites fellow group members to get to know the woman in question better by providing an opening for asking questions about religious and cultural traditions. Food, then, invites members to let others in. Explicitly, when sharing food, the Daughters join in sharing of information about themselves. It provides a space to articulate values and views on everyday and wider life matters that can go beyond the focus on the “Abrahamic religions” defining book discussions. Consequently, the conversations that take place around and about food can provide members with additional references of understanding about each other that contribute to the formation and maintenance of interreligious relationships. Gathering over food in the Daughters of Abraham, then, brings together participants in a shared activity that contributes to establishing “safe space” for engaging with religious diversity whilst creating sentiments of belonging to this interfaith community.

Daughters of Abraham's interfaith cookbook permits that food brought to meetings can be used to express religious and/or ethnic affiliation. The theme of Daughters of Abraham's Annual Gathering 2015, which brings together members from the different Daughters chapters located in the Greater Boston Area, was "Nourishing Ourselves, Nourishing the World." This theme highlights food as an essential element of this interreligious encounter. In the spirit of the theme, the event organizers had asked participants to bring a recipe dear to them to be included in a Daughters of Abraham interfaith cookbook. This cookbook has subsequently been made available online.<sup>40</sup> It contains thirty-seven contributions from a cross-section of members divided into "Jewish," "Christian," and "Muslim" recipes.<sup>41</sup> Every contribution comes with an explanation of why members have chosen to share that particular dish. These recipes illuminate the religious and ethnic diversity defining this women's interfaith book group. For example, this cookbook sees an American-born Jewish member share her mother's latke recipe to be served for Hanukkah made in accordance with her Ashkenazi heritage; a Christian member shares her German great-grandmother's recipe for *lebkuchen*, German honey cakes, eaten at Christmas; and two first-generation Syrian Muslim members share the dessert *maamoul*, a shortbread pastry filled with dates served at their family's Eid celebrations (Daughters of Abraham 2016a). Members occasionally bring these sorts of dishes to group meetings. The Daughters of Abraham cookbook highlights how members can use such foods to express their religious and/or ethnic affiliation, and so increase their fellow group members' understanding of such.

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<sup>40</sup> Daughters of Abraham interfaith cookbook can be found using the following link: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B\\_1eh7CJBX5aTIB5RV8xTGxwbWs/view?pref=2&pli=1](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_1eh7CJBX5aTIB5RV8xTGxwbWs/view?pref=2&pli=1) (Accessed: 13/08/2016).

<sup>41</sup> Similarly, books read at Daughters meetings are divided into these three religious identity categories.

At the same time, this cookbook also indicates cultural relatedness that does not necessarily divide based on religious categories. Many of the recipes categorized either as Jewish or Christian speak to Daughters of Abraham's American setting. Examples of these distinctively American recipes are brownies, apple cake, snowballs, sugar cookies, and banana bread (Daughters of Abraham 2016a). These dishes highlight a connection based on national belonging cutting across religious divides. Moreover, a number of the "Jewish" and "Christian" recipes allude to similarities in terms of immigration histories to America. Dishes like apple crisp, scones, shortbread, and chocolate chip mandelbread all originate from Western Europe, specifically the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic-speaking parts. Members refer to their family's immigration history when they narrate their reasons for choosing to share these recipes, for instance by mentioning their Scottish parents or their Dutch grandmother who brought the recipe in question with them and passed it on to the next generation (Daughters of Abraham 2016a). Thereby, they indicate relatedness both of ethnic origin and contemporary national belonging.

Whilst cultural similarities cut across religious lines when it comes to the "Jewish" and "Christian" dishes, it is a different matter with the "Muslim" recipes. This collection of dishes from Syria, India, South Africa, Indonesia, and Pakistan indicates the eclectic ethnic mix of first-generation immigrants who participate in the Daughters of Abraham. To some extent, these recipes indicate relatedness between the Muslim members in immigration histories, explicitly because most of them are first-generation immigrants. On the other hand, these recipes also point to ethnic differences within the American Muslim community as well as to a divide between the recent American Muslim community and the long-established Jewish and

Christian communities. Consequently, the “Muslim” recipes seem to highlight difference more so than what is shared.

Nevertheless, cutting across all three of the religious categories is a generic reference to fond memories about grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and granddaughters in the reasons provided for the included recipes. Expressly, these explanations talk about the transmission of recipes between female family members; hence, they display a commonality of gender cutting across religious affiliations (Daughters of Abraham 2016a). This sameness is based on women’s conventional gender roles as mothers and housewives. These roles involve being responsible for cooking meals in order to nourish the family. Elements of gender, relationships, and food are, thus, closely interlinked. Illuminating their interaction is Lisa’s reason for sharing her recipe for *matzoh* balls. Lisa explains that this recipe originates from her grandmother, and that she makes this dish using her mother’s handwritten recipe because it “connects me to my mom” (Daughters of Abraham 2016a). Furthermore, Lisa’s daughter is now “next in line to make them” (Daughters of Abraham 2016a). Lisa’s explanation indicates the gendered transmission between daughters not simply of recipes, but of conventional gender norms defining women as the primary nurturer. These ideas of gender are not particular to any of the religions represented in this women’s interfaith book group and, accordingly, convey relatedness. The fact that the Daughters of Abraham is an exclusively female interreligious encounter enables this commonality of gender. The relatedness of gender expressed in Daughters of Abraham’s cookbook also shows the importance placed on exclusively female relationships that Daughters members carry with them into their interreligious encounter.

The interaction between relationships, gender, and food alluded to in Daughters of Abraham's cookbook is also apparent at group meetings. Explicitly, whilst food literally nourishes members at their monthly gatherings, the interreligious relationships formed are nourishing in a metaphorical sense. In the Daughters of Abraham, these two layers of nourishment are interlinked because the sharing of food encourages a sense of connectedness between members, which in turn supports interreligious relationship-building. Chapter 5 explores the ways in which Daughters members point to commonalities of gender, including appropriating conventional gender roles to stress what is shared across religious lines. This examination involves reflection on the implications of such for building interreligious relationships.

The Daughters of Abraham cookbook speaks to the organization's desire to use food as a structural element that encourages engagement with religious diversity. Still, there exists a tension between this aspiration with the inter- and intra-religious as well as ethnic differences that food can inadvertently express. An extraordinary meeting of group A's Daughters demonstrates that using food is a double-edged sword in terms of encouraging engagement with religious diversity. Nine members met to discuss the media's portrayal of Islam as a religion of violence brought on by the horrific acts committed by ISIS.<sup>42</sup> Sedrah, a first-generation Pakistani Muslim immigrant in her mid-seventies, had requested this meeting and had, therefore, offered to cook dinner.<sup>43</sup> A Conservative Jewish member, Emma, had expressed her desire to

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<sup>42</sup> In the summer of 2014 media coverage of the havoc caused by ISIS in the Middle East had been particularly intense causing much negative media portrayal of Islam. This is the context in which this meeting was requested and held relatively soon after the group's first meeting of the season in September.

<sup>43</sup> The fact that the group discussed an overtly political topic is interesting because of Daughters of Abraham's no-politics rule. Giving me a lift to the meeting, Deborah, the Jewish group leader who had agreed to this extra meeting, explained that she considered the level of trust sufficiently high to talk about political issues due to the group's decade-long existence. Also, Sedrah had been so adamant about wanting to dispel Muslim stereotypes that she could not ignore her request for a meeting. Moreover, Deborah hoped that the meeting would provide some basic facts about Islam that would

bring some *kosher* dishes for everyone to enjoy, but according to her, Sedrah had refused any help. Sedrah's refusal was presumably made to avoid inconveniencing anyone, but it had an unfortunate outcome because Sedrah had cooked traditional Pakistani dishes: *daal*, potato curry, and rice pudding, which Emma did not consider *kosher*. Consequently, she could not eat the meal in good conscience.

Emma did not express her grievances about the food at the meeting. Instead, she lamented about this flaw to me over a casual cup of coffee a few weeks later. She told me that she had emailed the group leader to voice her concern that the food had not been *kosher* and to question why she had been prevented from bringing along dishes that could have alleviated this reality. According to Emma, this exchange had not been pleasant. Contrary to Emma's interpretation, the group leader, who identifies as Reform but was raised in an Orthodox/Conservative Jewish household, did not consider Sedrah's dishes in violation of *kashrut* laws. Emma reasoned that the underlying reason for this intra-religious disagreement over religious dietary laws was that the group leader considers herself more knowledgeable about Jewish food rules because of her Orthodox upbringing that stands in contrast to Emma's ethnically Jewish childhood home. Emma was clearly upset about the refusal to acknowledge her standpoint, which amounted to a refusal to validate her Jewish identity. The leader appeared unwilling to accommodate alternative interpretations of what it means to be

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empower the Jewish and Christian members to combat prejudices about Islam. Deborah's reasoning reveals underlying political sentiments – she deems it necessary to provide members with a particular understanding of Islam and Muslims that rejects ISIS' militant and inhuman interpretation. Her final reason that members who did not wish to partake in this politically loaded conversation could simply stay away from the meeting masks this top-down decision about the deemed "correct" interpretation of Islam. Deborah gave the same reasons at the semi-annual group leaders meeting where this subgroup meeting was held up as a template for talking about politically loaded issues. Thus, even if the Daughters of Abraham defines itself as an apolitical group because the everyday lived experiences of the "Abrahamic religions" is the key conversation focus, a political agenda seems to underlie such discussions because a view of the "Abrahamic religions" as ultimately peaceful is encouraged. Chapters 4 and 8 elaborate on tensions arising from Daughters of Abraham's apolitical self-understanding.

Jewish. This attitude might hinge on issues of power – the leader wanting to assert her position in the group, but it does leave us with the question as to the extent to which religious diversity at large is accommodated in Daughters of Abraham’s interreligious encounter.

Emma viewed the group leader’s refusal to acknowledge her standpoint as a clear indication that Muslim members are treated favorably to Jews and Christians because of the limited Muslim representation in the group. To Emma, the food served at the meeting had become a symbol of this perceived different treatment of members based on religious affiliation. The food had highlighted difference because religious diversity had not been accommodated. Instead of being a social gathering tool, the food gave a bitter aftertaste of exclusion. For Emma, there was the added layer of feeling of less value to the Muslim Daughters due to her Jewish self-understanding that was left unacknowledged by her fellow group members. Food generated these sentiments of difference, and in doing so caused both intra- and inter-religious rifts. In summary, the organization’s intent behind structuring the first part of group meetings around food might be to facilitate “safe space” so as to prompt engagement with religious diversity. However, when food is imbued with religious or ethnic meanings, and differences in such belongings are not accommodated, the presence of food can be detrimental to intragroup dynamics.

Still, the gathering around food in the Daughters of Abraham generally guides members about how to engage with religious diversity and, therefore, provides a foundation for fostering interreligious understanding in this group. Without such guidance, navigating the complex intersections of religious and ethnic belongings might seem too overwhelming as indicated by the fact that most members refrain from meeting outside the clearly delineated Daughters space. Similar to the element

of food, the book is indispensable for prompting engagement with the group's religious diversity. This chapter now considers this aspect.

### ***The Role of Books for Prompting Interreligious Dialogue***

The various nibbles brought along by each of the nine Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Daughters members present at a late fall meeting held southeast of Boston were quickly gone. Once the members had exchanged the latest news and activities undertaken since their last meeting, the women who met in a local museum's conference room proceeded to randomly sit down around a long table for the second part of all Daughters gatherings: the book discussion. That month's assigned book was *My Neighbor's Faith: Stories of Interreligious Encounter, Growth, and Transformation* edited by Jennifer Howe Peace, Or N. Rose, and Gregory Mobley.<sup>44</sup> Whilst the Daughters subgroups commonly alter between books categorized as "Jewish," "Christian," and "Muslim," respectively, occasionally books like this one designated under Daughters of Abraham's "Cross-Religion" category are read. The book consists of fifty-three contributions that all recount an informal interreligious encounter, which has somehow impacted the author's religious identity or perception of religious "others." Thus, the book concerns personal experiences of engaging with religious diversity and is, therefore, easily relatable for Daughters members because of their participation in this interfaith book group. Whilst conversations over the food

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<sup>44</sup> It is a curious detail that the book is dedicated to Daughters of Abraham's founder who worked with the editors and was related to one of them. This detail was not mentioned at the meeting, though, presumably because none of the members personally knew the founder or her family. This absentmindedness of Daughters of Abraham's founding history shows that the overarching relationship that members hold with this interfaith community is to their specific Daughters chapter, not the wider organization. Thus, whilst the Daughters of Abraham now numbers thirty-six chapters, it is an interfaith community rooted in the local.

had mainly concerned the women's families, their caretaking roles, and more upbeat topics like upcoming vacations away from the dark winter, the focus now turned to *Daughters of Abraham's* main conversation topic: religion. Prompted by the assigned book, this discussion witnessed the sharing of personal experiences with informal interreligious encounters. This emphasis on sharing personal experiences with religion, instead of examining texts from a theological standpoint as would be the norm in conventional interreligious encounters, conveys an organizational desire to be inclusive. Specifically, this stress seeks to create a "level playing field" for potential and existing members because everyone is able to contribute to conversations focused on personal understandings of religion (Daughters of Abraham 2016c). Moreover, it invites group members to pose questions to each other about alternative religious outlooks.

The following accounts illuminate some of the connections made by members to the narratives recounted in *My Neighbor's Faith* during this second part of a typical *Daughters* meeting. It shows how the book prompts engagement with religious diversity and encourages greater understanding of the "other."<sup>45</sup>

The story that I related to the most was the one about the Hindu nun and how she learnt to be the best human being possible from her encounter with Evangelical Christians. It reminded me of a recent event that I went to, which surprisingly turned out to be an incredibly holy experience. It was an experience of faith that I never imagined could have happened in that setting. The event was an eight-day conference intended to connect Vietnam veterans and their wives. I am a pacifist, but I went as a 'good wife' to support my husband. My husband never talks about Vietnam. Never. Despite us having been married for forty-four years. Sometimes he simply sits in a corner not talking, or he has outbursts of anger without warning, and horrid nightmares...But I always thought that this is just who he is,

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<sup>45</sup> My policy for book discussions was that I did not participate beyond observation unless explicitly prompted to contribute to the conversation. I would always read the assigned book so as to be able to follow the discussion and pick up on the themes emphasized or left out. It was a different matter during the socializing part over food where I would not simply take notes, but engage in more lighthearted conversation with various members who would consistently approach me with questions about my research and my wellbeing.

until this event. All the men shared stories about their time in Vietnam, and they also talked a lot about how that experience has influenced their lives. My husband cried. He never cries! I feel that our lives have been transformed because through listening to the men's stories and by talking to their wives, I realized that my husband suffers from PTSS – post-traumatic stress syndrome. When I talked to the wives, we discovered that we had almost identical journeys in terms of dealing with our husbands' PTSS. It was an epiphany. An amazing epiphany! We connected as wives and as women. It reminded me of our connection as Daughters. I am a Liberal Christian. Most of the people gathered there, though, were very, very Conservative Christians, but the compassion we felt for each other...I don't know if it were a religious experience, but it definitely proved a forum for experiences of faith. I felt like I was doing interfaith incognito. By the time we left, we were family. It was an incredibly holy experience.

What a perfect wife you are to him! Thank you so much for sharing your story Laura. It really touched me. I feel such a relation to my own life and to our group, to our relation as women. For me, religion is about really deep experiences. The world religions suffer from being over-verbalized and under-experienced. We need religious experiences, and in meetings with others it is possible to get that if we are open, if we approach others with trust and openness of the heart. This is what we have here. I am in three other book groups, but there is no book group like this. It is so important what we have here, so I want to thank you for being open. I also wish to relate to you a story that I wrote for my writing group called 'The Gift.' One of the stories in this month's book reminded me of an interfaith encounter that I had with a Jewish man when I was in the hospital waiting to hear the result of my daughter's surgery. I had a bracelet with a cross on it. I was using it like you would a rosary: stroking the cross whilst praying. I had a verse with me from the Bible that means a lot to me. I was reciting this whilst praying for my daughter. As I looked up, I noticed this man wearing a *kippah* who was rocking silently back and forth. When he finished, we started talking. He had also been praying for his child. He showed me the verse in the Torah that he had been reciting – as I read it, I realized that it was the same verse as the one that I was clinging to. We were saying the same prayer! We were separate, but connected. We were praying to the one God, he from a Jewish lens, me deeply anchored in Christianity, but it was the same prayer. That to me was a sign of faith. It was a sign that everything would be ok. That I did not have to worry about my daughter. Being in this group has made me open to experiencing our faith connection. Thank you.

“Thank you! That was very moving,” a couple of the Daughters expressed almost in unison. Cecily, one of the Jewish members, concluded the appreciative comments, “I always want to see the sameness. Our roots are so similar. I really feel that we are all one.”

The Daughters' shared stories display the way in which individual members relate to an assigned book, expressly how they self-identify with some of the narrative. These references reveal that the book functions as a vehicle for generating conversation. Moreover, the book prompts individual expressions of ideas about religion that venture beyond the specific content of the read book. Thus, the book is a central feature of Daughters meetings because without it, the women would not get to the crux of their interreligious encounter, which is the sharing of personal experiences with religion. With such sharing, comparisons are made between the "Abrahamic religions" that see Daughters members straddle personal understandings of similarities and differences between and within their respective religious traditions. Such straddling can develop interreligious understanding. Consequently, the book plays a crucial role in terms of prompting individual members to explore ideas about their own and alternative religious worldviews, which, as the Daughters' shared stories demonstrate, can develop members' self-understanding and understanding of both intra- and inter-religious "others."

It is interesting to note that the women were able to connect their informal interreligious encounters to their actively chosen interreligious engagement in the Daughters of Abraham because such comparisons speak to similarities and differences between formalized and impromptu interfaith experiences. Specifically, the level of closeness and trust between people who meet regularly is obviously different to engaging with a relative stranger. Still, the women found some connection of religion, gender, or similar life stories to the "other," which prompted them to bond. In both formal and informal interreligious encounters, then, it is possible to connect across religious divides through shared experiences. Perhaps the difference lies in the extent of personal sharing. The recounted stories exemplify the very intimate experiences

with religion shared that afternoon. That the women chose to share such personally sensitive stories speaks to the level of closeness in this particular Daughters chapter. A sense of belonging to this interfaith community is conveyed by the comment that their Daughters group is unique; the notion expressed that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are connected in various respects; and when members thank each other for sharing their stories. The Daughters feel connected based on the importance placed on religion in their lives, irrespective of the fact that these are different religious traditions.

The personal stories shared and the thoughtful responses to such sharing convey trust between the Daughters members. Trust is arguably essential in allowing individuals to contribute such intimate details about their life. Such trust relates to the notion of “safe space” since a space is only considered “safe” when individuals trust that no one will harm them. In the beginning of the lifespan of a Daughters chapter, trust obviously needs to be built. In this connection, the assigned book can act as a buffer for the sharing of personal details because participants can choose to simply refer to the book rather than reveal intimate information. As Eileen, the Christian leader of group F, expresses it,

I always explain to people that I think the books are so essential, especially in the beginning because it allows people to disclose themselves at the rate that they want to. Without it, let's say the book says something about prayer. The first year you are in the group, you might not want to talk about your [practice], but you can still talk about the nun, and the story, and her prayer, and how the prayer she was discussing was like some...either a character or...some people are very open, and some people aren't. You can always fall back and discuss about the book, and you can add levels of your own practice or your own experiences as you see fit (...) so you can still have rich discussions about the books with people contributing as they feel comfortable, and some people are more outgoing than others (...) I've never been in an interfaith 'just meet each other and discuss religion' [setting], but I've heard other people say, 'won't it be difficult and awkward?' And I do think that the books take away that awkwardness.

Like it would be the case for any social interaction, the level of trust in the Daughters chapters builds up over time, as does the sharing of personal experiences. Thus, whilst the Daughters meeting about *My Neighbor's Faith* did witness the sharing of very personal experiences related to religion, such conversations only happen once “safe space” has been established in conjunction with the materialization of trust. The book holds a crucial role in this respect. Aside from acting as a buffer for the sharing of personal details and as a generator of conversation, the fact that meetings repeatedly center on book discussions contributes to establishing this “safe space” because it helps facilitate trust. The gathering around books should, therefore, be viewed as the second key structural element of Daughters meetings that prompts engagement with religious diversity. It ensures that members engage with religious differences and similarities in a more formal and structured manner to the initial socializing over food that generally works to foster interreligious understanding and build community. Accordingly, similar to the congregating around food, the repeated gathering over books about the “Abrahamic religions” creates “safe space” for engaging with religious diversity.

The framing of Daughters of Abraham’s intragroup dynamics through the repeated use of food and books is similar to the manner in which distinct religious communities are created and maintained through the use of rituals. The renowned anthropologist Clifford Geertz writes about how religious communities are defined by repeated collective performances of religion, and how such performances help individuals make sense of their religious identity. According to Geertz, individuals act out their religious worldviews in collective rituals (1973: 112). Geertz explains, “in a ritual, the world as lived [i.e. ethos] and the world as imagined [i.e. world view], fused under the agency of a single set of symbolic forms, turn out to be the same

world” (1973: 112). Geertz argues that religions are particularly effective in fusing worldview and ethos because religions present a metaphysical way of life that is applicable to the real world and, therefore, becomes matter of fact to individual practitioners (1973: 131). Geertz refers to the acting out of religious worldviews as “cultural performances” because of the elaborateness of such rituals, not simply in their physical manifestation, but especially in relation to the variety of individual motivations and emotions involved (1973: 113). Performing rituals related to religion, then, creates meaning(s) for individual participants because such performances express religious self-understandings that are negotiated, shaped, and ultimately reinforced in the ritualistic activity.

Whilst Geertz writes about collective performances of religion by practitioners adhering to the same tradition, a similar understanding of the role of rituals for expressing, developing, and affirming religious self-understandings is arguably applicable to Daughters of Abraham’s interfaith setting. Here, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women come together to engage with religious diversity. Prompted by the two key elements of food and books around which Daughters meetings revolve, members act out their respective religious identities, which are continuously shaped as members try to make sense of their self and the “other.” Moreover, as the group meeting about *My Neighbor’s Faith* illuminates, this collective interfaith performance serves to create a sense of belonging to the Daughters of Abraham interfaith community. By extension, it nurtures a group identity built around the collective engagement with the two key structural elements of food and books. Even if the repeated acts of getting together over food and books cannot be considered religious rituals per se, these two components still share ritualistic characteristics in that they structure Daughters of Abraham’s intragroup dynamics and prompt engagement with

religious diversity that can result in interreligious understanding. Thus, the repeated gathering over food and books generates ritualized patterns of behavior that create “safe space” for exploring differences and commonalities of religion.

***Conclusion: Framing Daughters of Abraham’s Intragroup Dynamics Around Food and Books***

This chapter has served to introduce what typically happens at Daughters of Abraham book group meetings. Daughters of Abraham’s intragroup dynamics are framed around the two key structural elements of food and books. The meeting structure around food and books provides a recipe for dealing with religious diversity and, consequently, establishes a foundation for fostering constructive intragroup dynamics essential for bringing about interreligious understanding. By facilitating “safe space,” the gathering over food at Daughters meetings can encourage engagement with religious diversity. At the same time, food can be used to articulate religious and ethnic belongings that can be detrimental to interreligious relationship-building if differences are not accommodated. The book also prompts engagement with religious diversity by contributing to “safe space.” Book discussions see members straddle notions of sameness and difference of religion as they compare and contrast their experiences. Tying together the engagement with food and books is the occurrence of individual processes of learning about self and the “other.”

The following chapter continues to reflect on the centrality of texts for the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups, but focuses on questions concerning issues of boundary drawing and power dynamics from engagements with this

medium. It additionally contextualizes and teases out Daughters of Abraham's book group identity.

## **CHAPTER 4: Drawing and Unsettling Boundaries by Engaging with Textual “Others:” Constructing a Distinct Book Group Identity**

I personally wouldn't come to have coffee every month just 'cause I like the people, [but] after I've read a book, there's often a desire to hear what my other co-book readers have to say about it, or I'm eager to chew it with other people (Lisa, Jewish Daughter).

A key motivation for Lisa's participation in the Daughters of Abraham is the fact that it is a book group. With at least five million Americans belonging to one or more book groups, being part of a shared reading practice is undoubtedly a popular leisure pursuit (Burger 2015). An exact estimate of book group members in the United States is difficult to make because there is no central registry (Atlas 2014). But *Goodreads*, for example, a site dedicated to popular book reviews and online book group gatherings, claims to have fifty-five million members, implying that the number of Americans participating in book group activities might be significantly higher than the estimated five million (2016). What is clear is that belonging to a book group has become increasingly popular in the contemporary American context. Televised book groups, like Oprah's Book Club, testify to their popularity (Heller 2011), as do online reading communities that cut across geographical boundaries like “Our Shared Shelf,” a feminist book club founded by UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson that is hosted on *Goodreads* (2017). A plethora of book group types has appeared as a result. Some groups have a particular focus based around a theme, author, or genre whilst others are more general in character (Heller 2011). Americans, then, have a wide range of choice in terms of finding a book group that suits their individual preferences.

So what makes the Daughters of Abraham stand out from the countless other book group options available for Americans to join? I address this issue by assessing Daughters of Abraham's book group identity from the point of view of first individual members, then its leadership, and finally the subgroup level that ties together the former two. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the centrality of texts in the Daughters of Abraham, raising questions about boundary drawing and power dynamics from engagements with this medium. These examinations challenge the group's self-image as an apolitical book group. In this connection, I consider the organization's rules for selection and discussion of texts that seemingly demarcate "appropriate" conversation topics, and so the perspectives allowed in to the Daughters space. At the same time, I demonstrate how Daughters subgroups' collective engagements with textual "others" can unsettle such boundaries for inclusion. First, I situate the Daughters of Abraham as a book group by providing the historical and academic contexts of women's shared reading practices.

### ***The Underappreciated Phenomenon of Women's Shared Reading Practices***

"Although book clubs have become a highly visible cultural phenomenon, little scholarship has yet been devoted to their activities" (Long 2004: 344). Academic research concerning reading groups has been deprioritized despite the fact that book group membership has become a hugely popular leisure pursuit. It is only in recent years that academics, feminist scholars in particular, have tentatively begun making them their research object. A few ethnographies of contemporary women's book groups are among the publications (Barstow, 2003; Long, 2003; Sedo, 2002), which

also include historical studies of the 19<sup>th</sup> century literary societies (McHenry, 2002; Murray, 2002), analysis of online book groups (Sedo, 2011), and more broadly of the social practices of reading (Fuller and Sedo, 2013).

I propose that gender bias, to some extent, explains the limited range of scholarship on book groups. Women have consistently made up the majority of book group members. In the wider sociocultural context, women's book groups have been dismissed as trivial coffee clubs where anything but the read book is discussed. No value, then, has been assigned to such activities. Elizabeth Long, an emeritus professor of sociology, captures this dismissive attitude in referencing the ridicule that her research project about a women's reading group met: "I often felt that male academic colleagues could not understand why an intelligent person might consider women's reading groups a serious topic for investigation" (2003: x). Book groups are much more than a simple chat over a hot drink, though, they are a cultural practice and an important component of American life both historically and today.

The dismissive view of book groups expressed in the Academy is reminiscent of the attitudes towards women's literary salons and societies found in 19<sup>th</sup> century America and Britain. The coming together of women to expand their minds through shared reading and discussion of literature was considered destructive to the patriarchal social order. It was, therefore, dismissed as a frivolous female activity as evidenced by the numerous satires targeting women's literary groups (Long 2004: 337). In reality it was anything but frivolous. The English literary salons, that American literary societies came to emulate, empowered its members because they provided a forum where women could gain the education denied them by patriarchal social structures and cultural norms. Moreover, the engagement in intellectual discussion in a supportive women-only space allowed members to voice their

thoughts, which were valued in this setting in contrast to society at large. Thus, the concept of “safe space” shown to be crucial for prompting engagement with religious diversity in the Daughters of Abraham was also an important dimension of women’s book groups historically.

The phenomenon of women-only book groups can be traced back to early 19<sup>th</sup> century England. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century, men across Europe had formally gathered in salons to debate current affairs, literature, and politics. In response to these exclusively male societies, a small group of upper-class British women founded their own literary society revolving around book discussions. Members also supported each other in their shared aim to publish their own works of literature; hence, the meetings occasioned quite a substantial degree of independence in a society that generally denied women such freedom of mind. The primary role of these all-women’s literary meetings for its educated and socially privileged members was advancing their education on their terms. In doing so, the members, who came to be known as “Bluestockings,” defied the patriarchal gender norms of the time (Sedo 2011: 3; 12). Their defiance was met with social disdain as revealed by the 1863 edition of *The New American Cyclopeadia* that listed the term “Bluestockings” as denoting “pedantic or ridiculously literary ladies” (Heller 2011). The current edition of *Encyclopedia Britannica* confirms this negative perception of the Bluestockings, which is explained as “a derisive name for a literary woman” (2010). The two encyclopedia entries reveal the patriarchal social structures that 19<sup>th</sup> century women fought against. The attainment of new knowledge by way of reading and discussing books in the literary salons was one manner in which such sociocultural confinements based on gender were challenged. The Bluestockings set the example for millions of women who, in the succeeding centuries, followed them in defying gender bias by

partaking in all-women's book groups. For instance, some of the literary societies that appeared in 19<sup>th</sup> century America served as training grounds for women participating in the social movements of the time like the Suffragettes (Sedo 2011: 4).

From the onset, book groups have provided a space for the expression and validation of women's perspectives on numerous subject matters and have, therefore, provided a space for self-development (Sedo 2011: 5). However, the negative labels ascribed to the literary salons of the past continue to be applied to present-day book groups. Similarly, contemporary characterizations disregard book group participation as a simple pursuit that men would never deign to engage in (Kiernan 2011: 123-4). This attitude, by extension, implies that because the majority of book group members are women, it is somehow a less valuable activity than if men were represented to a greater degree. This undoubtedly biased standpoint is a gross oversimplification of the workings of book groups; it reveals a misplaced disregard for the transformative potential in terms of self-development that book group engagement holds.

Self-development has consistently been the ultimate goal of women's reading groups, but early on this individual process had a higher purpose: a woman should become better educated so as to be able to serve the collective. An example is "The Boston Gleaning Circle" founded by sixteen women in 1805 (Kelley 2008: 4). The Gleaners were committed to "the improvement of the mind," but this self-improvement was only considered valid when individuals contributed to collective betterments, for instance the Gleaners established libraries to serve the community at large (Kelley 2008: 8-9). It was an impulse for social betterment shared with other 19<sup>th</sup> century American literary societies, which transcended individual self-development and ensured "a sense of the collective powers and possibilities of Women" (Long 2004: 341). Still, these book groups were reserved for white, middle-

class, and fairly educated women, implying that the sense of “sisterhood” was limited to a fairly small segment of American society (O’Connor 1991: 334). Nevertheless, this social mission legitimized women’s literary groups in the eyes of society at large and ensured their proliferation; a factor, which helped facilitate access for women to higher education institutions at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Once women gained access to higher education, the need for self-education via literary societies disappeared and so did many of these groups. In the early 1990s, the American talk-show host Oprah Winfrey revitalized book groups by establishing her own televised book club (Sedo 2011: 6). Today, book groups are trending in the U.S. as attested to by the millions of Americans belonging to one or more such groups (Burger 2015). Book groups have become for the masses, but membership is still primarily female (McArdle 2009: 125).

As an all-women’s book group, the Daughters of Abraham is firmly situated within a long history of women coming together to reflect on texts for purposes of learning and self-development. Tying together book groups of the past with those of the present is their ability to bring together women in a community that “provides its members with insight and support, broadens their critical perspectives on self and the world, and develops their own capacities” (Long 2004: 357). Book groups have historically served an important role for white upper-middle-class women when it came to attaining new knowledge and forming friendships. They continue to provide a venue for intellectual engagement when during book discussions participants compare and contrast their perspectives to both real-life and textual “others.”

### *Members' Define the Daughters of Abraham as a Book Group*

Individual members' reflections on the Daughters of Abraham as a book group help tease out its distinctive traits vis-à-vis the seemingly endless book group options available in present-day America. A key characteristic consistently highlighted as unique to this book group is its thematic focus on religion. But equally important is the way in which this key subject matter is discussed and the underlying sentiment for exploring this issue in the first place. Lisa, a Jewish member, explains,

There's a space in the group for people to discuss their personal faith journey, you know, and how the reading connects to...that's why I really do feel that our group is both personal and intellectual. That there is an agenda. I think I play a part in that. I always – kind of raising the psychologist flag, you know, they dislike me for it, but you know – go from the big picture of 'what does this mean' to ask for our journeys.

Lisa highlights that the collective engagement with texts enables explorations of religious worldviews that develop self-understanding and understanding of the "other." Such explorations happen when members compare firsthand experiences with religion to each other and to viewpoints expressed in the text. Consequently, the text is indispensable for the kind of learning about religion taking place in the Daughters book groups. Lisa also insinuates that there is more to this interfaith book group than literary analysis. Its agenda is not "just" intellectual discussion because the personal connections made can potentially bridge religious differences.

In her book group comparisons, Natalie also addresses this perception of there being another layer to partaking in the Daughters of Abraham than intellectual stimulation. Besides being a Christian Daughters member, Natalie belongs to two other book groups reserved for women. One of these is comprised of her former work

colleagues and is based on their common professional interest in nursing. The other involves close friends who read all kinds of books together. When asked what she considers to be the elements setting apart her two other book groups from the Daughters of Abraham, Natalie states,

I would say the life involvements of the people. And there is no special, there is not a bigger reason to meet than be together because we all love to read. The conversation there can be political, you know, wider because (...) the religious affiliation is not what becomes our concern.

Aside from highlighting the group's thematic focus on religion, Natalie demonstrates that amongst individual members, there exists a sense of contributing to something bigger by participating in this book group. This view seems connected to the group's interfaith character. The interfaith element means that group conversations center on gaining understanding about the "other," not simply discussing a text for intellectual stimulation.<sup>46</sup> It points to an obvious feature distinguishing the Daughters of Abraham from other book group possibilities: members choose to actively engage with religious diversity by way of collectively discussing texts on religion. Perhaps because this trait is fundamental to the Daughters interfaith book groups, members do not explicitly acknowledge it.

Still, Grace elaborates on this distinguishing feature by highlighting "the personal" as a key factor in generating understanding about the "Abrahamic religions," and so of the "other." Despite already participating in three book groups, Grace decided to start a Daughters chapter in her local community. When asked why she felt the need to become part of a fourth book group, the Christian group leader

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<sup>46</sup> This notion of contributing to something bigger by partaking in the Daughters of Abraham also implies underlying political sentiments for choosing to engage in this interfaith book group in the first place. Chapter 8 addresses such sociopolitical values, which involves considering the self-selective element of Daughters membership and with that issues of inclusion and exclusion.

states her interest in “most of all, of what really motivates people, how they decide to make decisions in their lives.” Particularly appealing was the information to be gained about how religion “impacts people’s lives [and] informs people.” Grace explains,

Even among close friends, it has been most unusual to have very spiritual and deep religious conversations. I don’t think it happens very often in life (...) so I thought that this was also an opportunity to really engage in a subject where you didn’t dance around the subject, but in fact we focused on the subject.<sup>47</sup>

The ability to gain deep knowledge about the role of religion in individual women’s lives is considered unique to the Daughters book groups. Whilst the book might prompt such new knowledge, literary analysis is not the main reason that Grace is part of the Daughters of Abraham. She explains,

We’ve never gone chapter by chapter, word for word (...) we are looking more for an umbrella from which we can share: ‘this is what I saw, this is what I heard, this is the piece of the book I questioned, or this is the piece of the book that I disagreed with’ (...) I would feel as if somehow our group were not as unique and special as it is if we were looking word by word, chapter by chapter [then] we are just back in school when (...) you had to stay with the book (...) That to me is not what I’m looking for in having a book group. And it’s kind of interesting because the other book groups that I’m in, in two cases, they are that, but in another case other than this one (...) the book again is a jumping off spot, but it’s not the only focus of that meeting. It’s really *how I as a person with my life experience relate to what I just read* (my emphasis).

The focus on sharing individual experiences with religion is key. Specifically, the Daughters of Abraham differs from Grace’s other book groups “in the vulnerability

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<sup>47</sup> A recent survey conducted by Pew Research Center shows that Americans typically refrain from talking about religion outside of their immediate family. Even with close family, twenty-six percent of Americans seldom discuss religion whilst thirteen percent never talk about this subject matter. Along with other potentially contentious issues like politics, money, and sex, which are deemed taboo according to cultural etiquette, in the American context bringing up religion in social conversations is considered impolite (Cooperman 2016). Thus, Grace touches upon a cultural norm when stating that religion is not usually talked about around American dinner tables. Accordingly, the Daughters’ interreligious encounter provides a rarely available venue for engaging in conversation about religion. Further information about Pew Research Center’s survey can be found online: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/15/many-americans-dont-argue-about-religion-or-even-talk-about-it/> (Accessed: 16/04/2016).

piece.” She explains, “when I sit in the Daughters meetings, I feel almost as if I’m sitting with a religious totally committed community of listeners who are non-judgmental, who are present, who are supportive, compassionate, understanding, and I think that’s unique.” Thus, the emphasis on “the personal” creates belonging, which is deemed unusual in a book group setting. The Christian member, Leonore, captures this sentiment when explaining, “you always speak from your heart.” Leonore believes that Daughters of Abraham’s stress on firsthand learning about religion engenders such emotional textual engagements. Accordingly, it is not simply the thematic focus on religion that distinguishes the Daughters of Abraham from other book groups, but the manner in which this issue is discussed. Moreover, engaging with the group’s religious diversity by discussing personal experiences of religion through the medium of numerous texts sets the Daughters of Abraham apart in the wider spectrum of formalized interreligious encounters, which chapter 1 showed typically center on discussion of key religious texts with basis in theological knowledge.

It is worth noting that the personal is considered legitimate knowledge. The group’s focus on individual understandings of religion stands in contrast to conventional forums for interreligious dialogue where knowledge of theological discourses legitimizes the presence of participants. Members do not speak for an entire religion in the Daughters of Abraham; they speak for themselves. Their personal experiences grant them authority to discuss and explore understandings of the “Abrahamic religions,” not theological knowledge. Consequently, a layer of power is removed from the onset since Daughters members are not required to be religious experts in order to engage with texts about religion.

Overall, then, individual members identify three key characteristics carving out a distinct book group profile for the Daughters of Abraham, namely the group's thematic focus on religion, engaging with texts through the lens of personal experiential knowledge, and a perceived bigger purpose for meeting than literary analysis. This final characteristic expressed by Lisa, Natalie, Grace, and numerous other members whom I interviewed, relates to the organization's overarching mission of fostering peaceful coexistence. It indicates a link between the messages promoted from the top-down about the "Abrahamic religions" and the views held by individual participants of this book group. The following section elaborates on such dynamics that speak to issues of power and boundary drawing by examining the leadership's use of texts to control the kind of learning taking place in all of the Daughters chapters. By extension, it looks to define Daughters of Abraham's book group identity.

### *Top-Down Use of Texts to Control "Suitable" Perspectives for Group Discussion*

#### The Daughters of Abraham Model:<sup>48</sup>

The goal of our gatherings is the slow, thoughtful work of getting to know each other over a good book. As we engage with the books we explore the meanings, shape and practices of our own and one another's religious experiences. We are not interfaith dialogue groups nor do we read books where the focus of the content is political. Occasionally, groups may include activities that build community or explore one of the three religions through films, visiting a site, sharing music or attending a lecture. However, the focus always returns to gaining a deeper understanding of each other's faith traditions.

**Anyone can start a casual book group. But to start a Daughters of Abraham book group based on this model, there are certain core elements or conditions that members follow:**

- Members speak from their own experiences rather than as spokesperson for

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<sup>48</sup> This model can be found on Daughters of Abraham's website: <http://daughtersofabraham.com/our-model/> (Accessed: 27/12/2016).

their religion

- Members agree to the Daughters of Abraham ground rules
- All three religions must be represented
- Co-leaders are made up of one member from each faith
- If any member strongly objects to reading a particular book, the group does not read it.
- In meetings the focus is on the books. This creates safe space which allows each woman to decide how much to share on a personal level.

The Daughters of Abraham model emphasizes that the group's self-understanding is tied up with it being a book group. The stated goal and approach of Daughters meetings – discussing books about the “Abrahamic religions” to foster interreligious relations and understanding about the “other” – crystalizes this self-image. By adhering to this framework, Daughters book groups are claimed different from “casual book groups;” consequently, this model works to situate the Daughters of Abraham as a unique type of book group in its wider American context where, as examined, these are flourishing. Moreover, this model indicates that the Daughters of Abraham has various rules for engaging with texts that limit both potential conversation topics and their facilitation. The organization explains that these guidelines have been put in place “to provide a safe space for discussion” (Daughters of Abraham 2016f). However, these rules also express a degree of top-down control over the individual Daughters chapters concerning selection and discussion of “appropriate” book content. As such, examining these parameters framing the Daughters of Abraham as a book group can illuminate issues of power and boundary drawing found in this interreligious encounter.

Aside from the organization's no-proselytizing rule, the biggest restriction placed on group engagement with texts is the avoidance of politics. “Politics” for the Daughters implies contemporary world affairs with the Israel-Palestine conflict being held up as the most sensitive issue that groups should avoid debating at all costs. Most

members appreciate this prohibition because politics is considered a likely trigger of conflict that could result in unwanted hurt feelings. The official reason for avoiding politics relates to individual members' view of political subject matters as potentially divisive. The organization explains its no-politics rule in the following manner:

Our mission as Daughters of Abraham is to increase our respect for all of the Abrahamic religions by reading books that teach us about each other's religions and help us learn from each other about the practice of our respective faiths. We are committed to building relationships with each other. For this reason we choose books that help us fulfill our mission. Understanding world events is not our goal; rather, our goal is to show that all Abrahamic faiths can be a force behind a variety of lives lived well and honorably. It is not that we seek to exclude politics; it is that politics can also emphasize the things that divide us. We prefer to focus on what unites us and deepens our knowledge and respect for each other. Political discussion groups are very important, but they are not part of our mission as Daughters of Abraham. If political issues arise as a result of what we are reading we discuss them in the context of the book (2016c).

As the Christian founding member, Mary, phrases it, "we don't go there, not because we hate politics, but because our focus is on our religious identity." So whilst the exclusion of overtly political conversation topics limits the issues available for discussion, it could be viewed as an attempt to provide "safe space" for exploring religious diversity. More pragmatically, the no-politics rule serves to focus group discussions on the main theme of religion. Still, the prohibition on debating politics also expresses a degree of top-down control over the kind of learning taking place in the various Daughters chapters.

Each Daughters group typically decide in plenum what books to read for the season during the first autumn meeting in September. Group leaders are normally in charge of the final selection; however, if a member strongly objects to reading a book, this will not be read. A few groups have set up rigid regimes for choosing what books to read. For example, in group F two readers belonging to two different religions pre-

read a prospective book and recommend whether or not its content is appropriate for discussion. The readers look out for potential sore points particularly related to politically contentious material like the Middle East conflict. Hence, the selection process serves to exclude any material not in line with the organization's ground rules and mission. Most groups take a more relaxed approach to their selection of texts, though. They make decisions based on collective enthusiasm for a given text, or lack thereof, whilst keeping in mind the compulsory rotation between the organization's four main book categories: "Jewish," "Christian," "Muslim," and "Cross-Religion." Still, to some extent, this selection process is controlled from the top-down because in making these choices, members often defer to Daughters of Abraham's online reading lists containing hundreds of pre-approved book suggestions. It is, therefore, worth reflecting on the extent to which the textual choices are a conscious organizational strategy towards promulgating a particular view on interreligious encounters and, hence, whether the organization's self-image as an apolitical book group in actuality carries underlying political sentiments.

A dimension of the group's self-image as an apolitical book group is the top-down use of texts to draw boundaries for the kinds of perspectives allowed at subgroup meetings and, by extension, to exclude values not in line with Daughters of Abraham's mission of increasing respect for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (Daughters of Abraham 2016g). The categorization of texts in accordance with the "Abrahamic religions," the selection process, and the content of texts deemed appropriate for reading establish such boundaries. In practical terms, this top-down control is facilitated through recommended reading lists of "suitable" texts.

Specifically, Daughters of Abraham has a *Goodreads* booklist.<sup>49</sup> The list numbers 281 books, and counting, divided into the group's four main book categories: "Jewish," "Christian," "Muslim," and "Cross-Religion." Although, former and existing members of Daughters of Abraham's leadership have contributed many of these reviews, the *Goodreads* profile allows any member to rate books. Moreover, members use this site to advice or warn other Daughters subgroups as to whether a given text complies with the organization's ground rules and whether it prompted "good" conversation about the "Abrahamic religions" (2016d). The *Goodreads* list is not the only recommended collection of books encountered on the group's website, though. An alphabetical list of books read and a sample book list with descriptions are immediately available for viewing.<sup>50</sup> The texts found on these lists have been classified as suitable for consumption by Daughters of Abraham's leadership.

These book lists upset the group's apolitical image because in deciding on what texts to recommend, choices have been made involving processes of inclusion and exclusion of perspectives on the "Abrahamic religions" and beyond. Accordingly, the texts promote certain sociopolitical values including placing a high value on participation in interreligious dialogue. The recommended reading lists, therefore, help mainstream the perspectives gained on the "Abrahamic religions" in the individual Daughters chapters. Texts deemed unsuitable for discussion at Daughters meetings are ones that "highlight derogatory stereotypes or religion as a destructive force" (Daughters of Abraham 2016c). Instead texts, irrespective of genre, are required to highlight the practice and experience of living as a religious person in order to prompt learning about members' different religious traditions and their

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<sup>49</sup> Daughters of Abraham's *Goodreads* book list is available online: <http://www.goodreads.com/review/list/2293662-daughters-of-abraham> (Accessed: 24/11/2016).

<sup>50</sup> Appendix B contains Daughters of Abraham's sample book list.

personal understanding of such (Daughters of Abraham 2016c). By providing sample selections of texts considered suitable for group discussion, a degree of control over the individual subgroups is maintained. Expressly, the texts deemed fitting for group discussion determine what religious outlooks and sociopolitical values can or should be allowed in to the Daughters space. Accordingly, the texts can help ensure that the group conversations taking place in the various Daughters chapters work to support the organization's larger mission of dismantling religious stereotypes and building interreligious relationships (2016g).

The content of the reading material deemed suitable reveals the book group character envisioned and promoted on the leadership level. What kind of reading material is appropriate for discussion at subgroup meetings according to Daughters of Abraham's leadership? The sample book list contains many texts narrating the religious journeys of both fictitious and real-life women like Anne Lamott's memoirs, *Travelling Mercies*. Others depict the development of real or fictitious interfaith relations like the Jewish-Christian romantic relationship depicted in *The Ritual Bath* by Faye Kellerman. Some books narrate aspects of the history of the "Abrahamic religions" and interactions between them. When this is the case, texts tend to emphasize that which is shared between these religions. Bruce Feiler's book, *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of the Three Faiths*, that stresses the perceived unity between the "Abrahamic traditions" is a good example, and one that many members mention as their favorite book. Another example is *Common Prayers* by Harvey Cox that, with basis in the author's interfaith marriage, offers ways in which Christians can partake in Jewish holiday celebrations. Other recommended reading is scholarly texts like *A History of God* by Karen Armstrong, which claims there are many overlaps between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. A similar sentiment is found in Maria Rosa

Menocal's *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain* that portrays the historical *al-Andalus* (786-1492) as a place where a culture of tolerance and cooperation between people belonging to all three of the "Abrahamic religions" were prevalent.

These examples of texts recommended for reading demonstrate that the organization uses texts to promote its fundamental view that interreligious understanding and relationship-building hinge on being able to highlight that which is shared between the "Abrahamic religions." Additionally, these texts speak to Daughters of Abraham's educated demographic. The content of these "appropriate" texts challenge the organization's image as an apolitical book group because they convey the organization's perception of the "Abrahamic religions" and interactions between them as harmonious, even if this view is not necessarily historically or factually correct. These lists of "suitable" reading material, then, work to support the organization's overarching mission of fostering peaceful coexistence. Accordingly, Daughters subgroups might not be allowed to engage in overtly political debates, but the texts still carry underlying political sentiments. Explicitly, highlighting interfaith conviviality and that which is shared between the "Abrahamic religions" proclaims a particular view of these traditions as peaceful and that of their practitioners as tolerant. As such, the organization uses texts to both promote certain ideas and restrict the kinds of perspectives allowed in to the Daughters space, thereby controlling what learning takes place in the individual book groups.

Reflecting on the first text that all newly established Daughters groups must read together helps clarify how and to what extent the character of this interfaith book

group is controlled from the top-down.<sup>51</sup> Members must read the chapters on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam found in *The World's Religions: Our Great Wisdom Traditions* by Huston Smith described by the publishers as “the definite classic for introducing the essential elements and teachings of the worlds predominant faiths.” Moreover, the cover claims that the book provides “sympathetic descriptions of the various traditions, explaining how they work ‘from the inside.’” Thus, the first assigned book focuses on insider perspectives similar to *Daughters of Abraham*'s stress on discussing texts from a personal experiential point of view.

Discussion questions are also provided, which allude to the type of conversation expected to be had in the *Daughters* book groups. Specifically, the questions prompt personal understandings of the “Abrahamic religions.” They ask members to reflect on what the author got “right and wrong” about their tradition, and what they would add or change in emphasis. Additionally, the questions ask what was new, surprising, or in need of elaboration regarding the two unfamiliar religions (*Daughters of Abraham* 2016b). The focus is undoubtedly on individual understandings about these religious traditions and the variance in such personal viewpoints. Accordingly, the discussion questions convey the organization's mission to dismantle religious stereotypes by sharing personal experiences with religion when discussing texts on this subject matter. In fact, all of the twenty-one recommended first-year readings are claimed to “help build a common foundation for deeper understanding and discussion in future meetings” (*Daughters of Abraham* 2016c).<sup>52</sup> It would seem that at least initially there exists a great degree of control from the top-

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<sup>51</sup> This book is also compulsory reading for individual women joining an already established *Daughters* chapter.

<sup>52</sup> *Daughters of Abraham*'s first-year foundational reading list and discussion questions are available online:  
<https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbX0ZXR0ZG9mYXxneDpjZDFhMTY0ZTM0MTNmNDg> (Accessed: 28/11/2016).

down to make sure that the individual Daughters groups ascribe to a view of the “Abrahamic religions” and interactions between them as peaceful and positive. This perspective defines the Daughters book group character from the point of view of its leadership. This control happens by recommending texts expressing such sentiments and by providing guidelines for the facilitation of these. Accordingly, the top-down control involves both the content of the books read and the manner in which these are discussed.

Aside from providing discussion questions to guide – or control – new Daughters chapters, the organization also provides general rules for discussion. These guidelines prescribe how all Daughters subgroups should engage with the primary medium of texts. Specifically, Daughters book groups must adhere to both ground rules for discussion and eight principles for interreligious dialogue.<sup>53</sup> The first principle for interreligious dialogue states that individuals must enter into dialogue “to learn and grow, not to change the other” (Daughters of Abraham 2016e). Other principles state that no one is a spokesperson for their entire religion; instead, everyone must be able to define their individual understanding of their religious worldview and be respected for such (Daughters of Abraham 2016e). More pragmatically, the ground rules ask members to listen, to speak respectfully and from personal experience, to avoid criticizing another member or religious tradition, and to avoid interrupting or monopolizing the conversation (Daughters of Abraham 2016f).

These principles form the foundation for Daughters of Abraham’s identity as a book group. As the Daughters model clarifies, the Steering Committee only allows a new group to call itself “The Daughters of Abraham” if all members agree to adhere

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<sup>53</sup> Daughters of Abraham’s eight interreligious dialogue principles are available online: <https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbX0ZXR0ZG9mYXxneDoxYmI5ODAxMWY4NmNhNzY1> (Accessed: 23/11/2016).

to the ground rules from the onset (2016f). Still, the principles can also be put to use later on. For instance, one Daughters chapter, that has been meeting for several years, has resorted to commencing each meeting with reading out loud these rules for discussion due to a dispute about the stated superiority of Islam, a claim that clearly clashes with the organization's no-proselytization rule (2016f). Moreover, groups are required to have a discussion facilitator whose principal function it is to ensure that these organizational principles defining the Daughters of Abraham as a book group are adhered to. Usually the group leader takes on this role, but some groups assign a separate discussion facilitator whilst in other groups this role is shared. Thus, parameters are put in place to ensure that all Daughters chapters ascribe to a certain format for engaging with texts that support both the organizational model and mission.

Explicitly, the discussion guidelines prescribe how all Daughters chapters should engage with texts whilst the recommended reading lists limit the perspectives available on the "Abrahamic religions" and ascribe value to interreligious encounters. As such, these parameters serve to support the organization's vision of dismantling negative stereotypes and increasing respect for all of the "Abrahamic religions" (2016c). Accordingly, the control exercised from the top-down regarding available viewpoints on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and the facilitation of such understandings can be considered a push for peaceful coexistence. The Daughters of Abraham model claims this goal achievable through active participation in interreligious dialogue. By extension, the act of coming together to talk about perceived similarities between the "Abrahamic religions" is arguably a political statement in itself. Even if the Daughters of Abraham claims to be an apolitical book group because of its conversation focus on religion, the texts deemed suitable for

group discussion promote a particular worldview. A tension, therefore, exists between the Daughters' apolitical book group identity and the political sentiments conveyed in the texts discussed. Accordingly, there is an inbuilt tension in the Daughters of Abraham model because it claims an apolitical book group identity for the Daughters chapters when in fact it promotes a particular view on the "Abrahamic religions" and interactions between them, which speaks to political sentiments that are then promoted in the individual subgroups through the recommended "appropriate" reading material.

Daughters of Abraham's guidelines regarding "suitable" texts and how to discuss these seemingly limit the perspectives allowed in at subgroup meetings. These organizational parameters, therefore, control the kind of learning about religion that takes place in all of the Daughters chapters to some extent. However, the Daughters model does not elucidate the ways in which members negotiate these boundaries through their collective engagement with textual "others" that take the form of literary characters and/or the author. Following my analysis of the implications of the Daughters of Abraham model for the kind of learning taking place in the individual subgroups, I will now examine the ways in which a subgroup's collective engagement with textual "others" both unsettle and uphold the organizational control on the perspectives considered appropriate for inclusion. It will convey a more fluid impression of Daughters of Abraham's power dynamics and continue to challenge the organization's apolitical book group identity.

## *Unsettling Boundaries for Inclusion by Engaging with Multidimensional Textual*

### *“Others”*

Usually the main character is a Protestant woman or the main character is an Orthodox Jewish woman and that's just sort of her sphere. So that's what we'll talk about and sort of try to understand her experience. And then if it dovetails with the other women in the group or not, then, that gets discussed (Emily, Christian member).

The book gives us exposure to other people's experiences, and then we can compare ourselves to them. It almost brings like another character into the group (Elsie, Jewish member).

This section examines a Daughters subgroup's engagement with the primary medium of texts. It focuses on the connections and comparisons made by Daughters members to extra textual “others;” explicitly, between members' personal experiences with religion to those narrated in the text in question. I argue that members' appropriation of literary voices advances their engagement with the group's religious diversity because by doing so members are able to further explore and develop understandings of their own and alternative religious outlooks. Daughters members, then, go beyond comparing their individual experiences with religion in relation to each other to also contrasting these to textual voices. These literary “others” take the form of purely fictitious characters or, if discussing a memoir, real-life people represented on paper. Such real-life references provide a multilayered textual “other” with which to engage because the person in question is the author of the book who then takes on a fictitious dimension as the protagonist of the text. Consequently, when the Daughters groups discuss texts, their members encounter and engage religious diversity on multiple levels: in relation to each other and in relation to potentially multidimensional textual “others.” Thus, during discussions of texts members, to a certain degree, invite in

additional religious “others” to the Daughters space. It blurs boundaries for inclusion counting the organizational parameters for “suitable” perspectives. The following Daughters meeting about contemplative practices clarifies the multifaceted connections made when the individual Daughters groups engage with texts, and how these engagements challenge the organization’s claimed apolitical book group identity.

We arrive at a fall meeting in a leafy suburb west of Boston where five Jewish women, three Christians, and three Muslim Daughters are discussing their experiences with partaking in meditation practices by making comparisons to each other and to the protagonist’s story recounted in the memoir, *Surprisingly Happy: An Atypical Religious Memoir* by Rabbi Sheila Weinberg. The memoir concerns Weinberg’s enduring search for a viable religious identity. It takes the reader on her religious journey from her childhood to her youth in the 1960s until present-day through a focus on her struggle with addiction, her roles as wife; mother; and grandmother, and her work as a rabbi. The book highlights Weinberg’s explorations of various religions and explains her choice to use Buddhist meditation to advance her practice of Judaism, her birth religion. The memoir, then, is a consciously chosen self-representation of Weinberg’s religious journey. The following scene from group C’s autumn meeting shows the connections made by participants to Weinberg’s story.

“I know exactly what you mean!’ was my first thought when I read about her zigzag journey in and out of Judaism towards other spiritual practices,” Philippa, a Christian Steering Committee member, interjected. “Her religious journey made sense to me. I think it is human. It’s universal, risking to step outside your comfort zone, I very much identify with that.” Philippa continued,

Like her [the protagonist] I mix meditation with my Christian faith. Initially I was very very hesitant because I just didn't get it. But then this small voice within kept telling me to just go! Go explore the unknown. So years ago now when my church offered a meditation session, I went because I kind of had to with my responsibilities there as the activities coordinator. Privately I rolled my eyes: having to sit in silence with other people for thirty minutes! Really!? But then wow! It was such a powerful experience, and that was so unexpected. It just made sense to me, like it did for her. So I kept doing it.

Philippa, a lawyer around sixty who has always been very active in her local Protestant community, expresses how she empathizes with the protagonist's experience with missing and then finding a spiritual connection to God by venturing outside one's primary religious tradition. Philippa legitimizes her decision to do so through a discovered connection to the textual character. She collectively affirms both her approach to and understanding of Christianity by voicing these in *Daughters of Abraham's* interfaith setting. "That resonated with me too," Tamarah, a middle-aged rabbi and interfaith chaplain, said. She continued to explain,

Not so much the meditation, although that is part of Judaism – *shiviti* it's called where we use candles to contemplate God's names – but because I use art and music or words to contemplate God in both my personal practice and when teaching about Judaism. So I identified with her use of chants or repetition of words during meditation (Tamarah).

"It made me wonder how that compares to other traditions?" Tamarah asked her fellow group members. "It never occurred to me that meditation could be part of the Jewish tradition so it was that realization that 'oh, they do that too,'" Lillian, a former head of her Catholic community's religious education, expressed. "God's presence is in everything so you don't have to search," Aya, a middle-aged Muslim Steering Committee member, contributed, "but *Sufis*, in their *dhikr* ceremonies, they use music and repeat words to get closer to God by the annihilation of self," she added based on her experience with growing up in India. "That's similar to my yoga practice!"

Buddhism is all about the annihilation of self,” Caroline, the group’s self-defined seeker, volunteered.<sup>54</sup> “It’s in *kabbalah* too, the annihilation of one’s ego is necessary in order to be unified with God. It’s the idea or mystery that we are all one,” Tamarah added. “Saint Paul wrote that God is one,” another Christian Steering Committee member offered. Prompted by the protagonist’s Buddhist meditation practice, the women present took turns sharing their individual experiences and knowledge of contemplative practices within and outside the “Abrahamic religions” framework. All were taking great care to let everyone have their say, apologizing if they unintentionally interrupted one another. Aya continued the reflections,

I think that her story is very much about the tools that she has found to become who she is. Combining being with doing. It’s human to look for self-awareness. It’s like me being Muslim. Performing the *haji* made me a little bit more aware of my own religious being because it’s about the inward you. It has stayed with me. It becomes part of who you are, how you think, how you act in your relations with others. So her feeling happier and more at peace as she grows older through her dedication and faith and willingness to find her self through her faith, that speaks to me so well.

“Yes! I feel like I’m learning to be an adult in my faith by allowing myself to individually interpret my religion rather than blindly relying on theological rules,” Lillian stated, resulting in much nodding from everyone around her.

Sheila Weinberg’s memoir about her religious journey clearly resonated with group C’s members. The conversation flowed as the Daughters related their individual engagements with Christianity, Judaism, and Islam to one another and to the textual “other.” They connect with her story based on personal experiences with partaking in contemplative practices that have encouraged greater self-understanding, or based on general knowledge about meditative practices within and outside the “Abrahamic

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<sup>54</sup> Caroline’s seeker identity is examined in chapter 6.

religions” framework. All the women highlight the personal experiential basis for these claims to insider knowledge. Some of the contemplative practices and strands mentioned – *kabbalah*, *Sufis’ dhikr*, *shiviti* – fall outside mainstream organized religion. Similarly, the protagonist’s use of Buddhist meditative practices to nurture her Jewish identity and Philippa’s comparable experience within a Christian framework can be considered “unorthodox.” It highlights that the Daughters’ engagements with texts center on individual interpretations of religion and that members negotiate understandings of the “Abrahamic religions” to suit their self-understandings both within and outside Daughters meetings. Furthermore, the fact that Buddhist practices are discussed despite both the physical Daughters space and the group’s book categories being confined to the “Abrahamic traditions” disrupts the organization’s rigid boundaries for what and who can be included. It shows that even if rules are invoked from the top-down regarding “appropriate” reading material and so “suitable” perspectives for inclusion in the Daughters’ space, subgroups do not necessarily strictly adhere to these guidelines. Finally, it establishes that the texts read play an important role towards determining the parameters for this interfaith book group. In fact, the texts chosen and the ways in which the individual Daughters chapters engage with these can break down organizational boundaries for inclusion. Accordingly, Daughters of Abraham’s power dynamics are more complex and fluid than the model for its apolitical book group identity conveys.

At the same time, the conversation focus on contemplative practices appears in line with the organization’s self-image as an apolitical book group because meditation practices can be incorporated into all of the “Abrahamic religions.” Additionally, engaging in Buddhist meditation practices does not require an individual to self-define as Buddhist or partake in other Buddhist practices. Finally, Judaism,

Christianity, and Islam all contain contemplative elements as recognized by the Daughters members. Consequently, this conversation topic is inclusive. Moreover, the act of meditation is peaceful and its purpose is achieving “inner peace,” a state of non-judgment of self and others achieved by gaining greater self-knowledge (Hendrick 2010). Meditation alone cannot achieve this goal, though; it requires compassion, “right” understanding, and “right” action (Hendrick 2010). The Daughters of Abraham embodies the impetus to take action towards peaceful coexistence and to gain greater understanding of self and the “other.” Explicitly, the organization’s overarching sentiment is that interreligious encounters can lead to not necessarily “inner peace,” but “outer peace.” In other words, the act of partaking in a Daughters of Abraham book group is a political statement about the need for interreligious understanding and the view that such understanding occurs through interreligious dialogue such as that facilitated when the Daughters engage with texts. In a sense, the conversation about contemplative practices, therefore, epitomizes the political sentiment underlying Daughters of Abraham’s self-image as an apolitical book group.

Moreover, the organizational parameters for both “suitable” reading material and its discussion raise the question of to what extent the textual others allowed in to the Daughters book groups are in fact “other.” Explicitly, the extra-textual other is “other” because s/he is not a consistent part of the physical Daughters space. Still, as the discussion of Weinberg’s memoir conveys, the viewpoints and sentiments revealed about religion in the texts typically align not only with the organizational parameters for “proper” subject material, but also with members’ personal values. Accordingly, because the textual “others” commonly speak to insider attitudes, the outsider status of these “others” is lessened.

The themes discussed in relation to Weinberg's memoir illustrates how the organization places great importance on book choices in order to ensure that the texts read support its self-representation as an apolitical book group. The women belonging to this Daughters chapter had chosen to read this memoir because Mona, one of the Jewish members, knew the author personally and so had recommended the book. The group discussion about Weinberg's religious journey displays a complex engagement with a multidimensional textual "other." Long explains that book group discussions are "intersubjective creations" that move beyond the assigned book to consider "the personal connections and meanings each has found in the book, and the new connections with the book, with inner experience, and with the perspectives of the other participants that emerge within the discussion" (2003: 144). Consequently, as this group conversation illuminates, book discussions involve the navigation of a range of interpersonal dynamics both between members and in relation to extra textual "others." Accordingly, when engaging with texts, Daughters members can make interreligious connections to both physically present and literary "others." Multiple interreligious encounters, therefore, take place when Daughters subgroups engage with texts, which contribute to informing members' understandings of their self and the "other." The connections made regarding meditation practices between members as well as between members and the author/protagonist at group C's meeting demonstrate this dynamic.

Since the main character in this example is both the protagonist and the author of the book, this extra textual voice should be considered a double literary "other;" explicitly because it is simultaneously a real person and a fictitious or constructed character. Moreover, in relation to this particular book discussion about Sheila Weinberg's memoir, the textual "other" had an additional third layer because of

Mona's personal connection to the author. Mona knew Rabbi Weinberg through her job as a cantor at the local temple. As a result, the eleven women's interreligious encounter with the author/protagonist became three-dimensional. Mona contributed her subjective opinion about the author's personality. Specifically, she claimed that the memoir genuinely portrays, "who she is at her core, her humanness, her imperfect self." This personal connection downplays the literary element of this particular textual "other." It confuses boundaries between fiction and reality. Consequently, it humanizes Weinberg to an even greater degree than can be accomplished from her being the author of a book depicting her personal religious deliberations. In a sense, the author/main character becomes present during the book discussion due to Mona's personal anecdotes about her. For the approximate hour and a half that the book discussion lasted, then, the Daughters opened up their space to an outsider who for that brief period of time became an insider, to some extent. Therefore, whilst the Daughters model draws boundaries as to who and what sentiments are "suitable" for inclusion in these interfaith book groups, the Daughters space is, nevertheless, temporarily extended to textual outsiders and their perspectives on religion month after month. Since Daughters meetings are structured around the reading of new texts for every meeting, novel textual voices are continuously invited in to the Daughters space. This constant stream of literary "others" ensures that members gain fresh perspectives on religion with which to explore individual understandings of the "Abrahamic traditions." Moreover, it disrupts rigid notions about insiders and outsiders. In this case, the new perspective presented by the textual "other" generated feelings of connectedness between the Daughters members based on meditation practices found in Buddhism, a religion otherwise excluded from the Daughters book groups.

The sentiment of connectedness between members of group C was extended to the memoir's central character, but only to a degree because the textual "other" could not actively engage in the conversation. That is, the character's story can prompt conversation amongst the Daughters members present, but the character cannot physically participate and, therefore, cannot elaborate on the narrative or contribute to the book discussion. Thus, whilst textual engagements can unsettle the organizational parameters for "appropriate" perspectives, inclusion of outsiders only goes so far. Still, whilst the textual "others" cannot answer back, in a sense, they have agency because their stories shape the Daughters members' meaning-making processes. The textual "others" influence the kind of connections that group members make to each other when, each month, they share their thoughts on the themes narrated in a given book. Accordingly, the literary voices shape group meetings in terms of content and intragroup dynamics. As such, they have agency. This does not mean that the readers passively receive a text's discourses, but it does raise questions regarding agency or the role of text vis-à-vis its readers. Specifically, who is active and who is passive when it comes to delivering and receiving messages about religion expressed in a text?

Talal Asad sheds light on this conundrum in writing about how Islam has been depicted in the media following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. Asad depicts two contradictory views of agency as it relates to (religious) texts and its readers. He writes,

The present discourse about the roots of 'Islamic terrorism' in Islamic texts trails two intriguing assumptions: (a) the Qur'anic text will force Muslims to be guided by it; and (b) that Christians and Jews are free to interpret the Bible as they please. For no good reason, these assumptions take up contradictory positions between text and reader: on the one hand, the religious *text* is held to be determinate, fixed in its sense, and having the power to bring about particular beliefs (that in turn give rise to particular behavior) among those exposed to it – rendering readers passive. On the other hand, the religious *reader* is taken to be

actively engaged in constructing the meanings of texts in accordance with changing social circumstances – so the texts are passive (Asad 2003: 10-1).

Asad's analysis is valuable in that it illuminates that both text and readers can occupy active and passive roles in meaning-making processes. Textual characters have agency because its readers evaluate the sentiments expressed in a text. This is especially true in a book group where such ideas are discussed in length, even more so in the Daughters of Abraham because of the group's emphasis on personal knowledge and on relating individual experiences with religion as inspired by a text's content and/or characters. Consequently, it appears a "give-and-take" relationship is formed between text and readers in the sense that the author and literary characters communicate certain messages that are engaged by the reader. As Asad goes on to stress,

The way people engage with such complex and multifaceted texts, translating their sense and relevance, is a complicated business involving disciplines and traditions of reading, habit, and temperament, as well as the perceived demands of particular social situations (2003: 10).

The multidimensional textual "others" that are allowed in to the Daughters space at every monthly meeting have more agency than might appear at first sight.

Consequently, definitions of insiders and outsiders become blurred during Daughters meetings, and the organizational parameters for texts, looking to control the sentiments on religion that subgroups can be exposed to, can seemingly be unsettled by the text itself. That is, the top-down control on texts is unsettled both by textual "others" and members' engagements with these in the individual Daughters subgroups.

Ultimately, the interreligious encounters with textual “others” at Daughters meetings contribute to advancing reflections on similarities and differences between the individual members’ religious worldviews. In the group discussion about Weinberg’s religious memoir, the ambiguity surrounding the textual “other” generated comparisons to the narrated theme of turning and returning to religion. These comparisons were made between the Daughters present as well as between members and the protagonist/author. In doing so, the Daughters extended their interfaith space to a textual outsider who practically became another Daughters member with whom to explore understandings of the “Abrahamic religions.” Overall, this example has clarified that during group discussions of texts, engagements in interreligious relations become multidimensional. Moreover, ideas about insiders and outsiders are blurred because literary “others” are invited in to contribute fresh perspectives on religion in what should be considered a complex interreligious encounter. Finally, the top-down control on texts is unsettled both by the textual characters and the group’s engagement with these. Accordingly, Daughters of Abraham’s power dynamics are more complex and fluid than conveyed by the model framing it as an apolitical book group.

***Conclusion: Using Texts to Define and Upset Boundaries Framing the Daughters of Abraham as an Apolitical Book Group***

This chapter has spoken to Daughters of Abraham’s self-understanding as tied up with texts about the “Abrahamic religions” and examined questions concerning issues of power and boundary work as a result of its book group identity. The

historical and academic contextualization of women's shared reading practices showed that the development of knowledge and self-awareness taking place in the Daughters of Abraham has been a consistent feature of book groups throughout history. It helped clarify the distinctive traits of Daughters of Abraham as a book group within the contemporary American setting where book group participation is immensely popular. I analyzed the degree of top-down control over "appropriate" reading material and "proper" discussion of such. This control challenges the group's self-image as an apolitical book group and raises questions as to the boundaries for participation in this encounter. In this connection, I demonstrated how subgroup engagement with texts opens up the Daughters space to outsiders. However, I also showed that these textual "others" to a great degree can be considered insiders because the attitudes promoted in the texts selected for consumption tend to be in line with both the organization's prescriptions for "appropriate" conversation matters and members' personal values. Even if textual "others" have agency to influence what is discussed at Daughters meetings and how members relate or understand each other, the texts, to some extent, also support the maintenance of the organization's image as an apolitical book group concerned with promoting peaceful coexistence. What is clear is that Daughters of Abraham's power dynamics are more complex and fluid than conveyed by the organizational model. Furthermore, in these textually mediated interreligious encounters, Daughters members are provided with additional perspectives on the "Abrahamic religions," which contribute to nuancing their understandings of self and the "other."

The next chapter delves into the various ways in which Daughters of Abraham's women-only demography influences engagement with the group's religious diversity and the resulting learning about religious self and the "other."

## CHAPTER 5: Mothers, Sisters, Daughters, Wives: Performing Gender Across Religious Divides

Lucy: It was Bathsheba's fault for being too beautiful; the men simply had to seduce her!

Lydia: You are getting it from the male perspective! The book shows how Christian women were supposed to act in mid-17<sup>th</sup> century New England according to patriarchal religious teachings.

Ellen: So what defined a woman in this time period according to the book's Christian sources...? Eve does not follow men's direction, which is bad. Jael kills you if you don't follow her lead. Bathsheba is a seductress who is easily co-opted and, therefore, should be kept in the home. She is the paragon housewife.

Deborah: Women were taught to be like Bathsheba back then.

Sharon: It's all about the lens that you're looking at it from, though. My husband quotes the passage from the Hebrew Bible about women's housework every *Shabbat*. It praises how women do the impossible every week by keeping a Jewish household.

Seated in a circle in Ellen's living room one Muslim woman, seven Christians, and five Jewish Daughters were discussing that fall meeting's designated "Christian" book, *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England 1650-1750* by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. Although published for a general audience, the book is written in an academic fashion. It contains an overwhelmingly large number of footnotes since the book is based on historical sources about the lives of women in Colonial New England. Specifically, the book depicts both the limitations imposed on women by religious patriarchal teachings in terms of social roles available to them as well as the female characters' individual navigations of such socially enforced restrictions. The author presents these performances of gender by making connections between the historical life stories to Biblical texts about women that were commonly known at the time.

The Daughters members, gathered in one of Boston's intellectual suburbs, are not convinced by the patriarchal view on women promoted in mid-17-18<sup>th</sup> century America, though. All of group A's members are strong-willed women, most self-defined feminists. The majority of the women present have impressive résumés as academics, doctors, lawyers, and real estate agents. Many of them are retired, but they have played their part in scratching at the glass ceiling. The ironic tone indicates that the women consider the three characteristics assigned to women as seductresses, murderers, or disobeyers to be ludicrous. None of the women understand themselves according to these limiting female characteristics. It is not the social or religious framework within which they operate – “women were taught to be like Bathsheba *back then.*”

The collective recognition of changes to the social fabric in terms of gender expectations along with a more personal understanding of women's past and present social positions speak to the Daughters' all-women group dynamic. As a collective, Daughters members reject limitations based on generic social ideas about gender imposed in the past and present. Their dismissal of these assigned attributes is enabled by their personal experiences of navigating conventional social and religious ideas about acceptable female behavior. That is, members' experiences with women's conventional roles as nurturers, wives, mothers, sisters, and daughters enable this shared recognition that a more nuanced framework is needed in order to account for their own experiences as well as to complicate more generic views about what defines a woman and a man, respectively. Members connect across religious lines by refusing to be defined according to patriarchal religious teachings about the supposed female nature. Their reflections show that value is ascribed to exclusively female experiences with religion during book discussions, and so that Daughters members together can

validate women's position within the "Abrahamic religions" despite their structural frameworks being primarily male-dominated. Whilst the Daughters collectively reject confining definitions of "womanhood," they also demonstrate that there is room for diversity in terms of how individual members navigate contemporary gender relations and ancient religious texts on the matter.<sup>55</sup> As Sharon contends, such seemingly patriarchal teachings can be altered to accommodate a more nuanced and positive view of women's conventional roles as nurturers and housewives. Sharon enjoys preparing the *Shabbat* meal. "It is about *the lens*." This discussion indicates that Daughters of Abraham's all-women gender dynamic facilitates explorations of destabilized notions of "womanhood." Moreover, the recognition that women's social and religious positions are up for discussion speaks to the notion of gender as a fluid category.

This chapter concerns the gender performances taking place in the Daughters of Abraham. I contend that the all-women gender dynamic prompts members to discuss issues particular to being a religious woman, and that sharing personal experiences of occupying conventional gender roles as mothers, wives, nurturers, and daughters works to downplay religious diversity. Accordingly, references to experiences that are uniquely female enable members to go beyond the focus on religious identity categories, and so provide them with more nuanced understandings of each other as individuals.<sup>56</sup> In other words, members get to know one another not

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<sup>55</sup> It is important to recognize that no common identity exists that can be applied to specific identity factors, for example there is no universal "womanhood." Accordingly, one should not assume that an individual would behave in a certain way because of gender, religion, ethnicity, and so on. Instead, it is important to bear in mind individual particularities, which may align well with dominant conceptions of religious and/or gender identities etc., but equally may not. Moreover, it is worth noting that apart from a couple of Daughters members who identify as queer, members predominantly understand their gender identity to be in line with the traditional division based on biological sex even if they creatively navigate conventional gender roles as accentuated in this chapter.

<sup>56</sup> I understand the concept of identity to signify the "emotionally charged discursive and changeable description of oneself" that is continuously re-evaluated in relation to others and a given sociocultural

simply as Jews, Christians, or Muslims, but as Aya, Cecily, Gabriella, and so on. Furthermore, I consider the implications of uses of gendered terminology by individual members and the organization. I use Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (1990; 1993) to account for the varied engagements with issues of gender taking place in the Daughters of Abraham because this theoretical framework allows for ambivalences and so provides a nuanced view of such explorations. The following section introduces Butler's theory of gender performativity before discussing it in relation to group A's meeting about *Good Wives*.

### ***Connecting Across Religious Lines by Discussing Dynamic Approaches to Women's Conventional Gender Roles***

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a useful framework to account for the engagements with gender taking place in the Daughters of Abraham because it can illuminate members' nuanced understandings of gender and fluid performances of women's conventional gender roles.<sup>57</sup> Butler argues that both "sex"

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context (Barker 2008: 216). Moreover, identity is comprised of several factors like gender, religion, and ethnicity, which are more or less salient (Lawrence and King 2008: 252). Chapters 6 and 8 elaborate on the concept of identity as it pertains to both individual and collective identification.

<sup>57</sup> Judith Butler positions her theory within the wider framework of feminist theory. Specifically, her theory of gender performativity initially introduced in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990) expands on Simone de Beauvoir's dualist self/other framework. In *The Second Sex* (1949) Beauvoir argues that a binary power dynamic of man as the dominant "Self" and woman as his insignificant "Other" exists due to patriarchal social structures with the unjust consequence of women being considered weaker than men in all senses of the word (2011: 6). Woman's "otherness" limits female self-assertion and positions women as lesser than men. Being "othered" means that individual women are conflated as one, their individual voices and selves ignored. Women are thus objectified or rendered passive due to their position as other; hence, this designation restricts women's agency. Moreover, if women fail to adhere to gender conventions, they are socially "othered." To an extent, Beauvoir's gender dynamic is still applicable today, but it is not sufficiently nuanced to comprehensively account for women's reality where the notion of gender and gender relations are unstable categories. Such fluidity can largely be explained by the rapid social changes that have taken place since Beauvoir wrote her feminist theory in 1949. The patriarchal gender dynamics that clearly outlined and prescribed female and male traits as well as social roles as confined to the private or public sphere, respectively, have been unsettled. Consequently, women and men have a greater range of choice in these areas. Gender identities are in

and “gender” are socially constructed terms. Subject formation is, therefore, “dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms” (Butler 1993: 23). I disagree with Butler’s argument that “sex” is simply a social construction because the term describes actual physical differences between men and women. However, the term itself is obviously constructed in order to depict such biological differences. In patriarchal societies, discourses have been constructed that use the biological differences of “sex” to limit women’s agency. Such discourses relate to the culturally constructed term “gender,” which has generally been employed to justify a male-dominated power dynamic. Specifically, Butler argues, gender can be considered “the effect of a regulatory regime of gender differences in which genders are divided and hierarchized under constraint” (1993: 21). Individuals repeat gender norms assigned to femininity or masculinity, which produce and destabilize the notion of subject. Thus, an individual performs gender, which is necessary to “become viable as a ‘one’” (Butler 1993: 22-3). “No subject is ‘free’ to stand outside these norms;” therefore, agency is always negotiated within the gender power matrix (Butler 1993: 22). Accordingly, gender can be perceived as an assignment that is never performed according to expectation, and individuals can subvert “the embodiment of certain ideals of femininity and masculinity” as a result (Butler 1993: 22).

The gender power matrix, along with its concomitant dissimilar norms for women and men, makes it compulsory for individuals to perform gender, but such performance never occurs according to expectations. Individuals can, therefore, subvert prescribed gender roles and characteristics. Women and men, thus, ambiguously struggle with gender. That is, individuals affirm, negotiate, and subvert conventional gender expectations. Socially and religiously designated female traits

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flux. Contemporary gender performances are, therefore, complex yet indispensable as elucidated by Butler’s theory of gender performativity.

and subject positions, therefore, can and will inevitably be challenged. Arguably, Butler's theory of gender performativity can be extended to involve other identity factors like religion or ethnicity because these are also performed within a social power hierarchy of discursive practices. Consequently, Butler's framework indicates that all identity factors are continuously altered, and so the concept of identity is dynamic. Chapters 6 and 8 elaborate on processes of identity formation as it pertains to individuals and groups.

Butler's theory of gender performativity allows for ambiguity and so a nuanced view of explorations of gender such as those taking place in the Daughters of Abraham. At the Daughters' fall meeting about *Good Wives*, Deborah, the designated discussion facilitator, continued the conversation by asking whether women's roles had changed much since the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. Ellen, a forty-something academic specializing in Christian feminist thought, took the prompt answering,

Sexism is still rampant. *The Atlantic* published that article: 'Closing the Confidence Gap' about discrimination of women in the workplace.<sup>58</sup> The first time a woman does something is still important. We need to change that template so restraints based on gender disappear. We need a different kind of role model.

"So what if we were to add a section to the book and fill in the years 1990-2014, how would we define contemporary religious women?" the discussion facilitator prompted. Ellen continued, "for me, it would be about relations: to self – my career; to others – being a wife, mom, daughter, friend; and to God." Esther added, "I would say it's about independence, interdependence, and something spiritual." "The

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<sup>58</sup> The mentioned *Atlantic* article "Closing the Gender Gap" by Katty Kay and Claire Shipman is available online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/05/the-confidence-gap/359815/> (Accessed: 29/11/2016).

paradigm is no longer being either a wife and mother or being out there in the world,” Deborah agreed.

The Daughters’ individual definitions of what it means to be a religious woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century highlight the fluidity of gender roles attested to in Butler’s theoretical framework. Their personal character elucidates that Daughters members actively engage in exploring and defining their religious identity individually, an identity that is then voiced and examined in this collective forum. The fact that Ellen and Esther both define a contemporary religious woman in strikingly similar veins is noteworthy because of their different religious affiliations – Ellen is Christian and Esther is Jewish. Nevertheless, their understandings of the key characteristics defining a contemporary religious woman – the self/independence, others/interdependence, and God/something spiritual – are comparable. Both, then, provide a multilayered and relational understanding of a contemporary religious woman. The religious diversity, that might have generated diverse notions thereof, is bridged by their shared gender identity.<sup>59</sup> As Deborah’s follow-up remark elucidates, being a religious woman no longer depends on choosing between the private or public sphere. Daughters of Abraham’s gender dynamic generates empathy based on the particular and similar challenges that women face within social and religious frameworks. Difference of religious worldview becomes less important in these collective explorations of women’s conventional gender roles precisely because members can empathize with each other based on such gendered positions.

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<sup>59</sup> Ellen is part of a Liberal Protestant congregation whilst Esther identifies as Reform Jewish. Consequently, they are both part of religious communities promoting similar sociopolitical attitudes, which might have contributed to their comparable understandings of what defines a contemporary religious woman. Thus, sociopolitical values can also contribute to highlighting common ground spanning across religious differences.

The Daughters were not finished discussing gender norms, though. Lydia, a Christian member and retired doctor, continued, “we have to make room for other conceptions of gender...for a continuum of gender identities, for the in-between of man and woman.” “Children still prefer women to do the cooking and run the house,” Sedrah, who runs her son’s household, protested. Ellen immediately objected,

Not in this household! Pete [husband] cooks and cleans. He is as much the nurturer as I am...for years, I felt guilty about combining the running of a home with going to work. I felt that I was supposed to choose one or the other. I felt disrespectful to my mom because she chose to be a housewife, she chose motherhood. But I chose to share it.

Lydia’s statement about the need for a more fluid conception of gender captures Butler’s view of gender as culturally constructed and therefore dynamic. Whilst the members perform designated female roles as mothers and housewives, they not only value such roles, some also approach them in more unconventional manners, for instance Ellen shares women’s traditional role as the primary nurturer with her husband. Whilst the Daughters members could all relate to being mothers and housewives, individual approaches to such conventional female positions vary as exemplified by Ellen’s objection to Sedrah’s idea of women as the *de facto* nurturer. The fact that nuances of gender are explicated broadens members’ understanding of such roles and of their fellow group members. Explicitly, this is the case because members reveal personal understandings and experiences with an inevitable aspect of life that is not necessarily related to the group’s key conversation topic of religion. Moreover, the revealed variance in approaches to conventional gender roles elucidates the dynamic character of the concept of gender explained by Butler. Both Ellen and Sedrah base their opinions about perceived typical female and male roles on personal experience. Their difference of opinion demonstrates the idea that gender is constantly

negotiated and potentially subverted (Butler 1993: 22). The generational gap between Ellen in her early forties and Sedrah who is in her seventies might help explain their dissimilar positions. Additionally, Ellen comes from a very liberal part of America whereas Sedrah is a first-generation immigrant from Pakistan whose primary roles throughout her adult life have been being a mother and a housewife. Thus, cultural differences and different emphasis in the women's private lives might also help explain this disagreement about deemed female traits. In other words, whilst variances are brought out in terms of individual approaches to women's conventional roles as mothers and wives, these appear a matter of generational differences or personal values, not the interfaith character of the group.

Another line of discussion that evening highlights the social changes that have influenced commonly held perceptions of gender roles, including the varying degree of freedom that women have held in terms of defining their self outside prescribed social positions. Ellen started this conversation by observing, "all that the main character wrote in her diary was her household chores. I've kept a journal since I was fifteen, but I've never recorded my housework." Her reflection prompted Esther's statement:

It raises the question: 'how do you define yourself?' I was a housewife for a few years and that was meaningful to me then, but when I was out with my husband and people asked about my work, it was crystal clear that 'working' as a housewife and being a mom held absolutely no currency. Instead, I had to acknowledge my self and ascertain that being a housewife was a dignified use of my time. Once I got my PhD as a clinical doctor, well that was a completely different matter!

Sedrah could relate to Esther, "I take care of my son's household and his kids. When we have guests over, they always ask me: 'what do you do all day?' – I run around all day, and I just cooked your dinner! So, I've also had to internally value my work."

Still, Lydia contended, “our grandmothers were phenomenal housewives, and they were appreciated by their children.” “Were they?” Emma questioned. “Some women are depressed in those roles. My mom would have liked to be an English teacher, but it wasn’t the norm so she stayed at home. I mean, what choice did they have?!”

The Jewish, Christian, and Muslim members’ personal experiences with the general under-appreciation for hardworking housewives and mothers in American society enable a connection based on such conventional gender roles. Both Esther and Sedrah, therefore, speak of the need to individually acknowledge the value of performing such roles in contrast to work outside the home that carries with it social status and, consequently, is readily appreciated. Despite their respective Jewish and Muslim identities, Esther and Sedrah’s experiences are similar. In this instance, then, the difference in religious worldview is irrelevant. Moreover, Esther and Sedrah’s articulations of their personal experiences with being housewives and (grand-) mothers enable their fellow group members to validate their worth. For example, Sharon explained that she realized how challenging both housekeeping and parenting is once she became a mother, yet she neglected to appreciate her own mother’s work. Sharon’s reflection implicitly acknowledges her fellow Daughters members because it voices the challenging nature of performing distinct female roles. In Daughters of Abraham’s women-only setting, then, Esther and Sedrah’s individual assertions of the value attached to being mothers and housewives are amplified by collective expressions of empathy. Furthermore, the Daughters recognize nuances in the performance of women’s conventional gender roles – some women find contentment as mothers or housewives whereas others, like Emma’s mother, are miserable. This discussion, then, makes connections based on shared experiences with conventional female roles. It also speaks to the dynamic performance thereof as outlined by

Butler's theoretical framework. In this instance, the women-only dynamic enables members to both emphasize and compare personal experiences with distinctively female roles. It seemingly bridges or at least downplays the group's religious diversity. In turn, discussions of women's socially and/or religiously prescribed roles provide participants with more holistic understandings of their fellow group members. Expressly, because such conversations illuminate aspects of members' lives that are not necessarily tied to their religious identities, which are otherwise stressed in this interreligious encounter.<sup>60</sup>

Evidently, the Daughters do not let patriarchal interpretations of a religious woman like those depicted in *Good Wives* dominate their self-understandings. Rather, they navigate both religiously and socially imposed gender characteristics individually and collectively, and in the process they arrive at multilayered understandings of what it means to be a religious woman in contemporary American society. Butler's concept allows us to see the performative aspects of gender when Daughters members use their interfaith membership to explore and validate particularly female experiences with religion. In the process, the connection based on shared experiences with performing conventional gender roles downplays the group's religious diversity.

An important prelude to the group discussion of *Good Wives* is the socializing aspect that commences every Daughters meeting because gender performances also take place during this part. Chapter 3 explored the important role of food in building community and fostering interreligious relations by way of structuring intragroup dynamics. Besides this structural function, I contend that the presence of food also

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<sup>60</sup> This example further attests to the key role played by the book in the Daughters of Abraham examined in chapters 3 and 4, specifically in terms of providing a guide for engaging with religious diversity or even bridging such difference by prompting discussion based on personal experiences.

expresses women's conventional role as nurturers and, as such, is one type of gender performance that occurs in this interreligious encounter. The nurturing role is associated with motherhood because women have traditionally been in charge of the domestic domain involving the raising and caretaking of children. This role, therefore, entails responsibility for cooking family meals. Whilst everyone eats their individual family dinners before attending Daughters meetings, an associated element is still present – members typically take turns bringing an assortment of snacks. Consequently, the notion of taking care of others by way of nourishment is still implied, albeit not in an elaborate manner such as, for instance, cooking an entire meal for a meeting would suggest. As a result, the women perform their conventional nurturing role only to an extent. Yet, it is a role that is shared irrespective of religious affiliation and, consequently, this common conventional female role serves to demonstrate sameness between members, which can contribute to downplaying a focus on religious difference.

Aside from implying ideas of nurture, food works to express hospitality. Both Esther, the member responsible for bringing food that evening, and Ellen, who was hosting the meeting, repeatedly encouraged everyone to “dig in” to the several types of hummus, carrots, cheese, grapes, and trail mix adorning the designated dining table. Seeing as women traditionally have been the ones in charge of the household, they have also been responsible for making guests feel welcome in their home. The availability of food at Daughters meetings can be viewed in the same vein – women performing their traditional role as head of the private sphere. It demonstrates Butler's idea that no one can refuse to perform gender (1993: 22). Furthermore, it shows that when women perform in accordance with conventional gender expectations, it is not necessarily an expression of oppression. It is a much more complex and nuanced

process. Individuals, then, have a choice in terms of the ways in which they perform gender even if they are compelled to do so (Butler 1993: 22). In this instance, performing women's conventional role as nurturer generally works to express care and hospitality, a welcome that is extended across religious divides.

Overall, it is clear that Daughters of Abraham's all-women gender dynamic prompts conversations about particularly female experiences. Such subjects are possible to discuss in depth due to members' common experiences with issues related to being a woman in contemporary American society. The Daughters' explorations of women's conventional gender roles illustrate performances of gender based on members' comparing their personal experiences with occupying such positions. It highlights that particularly female experiences work to connect Daughters members across religious divides. As such, conversations about women's conventional gender roles allow members to explore and stress their worth as women of religion in relational processes with women from within and outside their respective religious tradition. The group's religious diversity appears overlooked when group discussion concerns particularly female experiences because participants can all relate to such gendered subject matters irrespective of religious belonging. Conversations about exclusively female experiences illuminate commonalities between members. Since shared experiences are powerful means with which to connect with others, such displays of sameness aid the formation of interreligious relationships. Finally, members get to know each other as more than their religious identity category by discussing such gendered subject matters.

Aside from connecting across religious lines with basis in negotiating women's socially and religiously prescribed gender roles, other gender performances also take place in the Daughters of Abraham. Specifically, the terms "sister" and

“daughter” employed by members to refer to each other and their interfaith community as a whole reveal the importance of gender for the kind of interreligious relations created in the Daughters of Abraham as well as its role in maintaining such relationships. The following section examines how these female-specific terms work to create impressions of individual belonging in this interreligious encounter by downplaying religious diversity.

### *The Significance of Gendered Terminology for Building Interreligious*

#### *Relationships*

Louise: What do you think of the group name ‘The Daughters of Abraham?’

Laura: I like it. Because it’s relational and it connects us to the past by being daughters. Instead of ‘Women of Abraham,’ there is this seed that can continue on (...) if it were just ‘Women of Abraham,’ when they are done; they are done. We all get old. We don’t want to meet anymore. But ‘Daughters of Abraham’ sort of implies that there is going to be another generation after us.

Laura, a retired Protestant minister, emphasizes the relational and generational components of the group name. Both are based on members’ common identity as women. Specifically, present and future Daughters members share the experience of being daughters. The reference to the female-specific role as daughter in the group name, then, implies a common bond that extends beyond religious differences.

From the moment that I learnt about the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups, I had been intrigued by the group name. Why had a women’s group decided to reference a patriarch in its name? I wanted to know the story. What I did not know when I packed my suitcase for Boston was that my question was to be answered early on, in fact during my second fieldwork interview that had been arranged by way of an email exchange across the Atlantic. The Christian founding member, Mary, had

agreed to meet me at an Italian restaurant in Cambridge. We found ourselves overlooking a large brown stone building that turned out to be the UCC First Church Cambridge and its adjoining rectory where Mary and her wife had resided for years. This was also the church where the founder of the Daughters of Abraham, Edie Howe, attended the interfaith service that prompted the idea of this women's interfaith book group, and where the details had subsequently been hashed out with the women who came to form the first Daughters chapter in Cambridge. Thus, it felt like a fitting place to meet Mary, a petite white-haired woman in her early eighties. Her frail appearance does not do justice to her fascinating life story. A former nun, Mary left the Catholic Church to become an Episcopalian minister and a college teacher of Comparative Religion. Her wife is also a former nun turned Protestant minister and academic. Moreover, Mary is a staunch feminist who was an active participant in the women's movement during the 1960s. Her dry wit and impressive knowledge about virtually any subject make her engaging company.

Since I knew that Mary had been involved with the Daughters of Abraham from the onset, I had prepared specific questions regarding the history of this organization, including one about the group name. Mary, I later learnt, is affectionately known as "mother superior" by her fellow group members due to her encyclopedic knowledge about the history of the Daughters of Abraham. When I asked who had thought of the name, Mary pointed to herself. She went on to explain that the story behind the name was a situation that she had found herself in one day following teaching a class on world religions: "I would invite Deborah [founding member] to come and talk about Judaism, and she and I was leaving the building (...) and a friend of mine who is Muslim (...) was on her way in, and I said: 'Oh! The Daughters of Abraham!'" The name is supposed to convey the organization's mission,

which is “finding those things we have in common.” Nevertheless, outsiders are often baffled by the reference to a patriarch in the name of an all-women’s group.

Consequently, Mary has repeatedly had to justify the name to others, “we have two mothers, but we just have one father,” and since the Daughters of Abraham focuses on “what unites us, not what separates us,” the reference to a patriarch is not paradoxical in the sense that outsiders might think.<sup>61</sup> In fact, the reference made to Abraham, the perceived common religious “father,” allows for a connection based on gender – every member has personal experiences with the relational female role of being their parents’ daughter. Consequently, the gender fragment of the group name highlights a sameness spanning across religious lines.<sup>62</sup>

This common connection based on gender becomes all the more evident when examining the group members’ use of the term “sisters.” Daughters members frequently employ this expression when communicating with one another. Likewise when they talked about their interreligious relationships during interviews, members

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<sup>61</sup> For discussions of the implications of making references to “Abraham” for the dialogue element of the Daughters of Abraham and for the construction of the group’s collective identity, please refer to chapters 1 and 8, respectively.

<sup>62</sup> An important basis for my relationships with the Daughters members was our shared identity as women. In other words, I doubt that I would have been able to form an instant and/or close bond with members, had it not been for me being a female researcher. I might not even have been invited to conduct research about this women’s interfaith book group in the first place. However, I could seamlessly fit into the all-women’s group dynamic. In one important respect I was “the same” as them: I was also a “Daughter” in the gendered sense of the word. The fact that one of the members decided that I could consider her my “American mom” because she took it upon herself to take care of me as if I were her own daughter whilst spending time away from my own family adds to this relationality. According to Hackney and Warren, it is common for young female ethnographers to be assigned roles as “fictive kin,” for instance as an “adopted daughter or child” (2000). It suggests the importance of my identity as a woman for my engagement with the Daughters members. Moreover, it suggests that gender frames the overlapping stages of entrée, process, and analysis defining ethnographic research (Hackney and Warren 2000). Specifically, “gender and its intersections with other field-worker characteristics can provide and limit access to various settings and topics” (Hackney and Warren 2000). Whilst Hackney and Warren argues that such spatial access does not necessarily provide “access to the *meaning* of the worlds of informants,” I would contend that in a women-only encounter, it cannot but be an important contributing factor towards gaining such insight (2000). This chapter’s analysis testifies to the influence of gender for prompting conversation topics about particularly female experiences as well as encouraging relationship-building within the Daughters of Abraham. A similar significance can be applied to my interactions with the Daughters during both group observations and individual interviews.

would refer to each other as “sisters.” For instance, Laura states, “I think of them as sisters, I don’t think of them by their name, we are ‘the Daughters,’ but I think of them as women sisters.” Laura’s use of the affectionate and relational term “sisters” explains that there exists a sense of familial connection between members based on everyone being women. It additionally indicates that she cares deeply about her fellow group members whom she perceives as individual women united as such, irrespective of differences in religious affiliation.

The Muslim member Madeleine elucidates this notion of sisterhood,

I think they are like sisters in the true sense of ‘sisters.’ Some of them will challenge you in a very good way where they make you, like a family member would, where they make you think about hard questions and really challenge yourself.

Madeleine suggests that the familial and gendered character of the Daughters members’ relationships generates meaningful group conversations. She points to the all-women group dynamic as an underlying factor for establishing close almost familial connections as fundamental for stimulating explorations of particularly female experiences with Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Furthermore, the use of the term “sisters” shows that these affectionate interfaith relationships are bound up with everyone involved being able to undertake similar performances of gender, and so highlights the importance of the all-women membership for prompting engagement with religious diversity.

Finally, the Daughters members’ general use of the terms “sister” and “daughter” to refer to each other instead of the term “friend” indicate that members’ relationships are mainly confined to the Daughters space. Very few members express meeting individually outside the Daughters of Abraham context. Those who do,

typically do not meet as a result of their affiliation with this women's interfaith book group, but because they are members of the same religious community, share a leisure pursuit, or knew each other prior to joining the Daughters of Abraham. In general, outside interactions only happen when a special excursion has been arranged by a given Daughters subgroup, like attending the open day of the local mosque or visiting a *mikvah*. Members give various reasons for not getting together individually. Most state that they simply do not have time to meet up more frequently than for the monthly group meeting, thus claiming that it is not for the lack of desire, but a lack of free time. Others state that whilst they enjoy seeing their fellow Daughters at group meetings, they would not go out of their way to meet under other circumstances. It appears, then, that most members attend the Daughters of Abraham with a particular purpose in mind, namely discussing and exploring the "Abrahamic religions." A third reason provided is the one explored in chapter 3, namely that the Daughters space is viewed as "safe" and egalitarian in the sense that all the women present are considered experts on their religious experience, the key topic up for discussion. However, meeting outside this "safe space" could disrupt that dynamic because subject matters other than religion would be brought up, meaning it would no longer be an equal playing field. Members fear that such potential experiences of inequality might negatively influence their otherwise comfortable interfaith relationships and, therefore, refrain from meeting outside the guarded Daughters space. Overall, it seems unrelated outside activities are neither desired nor needed in order to fulfill members' expectations for participating in this interreligious encounter.

The fact that the majority of members do not meet outside Daughters meetings does, nevertheless, raise the question as to what extent participation in this group facilitates sustainable interreligious connections. Perhaps the explanation is simple: in

a group there will always be some people that you connect with more than others. Yet, another reason could be that actively engaging in interreligious encounters is a fragile position to put oneself in because it requires being open to ideas that could upset one's religious worldview. Within the Daughters space, members can stress sameness – they are “sisters of faith,” they are all Daughters. But outside this specific context there will be differences between members in terms of lifestyle, interests, political attitudes, sociocultural power dynamics, and so on.<sup>63</sup> That is, outside the Daughters setting, members are no longer “the same.” Consequently, if or when differences become apparent, it would not be as easy for members to gloss over these by referencing their shared belonging to one of the “Abrahamic religions” or their common experiences with particularly female gender roles as it is within the Daughters context where these similarities are accentuated. The use of the female-specific terms “sisters” and “daughters” testifies to this emphasis.

Accordingly, the reluctance to meet outside the monthly Daughters meetings does not imply that relationships between members are not genuine, strong, or valuable to the individual women. Rather, it speaks to notions of power and with it the straddling of sameness and difference that takes place in this interreligious encounter.<sup>64</sup> Within the group meetings and when individual members refer to said

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<sup>63</sup> The references made to “sister” and “daughter” demonstrate how stressing common ground like a shared gender identity can serve to downplay differences in relative power. As mentioned in chapter 1, one consequence of the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 claimed done in the name of Islam was the American Muslim community being vilified with the concomitant result that this religious community is struggling to hold a comfortable position in American society. Adding to this problematic position is the fact that in contrast to the well-established Jewish and Christian communities, the Muslim community is a more recent addition to the American sociocultural context as explored in chapter 2. Consequently, there exists an unequal power relation between Muslims vis-à-vis Christians and Jews in the United States. However, because Daughters members choose to confine their interreligious relationships to a space where it is possible to stress equality by referencing a perceived “sisterhood of faith,” within this setting members can circumnavigate unequal power relations found in their wider sociocultural context, and so create a more equal or inclusive space.

<sup>64</sup> Please refer to chapter 7 concerning a fundamental interreligious dynamic in this interfaith book group that positions Muslims as different vis-à-vis Jews and Christians and, as such, speaks to the issue of positions of relative power.

meetings, the women know how to navigate these categories, for example they refer to each other as “sisters” or “daughters,” and hence, they stress sameness and equality.<sup>65</sup> If they were to meet outside this well-defined framework, however, engaging with religious diversity might present more of a challenge, and so otherwise comfortable relationships might be upset. Consequently, the fact that members tend not to meet outside group meetings yet consider their relationships with their fellow Daughters participants to resemble the closeness of familial relations between sisters indicates that the women-only gender dynamic simultaneously works to downplay the religious diversity and connects members based on similar ideas about what it means to be a sister or a daughter. It conveys that the chance to stress such commonalities is welcomed in this encounter that revolves around difference.

The next section continues to accentuate ways in which members come to appreciate each other as multifaceted individuals. It further elucidates the consequences of Daughters of Abraham’s all-women gender dynamic for the character and facilitation of group discussions as well as for the building of interreligious relationships.

### ***How Sharing Particularly Female Experiences Shapes Interreligious Dialogue and Relationship-Building***

The Daughters’ all-women dynamic provides a marker of commonality that would be lacking in a mixed-gender setting. This commonality encourages expression

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<sup>65</sup> For discussions of additional instances where Daughters members situate themselves as a group by stressing sameness, please refer to chapter 8 concerning the construction and maintenance of Daughters of Abraham’s collective self.

of voice and contributes to facilitating an appreciation for fellow group members, which ventures beyond the individual participants' desire to develop greater understanding about religion. A Christian Steering Committee member, Philippa, confirms that it makes a difference that the Daughters of Abraham is open to women only:

We then come with a commonality (...) The fact that we have more in common than not is hopeful when we are talking about a topic that can be very tender to many of us, and we can have a lot of differences outside (...) Religious practices are (...) very personal for me, and I think it's very personal for most of the women in the group, and having more connection than not to the people that you are sharing faith intimacies with is more productive.

Besides the women-only gender dynamic prompting particularly female conversation topics, it also brings with it an instant commonality that can serve to downplay religious differences and provide more holistic views of fellow group members in the sense that they come to understand aspects beyond their respective religious identity categories.

On an individual level, members mention the discovered commonality of particularly female experiences like motherhood as an important motivation for partaking in the Daughters of Abraham. Some members even consider the connections made across religious traditions due to women's shared nurturing role to be the key reason for showing up to the monthly meetings. Emily, for example, joined the Daughters of Abraham in the hope that she would find sympathy for the daily struggle of being in an interfaith marriage – Emily is Catholic and her husband is Jewish. She explains,

I feel as though my religious life used to be a puzzle so seamless I didn't even know it had pieces, and then I went to college and it started to crumble, and then I

met my husband and it crumbled some more. I'm trying to make it make sense again, and I guess I was looking for some people who were in a similar situation, who had similar experiences.

However, Emily has not found understanding for her situation because no one in her group has married outside their religious tradition.

The Daughters of Abraham has not been able to offer Emily a respite from the uncomfortable position of navigating the in-between of two religions. In fact, she feels that, "I'm the only one who has a negative experience with things a lot of the time." However, what she has found is likeminded people with whom she can discuss intellectual issues, but also more personal conversation topics. Emily explains why she continues to attend despite her initial search for other women in interfaith marriages having proved to be futile: "I like all of the women and some of them I really like. They are interesting and they are kind, and I have things in common, personal things, other mothers of twins for instance. It is an escape from 'mummyhill.'" Emily works as an adjunct professor and, therefore, spends the majority of her time taking care of her three young children at home. When asked to elaborate, Emily explains,

The traditional model of mothering is different from the traditional model of fathering or fatherhood. And that's another thing, which I struggle with, and I think a lot of the other women in the group too (...) I was raised in a very traditional household and my mother actually said to me once: 'It's the best job I ever had.' And I think: 'What is wrong with me?! It's not the best job I ever had!' (...) So having other thinking people who have similar experiences...

To Emily, her Daughters group has become "a site of likeminded people." Emily feels that her fellow group members can empathize with her struggles as a mother.

Accordingly, her Daughters group provides a forum for voicing her frustrations concerning her nurturing role. Whilst she does not find understanding for her religious

deliberations, the fact that this all-women's interfaith book group provides an outlet for her frustrations related to motherhood is a key reason for Emily's decision to remain involved. Emily's reasoning for her continued participation in an encounter meant to highlight issues of religion illuminates that members come to know each other as individuals with various interests and concerns. That is, they get to know each other as much more than "just" a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim woman. It shows that members have numerous reasons for being involved in the Daughters of Abraham, and that these are sometimes related to particularly female experiences like motherhood.

Similarly, Ellen, an academic who has been part of the Daughters of Abraham for over a decade, states that the women-only space is an "oasis" providing "a little rest" from her otherwise male-dominated work and home-life. Being able to share particularly female experiences like her C-section and feeling understood when doing so, has motivated her to remain part of her Daughters group for all these years. For some members venturing beyond issues immediately related to the "Abrahamic religions," then, imbues this interreligious encounter with meaning. Ellen highlights this sentiment when explaining how her Daughters group consciously chooses books that foreground female characters in order to be able to "relate and respond." Ellen explains,

It's just valued, you know, it's ok. We talk about what it means to be women, not in a way that feels essentialising to me in the way that 'women are like this and men are like that,' but just like: 'ok, you're embodied as a woman, as a Christian, as an academic,' whatever your identities are, and this gender one is one we share. Now, it's more complicated than that because we have people in the group who are gay or transgender or different sorts of gender and sexual identities, but that hasn't come up as an issue in my group, and I don't know of anywhere that it has. So it still seems to matter that we are all women together. We can talk about topics that we may not be as free to talk about in mixed settings.

Ellen indicates the importance of Daughters of Abraham's women-only gender dynamic for interreligious relationship-building. Many of the group interactions are based on finding commonalities of gender, which are highlighted because membership is reserved for women. Daughters of Abraham's women-only gender dynamic, then, enables members to connect based on particularly female experiences, which can work to create belonging to this interfaith book group.

It has been made clear that Daughters of Abraham's women-only membership to a great extent determines or at least supports the discussion of particularly female experiences with religion and beyond. Additionally, this gender dynamic influences the character of group discussions and encourages the expression of women's voices. Expressly, the majority of members interviewed state that they voice their opinion more often than they would have if men were present. The Jewish member, Elsie, describes this greater level of comfort:

I really like speaking with just women. I don't know, it just feels very comfortable (...) There is a lot for us to relate to in our lives; things that we go through as daughters, as mothers, as wives (...) I feel it's easier for me to get close with a group of women (...) with men the conversation would remain more intellectual maybe, with women it can be much more personal, emotional...we do plenty of analyzing, but there is that other element to it – the deeper inside too.

Leah, another Jewish Daughter, works as an engineer in a predominantly male environment and, therefore, finds Daughters of Abraham's all-women gender dynamic somewhat strange. Nevertheless, she considers the idea of introducing men to the group absurd because "religions tend to be so male-dominated so a lot of our discussions are about the role of women in religion and society." She cannot envisage such conversations taking place in a mixed gender setting. The Christian founding

member, Mary, clarifies the importance of Daughters of Abraham's exclusively female membership for both the character and facilitation of group discussions,

The intimacy of being able to share with other women is a real gift of Daughters (...) it's a different dynamic (...) if men are present, there are things you won't talk about, and sometimes if men are present, sometimes women will defer to men (...) whereas if a man is not present, women are able to speak more fairly.

Helena, a Conservative rabbi who is involved in several interfaith initiatives including some mixed gender activities, elaborates on the idea that the all-women dynamic makes a difference from the onset. She states, "it is a powerful feeling not to be defined by men and not having to begin a gender debate about what constitutes a woman." Helena hints at the idea shared by many of the Daughters that the all-women membership is empowering because it ensures an emphasis on particularly female experiences with religion that have traditionally been silenced within the male-dominated frameworks of the "Abrahamic religions." Sarah, a self-described feminist studying to become an Orthodox rabbi, suggests that in the Daughters of Abraham, "the fact that it can be looking at religion from a woman's perspective, because it is always from the man's perspective, (...) is rewriting women's voice in it [religion] in a sense." Similar to the self-developing character defining women's book groups of the past, the Daughters of Abraham is empowering in the sense that women's voices on religion come to the forefront and are collectively acknowledged.

The final section of this chapter illuminates how individuals point to the interplay between religion and gender when situating themselves in their Daughters group. It shows how highlighting particularly female experiences with religion and challenges based on gender conventions contribute to interreligious relationship building and understanding of the "other."

## ***Gendered Religious Bricolages Determining Roles and Perceptions of the “Other”***

Some members use their experiences of performing gender outside the Daughters of Abraham to position themselves in their Daughters chapter. Leonore, for instance, emphasizes both her feminist self-understanding and her nurturing role as a teacher when she talks about the role that she occupies within her Daughters chapter and her motivation for partaking in this women’s interfaith book group. Leonore defines herself as an “outlier” when it comes to religion because, although she self-identifies as Christian, she explains, “by any of the other three religions’ definition, I would be an atheist.” Specifically, Leonore’s religious identity is a “construction improvised from multiple sources” or, in other words, a “bricolage” of religious frameworks (Wuthnov 2007a: 14). The sociologist Robert Wuthnov contends that the younger generation of Americans (ages 20-44) have a “tinkering” approach to religion, which means that individuals piece together their understanding of religion from the skills, resources, and materials readily at hand in the surrounding society and their immediate relations (2007a: 13-14). “Hardly anybody comes up with a truly innovative approach to life’s enduring spiritual questions, but hardly anybody simply mimics the path someone else has taken either” (Wuthnov 2007a: 14). Wuthnov’s view of the younger generation as tinkerers can be extended to other generations too. Whilst Leonore is nearing seventy, she has the attitude of a tinkerer:

There is something in me that has always driven me to frame, to conceptualize, to make sense of it...what this divinity, divineness...see I’m lost for words because I don’t know how to define this remarkableness that is our world. And how I fit, how am I part of that? How am I connected to it? Institutionalized religion does not take me there. I have to form my own worldview.

Leonore's worldview is a religious bricolage assembled from certain Christian, Unitarian Universalist, Panentheist, Pantheist, and Buddhist ideas, which all resonate for her. Participating in the Daughters of Abraham has helped her articulate and clarify this worldview. Leonore's religious bricolage partly explains her contention that the institutionalized versions of the "Abrahamic religions" would label her an atheist. It also explains her consequent role within her Daughters subgroup. Leonore explains,

I don't believe in God that is defined in the way that religions define God. Or the conceptions – from literal pictures to the way they talk about God: 'God has intention. God wants us to do this, God wants us to do that, God doesn't want us to do this.' Also, anytime you anthropomorphize God as a person-ish of some kind, I'm like: 'Not for me! No, no, no, no!' So I'm more out to be the one in the group to say: 'Hey! This is a bunch of men saying this. What would happen if we women were writing this, or doing this, or saying this? How would that change it? How would it benefit us?'

It seems that Leonore's engagement in her Daughters book group is influenced not only by her religious self-understanding, but to a great extent also by her experience as a woman within institutionalized Christianity. In fact, she has "always felt the injustice of patriarchal religions." The male-dominated language in her church and the lack of female role models with which to identify, as Leonore says, "I can be a virgin like Mary or I can be a whore like the other Mary," have led her to question, "where is the model I can identify with? Where is my reality?" She has not considered converting to another religion because the church was what she grew up in, and Christianity has become a marker of her family's life events. However, in order to find her reality within a male-dominated Christianity, Leonore has privately studied religious texts from a feminist perspective, a passion that culminated with her teaching women and gender studies at college level.

Leonore brings this feminist critique of the institutionalized versions of the “Abrahamic religions” to her Daughters group. Daughters of Abraham’s women-only membership provides her with a forum for, in her own words, “pushing the limits,” which her church community does not. Before joining her Daughters chapter, Leonore had looked specifically for a group of women with whom to share and explore her religious worldview because she believes that women, “we are better at talking about our own personal experience and we talk from the heart. We own what we are thinking.” Since its membership is reserved for women, the Daughters of Abraham allows Leonore greater freedom to practice her feminist approach to religion than her Christian community does. The fact that the Daughters of Abraham is an interfaith group is deemed of secondary importance. What is crucial to Leonore’s participation is the fact that her Daughters group provides a space reserved for women who want to discuss religion in the analytical manner that Leonore appreciates. It allows her to articulate her feminist self-understanding. It should be noted that most of the women whom I interviewed expressed that they would not have joined the Daughters of Abraham or been as interested in joining if the group had included men. Thus, Leonore’s motivation for advancing exploration of her religious self-understanding in a women-only space is shared by most members. This fact underlines that Daughters of Abraham’s gender dynamic to a great degree determines the group character.

Leonore’s former teaching role is also articulated in her Daughters engagement. Leonore used to think of her students as her “pebbles” who would make ripples for “the greater good” once they ventured out into the world; now, her fellow Daughters members have become her new pebbles. Her reason for critiquing patriarchal structures of the “Abrahamic religions” in her Daughters group is to encourage other members to “start thinking about their own religion a little

differently.” Leonore believes that by exposing people to a deconstruction of what she considers to be patriarchal religious teachings, the world can become defined by mutual empathy instead of bigotry fueled by absolute truth claims. Leonore’s engagement in this interfaith book group, then, is shaped by a need to nurture others with new vantage points on religion. As such, she performs the traditional female role as nurturer, but in a way that supports her feminist self-understanding. To extend Wuthnov’s theoretical framework on religious identity, Leonore’s “bricolage” of gender identities illuminates the fluidity of “gender” elaborated by Butler.

Just as important, Leonore’s fellow group members have come to understand her complex tinkering of both religion and gender conventions. According to Leonore, her group has reached a level of trust where her feminist critique of religious frameworks is not only accepted in the group, but is actually considered “normal” for her. She explains, “they know it’s me, and they are like: ‘that’s not unusual for Leonore to point that out and saying that.’” Leonore’s gender performances, which involve her teaching role, her feminist critique of texts read in the group, and her feminist stance on institutionalized religion, have come to define her interreligious relationships and role in her Daughters chapter. Leonore’s religious bricolage disrupts any rigid perception of what it means to be a Christian woman in contemporary America. It provides her religious “others” with a more nuanced understanding of religious identity categories and of Leonore as an individual. It shows that Daughters of Abraham’s all-women membership plays a part in facilitating such nuanced understandings because it provides an opportunity to discuss and highlight connections between religion and gender.

Leonore’s tinkering approach to religion (and gender) can be applied to the majority of Daughters members. Their personal religious bricolages might make them

“outliers” in the eyes of institutionalized religions. However, within their Daughters group their religious subjectivity negotiation makes them “normal” because the focus is on exploring individual understandings of being Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. That is, the Daughters of Abraham involves women who reflect on their religious worldview and how it relates to alternative religious frameworks. The next chapter continues to bring out ways in which individual members’ performances and voiced understandings of being Muslim, Jewish, or Christian complicate these religious identity categories.

***Conclusion: When Validating Particularly Female Experiences Downplays Religious Diversity***

This chapter has illuminated the significance of Daughters of Abraham’s all-women gender dynamic for downplaying the group’s religious diversity because it enables members to collectively emphasize commonly held female gender roles. Judith Butler’s theoretical framework illuminates gender as a dynamic and culturally constructed category that it is possible to subvert, but which at the same time must nevertheless be engaged. Butler’s concept of gender performativity allows us to see the complexity defining the Daughters’ explorations of what it means to be a religious woman in contemporary America, and the variety in how they inhabit conventional gender roles.

Members’ individual gender performances are collectively validated in the Daughters of Abraham. The all-women gender dynamic enables these validations based on common experiences with female specific roles because it ensures that

members can relate to each other's impressions of what being a (religious) woman in contemporary America involves. The Daughters of Abraham should, therefore, be considered an empowering space because women's experiences with non-patriarchal aspects of religion and beyond are validated. The general use of the female-specific terms "sister" and "daughter" to refer to fellow group members further express the significance of the all-women dynamic for interreligious relationship building.

Members' collective explorations of particularly female roles as mothers, wives, and nurturers and their uses of the familial gendered terms "sister" and "daughter" to refer to both the group and its members illuminate that their performances of conventional gender roles stress sameness. Consequently, the all-women gender dynamic works to downplay the group's religious diversity by accentuating aspects shared by all the Daughters, irrespective of their particular religious worldview.

Chapter 6 moves from the attention on gender performances to focus on the ways that engaging in Daughters' inter-religious and intra-religious dynamics impact members' explorations and understandings of their religious self and the "other."

## **CHAPTER 6: Inter- and Intra-Religious Dynamics Nuance**

### **Understandings of Being Jewish, Christian, or Muslim in**

#### **Contemporary America**

“I feel like I need to know the way that other people see the world. Or see my world,” Gabriella said, and with the Daughters, “it’s very rich conversation that happens, and I feel like it’s an opportunity to practice my faith in a way that fits me well.” Coming to consider the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups as the fitting forum for exploring her Christian self-understanding has been a proactive and ongoing journey for Gabriella, a married middle-aged academic in expressive arts therapy. Prior to participating in this women’s interfaith book group, she used to be, in her own words, a “very active member” of her local United Church of Christ (UCC) community. However, this membership is only one chapter of Gabriella’s multifaceted engagement with religion leading up to her joining the Daughters of Abraham in 2008. During Gabriella’s childhood, her family shifted from Evangelical Christianity to become members of a “non-denominational kind of very Pentecostal, African-American Holy Roller kind of church.” At college she was part of a Catholic group emphasizing liberation theology. Following graduation, Gabriella became a Quaker, though, after a few years, she became unaffiliated with organized Christianity. Once she had children, she and her husband wanted to be involved again. Because of its emphasis on social justice, they joined a UCC congregation. The fact that this church had a female minister who was an ex-nun, lesbian, and Italian also appealed to Gabriella. However, once the minister retired and a heterosexual white man took her job, Gabriella ceased being a member because “it just was not the

same.” Gabriella elaborated on this decision to leave the UCC congregation and instead orient her focus to the Daughters of Abraham:

I mean it’s complicated, but for me race, and religion, and politics, all are very interconnected. So even though I look pretty white or I live in a very white community, I think of myself as Latina, and I couldn’t deal with the kind of white-harbored Christian liberal ‘whatever’ at the church. And I teach in a pretty white-dominated university and living here in a very white-dominated community, I sort of felt like: ‘oh-my God! I’m gonna die! And not really be able to be myself.’ And I think in some ways that is partly why I’ve stayed with the Daughters of Abraham, is because it has given me a chance to feel my sense of Christianity and my sense of ethnicity and politics, even though we are not a very political group, in a way that has been easier than church, if you will. And I have a very, I think, not such a common experience of going from one to all these different branches of Christianity, and so most people, they don’t have a clue about half of those, but I think it [Daughters of Abraham] attracts people who have made that kind of move, who are more open to the diversity of what religion is all about.

According to Gabriella, her continuous exploration of her religious identity explains, “partly why I’ve a particular, I think, interest slash investment in understanding,” and why she, therefore, participates in the Daughters of Abraham. Gabriella constructs a narrative of coherence when depicting how her religious trajectory with its multiple intra-religious shifts has led her to the Daughters of Abraham. This women’s interfaith book group has become her current place for practicing her Christian self-understanding because it “fits her well.” The merging of several key identity factors: race, religion, politics, and gender in her Daughters group helps explain her choice to express and explore her religious worldview in this women’s interfaith book group. The sentiment behind her participation goes beyond her ability to voice her religious self-understanding in an ethnically diverse community, though. Gabriella views her membership as a type of activism. She partakes in the Daughters of Abraham “as a stand for greater dialogue,” and in the hope “that it makes a small difference.”

Whilst Gabriella's decision to make the Daughters of Abraham her primary religious community is rare, it speaks to the importance placed on membership of this interfaith book group. Furthermore, Gabriella's complex yet coherent self-understanding lived out in the Daughters of Abraham illustrates a search for a clearer sense of self that defines not only members' engagements in this interfaith encounter, but also the wider American context. Specifically, the kind of autobiographical thinking displayed by Gabriella is, according to the sociologist Anthony Giddens, characteristic of the approach taken by individuals in the contemporary Western world to making sense of existentialist questions like "what to do? 'How to act?' 'Who to be?'" (1991: 70).<sup>66</sup> Even though Giddens was writing in 1991, these existentialist questions are timeless, and so remain relevant a quarter of a century later. The same can be said for Giddens' conception of "the modern self." Giddens contends,

Self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*. Identity here still presumes continuity across time and space; but self-identity is such continuity as interpreted reflexively by the agent (1991: 53).

Moreover, self-identity as a coherent project presumes a "narrative," which is made explicit (Giddens 1991: 76). In order to actualize one's self or have personal growth, authenticity is essential, and "to be true to oneself means finding oneself [in] an active process of self-construction" (Giddens 1991: 79). Fundamental to this process is the element of choice (Giddens 1991: 80). That is, the individual reflectively chooses to assemble a sense of self that suits her in the present moment. This awareness creates the potential for change as well as the ability to create a coherent life trajectory that

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<sup>66</sup> In this instance, what is referred to as "the West" encompasses North America and Europe.

creates a sense of continuous development from the past to the present and towards the future (Giddens 1991: 71).

Gabriella creates a coherent sense of development from her childhood until present-day when reflecting on the choices that she has made concerning living out her religious identity. Her religious self-understanding also seems all pervasive because of the way that she has chosen to reflect on her Christian practice through additional factors deemed important like race, politics, and gender. Whilst any reflection on self implicitly involves such intersections of identity factors, the difference lies in the fact that Gabriella explicitly explores her religious identity in relation to these other elements that she considers significant to her self-understanding. Moreover, Gabriella's reconstruction of the past goes along with an anticipation of the future – through her membership in the Daughters, she hopes to make a difference by creating ripples for “the greater good.” Following a long list of intra-religious shifts, Gabriella has reached the point on her life trajectory where she considers Daughters of Abraham's interfaith encounter to be the best place for her to nurture and develop her Christian identity in the present moment. It is the place that fits her. It is where she can express her worldview and feel understood; it is a place where she is able to “feel my sense of Christianity, and (...) ethnicity and politics in a way that has been easier than church.” In short, the Daughters of Abraham is where she can be her self.

Gabriella's recognition speaks to the kinds of individual explorations of religious identities taking place in the Daughters of Abraham. It indicates the impact of the group's intra- and inter-religious dynamics on such explorations. This chapter elucidates the complex ways in which individual members engage with ideas of sameness and difference to explore, question, and affirm their religious self-

understanding within Daughters of Abraham's inter-religious and intra-religious dynamics. This engagement complicates individual understandings of what it means to identify as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, and helps clarify where on the wide spectrum of potential meanings applied to such religious identity categories that the individual woman belongs. The variation in how these religious identity categories are interpreted illuminates their fluidity, and so rejects a monolithic understanding of such. Further complicating the processes of identity formation taking place in the Daughters of Abraham are examinations of how individuals who display double belonging or who straddle two religious traditions navigate the group's inter- and intra-religious dynamics. Finally, I consider a tension between the inter- and intra-religious levels of this interfaith encounter. Explicitly, I demonstrate how the organization's emphasis on inter-religious commonalities brings out intra-religious differences that complicate the maintenance of a coherent sense of religious self because that which is supposed to be "the same" is illuminated to be "other." Before commencing this analysis, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the concept of identity.

An "identity" can be thought of as an individual's self-understanding that is constantly explored, developed, negotiated, and asserted in interactions with other people situated in a particular sociocultural context. Gabriella illuminates Giddens' idea of the self as a reflexive project that is situated within a particular sociocultural context and defined in relation to others (1991: 53). She highlights the element of choice and the idea of an individual being responsible for actively constructing a coherent biographical narrative of self (1991: 79-80). Such a biographical narrative can be viewed as the ultimate expression of self that comprises an individual's worldview, interests, thoughts, beliefs, and ideas. A self is articulated verbally and

through actions, often in relation to other people. A person's self consists of a number of identity factors like ethnicity, class, nationality, gender, and religion, some of which are more salient than others (Lawrence and King 2008: 252). Their exact salience depends on the particular context. For instance, the Daughters of Abraham is set up with the purpose of exploring religious commonalities and differences; members' religious identities will, therefore, necessarily be emphasized even if other identity factors like gender is sometimes highlighted, as the previous chapter illuminated. An individual's multiple identity factors overlap and intertwine with each other to construct a coherent sense of self. This implies that identity construction is an intersectional process as attested to by its flexibility and elusiveness. The intersectionality defining identity construction also helps explain why the concept of identity and its scholarly application is vigorously debated.

The concept of identity is contested in multiple manners, namely in terms of its use as an analytical tool, the characteristics of identity itself, and the elements involved in identity construction. Some scholars, therefore, refuse to give an overarching definition of identity. Margaret Wetherell, for example, considers the concept of identity "notoriously elusive" and, therefore, a "problematic site gathering together a wide range of concerns, tropes, curiosities, patterns of thoughts, debates around certain binaries and particular kinds of conversations" (2010: 3). Other scholars argue against using the concept of identity as an analytical tool because of the absence of a clear definition. Specifically, they argue against the concept of identity because it is "riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings, and encumbered by reifying connotations" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 35). Contrary to this critique, I consider the ambiguity surrounding the concept of identity a strength because it captures the messiness, multifacetedness, and dynamism that characterize

individual self-understandings. Individual meaning-making is an intricate and dynamic process. Despite a scholarly desire for straightforward theoretical definitions that can fix meaning, reality is more complicated. Such complexity does not invalidate analyses appropriating concepts to account for this reality. Rather, it captures the intricate approaches taken by people towards understanding who they are, how they relate to others, and how they fit in with their immediate and wider contexts. In other words, the ambivalence surrounding the concept of identity corresponds to the ways in which people in practice continuously reevaluate their fragmented sense of self in order to make it appear coherent to themselves and others. Accordingly, the scholarly use of the concept of identity understood as a fragmented and dynamic entity should be encouraged.

The key methodological debate surrounding the concept of identity revolves around and always returns to the issue of how and whether to account for identity as both an individual and a social construct.<sup>67</sup> The majority of the approaches taken to studying “identity” fail to account for the relation between the individual and the social because of an exclusive accentuation of either one of these dimensions. For example, the psychological approach to identity emphasizes a person’s cognitive processes because identity is considered a “subjective, individual achievement;” hence, as a personal entity (Wetherell 2010: 3). At the opposite end, the sociological approach focuses on power dynamics of inclusion/exclusion and belonging because identity is understood to be an external entity that is linked to group membership or social categories like “woman.” At the extreme, postmodernists regard identity as nothing but a discourse (Wetherell 2010: 4). The study of identity, then, is as wide-

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<sup>67</sup> Chapter 8 elaborates further on the scholarly debate surrounding the concept of identity including the numerous ways in which it is used as an analytical tool.

ranging as the meanings applied to the concept itself. Accordingly, the question for scholars becomes how to define and apply this concept to studies that concern the individual and/or the social.

Chris Barker's understandings of the concepts of "identity," "subjectivity," and "agency" are useful for this purpose because he illuminates their respective characteristics and their complex interplay. According to Barker, "identity" constitutes an individual biologically and culturally, and their self-perception. Specifically, identity is the "emotionally charged discursive and changeable description of oneself" related to "subjectivity," which is "the condition of being a person and the processes by which we become a person" (Barker 2008: 215-6). "Agency" is, therefore, both a "socially constructed capacity to act" and "a culturally intelligible way of understanding ourselves" (Barker 2008: 236). These interrelated concepts indicate an intimate link between the individual and the social. Giddens confirms this relation contending that "self-identity is created and (...) continually reordered" amid the "shifting experiences of everyday life" (1991: 185-6). Furthermore, identity is "impossible to understand apart from the dynamics of relationality" (Furey 2012: 25). Accordingly, a subject is interdependent, that is "in relationship with context and others" (Côté and Levine 2002: 221). This notion of the self as interdependent suggests that the interior aspects of a self, explicitly a person's ideas and values, are understood within cultural and relational contexts.

The notion of the self as interdependent stands in contrast to conceiving the self as independent. Scholars who approach the self as autonomous maintain that a self is "continuous and relatively constant in a temporal and social sense;" they, therefore, prioritize analysis of inner cognitive processes over sociocultural contexts (Côté and Levine 2002: 220). I find the idea of the self as independent not only

limiting, but ultimately wrong because it fails to account for the construction of a coherent sense of self as a reflexive and dynamic process influenced by relational and sociocultural engagements. The following analysis of individual members' engagement with Daughters of Abraham's inter-religious and intra-religious dynamics with the implications for their ideas about self and the "other" is, thus, rooted in an understanding that individuals actively construct and dynamically reevaluate a coherent sense of self expressed in relation to others at a particular moment in a given sociocultural context.

Following this clarification of key terminology and methodological debates regarding the concept of identity, I return to analyzing individual members' explorations of religious self as prompted by their engagement in Daughters of Abraham's inter- and intra-religious dynamics.

### ***Searching for a Coherent Religious Identity by Navigating Intra- and Inter-Religious Dynamics***

The Daughters of Abraham really has challenged my own set of beliefs at a time when I was ready to take a look at those beliefs. Even now, I can feel some changes going on (...) I haven't really been praying as much as I used to (...) but just recently I started finding myself praying, asking for help for my own mood, and what's coming out was Christian prayer. But I did that for thirty-three years, I prayed as a Christian. Which is making me think of, you know, certain questions like: 'do I see Jesus just as a prophet just as Muhammad, or do I see Jesus as the Son of God?' I think I see Jesus as the Son of God, but that doesn't mean that Muhammad couldn't be a Son of God. It isn't an exclusive view. I don't think...I'm very Judaic: I don't believe in being saved; I don't see a religion rescuing me. I see it as a day-to-day practice of good works and connectedness to a higher power (...) Judaism is helping me with the structures of the week and dealing with my own compulsive thinking, and I feel a kindred spirit amongst Jewish women that I don't feel amongst Christian women (...) So it's very interesting what is happening. That is why I say I'm a seeker because I realize that I'm constantly changing. There have been so many direct constants going on

like: ‘do I go to church today?’ ‘Do I go to yoga?’ (...) ‘Where do I belong?’ And maybe sadly, maybe I don’t belong anywhere. Maybe I am a seeker (Caroline).

For the past six years, Caroline, a retired teacher, has been on a quest to find her religious home. Caroline comes from a mixed Jewish-Christian background. Together with her husband, she has attended church for the past thirty-three years, but then she started feeling Jewish. The Daughters of Abraham has provided a key context for her search for belonging. With its composition of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women, she has been able to advance her exploration of her mixed Jewish-Christian heritage. Caroline finds it difficult to choose between Judaism and Christianity. Her self-understanding is undoubtedly tied up with both traditions. Her simultaneous intra- and inter-religious straddling of Judaism and Christianity illustrates that subject formation occurs via a complex “process of *becoming*” that merges an individual’s sociocultural context with self-reflexivity and relations to multiple social others (Barker 2008: 229). This dynamic engenders “the possibility of multiple, shifting, and fragmented identities” (Barker 2008: 229).

As a consequence of her Daughters participation, Caroline has commenced studying the Torah with two of her fellow Daughters group members, Tamarah, a rabbi, and Mona, a cantor. Yet, Caroline continues to attend church too. Caroline, then, is reflexively searching for her religious identity. She does so by engaging in both intra-religious and inter-religious processes inside and outside her Daughters meetings. Caroline’s mixed Jewish-Christian background means that she considers herself as both/and. Even if the resulting straddling of two religions makes her uncomfortable, she thinks, “that is where I have to be.” Consequently, it cannot be said that it is truly an inter-religious relation that Caroline negotiates for herself. At the same time, it is not an intra-religious dynamic either. Her religious subjectivity

negotiations can be classified as somewhere in-between. That is, Caroline simultaneously displays a double belonging to Judaism and Christianity and a shying away from aspects of both traditions. She is desperate to consolidate her fragmented sense of self.

The Daughters of Abraham has provided Caroline with a formative forum for exploring her two religious identities precisely because of its interfaith character. This interfaith makeup gives Caroline access to other Jewish and Christian women in relation to whom she can try out where she identifies more during the book discussions that disclose personal experiences with Judaism and Christianity. For instance, one year her Daughters group read numerous books about the Holocaust, and every time Caroline would identify strongly with the victims:

That's what did it, it was reading these books, knowing that I identified completely with being Jewish, and then getting into it so deeply that I would create my own mini depression sitting there (...) it was really clear where I identified [and so] Tamarah stepped forward and Mona stepped forward, they said: 'come study the Torah with us.'

Nevertheless, Caroline continues to actively look for a clearer sense of whether she is Jewish or Christian, especially since straddling the two means that Caroline finds, "it's tough being me." One could argue, however, that Caroline has, in fact, constructed a coherent religious identity. She might not have made a definitive choice between Judaism and Christianity, but she has decided to actively engage with both, choosing elements from both traditions that appeal to her, and which accordingly shape her religious self-understanding. Caroline is still in the process of becoming, but it is a directed search. Her simultaneous intra- and inter-religious straddling can, therefore, be said to define her religious identity.

Caroline's fluid religious subjectivity negotiation is relatable to Wade C. Roof's writings about a contemporary "quest culture." Roof contends that there has been a rise of a "quest culture" in a response to "the restlessness and flux of our time," which involves individuals becoming "fluid and many sided" (1997: 93; 95). The quest culture has witnessed the rise of "reflexive spirituality," which is defined as a "process oriented in the sense that it presumes a potential to grow and develop further, that we might actually learn from others" (Roof 1997: 95). This mode of being, then, involves a continuous exploration of self. Roof applies his quest model to New Age movements, but I would argue it possible to appropriate this model beyond this context. Despite defining herself as religious, not spiritual, Caroline exemplifies the fluidity and reflexivity that Roof talks about in her desire to develop a more defined understanding of her religious self, which sees her dynamically engage with two religious traditions.

Furthermore, Roof's conception of a quest culture has given rise to scholarship on seekership that is pertinent here because Caroline self-defines as a seeker. There are three generic seeker role models, namely "the singular seeker," "the multiple seeker," and "the serial seeker" (Sutcliffe 2009). Each model displays different tactics for generating religious self-understanding. The singular seeker is committed to one tradition, which is pursued with "reflexive devotion" and reinforced in established relations or community norms (Sutcliffe 2009). In contrast, the multiple seeker explores several religious and spiritual systems simultaneously and merges these into novel expressions. The multiple seeker revels in the multiplicity of religious and spiritual traditions available and rejects closure (Sutcliffe 2009). Finally, the serial seeker has changed direction or affiliation more than once. Consequently, there are "plural, potentially rivalrous *foci* rather than one steady and unifying *focus*," as is the

case for the singular seeker (Sutcliffe 2009). In contrast to the multiple seeker, however, the serial seeker does not enjoy the abundant available options, but is primarily concerned with “achieving resolution and closure” (Sutcliffe 2009).

Caroline undoubtedly falls into the serial seeker category. She wants to reach a conclusion about whether she identifies as Jewish or Christian, but finds herself trapped in a constant intra- and inter-religious straddling of these two religious traditions or opposing *foci* which she is trying to consolidate by picking and mixing from both. However, she has yet to achieve closure. Her determination to do so has seen her join the Daughters of Abraham in the hope that engaging in this interfaith book group might enable her to make a decision. She acknowledges that she has learnt more about both Judaism and Christianity through her involvement in the Daughters of Abraham. Still, Caroline’s “closure” has arguably been the recognition that she does not fully belong to either; she is somewhere in-between. In her own words, “I’ve looked around, but I have never seen another Caroline anywhere.” Her quest for a coherent religious identity is, in her own words, “a different story.” It is a story that she has come to a better understanding of through her interfaith engagement in the Daughters of Abraham, but one that is still ongoing as she continues her search for closure and with such closure a – to her – coherent religious identity.

Caroline’s search for religious belonging upsets any straightforward definition of both inter- and intra-religious dynamics and also complicates religious identity categories. Her straddling of intra- and inter-religious relations in an attempt to create a neat religious self-understanding shows that identity construction is a reflexive and continuous process. Caroline attempts to come to straightforward definitions of what it means to identify as Christian or Jewish. For instance, she tries to define a Christian as someone who believes in Jesus as the Son of God and classifies an individual as

Jewish if they identify with Holocaust victims. However, Caroline's unresolved deliberations of these religious identity categories highlight that in fact no straightforward definition can be applied to identifying as Jewish or Christian, and by extension, as Muslim. This definition depends on the individual. This multitude of possible religious self-understandings comes to light within the Daughters of Abraham due to individual members' engagement with intra- and inter-religious "others." Consequently, participation in this interfaith community can engender greater understandings of the lived reality of American Judaism, Christianity, and/or Islam. The following section elaborates on how Daughters members gain more knowledge about their self by engaging with intra-religious "others" in particular.

### ***Intra-Religious Dynamics Present Challenges to Religious Self-Understandings***

I've got a deeper knowledge of all three faiths. One of the things that happens to all of us, I think, is we get a much deeper knowledge of our own religion and the diversity within our own religion as well as of the other two like Catholics learning about Protestants and vice versa (...) it deepens the connection to your own [religion] because it shows you what is unique about yours. You might have thought such and such is unique, but then you find that 'ohh Jews and Muslims do that too.' It allows you to hone down on what's really central to who you are and what you believe, and usually that deepens your own commitment to that. What it does do, and I think most of the women would say that, is that it widens your perspective. So now when I go to church and I hear a reading from the scripture or when I listen to a sermon, I'm thinking about how my Muslim friends and how my Jewish friends would hear this. It widens what Edie [Daughters of Abraham's founder] calls 3D, seeing in 3D, that's all three religions. So it's richer, it's more complex (Mary).

Mary's reflections demonstrate that the Daughters of Abraham provides a forum for exploring both intra- and inter-religious relations, and that this engagement complicates ideas about what it means to lead a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim life. For Mary, such greater knowledge has both asserted and nuanced her religious self-

understanding even if she, as a former nun turned Episcopalian minister, entered into the Daughters of Abraham with great knowledge of Christianity. In contrast to Caroline who consciously chose to partake in this interfaith book group so as to clarify her religious worldview, Mary decided to participate in the Daughters of Abraham with an aim to contribute to fostering interreligious understanding and relationships. Nevertheless, Mary has become more reflective about her own religious identity through her personal engagement with her intra- and inter-religious “others.” Most members echo this result as an unexpected but welcome side-benefit of participating in this interfaith book group. Upon joining the Daughters of Abraham, members generally expect to learn about other religions, but it surprises most just how much they also learn about their own tradition in the process. Perhaps this outcome is not all that surprising, though, seeing as the organization explains that the focus and goal of meetings is “understanding each other more deeply” (2016g). Thus, the emphasis is on the group’s interfaith composition, which implies that it is set up to attract women who want to learn about unfamiliar religious traditions. Though, once they have joined, members find that taking part in such inter-religious learning necessitates the ability to articulate ideas about their own religious worldview and, accordingly, they nuance their personal understanding of such.

Even if it does take place, generally speaking, members do not actively reflect on their intra-religious learning.<sup>68</sup> Maia, a pediatrician in her late forties, is an exception to the rule since she reflects on both her intra- and inter-religious relations when explaining her motivations for joining and continuing to partake in the

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<sup>68</sup> One of the interview questions concerned key lessons from participating in the Daughters of Abraham. In answering this question, members might simply have articulated what they thought I wanted from our conversation and, therefore, have concentrated on narrating ideas related to their inter-religious “others” rather than their intra-religious learning. In other words, they might have been performing the deemed proper role or putting on the supposed right “mask” to use the terminology of the sociologist Erving Goffman (1959: 30). Chapter 8 engages further with Goffman’s work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

Daughters of Abraham. Maia joined this women's interfaith book group because she believed that it would provide a forum for advancing her search for greater understanding of her Jewish identity. She commenced this quest with her husband when they had children. She felt the need to do so because she grew up in a culturally Jewish home, but had next to no knowledge about the religious tradition. Maia explains,

At temple, it's a totally different Judaism than I grew up with. It's very accepting. It allows you to be very questioning [and it] will take you wherever you are on your Jewish journey (...) It has really reconnected back for me in terms of cultural Judaism and some interest in what the customs and religion is about for me...sort of the moral compass, where I can spend time thinking about those greater world questions in life. So the Daughters of Abraham allows me to see different perspectives on that kind of, what I'd call, that moral compass. How the different religions or different cultures process some of the tougher questions. It teaches me about my own background because the people there are much more Orthodox or Conservative or learned in Judaism than I am.

The Daughters of Abraham contributes to Maia's religious identity exploration because of its diverse membership both in terms of the different strands of Judaism represented and the two other "Abrahamic religions." The inter- and intra-religious diversity allows Maia to clarify further where she stands on this greater "moral compass" that she feels all of these religions encompass. Even if Daughters of Abraham's intra-religious dynamics is not the primary conversation focus for the majority of members interviewed, then, Maia illuminates that intra-religious learning does happen and that it contributes to more nuanced understandings of individual religious belongings.

Whilst Maia recognizes the impact of both her inter- and intra-religious relations for contributing to her Jewish subjectivity negotiation, a few members specifically point to the discovery of intra-religious diversity as fundamental to their

individual identity reflections. An example is Saima, a first-generation Pakistani Muslim member in her forties, who came to America to study at university but stayed to get married. When asked about the key lessons from partaking in her Daughters chapter, Saima expresses that learning about different ways to lead a Muslim life has asserted her Muslim identity:

I think the number one thing is how many different practices there are, even for the Islamic faith. Particularly speaking for myself, not necessarily as a group, you feel like: 'well this is what happens in Islam.' But even within the small [Daughters] group when you start hearing: 'oh no, no, no, wait a minute in Egypt we do blah, blah, blah...Really!!?' (...) I love the fact that the book group really allows you to speak for yourself, me and my household, me and my practice, and in my country or in my subgroup, this is what we do. It doesn't speak for the billion [Muslim] people, it just speaks for me (...) you allow there to be a dissent whether there are four Muslim women and each has a nuance to it. There is room for everyone. None of them is wrong. It's just different. I was surprised at the differences in our own little group. We had one woman who was from a community (...) aligned more with the Shi'ite practice (...) It was interesting that in every aspect that we discussed how it could be different in their practices even the basic things that I assumed: 'oh all Muslims do this,' and even if I didn't say it, I know in my mind I was probably thinking it many times. It is an eye-opener, because I'm from Pakistan and Pakistan is homogenous in many ways. It's ninety-five or ninety-six percent Muslim, so the other faiths were not somebody you would run into every day (...) so to find everybody around you of your faith and doing the same gives you almost this false level of: 'everyone is like me,' and it is not. It's kind of refreshing in that way to have that exposure [in the Daughters of Abraham]. It highlights that I may not be a very practicing Muslim in terms of rituals, but spiritually I feel the book club has sort of highlighted that I am very grounded in the spirituality of my faith. Prior to the book club I may have been coming from a more inadequate perspective of my own understanding (...) because since I don't practice the rituals I may have carried this sense of inadequacy like: 'What kind of a Muslim can I be if I don't pray five times a day? Can I really speak for my religion?' I think the spirituality aspect has been cleared up a little bit for me. That I can still be a spiritual person without the practices firmly attached.

Saima's recognition that she has come to a more complex understanding of Islam and her own sense of Muslim belonging through discovering intra-religious differences and similarities in her Daughters group is a rare articulated acknowledgment amongst the women whom I interviewed. Perhaps an underlying reason for the generally

missing reflection on intra-religious dynamics has to do with its potential to reveal so many nuances that it becomes impossible to hold a neatly-defined perspective on what it means to be Muslim, or Jewish, or Christian. That is, the intra-religious diversity has the potential to reveal differences that can significantly challenge a coherent religious self-understanding. It indicates that admitting to changes in one's understanding of one's own religious tradition might be more emotionally challenging than coming to appreciate interreligious differences.

Writing about Jewish-Christian encounters in Antiquity with a view toward theorizing about relations between “self and other,” Jonathan Z. Smith contends that situating oneself within interfaith relations becomes increasingly difficult with proximity. Specifically, J.Z. Smith argues,

While the ‘other’ may be perceived as being either LIKE-US or NOT-LIKE-US, he is, in fact, most problematic when he is TOO-MUCH-LIKE-US, or when he claims to BE-US. It is here that the real urgency of a ‘theory of the other’ emerges. This urgency is called forth not by the requirement to place the ‘other,’ but rather to situate ourselves (...) This is not a matter of the ‘far’, but, preeminently, of the ‘near.’ The problem is not alterity, but similarity – at times, even identity (1985: 47).

The fact that most members neglect to reflect on their intra-religious relations might be explained by this idea of proximity as being the issue. It is easier to reject that which is classified as “different” from the onset than that which is meant to be “the same.” Still, Saima shows that it is possible to situate oneself in intra-religious relations despite or even because of the realization that what was originally perceived to be monolithic is in fact diverse. On the other hand, Saima's conclusion about the way in which she personally identifies as Muslim appears to be made on the basis of difference. The illumination of diversity within the Muslim tradition from her Daughters participation appears the reason for her conclusion that she can identify as

Muslim despite not rigidly following prescribed practices. That is, Saima has come to accept that she practices Islam differently to how she believes the majority of Muslims do because of the diverse approaches taken by her fellow Muslim Daughters members. In this instance, because her intra-religious encounters reveal that she is “not like them,” Saima is able to situate herself within a larger religious framework. She has come to a greater appreciation and understanding of her religious self.

Another indicator that proximity might be an issue for individuals looking to situate themselves in intra-religious encounters is the fact that members generally agree that on the rare occasion that disagreements arise, it is usually between women belonging to the same religious tradition.<sup>69</sup> Nicola, one of the Christians who joined the original Daughters group more than a decade ago, elaborates on this perception. According to Nicola, members are “so anxious to treat people of the other faiths with every consideration” and, as a result, so concerned with avoiding inter-religious conflicts, that they overlook prejudices about their own religious tradition. Consequently, intra-religious clashes happen. The Christian founding member, Mary, explains further,

We don't have many conflicts actually (...) it's very rare that it's across the religions. Where it shows up is within a religion. It shows up sometimes as an off-the-cuff disparaging remark or a generalization like: 'Presbyterians are that way,' or 'you know how Catholics are like that,' or a Reform Jew can say: 'oh you know how the Orthodox are,' assuming that we all agree on that. That is not

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<sup>69</sup> I only learnt about one major intra-religious disagreement during my fieldwork with the Daughters of Abraham. This conflict between two Jewish women over whether or not the food served at a meeting was in accordance with *kashrut* guidelines is discussed in chapter 3. I did occasionally observe the expression of intra-religious differences within all of the represented religious traditions. Such differences concerned ethics or religious practice like the notion of forgiveness or the purpose of prayer. However, these intra-religious differences simply illuminated the personal character of religious belongings, it did not lead to any detrimental intra-religious disagreements. It could just be that the women were on their best behavior during group meetings due to the presence of a researcher, but the Daughters did seem genuine in their response when stating that conflicts are rare. The fact that the Daughters of Abraham is set up to explore similarities and differences between the “Abrahamic religions” and, therefore, attracts women willing to experience religious diversity can perhaps explain why disagreements are rare in this interreligious encounter.

intended to be malicious, but because we all have prejudices obviously, and a lot of it unexamined.

Whilst Nicola and Mary's explanations for the manifestation of intra-religious conflicts (and not inter-religious disagreements) in the Daughters of Abraham might to some extent be valid, the reality of intra-religious confrontations must also be considered in relation to the members' negotiations of religious subjectivity. Intra-religious disagreements arguably occur because when diversity is revealed within one's religious tradition, it challenges the viability of one's religious self more so than inter-religious differences do. As J.Z. Smith demonstrates, a religious "other" can easily be rejected as simply that. However, any examples of different approaches to issues essential to an individual's religious identity cannot as easily be rejected as "other" and, therefore, carries the potential to undermine an individual's religious self-understanding to a greater degree than inter-religious differences do.

Accordingly, when conversations about personal understandings of what defines a Jewish, Christian, or Muslim woman highlight intra-religious contradictions, that is, when they illuminate diversity in relations where the other who claims to "be-us" is "not-like-us," then, the presumed similarity is revealed to be nonexistent. This, in turn, can occasion intra-religious clashes about the "right" definition. The fact that group discussions are meant to focus on religious commonalities so as to stress that which is shared between the "Abrahamic religions" can, thus, work to emphasize intra-religious diversity, which in turn provides the foundation for generating intra-religious conflicts (Daughters of Abraham 2016c). In other words, the stress on inter-religious commonalities makes intra-religious differences more pronounced when, on the rare occasion, they come to the forefront of group discussions because it complicates members' ability to situate themselves within this interfaith encounter.

Only when the perceived similarity remains on the level of “like-us” instead of “too-much-like-us” can referencing intra-religious connections work to clarify and perhaps downplay inter-religious diversity.

In a context that encourages comparisons with women belonging to different religious traditions, it is easy to consider members belonging to one’s religious tradition to be “the same” as oneself. On the one hand, Saima’s reflections on her encounter with other Muslims demonstrate that despite a common religious identity, the individual encountered will have a different personalized approach to a shared religious tradition. Consequently, in intra-religious encounters individuals tend to view the other simultaneously as self and other, hence as “other-self.” Expressly, the “other” is a religious self because the “other” adheres to the same religious tradition, but she is still a religious “other” because of the divergent personal approaches taken to live out the shared religion. Intra-religious encounters, therefore, challenge understandings of what it means to belong to a religious tradition because it is not possible to clearly separate individuals into those with whom you share more than you differ in terms of religious belonging.

This notion of an “other-self” is inspired by Sami Schalk’s critique of rigid self/other binaries and promotion of both/and thinking in relation to ideas of self and other (2011). The “other-self” is defined as “either an other individual with whom the self identifies and connects with or as the self behaving as other in order to fill or expand the void of identity between the self and other” (Schalk 2011: 209). The “other-self,” therefore, opens up a more “fluid, contextualized understanding of the self in a spectrum of relatedness to others in any given moment” (Schalk 2011: 197). Individuals are typically placed in the “other-self” category in encounters where one identity factor is perceived to have “particular or more social weight” (2011: 205;

209). In Daughters of Abraham's interfaith setting, the socially significant identity factor is obviously religion, even if, as indicated throughout this thesis, additional identity factors like gender and ethnicity play a role in shaping the character of the inter- and intra-religious dynamics found in this encounter. I consider the "other-self" a useful concept to apply to understand individual engagements with Daughters of Abraham's multifaceted inter- and intra-religious relations. The following examination uses this analytical tool in order to illuminate the positions and identity explorations done by converts in this interfaith book group. It further complicates understandings of Daughters of Abraham's inter- and intra-religious dynamics as well as religious identity categories.

### ***In-Between Religious Belongings: Converts Upsetting Religious Identity Categories***

It is not only intra-religious encounters that complicate understandings of religious identity categories; multilayered interfaith encounters involving both intra- and inter-religious dynamics are similarly challenging when it comes to understanding the interplay taking place in interfaith settings. This interplay applies to converts who hold various positions in the Daughters of Abraham. In particular, converts hold a unique position in this interfaith book group because they can be perceived by several of the represented religious groups to be "like them" (Smith 1985: 47). Converts straddle both intra- and inter-religious dynamics when defining their religious identity to themselves and to others. Whilst converts do not make up the majority of Daughters members, several subgroups involve women who have converted from one of the "Abrahamic religions" to another. These converts have all made the shift from

Christianity to Islam.

Moreover, other less radical changes to religious self-understanding are the norm for both the Jewish and Christian members, most of whom speak of interdenominational explorations similar to Gabriella's religious trajectory explored in the beginning of this chapter. Members who have made these interdenominational shifts have typically gone from more Conservative traditions to more Liberal ones. Some have made the shift from Catholicism to Protestantism, others from Orthodox to Reform versions of Judaism. Such religious subjectivity deliberations are continued in the Daughters of Abraham setting, but now vis-à-vis intra- and inter-religious others. As a result, the idea of an evolving sense of religious self is familiar to most Daughters members. Only members born into a Muslim family admit that the thought of converting has never crossed their minds because, they explain, you remain within the religion that you are born into. Still, similar to the Jewish and Christian members, the Muslim women have considered what their religion means to them prior to joining the Daughters of Abraham, and they continue to explore such meanings both inside and outside this interfaith setting.

As for converts, they are not only navigating intra- and inter-religious relations when negotiating their own sense of belonging; they are also doing so in relation to their fellow group members. Explicitly, converts can be perceived as belonging to two religions – the one they grew up in and the one that they have actively chosen. Converts, then, can be viewed as the “other-self” by various religious “others.” Their in-between status when it comes to religion makes it complicated to place a convert in one religious identity category precisely because the convert can speak to two traditions at once. Madeleine, a Muslim convert, explains this in-between multilayered position,

I live interfaith everyday being a convert. Because you have to bridge two worlds being a convert between where you came from, which was Lutheran, in a very practicing family. My mother is a self-proclaimed church lady so being raised in the church heavily and then deciding to convert was a very difficult process for them. So trying to dispel myths about Islam to them just sort of opened my eyes to how much myth exist in the general public. When I was [at college,] I noticed that people felt very comfortable asking me questions, hard questions about the faith, hard questions about things that are very relevant today, and this was thirteen years ago, about: ‘does Islam encourage violence?’ ‘What’s up with all these terrorists who say they are Muslims?’ And I don’t think they felt comfortable asking a non-convert because they would feel that maybe it was an offensive question or....whereas coming from the same faith that they came from or they are, they felt very comfortable asking questions. So I thought, ‘well maybe this is something that I should get more involved in.’

Madeleine, who is approaching forty, converted to Islam from Christianity at age twenty-five following years of soul-searching during her nursing studies. Since then, she has married a second-generation Bangladeshi Muslim and become a mother of three. Madeleine’s convert status, her straddling of two religious traditions, and her consequent ability to speak to both sides, is the primary reason why she got involved in her Daughters group. It appears that she almost considers it her obligation to engage in inter-religious dialogue in order to educate her former intra-religious selves about her new religious identity. Niklas Luhmann argues, “in order to be able to enter into communication, individuals have to assume that there are similarities of experience between them and others” even when recognizing that they are individual subjects (2000: 81). Thus, the ability to conceive of some commonalities is essential for prompting engagement with the “other.” Converts’ “other-self” status plays into this potential to point to common ground because they do not seem completely foreign to people belonging to the religion left behind, a common discourse can be found. According to Madeleine, Christians are more comfortable engaging in inter-religious dialogue with her than with Muslims born into the tradition. An explanation is that Christians can conceive of some common ground with Madeleine on the basis

of her being raised Christian. That is, Madeleine can be viewed as an “other-self.” She is like them, yet at the same time unlike them. As a Muslim convert, Madeleine, therefore, has a unique starting point in terms of how she positions herself in an inter-religious encounter. She can play with ideas of religious sameness and difference because her background has taught her Christian norms whilst her chosen Muslim identity has required learning about an alternative religious worldview. Madeleine can, therefore, position herself as the same yet different to both the Christian and the Muslim members. Madeleine can also be considered an “other-self” when she references her Christian background in order to, thereby, gain authority amongst Christians to explain about her chosen Muslim identity. When Madeleine points back to her former religious identity, she takes the position as “other-self” because she “behaves as other in order to fill or expand the void of identity between the self and other” (Schalk 2011: 209). In her own words, she lives interfaith.

Perhaps Madeleine’s convert status, which requires her “living interfaith,” helps explain the impression that her internal and external intra- and inter-religious deliberations have become fundamental to who she is. From the early aftermath of her conversion to Islam, Madeleine has been involved in formalized interfaith activities. This “passion for interfaith” was what motivated her to join the Daughters of Abraham. Besides being involved in this women’s interfaith book group, Madeleine participates in other interreligious activities like interfaith thanksgivings or as the Muslim representative at her local community’s film and discussion series about religion. Such interfaith engagements advance Madeleine’s religious self-understanding. This is especially true for her participation in the Daughters of Abraham, which she considers “the cream” of her interfaith encounters because the recurring meetings and shared intimate experiences about religion generate close

interfaith relationships. Madeleine clarifies that participating in the Daughters of Abraham influences her sense of religious self when explaining what stands out to her from this interfaith engagement:

That you could learn something about someone else's faith tradition, and that it would enrich your own faith or your own connection (...) to God, that I found to be just the best part about it. You walk away from a meeting feeling lifted, feeling more connected.

The uplifted sensation that accompanies the ending of meetings suggests that Madeleine's interreligious engagement in her Daughters group confirms her decision to convert to Islam all those years ago.

Together with the friendships formed, Madeleine references this feeling of connection as the key reason why she considers the Daughters of Abraham to be like therapy and the one interfaith activity that she "will never give up! That's too important to me." In contrast to Caroline who is searching for the religious tradition to which she completely fits, Madeleine has actively chosen to identify as Muslim. Yet, she is still exploring what that means to her and what it means to others. Her therapeutic impression of the Daughters of Abraham arguably relates to her religious subjectivity negotiations. Therapy centers on exploring issues of identity with the aim of achieving greater self-understanding. Because the self is fundamentally interpersonal, people understand things relationally and comparatively (Kenny and West 2008: 120). Consequently, individuals need others with whom they can compare and contrast their own worldview in order to clarify their sense of self. It appears that Madeleine finds such essential comparisons in her Daughters group. Specifically, engaging in the Daughters of Abraham exposes her to Christian and Jewish self-understandings. Articulating and comparing her Muslim self-understanding to these

alternative identities clarifies her religious belonging. Her articulation of Islam to both Christians, her religious “other-selves,” and to Jews, her religious “others,” then, results in a deepening of her religious self-understanding.

Madeleine’s articulation of her “other-self” status sees her engage in dynamics that cannot fully be characterized as either intra-religious or inter-religious. Because of her convert status, Madeleine simultaneously engages in intra- and inter-religious deliberations when encountering Christians. Her in-between position highlights the complex interfaith dynamics negotiated in the Daughters of Abraham. She also demonstrates that participating in this interfaith encounter can engender greater self-understanding. Expressly, members can compare understandings of their religious self to religious “others” and/or “other-selves.” Such comparisons illuminate similarities and differences, and so prompt reflection on where one fits in on this continuum of religious belongings. Engaging in Daughters of Abraham’s inter- and intra-religious dynamics, then, can help clarify where an individual belongs on the wider spectrum of meanings applied to identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim in contemporary America because of the presence of various kinds of religious “others” who challenge and therefore nuance understandings of self.

***Conclusion: Nuancing Understandings of What It Means to Be Jewish, Christian, or Muslim in Contemporary America***

This chapter has examined various positions taken within Daughters of Abraham’s inter-religious and intra-religious dynamics. It showed how engaging in these relations can nuance individual understandings of what it means to identify as

Jewish, Christian, or Muslim in contemporary America. Moreover, it can help clarify where on the wide spectrum of potential meanings applied to such religious identity categories the individual woman belongs. The variety in the individual understandings of these religious identity categories further illuminates their fluidity and accentuates the personal character of meanings applied to American Islam, Judaism, or Christianity. Consequently, it rejects monolithic definitions of these religious identity categories. Additionally, individual members' displays of double belonging disrupt any straightforward definition of intra- and inter-religious dynamics. This chapter also illuminated a tension between the intra- and inter-religious levels of this interfaith encounter. Explicitly, the organization's emphasis on inter-religious commonalities can highlight intra-religious diversity, which is more difficult to deal with than inter-religious differences because that which is meant to be "the same" cannot as easily be dismissed as "other;" maintaining a coherent sense of religious self, therefore, becomes challenging.

Having analyzed individual members' complex engagements with Daughters of Abraham's inter- and intra-religious dynamics, I turn to a fundamental inter-religious dynamic in this women's interfaith book group that positions Muslims as "different" vis-à-vis Jews and Christians. I examine individual members' engagement with this interreligious dynamic whilst also considering the group level and the influence of the sociocultural context for prompting these relative positions of power.

## CHAPTER 7: Complicating a Fundamental Inter-Religious Dynamic

### Positioning Muslims as “Different” Vis-à-Vis Jews and Christians

Previous to 9/11 it was like: ‘Wow! What a wonderful place we are in, the United States! Nobody bothers you or troubles you for who you are or what you are, what you are doing or not doing. Nobody cares what your religion is about,’ (...) but then all of a sudden: ‘Boom!’ We ran into a huge wall. So I felt the need to go and make myself visible, more visible in terms of who I am and in terms of my faith. We never ever discussed religion. It was only later, after that date in point that I started to talk to people about it (Aya, first-generation Muslim immigrant, Steering Committee member).

It just felt unacceptable to me that there are millions of Muslims living in this country, and they are under siege right now, and I have no idea of how much I’m hearing about Islam is true and what isn’t (Deborah, Jewish founding member).

None of the eight Jewish and Christian members of chapter B located in southeast Massachusetts had met a Muslim woman before participating in the Daughters of Abraham. In fact, as Deborah’s comment reflects, a key motivation for joining the Daughters of Abraham for most of the Jewish and Christian members was learning about Islam, a religion that they knew next to nothing about beforehand. Now, however, the Jewish and Christian women of group B knew three Muslim women, each with a different ethnic background and immigrant status. The Christian group leader had been doubtful whether she would even be able to find any Muslim women in the local community to join back in 2012 when she had sought to establish a branch of the Daughters interfaith book groups. She had lived in the neighborhood for over forty years, but she had never met a Muslim woman before. At least she did not think that she had. When she had started looking for Muslims to join the group, she had looked for religious identity markers, particularly for the *hijab*. However, she had failed to find any woman in sight wearing the Muslim veil. After months of searching

and putting up posters at local libraries, colleges, and supermarkets, that is, anywhere that she could think of, Nadia had phoned. They had arranged to meet at a local coffee shop so Nadia could decide if the Daughters of Abraham was a group for her. As she entered the coffee shop, the group leader had looked around to spot a conservatively dressed, veiled woman. She did not have much luck, though. Only her lightly tanned skin color distinguished Pakistani-born Nadia from the other customers. It had been a similar experience with American-born Asma of Arab descent.

Only Fatima, a recent first-generation immigrant from Saudi-Arabia, lived up to the stereotypical image of a Muslim woman. When she is not taking care of her young family, Fatima volunteers as a Sunday school teacher at the local Islamic center. Clad in the traditional Saudi Arabian *abaya*, Fatima is easy to distinguish from the two other Muslim members and especially from the American-born Jewish and Christian members, who cannot easily be told apart. By choosing to wear this garment, Fatima highlights both her ethnic and her religious identity. By extension, she stresses difference from the American-born Jewish and Christian members who do not use clothes to signify their religious belonging. She also articulates difference from most of the Muslim Daughters who do not wear the *hijab* or other religious identity markers. Myfanwy Franks explains how since the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, “women who wear the *hijab* (...) or who cover themselves more completely (...) are seen as being emblematic of Islam” (2005: 199). Franks contends that women wearing the *hijab* in a Muslim minority setting are, therefore, “making an assertive act by giving themselves and their Islamic identity high visibility. Being visible may not be the intention of veiling in a non-Muslim environment but it is, however, an unintended consequence” (2005: 199). Specific clothes signify particular religious belongings. Individuals can, thus, actively use dress to articulate difference and, as

Fatima does, assert their religious identity in any social interaction including in interreligious encounters. The stereotypical views of Muslims arising in America following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 help explain why the Christian group leader was trying to find Muslim members to recruit for her Daughters chapters by looking for such stereotypical religious identity markers.

Now years later, the group leader tells this story of searching for women wearing the *hijab* with a sense of self-ridicule because she has discovered the great diversity defining the American Muslim community through participating in the Daughters of Abraham. Still, her initial search for the unfamiliar based on stereotypes speaks to the influence of the wider sociocultural context on collectively held ideas about what it means to be an American Muslim, Jew, or Christian. Specifically, it points to the general demography of the United States. As chapter 2 examined, before the 1965 legal change that opened up immigration from outside Europe, most Americans identified as Caucasian Christians (King 2002: 296 & Gerber 2011: 53). This law occasioned a rapid increase in the total number of immigrants to the United States, including many Muslims. Consequently, it has greatly diversified America's ethnic and religious landscape (Gerber 2011: 53). America's immigration history, then, means that the presence of Islam is more recent than the established Jewish and Christian communities. As a result, Muslims stand out as "different" to Jews and Christians in the American sociocultural context. This unequal dynamic on the macro-level influences the micro-level and, accordingly, it is also evident in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups.

This chapter elaborates on one of the consequences of this wider sociocultural context by examining the ways in which Daughters members view and position themselves in relation to each other based on religious affiliation. It focuses on a

fundamental interreligious dynamic in the Daughters of Abraham that positions Muslims as different vis-à-vis Christians and Jews. I analyze a tension between the leadership's rigid positioning of Muslims as "different" and individual members' more creative approaches to engaging with issues of sameness and difference, and so to understanding the "other." I argue that Daughters members can come to hold fluid perceptions of each other, which demonstrates that the notion of Muslims as "different" from non-Muslims and the concomitant implication of Jews and Christians as "the same" are too simplistic. Additionally, when engaging with ideas of difference and sameness of religion, members complicate understandings of their self. The following group meeting begins to illuminate the fundamental interreligious dynamic situating the Muslim Daughters members as "different" from the Jewish and Christian participants.

### *An Inescapable Position of Difference for Muslims?*

I deliberately asked her about her take on the portrayal of the Muslim woman. I wanted to know her reaction to the book, to know if she identified. I want to understand because I really don't know what they are thinking half the time! (Leonore, Christian).

Leonore had generously offered me a ride home from a winter edition of her Daughters group meeting. A retired teacher, her passion for learning had let her to the Daughters of Abraham a few years earlier. She had wanted to learn about Islam, of which she had no knowledge. Leonore's expressed desire to understand who the Muslim women are, what they believe, why they adhere to Islam, and what that involves, demonstrates a generic lack of knowledge about ways of living as Muslim on the parts of the Jewish and Christian Daughters members. That month, group D,

based north of Boston, had discussed *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela. This novel categorized as “Muslim” centers on issues of identity. It revolves around Najwa, a young woman forced to flee a privileged and secular life in Somalia. She ends up in London, impoverished and yearning for meaning. Najwa eventually finds such meaning by becoming a devout Muslim. The four Jewish and four Christian members present all used this fictitious story to ask the four Muslim Daughters questions about their relationship with Islam like, “could you put yourself in the place of the protagonist?” “Is there anything that you disagree with in terms of the author’s depiction of Islam?” “Did you find anything that is similar or different to your practice or understanding of Islam?” It seemed that it was not only Leonore who had questions about what identifying as an American Muslim woman means to the individual practitioner.

A large part of the meeting centered on this Q&A style format, with the majority of questions being directed to the Muslim members. Emre gave one of the more pertinent responses. Emre is the group’s newest Muslim member. Recently married to another second-generation Turkish-American Muslim, she is in her mid-twenties and works at one of Boston’s many universities. Emre strongly criticized that *Minaret* depicts wearing the Muslim veil as a sign of oppression. She did not identify with the book’s portrayal at all. Emre is the only one of the group’s four Muslim members who wears the *hijab*. She went on to explain that she had actively chosen to wear the *hijab* as a sign of her Muslim identity despite there being no tradition for doing so in her family nor in the American-Turkish community. Moreover, she felt liberated for doing so since, in her experience, after donning the *hijab*, people had actually started listening to her viewpoints instead of focusing on her appearance. Emre’s sharing of her individual experience and perception of the *hijab*, a defining

Muslim identity marker, accentuates the personalized character of religious belonging. She applies value to this Muslim identity marker, and in doing so, asserts her Muslim self-understanding. She further highlights that a monolithic view of Islam is flawed and likewise is generalizing about its practitioners. Emre's shared personal insight works to nuance the Jewish and Christian members' understandings of what it means to identify as Muslim.

The key takeaway from this scene is the dynamic between the Muslim and non-Muslim members. The Jewish and Christian group members' basic questioning of the Muslim members present speaks to a fundamental interreligious dynamic in the Daughters of Abraham, which positions Muslims on the one side vis-à-vis Jews and Christians on the other. This dynamic, then, creates an unequal relation based on religious affiliation. Whilst basic questions are sometimes directed to Jews and Christians especially from Muslim members, this Q&A style is not the norm when groups discuss books categorized as "Jewish" or "Christian." On these occasions, conversation tends to flow more fluidly as groups explore various themes prompted by the book in question often through pointing to religious commonalities. The variation in discussion formats relates to a significant difference in motivation for becoming a member of the Daughters of Abraham based on religious affiliation. Christians and Jews typically voice learning about Islam as a primary reason for joining this women's interfaith book group. Islam was a religion that was uncharted territory for most. Muslims, on the other hand, primarily join to educate others about their peaceful understanding of Islam deemed necessary because of the Islamophobia that followed in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001.

The previous chapter showed that Madeleine had recognized the need for dispelling myths about Islam prior to September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. This recognition was due

to her convert status prompting others to ask questions about her chosen Muslim identity. Madeleine's awareness stands in contrast to the experience of Daughters members raised in Muslim households, who are more often than not first-generation immigrants like Aya. Her opening remark: "I felt the need to go and make myself visible, more visible in terms of who I am and in terms of my faith" following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, conveys the generic experience of the Muslim interviewees. None of them found it necessary to publicly discuss their religion before this tragic event. They had been free to practice their religion without being questioned by others. However, the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, which were claimed to have been done in the name of Islam, triggered a greater "cultural awareness" of American Muslims (Gimino 2013: 341). Voices in the American public discourse stigmatized Islam as a religion of violence and further stressed that Jews and Christians worship a different God than Muslims (Gimino 2013: 341-4). The Muslim Daughters members verify this change in the general public discourse. This shift, they say, has transformed the Muslim experience of living in America because of the Islamophobia that has now become part of their social reality. For example, Sedrah told me about being harassed whilst carrying out her daily chores because her dress, a traditional Pakistani *saree* and a loosely tied scarf, signifies her Muslim identity.

Saima, a first-generation immigrant from Pakistan who works as a real estate agent, explains that she feels that she has to stand up for her Muslim identity in society in general now because Muslims:

We are fewer in numbers compared to the other religions, we are probably the least understood religion, and we are the most misunderstood religion, thanks to (...) some crazies who continue to use religion for their mafia tactics...it's almost like hijacking the faith.

Saima's reflections on the negative and uninformed perception of Islam relate to research concerning the general public perception of the American Muslim community in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 (Peek, 2010; Pew Forum, 2009; Welch, 2006). It speaks to the consequences of this wider sociocultural context for the positions taken by the Muslim women in Daughters of Abraham's interfaith setting. Expressly, as Saima highlights, the Muslim Daughters members feel a need to contest the, in their view, false representation of Islam as a religion of violence with which they are confronted in the media and everyday life (Jackson 2010: 7). Saima stands up for her Muslim identity. She finds it necessary to defend her religion due to the lingering social stereotyping of all Muslims as terrorists. The Muslim members try to own and thereby reverse this negative classification by informing the Jewish and Christian members about their alternative peaceful version of Islam. The Muslim women interviewed express that they consider their respective Daughters group a space where they can freely voice this impression in contrast to society at large.

What is clear is that the American sociocultural context makes the starting point for the Muslims members' interfaith engagement distinct from the Jewish and Christian women who do not express a need to defend their religious identities or correct general misconceptions about their religion. Similar to American society generally speaking, in the Daughters of Abraham the norm is being Jewish or Christian. Consequently, the default position for Muslims is one of difference. Aside from a felt need to educate others about Islam, a second important reason that the Muslim women join a Daughters chapter is, therefore, to show that they are "normal," or in other words, the same as Jews and Christians. Thus, it would appear that the American sociocultural context to some extent determines this fundamental and unequal interreligious dynamic found in the Daughters of Abraham, which positions

Muslims on the one side as “different” vis-à-vis Jews and Christians on the other as “the same.”

It is important to recognize, then, that a given sociocultural context provides certain discursive practices for the individual to engage with, which shapes understandings of self and others (Hall 2000: 17-8). The poststructuralist thinker Michel Foucault argues that these discursive practices are contingent upon social norms created by a hierarchy of knowledge based on power relations. An individual uses “models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society and his social group” to define his/her self (Foucault 1984: 291). Social power hierarchies entail that a subject occupies a “decentered position” within dominant discourses; consequently, an individual continuously aligns with and discards various discourses in an attempt to center him-/herself within the social power structures (Hall 2000: 16). Thus, the different motivations for participating in the Daughters of Abraham depending on religious affiliation further indicate underlying notions of power between the Muslim and non-Muslim group members that influence their interreligious interactions and so ideas about each other.

The only Muslim member who did not express a need to defend Islam was Madeleine, the American-born Muslim convert whose interfaith deliberations are explored in the previous chapter. The reason might be that Madeleine with her free-flowing long blond hair and tightfitting clothes does not live up to the mentioned stereotypical image of a Muslim woman, and so avoids everyday confrontations with Islamophobia. Moreover, because she is white, she can choose not to highlight her Muslim identity. Madeleine conveys that ethnicity plays an important role in terms of the positions available to Muslims both in the Daughters of Abraham and in society at large. That is, a relation between ethnicity and the degree of freedom that individuals

have to position themselves as the same or different vis-à-vis others exists. It speaks to the claim made by the social anthropologist Fredrik Barth that “ethnic identity implies a series of constraints on the kinds of roles an individual is allowed to play, and the partners he may choose for different kinds of transactions” (1969: 17). Barth emphasizes that the status of an individual’s ethnic identity is the primary factor for defining “the permissible constellations of statuses, or social personalities, which an individual with that identity may assume” (1969: 17). However, in interreligious interactions like the Daughters of Abraham book groups, this primacy is complicated by the added layer of religious identity. As an American-born white convert to Islam, Madeleine complicates any straightforward boundary drawing that Barth argues to be the basis for the continuation of ethnic units or social groups and, consequently, the positions available to her within and outside this interfaith group are greater than for the Muslim members with Pakistani, Indian, Arab, Turkish, Iranian, or Maghrebi roots, who stand out in terms of skin color (1969: 14). Thus, the ethnic origins of the Muslim members add to the impression of them being different from the Jewish and Christian members, who cannot easily be told apart.

On the organizational level, the view of Muslims as “different” found in the general American discourse is replicated. Specifically, amongst Daughters of Abraham’s Steering Committee and subgroup leaders, there exists a repeated discourse about the struggle to recruit Muslim members, and the consequent problematic numerical shortage of Muslims vis-à-vis Christians and Jews. This leadership discourse positions Muslims as different to non-Muslims. The reasons offered for this numerical shortage by group leaders from all three “Abrahamic traditions” are usually either the younger demographic of the American Muslim population, and so a lack of time to commit to a book group due to family and work

commitments, or the more recent Muslim immigration to the United States meaning that the older generation who might have time to participate is not sufficiently fluent in English. Irrespective of the leaders' presumed reasons for the numerical shortage of Muslim participants, the fact that the original Daughters chapter has only one consistent Muslim member testifies to the reality of this discourse. Sedrah, who is that sole Muslim Daughters member, relates the resulting challenges from this position,

Being the only [Muslim] member, it can be hard (...) Even if I'm the only member, I never felt alone or lonely (...) but it's because the members are all so nice (...) The only time sometimes I feel alone is when I have to read the book, and I have to...I should know ahead of time what the questions might be...sometimes that puts pressure on me, and sometimes I cannot answer the questions when...so what if I can't read the book, I can't lean on anybody!

The scarcity of Muslim members makes Sedrah stand out. It highlights her religious identity and with that her difference from the Jewish and Christian members who are in the majority, or in other words, the norm. Sedrah, therefore, feels responsible for representing Islam "correctly," and so feels unaccomplished when she lacks knowledge about her religion. Being the group's only Muslim, then, influences Sedrah's experiences with engaging in this interreligious encounter. Moreover, it reflects the status of difference that Muslims hold in society in general. Consequently, it demonstrates the intimate connection between macro-level and micro-level experiences and relative positions of power.

Daughters of Abraham's leadership, which encompasses members from all of the "Abrahamic religions," mentions the problem of the "missing Muslims" at practically every subgroup meeting. It was highlighted during Daughters of Abraham's Annual Gathering in April 2015 as well as at the semi-annual leaders' meeting held in October 2014. It is not only Jewish and Christian members who

position Muslims as the “other” in this interreligious encounter, then, the Muslim Daughters also contribute to this view. Good intentions lie behind reiterating this stated challenge, namely the leaders’ desire to ensure a more balanced representation of the “Abrahamic religions” in the individual subgroups by recruiting additional Muslim members. Nonetheless, this constant talk about the “missing Muslims” insinuates their difference from Jews and Christians. The notion of the “missing Muslims” implies that Muslims, generally speaking, create an obstacle to fulfilling the organization’s overarching goal of fostering interreligious understanding. This goal cannot be achieved without Muslim voices available to convey knowledge about Islam so as to generate greater understanding about this religious tradition. Accordingly, the leadership’s discourse assigns Muslims a position as “different” from which it is difficult to escape. It, therefore, carries with it a danger of scapegoating Muslim members by singling them out as a problem.

Evidently, on the organizational level, Muslims seem by default to be positioned as “different” in relation to non-Muslims. Barth argues, “ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which embracing social systems are built” (1969: 10). Such boundary drawing and maintenance “entail social processes of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained” (Barth 1969: 10). Considering the default notion of Muslims as “different” on the leadership level, it would appear, then, that the classification of Muslims as “different” vis-à-vis non-Muslims is the very foundation for the existence of the Daughters interfaith book groups.

However, complicating this view are individual members’ more creative approaches to the “other.” In contrast to the leadership’s binary stance stand Jewish

and Christian members' approaches to their interreligious engagement with the Muslim Daughters. These interreligious encounters occasionally do away with the leadership's dichotomized view declaring Muslims to be "different" from non-Muslims. Looking to make sense of their self and the "other," the Jewish and Christian members' approaches to their Muslim counterparts demonstrate a vacillation between pointing to difference and sameness of religion. Moreover, these approaches illuminate that it is possible to transcend rigid power dynamics and discourses such as that claiming Muslims to be "different" from non-Muslims. Accordingly, it is pertinent to analyze how Jewish and Christian members point to similarities and differences when positioning themselves in relation to Muslims in this interreligious encounter.

Individual Jewish and Christian Daughters members typically adhere to the leadership's default view of Muslims as "different," at least upon joining the Daughters of Abraham. Besides the Muslim stereotypes previously examined, a key reason behind this view is ignorance of Islam, which is the general starting point for the Christian and Jewish women. In fact, as the story about the Christian group leader looking for stereotypical Muslim markers when trying to recruit Muslim Daughters members illustrates, most had never met a Muslim before participating in the Daughters of Abraham. The Jewish founding member, Deborah, explains that she "didn't know diddly-squat about Islam." Deborah found this lack of knowledge inexcusable following September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 due to the Islamophobia that followed in the wake of this national tragedy. Seeking to correct her ignorance, she viewed the Daughters of Abraham as an accessible way to learn about Islam. Accordingly, the Jewish and Christian members' common impression of Muslims as "different" can partly be explained by their motivation to nuance this view through participating in

this interreligious encounter. The reflection made by the Christian member, Nicola, who has been part of the Daughters of Abraham from the onset, illustrates this developing impression of Muslims:

For me the real learning curve was learning about Islam and meeting Muslim women. Our most consistent Muslim member in our group has (...) become a close friend of mine. The only Muslim woman I've ever really known as a person. When we get together for tea, we don't talk about the group or our faiths, we just talk about what's going on with my kids and her kids, the way you do with any woman friend, and it's a wonderful thing.

Nicola elucidates that members can come to hold a holistic view of their fellow Muslim members – she talks about general life topics with her friend from her Daughters group who simply happens to be Muslim. In contrast to the leadership's discourse, then, individual members do not necessarily maintain a rigid view of Muslims as “different.” The Daughters of Abraham offers a setting dedicated to fostering interreligious learning, but conversations venture beyond this focus on religion and offer a window into members' everyday lives. Both types of knowledge can work to downplay the group's religious diversity and with that a view of Muslims as “different.”

In fact, for some Jewish and Christian members learning about Islam in their Daughters group dispels the idea of Muslims as wholly different. Anna's motivations for joining the Daughters of Abraham reveal this diminishing of otherness:

I wanted to know more about Islam [which] was a mysterious religion to me. I had thought of it as a group-kind of thing (...) that is not something that attracts me, and I wondered if there would be any diversity of thought within Islam. Among the women I've found that indeed there is.

Evidently, the interreligious encounters with the Muslim members belonging to her

Daughters group have demystified Islam for Anna. In fact, she has come to view Muslims as similar to herself in the sense that they also critically engage with their religious tradition. Anna self-defines as a progressive Catholic who is exploring alternative Christian denominations because she is “turned off by Rome.” This discovered resemblance of taking a critical approach to religion facilitates interreligious understanding. Accordingly, it seems that interreligious understanding can be achieved in a relational process where members recognize and are able to explore and/or confirm their self through engaging with women belonging to other religions. Specifically, the acquired knowledge about Islam has given Anna a new lens with which to negotiate her Christian tradition. She states, “I can’t look at Christianity without thinking of it in terms of Islam and Judaism.” Whilst her face-to-face meetings with Muslims have lessened their difference, these encounters have also sparked explorations of religious self, which Anna states have simultaneously made her more appreciative and more critical of her own religion. Her interfaith encounters with Muslims, then, have both unsettled and strengthened her religious self-understanding. This outcome illuminates that the dynamic between Muslim and non-Muslim members is an interactive process that, similar to processes of identity formation, relies on an ongoing production of cultural differences and similarities as claimed by Barth (1969: 10). Accordingly, Jews, Christians, and Muslim members alike have agency to try and alter this unequal power relation between them.

It is interesting that Anna does not single out the Muslim members when it comes to explaining the impact that her engagement in the Daughters of Abraham has had for her personal engagement with Christianity. Whilst gaining knowledge about Islam might have been an initial motivation for Anna to join, her interactions with both Jews and Muslims, that is with both of her religious “others,” contributes to her

continuous exploration of her Christian identity. Her interreligious encounters with Muslims might simultaneously upset and affirm her religious self-understanding, but so have her encounters with the Jewish Daughters members. Engagements with religious difference at large, then, can nuance the understanding of alternative religious worldviews, but can also enrich ideas about personally held beliefs. This outcome along with the fact that Anna does not point specifically to Muslims when it comes to reflecting on her own Christian identity illuminates that the dynamic between Muslims and non-Muslims is an interactive process and not a one-way rigid display of power that confines Muslims to a position as “different.” That is, she demonstrates that on the personal level, Muslims do not hold a default position as somehow separate from non-Muslims. In fact, some Daughters members find creative ways to approach and transcend religious diversity.

A noteworthy fact to mention is that Anna is part of Daughters of Abraham’s Steering Committee. In this forum, she is a fierce advocate for recruiting more Muslim participants. Consequently, when she acts in her capacity as a Steering Committee member, she adheres to the leadership’s “missing Muslim” discourse that locks Muslim members in a position as “different” vis-à-vis non-Muslims. However, on the individual level, she complicates this dichotomized social relation and, evidently, comes to hold a more nuanced view of Muslims.

Anna’s reflections on her encounters with Muslims additionally show that members use new knowledge about the religious “other” to explore their own religious identity. She underscores that this interreligious encounter engenders a more nuanced understanding of religious self because the discovered similarities and differences with women holding alternative religious worldviews prompt reflection on where the individual belongs on the wider spectrum of meanings applied to being

Christian, Muslim, or Jewish in contemporary America. Thus, evidently identity construction ultimately requires the presence of others who can challenge and so nuance ideas about self, but for individual Daughters members that “other” can come to be viewed as similar to oneself. On the personal level, then, the Muslim members’ default position as “different” from the Jewish and Christian Daughters members can be transcended.

Nevertheless, a few Jewish and Christian members choose to accentuate their difference from Islam. They arguably do so because creating a clear distinction enables assertion of religious self-understandings. Sarah, a middle-aged Orthodox Jewish member, stands out in this respect. Sarah is studying to become a rabbi following years of teaching religion at a Jewish primary school. Sarah is visibly leading a Jewish life: her kitchen is filled with *Kosher* foods, invitations to events at the local synagogue decorate her fridge, and her living room displays shelves overflowing with books about Jewish history and theology. Sarah chose to become involved in the Daughters of Abraham in order to break away from her Jewish circle. Her interreligious encounters have confirmed and strengthened her sense of Judaism as being right for her in large part due to a persisting lack of understanding for why anyone, and women especially, would ever be attracted to Islam. Sarah states,

Tell me something good about Islam, being a woman in Islam! (...) I can tell you what in Judaism compels me as a woman, but I can't tell you yet how Islam...it's hard. You want to be in liberal consciousness, but I'm not seeing the love of Islam [just] all this terrorism.

Evidently, Sarah positions herself as opposite to Muslims and uses this distinction to assert her Jewish self. Sarah exemplifies Barth's argument that social relations are frequently based on dichotomized statuses, although in this instance, the status of

religion takes primacy over ethnicity, which is the key identity factor in Barth's analysis (1969: 10). Still, Sarah's understanding of Islam as opposite to Judaism is not an automatically imposed display of power in which the Muslim "other" is passive, but one that has been engendered in a two-way interreligious encounter and can, therefore, actively be reconfigured by Sarah as well as by Muslim Daughters members who might convince her that Islam can bring meaning to individuals. Accordingly, it is possible to alter dichotomized social dynamics. The earlier examples, which demonstrate that individuals participating in interfaith activities find creative ways to approach and occasionally transcend religious diversity, support this conclusion.

Overall, the varied individual approaches taken by the Jewish and Christian women to position themselves in relation to the Muslim members in the Daughters of Abraham illuminate the interactive, dynamic, and complex character of interreligious relations. They also show the nuanced ways in which individuals engage with notions of sameness and difference of religion that can result in greater understanding for both their self and the "other." On the personal level, then, the creative approaches to religious diversity taken by individual members can break down rigid ideas about specific religious traditions and its adherents, and so generate understanding that cuts across religious divides. The diverse approaches taken by individual Daughters members to the fundamental interreligious dynamic between Muslim and non-Muslim members clarify Barth's theoretical stance that ethnic, and by extension social, groups emerge through the ongoing production of cultural differences and sameness within groups (1969: 10). Consequently, any dichotomized statuses are open for negotiation. The creative approaches taken by Jewish and Christian members to their Muslim counterparts, therefore, complicate the rigid binary of Muslims as "different" vis-à-vis

non-Muslims narrated on the leadership level and in the group's wider American sociocultural context. Evidently, then, there exists a tension in the Daughters of Abraham between the creative individual engagements with religious diversity that sometimes succeed in transcending religious differences and the leadership's discourse that rigidly assigns Muslims to a position as "different." As the Jewish and Christian women come to gain more complex understandings of what identifying as an American Muslim woman means, they also explore and develop their own religious identities. Consequently, they demonstrate that the interreligious relations between Muslims and non-Muslims members of the Daughters of Abraham are interactive and dynamic.

***Conflating Jews and Christians as "the Same" When Faced with the Muslim "Other"***

An implication of the fundamental interreligious dynamic that by default positions Muslims as "different" vis-à-vis non-Muslims in the Daughters of Abraham is the notion of Jews and Christians as "the same." Whilst the perception of Jews and Christians as "the same" is not as pronounced in the Daughters of Abraham as the fundamental interreligious dynamic claiming Muslims as "different," the two are interrelated. Therefore, this idea of sameness needs addressing. Daughters members from a cross-section of the three "Abrahamic religions" express this view of Jews and Christians as "the same." This perception is somewhat ironic considering the fact that Judaism has the smallest number of adherents on a global level compared to Islam and Christianity claiming the second-largest and largest number of adherents, respectively

(Pew Forum 2012). This irony is also apparent in the American context where 70.6 percent of the population identify as Christian whilst only 1.9 percent of Americans identify as Jewish and 0.9 percent as Muslim (Pew Research Center 2017).

Being an aspect of the fundamental interreligious dynamic between Muslim and non-Muslims, the perception of Jews and Christians as “the same” relates to the wider contextual factors that helped explain why this dynamic arises in the first place. Specifically, differences in immigration histories occasion unequal social statuses because the presence of American Islam is relatively new compared to the long established Jewish and Christian communities. These macro-level sociocultural factors influence this micro-level interreligious encounter. For example, Muslim members consistently conflate Jews and Christians when they voice their motivations for partaking in the Daughters of Abraham. That is, they do not direct their desire to educate others about their peaceful version of Islam to any particular religious group in question, presumably because they consider Jews and Christians as being part of the same national mass that lacks in knowledge about the more recent American Muslim community. Thus, the perception in the Daughters of Abraham of Jews and Christians as “the same” can be considered a subtle acting out of wider sociocultural discourses pointing to ideas of sameness and difference of religion, ethnicity, and national belonging.

More frequently than the Jewish members, the Christian Daughters cite perceived religious commonalities as reasons for why they consider Christianity to be interlinked with Judaism. Christian members often refer to a perceived connection between the Old Testament and the Torah or church teachings about Jesus being a Jew as reasons for why they feel connected to Judaism. The same reasons are provided when claiming their knowledge about Judaism to be almost on par with their

knowledge about Christianity. A few even speak of incorporating Jewish prayers into their religious practice based on this sense of sameness. Still, some Jewish members admit to holding prejudices about Christians, such as all Christians being missionaries who are only concerned with convincing Jews to convert to the deemed superior Christian tradition. At the same time, the Jewish Daughters stress that such prejudices have been overturned through their encounters with the Christian members.

Christian and Jewish members also point to personal reasons for conceiving of Judaism and Christianity as interlinked. Many Jewish and Christian members speak of friendships or extended family relations that bridge the two religions as the reason for their view of Judaism and Christianity as, if not exactly the same, then very similar. Most Jewish and Christian members have grown up in religiously mixed neighborhoods and/or had interreligious friendships in their adult life. In contrast, as mentioned, everyday interactions with Muslims have not been part of the Jewish or Christian members' experience prior to participating in the Daughters of Abraham. The recent immigration history of the American Muslim community explored in chapter 2 might to a large extent explain this reality. Quite a few of the Jewish members are married to a Christian convert or have a Christian husband who has agreed that their children be raised in the Jewish tradition. Likewise a few Christian members are in interfaith marriages, like Emily whose husband is Jewish, but where they have decided to raise their children in the Catholic tradition. In fact, with the handful of Daughters members in Jewish-Christian marriages, it is the woman's religious tradition that is being transmitted to the next generation. Nevertheless, seeing as these Daughters members consider Judaism and Christianity as similar, they do not think this a dramatic choice, but one that was made more because they feel that their children would lose something if they were not raised with religion. Finally,

many Jewish members have grown-up children married to Christians, and so have had to come to terms with their grandchildren being raised in interfaith families. This reality sees members accentuating the perceived interconnectedness between the two traditions, perhaps as a way to cope with the fact that the transmission of their Jewish tradition is approached differently by the next generation. Thus, the idea of sameness between Judaism and Christianity also aids members in navigating their interreligious relations outside their immediate Daughters group.

The Jewish and Christian Daughters are generally open to the possibility of interfaith marriage between the two traditions in contrast to the Muslim members who emphasize that they would not accept their children marrying outside Islam unless their prospective spouse would agree to convert. The only other Daughters of Abraham member to express a similar sentiment was its sole Orthodox Jewish member, Sarah, who told me that she would disown her children if they were to marry outside Orthodox Judaism. None of the Jewish and Christian members, however, reflected on the prospect of their children marrying a Muslim, neither during interviews nor during group meetings. A probable explanation is that this has never been a credible scenario, but to a great extent, this difference in attitude might be explained with the difference in immigration status explored in chapter 2. The Jewish and Christian members are part of communities that have lived side-by-side for centuries in contrast to the Muslim members who, as primarily first-generation immigrants, still have ties to their home countries with its concomitant cultural traditions. The handful of Muslim members who talked about marriage during interviews or group meetings mentioned that it is not sufficient that their children marry a Muslim; he or she also has to have the same ethnic background in order to be considered suitable marriage material. In other words, a match has to be judged as

sufficiently similar. It would appear, then, that the difference in attitude to the possibility of interfaith marriage extends beyond religious identities and involves issues of ethnic and national belongings. Accordingly, the implicit idea of Jews and Christians as “the same” vis-à-vis Muslims is multilayered. To use J.Z. Smith’s framework, in contrast to Muslim members who are “not-like-us,” Jewish and Christian members, then, typically consider each other as “like-me,” but not “too-much-like-me” (1985: 47). Taken together, all of the mentioned personal and contextual reasons explain why a perception of sameness between Jewish and Christian members arises.

Finally, the conflation of Jews and Christians as “the same” relates to the connection based on the perceived shared religious ancestor, Abraham, examined in chapter 1. Tamarah, whose husband converted from Christianity to Judaism following twenty-eight years of marriage, expresses this idea of connection, which has been intensified through her participation in the Daughters of Abraham. She states,

There are so many similarities, in that other religions have built on the values in Judaism and taken it in their own direction of course, but that the foundation is rooted in values that we share. It has made me feel proud of my religion, that it’s expansive enough to include.

This expressed similarity extends to the Muslim members too. Consequently, this perceived common religious root positions all Daughters members as “the same” in stark contrast to the leadership’s discourse that singles out Muslims as “different.”

The reason for these contrasting views might be found in their different applications, which are nevertheless interrelated. The leadership’s discourse about Muslims as “different” to Jews and Christians intends to increase the number of Daughters book groups by recruiting more Muslim members. The leaders, thereby,

wish to offer more Muslim voices that can educate the Jewish and Christian members about the diversity within Islam. On the other hand, the reference made to the perceived shared religious origins works to construct Daughters of Abraham's group identity, which requires the inclusion of all of the religious traditions represented in this interreligious encounter. Accordingly, both of these contrasting discourses, that position Muslims as either "different" or "the same" as Jews and Christians, aim to include everyone. However, these conflicting discourses have different outcomes in terms of the positions available to individual members when they engage in Daughters of Abraham's interreligious dynamics. What positions are available depends on the member's particular religious affiliation. The next chapter takes a closer look at the collective identification processes taking place in the Daughters of Abraham.

***Conclusion: Complicating an Unequal Dynamic Between Muslims and Non-Muslims***

To conclude, the creative approaches taken by the Jewish and Christian Daughters members to their Muslim counterparts complicate the default status of Muslims as "different" held on the leadership level and in the American sociocultural context. Engaging in this interreligious encounter can highlight both differences and similarities, and depending on the situation either or both is accentuated. Daughters members creatively negotiate the power dynamics arising from ideas of sameness and difference of religion resulting in more fluid perceptions of each other. It demonstrates that the fundamental interreligious dynamic that rigidly positions Muslims as "different" from non-Muslims in the Daughters of Abraham is an overly

simplistic view, and likewise is the concomitant implication that Jews and Christians are “the same.” Accordingly, participation in the Daughters of Abraham can break down stereotypes and ideas about religious difference allowing for complex and nuanced understandings to arise concerning what being an American Muslim, Christian, or Jewish woman means to the individual. Daughters members, therefore, develop understandings of both their self and the “other” when negotiating interreligious dynamics.

Furthermore, this analysis has illuminated how the interplay between religion and ethnicity determines positions of relative power in the wider American sociocultural context. Specifically, a macro-level discourse places Muslims in a position as “different” to non-Muslims. The aftermath of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 and the diverse immigration histories of the American Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities determine these dichotomized social statuses and engender stereotypical views of Muslims as “other.” Moreover, the macro-level influences the micro-level because it provides different starting points for interreligious engagement as attested to by the different motivations expressed by the Muslim and non-Muslim women, respectively, for participating in the Daughters of Abraham.

The discourse of Daughters of Abraham’s leadership singles out Muslims as “different” to the Christian and Jewish members within the Daughters space. However, when members of this interfaith book group as a collective are faced with outsiders, Muslims are viewed as “the same” as Jews and Christians. The next chapter explores this tension by analyzing the boundaries put in place in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups in order to create and maintain a collective identity.

## CHAPTER 8: Relational Bridge Building: “Mapping” Daughters of Abraham’s Collective Identity

*There is a hunger in the land  
Not just for bread and water  
But for the words of God*

Standing in a half circle, fifty-two women were joined in singing, their voices growing progressively louder as the three lines were repeated over and over for several minutes. The women singing had come to participate in a more elaborate version of interreligious bridge building to their usual book group meetings. Specifically, they were partaking in Daughters of Abraham’s Annual Gathering held in the spring of 2015. This was the third time that the thirteen Daughters chapters located in the Greater Boston Area were coming together as a unit. The first Gathering had celebrated the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Daughters of Abraham women’s interfaith book groups. It had been held at the UCC First Church Cambridge where the group was founded. The following year a local Islamic center had hosted the Gathering, and this year it was the Jewish members’ turn to stage the event.<sup>70</sup> The women were, therefore, singing in the entrance hall to a Reform temple, a fact alluded to by the presence of several Israeli flags, posters encouraging donations to support the Israeli cause, and a few plaques with Hebrew script. The Steering Committee’s overarching aim with the Annual Gathering is making members aware that their monthly Daughters meetings have a bigger purpose. Specifically, it is

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<sup>70</sup> This alternation demonstrates that the Daughters of Abraham always seeks to treat the three “Abrahamic religions” equally. Other examples are the organization’s aim to have an equal representation of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim members in every subgroup, and that groups rotate between reading books categorized as “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim.” This chapter elucidates that the use of these religious identity categories not only impacts intra-group dynamics, but also works to establish boundaries for inclusion into this women’s interfaith book group.

expected that members seek to contribute to engendering peaceful coexistence on the macro-level because of and enabled by their participation in this grassroots level interreligious encounter. Most leaders and many longstanding members consider Daughters of Abraham's interfaith book group model as a pertinent one for achieving this goal. Specifically, they believe that individual participation in a Daughters chapter can cause "ripples of peace" if and when members speak about the interreligious understanding gained in this group to outsiders. The rabbi who led the singing distilled this underlying sentiment of contributing to world peace through relationship-building by ending the song stating, "today we have gathered to nourish each other through food and friendship. Thereby, we hope to bring peace and understanding to each other and to the world."

The theme for the 2015 Annual Gathering, "Nourishing Ourselves, Nourishing the World," speaks to this vision of the potential of interfaith grassroots initiatives for bringing about world peace. It also suggests a religious dimension to the notion of nourishment as evidenced by the inaugurating lyrics – the hunger is not simply for bread and water, but for God. Finally, the theme, "Nourishing Ourselves, Nourishing the World," alludes to the physical and social aspects of nourishment. Since the invitation to the Annual Gathering had asked members to bring with them non-perishable food items for donation as well as a family recipe to form part of a Daughters of Abraham interfaith cookbook, one could easily be led to believe that the event would focus on the dimensions of physical and social nourishment.<sup>71</sup> However, the main focus this afternoon was how the Daughters of Abraham as a collective can

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<sup>71</sup> Daughters of Abraham's interfaith cookbook, *Food to Nourish Our Souls*, has subsequently been made available online: [https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B\\_leh7CJBX5aTIB5RV8xTGxwbWs/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B_leh7CJBX5aTIB5RV8xTGxwbWs/view) (Accessed: 13/08/2016). Please refer to chapter 3 for an analysis of the ways in which this cookbook brings out issues of belonging within the Daughters of Abraham because it points to sameness and difference of religion, ethnicity, nationality, and gender.

contribute to bringing about world peace. Daughters of Abraham's leadership believe that expanding the number of Daughters subgroups is key towards making a difference in this regard.

In fact, this view of numerical expansion as an approach towards a more peaceful world is an organizational refrain. For instance, at practically all of the monthly subgroups meetings that I observed, the group leaders would encourage existing members to recruit more women to partake in their respective Daughters chapter. Another example is that the intention behind assembling a Daughters of Abraham interfaith cookbook was for it to be distributed to non-members so as to expand awareness of the organization and its aim of peaceful co-existence. The Christian founding member, Mary, distils this expansion agenda when talking about her hopes for the future of the organization:

I would like a Daughters of Abraham in every hamlet of every town. I would like national conferences, get-togethers sometimes. I'd like a book about us. I would like us in all countries [because] mutual understanding is critical to world peace and to us just getting along with each other.

The six current Steering Committee members, in particular, are very aware of advancing this goal. It is the reason behind starting a monthly newsletter, for creating the first-year foundational reading list and discussion notes, and the newly established mentor scheme.<sup>72</sup> These initiatives have also been put in place in the hope of creating a sense of connection between the now thirty-six Daughters subgroups located across the United States. Moreover, they seek to ensure that newly started groups succeed in

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<sup>72</sup> Long-participating members volunteer as mentors for Daughters subgroups in their start-up phase. Mentors teach group leaders and ordinary members about Daughters of Abraham's ground rules and principles for interreligious dialogue. The training focuses on facilitating constructive group discussions in line with these general guidelines. The leadership's stated aim with this mentor scheme is preventing new groups from faltering during the start-up phase by teaching members how to engage with religious diversity. Still, this mentor scheme also expresses a degree of top-down control because it serves to ensure that new chapters adhere to the Daughters of Abraham model examined in chapter 4.

the long term. Seeing as five of the Steering Committee members took part in organizing the Annual Gathering 2015, the theme of this event, “Nourishing Ourselves, Nourishing the World,” should be considered with a view to the leadership’s emphasis on numerical expansion of the Daughters interfaith book groups as a way to generate peace on a wider level.

This vision relates to a difference in emphasis between members who view the Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith movement and members who mainly consider it an independent book group. Daughters of Abraham’s leadership and longstanding members tend to accentuate its potential as a movement for peace whereas more recent members generally consider it a book group about religion. Whilst most members acknowledge the potential of grassroots level interfaith activities for contributing to generating more peaceful communities, the difference lies in whether or not it is their main reason for participation. The differing views of the Daughters of Abraham model speak to the construction and maintenance of Daughters of Abraham’s collective self-understanding, which this chapter explores in depth.

It does so by examining the vision of the Daughters of Abraham as an interreligious movement, which indicates awareness amongst members of the greater mosaic of interfaith activities in which this interfaith book group is situated. Informing this analysis are the concepts of nourishment and relationships, which previous chapters have shown to be key gender characteristics at play in this interreligious encounter. It illuminates that the Daughters interfaith model promotes relational bridge building as the primary mode in which members can contribute to generating peaceful coexistence. The contextualization of Daughters of Abraham within a wider web of interfaith activities relates to the parameters set for inclusion into this interreligious encounter. An examination of the processes of “mapping”

taking place in this women's interfaith book group elucidates such boundary drawing. These processes work to create and maintain a group identity by establishing parameters for belonging and not belonging. This analysis shows how the collective identity is defined in contrast to what the Daughters of Abraham and its members are not, which takes the form of a more or less concrete "other" situated within the American sociocultural context. It does so by exploring three key discourses framing Daughters of Abraham's collective self-understanding, namely the "same God discourse," Daughters members as supporters of liberal sociopolitical values, and members as each other's religious allies.

Before elucidating Daughters of Abraham's collective self-understanding, it is necessary to reflect on my fieldwork experiences with this interfaith book group. This self-reflexive section brings out challenging fieldwork dynamics that influenced my interactions with informants. It highlights processes informing ethnographic research at large and more specifically my project with the Daughters of Abraham. Consequently, it touches upon this chapter's recurring themes of power dynamics and boundary drawing involving ideas about insiders and outsiders.

### ***You Are Amplifying the Voices of the Daughters Women!***

Attending the Annual Gathering in April 2015 was my final fieldwork assignment with the Daughters of Abraham. It felt like a fitting end to eight months' worth of engaging with members of these interfaith book groups. Whilst everyone was given a nametag, I found myself in a privileged and unusual situation because the women present did not need to look at mine. I had met most of them at the various

subgroup meetings that I had observed in the months leading up to this event. In contrast to the Daughters members for whom only a handful of faces were familiar, I knew almost everyone. It was a funny sort of irony – despite being an outsider, I had become more of an insider than the majority of the Daughters members due to my ethnographic research with this organization. My notebooks were bursting with insight that I was solely privy to. Being entrusted with so much information about group dynamics and individual participants gave me a unique position of power in relation to the women present. My position as a researcher vis-à-vis informants had continuously been renegotiated over the course of the fieldwork process: from requesting access, being vetted, entering into the field, asking for individual volunteers to give up their time for interviews, and being allowed access to group meetings. Now, as my fieldwork was coming to an end, my notebooks and interview recordings probably held more inside information about this interreligious encounter than those of the Daughters members, the actual insiders who had welcomed me inside.

By the time I arrived for Daughters of Abraham’s Annual Gathering in April 2015, I had navigated a “continuum of membership roles from stranger to complete member,” implying that the relationship between researcher and informants is dynamic (Hackney and Warren 2000). Writing about fieldwork relationships, Carol Warren and Jennifer Hackney confirm, “although the fieldworker may seek to find or keep a particular place, respondents are simultaneously putting her into a place” (2000). That is, “the place the researcher seeks or finds herself or himself in changes situationally and over time” (Hackney and Warren 2000). As I became better acquainted with the Daughters of Abraham, I also became more conscious about the roles performed in the researcher-research subject relations. Consequently, my

navigation of the various positions that I was placed in like academic, granddaughter, or confidante, improved. As the sociologist Erving Goffman explains in his analysis of representation of self to others, I came to “a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role,” that is an individual always puts on a “mask” (1959: 30). Further, “it is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves” (Goffman 1959: 30). It is easier to know what “mask” to put on when you know the rules you are playing by. That is, once you have insight into the intra- and inter-group dynamics that you are navigating and have got to know the people with whom you are engaging.

Still, putting on the right mask is not always easy in the moment, especially if you are caught off-guard. I experienced such a moment of ambivalence when I discovered that the organizational goal of numerical expansion influenced the leadership’s approval of my research project. Apparently, the Steering Committee viewed my research project as yet another avenue for spreading their message about interreligious coexistence and for attracting attention to their book group approach to facilitating this aim. During my time in the field, Steering Committee members would sometimes suggest that I could expand the organization to Europe by starting a Daughters group upon my return from fieldwork. A few times, they would directly ask me whether I intended to do so. My answer involved something about a PhD being very time-consuming so I would have to finish this research before making any decisions about outside activities.

The idea of tasking me with expanding the Daughters of Abraham across the Atlantic indicates that some of the more influential members placed me in a role as their messenger. I first learned of this role two months into my fieldwork during a private dinner with Anna, the member who had been my initial point of contact. She

confided in me that there had been other doctoral candidates before me who had requested access, but I was the first research student to have been accepted by the Steering Committee. Apparently, it had been perfect timing. Had I contacted the Daughters of Abraham a year earlier, my request would most likely have been rejected. But since then, a new Steering Committee had been chosen, and the six women now comprising Daughters of Abraham's leadership were adamant about numerical growth by way of spreading awareness of their interfaith book group model. Although, it might be risky to allow an outsider inside, they felt that my research project was one of the ways in which to gain more attention, and so I had been chosen to represent them to a wider audience.

The fact that Daughters of Abraham's leadership had its own agenda of expansion behind agreeing to my research project put me in an awkward position since being a researcher requires me to be an independent observer, and not someone to promulgate my informants' agenda. Yet, I could not state this outright because of my reliance on the goodwill of the Steering Committee to keep supporting my project with them. That is, whilst I had to maintain my integrity as a researcher, I also had to make sure to stay on good terms with Daughters of Abraham's leadership. After all, they possessed the power to revoke their approval of my ethnographic fieldwork with them. The messenger role, then, was an uncomfortable position to be placed in because I could never carry out their agenda; this was not *my* reason for undertaking fieldwork with them. This difference between my research agenda – learning about this women's interfaith book group – and the idea of numerical expansion that Daughters of Abraham's authority figures saw for my study of them, illustrates how issues of power and authority were underlying every fieldwork interaction. It helps

explain why ethnographic research is not simply time-consuming, but also emotionally draining at times.

Another challenging situation that I had to navigate during my time with the Daughters concerned questions about my personal religious standpoint. I faced such questions regularly. While this might not be a sensitive issue in some social situations, the fact that Daughters of Abraham's ground rules state that only women for whom Judaism, Christianity, or Islam inform their everyday life can join the group made it a delicate situation. In anticipation of this question, I had decided to answer honestly – I defined myself as culturally Protestant. The Jewish Daughters members tended to be most readily accepting of my religious self-understanding. Presumably this was the case because self-identifying as ethnically or culturally Jewish is a matter of fact for them. In contrast, when I talked to the Christian and Muslim Daughters, I had to elaborate on that definition: “I am not sure there is a God, but I grew up in a country where Protestantism has significantly shaped the national ethos, and religion has, therefore, invariably influenced my worldview.” When the person asking did not appear content with this answer, I quickly learnt to add that I was still searching for more. Adding this notion of being a seeker appeared to assuage any disappointment. Because religion holds a paramount place in the lives of the Daughters, many of them challenged the fact that it was not the case for me too. They had hoped for another answer. Therefore, in this particular instance, I was trying to “underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealized version of [myself]” (Goffman 1959: 56). “Idealized” in the sense that I was trying to fit in with one of Daughters of Abraham's key group norms, namely framing one's life around Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. According to Goffman, an individual will “tend to incorporate and exemplify the officially accredited values of the society” when

presenting herself to others (1959: 45). As displayed by my navigation of the question about religious worldview, when I presented myself to the Daughters of Abraham, a microcosm of society, I was trying to live up to group norms. Performing in accordance with group values, or at least avoiding straying too far from these, seemed essential in order to maintain a constructive working relationship with members. I had to put on the right “mask” whilst at the same time remaining true to myself (Goffman 1959: 30). Accordingly, I continuously navigated issues of authenticity and ethics in the field.

All of these relational fieldwork dynamics came to the fore during the Annual Gathering 2015, particularly so when the event organizers announced that I was going to share some reflections about my project with the Daughters of Abraham. Everyone had taken their seat ready to share a vegetarian dinner, but first, the Daughters wanted to know what I would be writing about them. I was unprepared for this request. Whilst I appreciated the members’ genuine interest in my project because it had made the collection of data a relatively smooth process, this invitation to speak epitomized the delicate relation between researcher and informants. I was in no position to give them any analytical insights. I was exhausted from my fieldwork experiences, and it would take much contemplation before I had made sense of my data. Most of all what was running through my mind, as I stood up to say something about my project, was that each of the women present would want a different answer. I did not want to disappoint anyone. I was not ready to share any insights yet, and I did not find it ethical either. I had been entrusted with information that the women present might not want broadcasted at this collective gathering. I found myself at a loss regarding what to say. Grace, who from the moment that I met her had referred to herself as my “American mom,” recognized my distress. As I began walking towards the podium,

she grabbed my arm and whispered, “Just say thank you, that’s all you need to do. Americans just want to feel appreciated. Just say thank you.” That is exactly what I ended up doing.

In retrospect, I valued the opportunity to express my gratitude for being allowed to conduct fieldwork with these women’s interfaith book groups and for members’ genuine interest in my research. I was overwhelmed with emotion now that my fieldwork was coming to completion. As tears started to well up, I felt the support of the Daughters whose applause guided me back to my seat. It was an emotional but fitting end to my time with the Daughters of Abraham, which had involved tricky fieldwork dynamics, but more so both heartfelt and intellectually stimulating interactions. In some ways, getting out of the field, therefore, felt more challenging than getting in.

### ***Daughters of Abraham as an Interfaith Movement Nourishing the World***

At the Annual Gathering 2015, the women ceased singing. Bridget, a Jewish Steering Committee member who had taken part in the event planning, took center stage to announce the template for the day. Everyone had been divided into groups that each had a designated discussion facilitator. All of the groups would engage in conversation about the theme, “Nourishing Ourselves, Nourishing the World,” for an hour before sharing an early vegetarian dinner.<sup>73</sup> I joined group three together with the

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<sup>73</sup> Before the singing, Daughters of Abraham’s Annual Gathering 2015 had commenced in the same manner as a typical group meeting: an assortment of appetizers had been served to prompt conversation. Thereafter, the women divided into groups to discuss the theme of nourishment. The format of Daughters subgroup meetings depicted in chapter 3, then, was adhered to at this larger get-together of these interfaith book groups. Presumably, this known meeting structure had been chosen to provide “safe space.”

Muslim members: Nadia, Didem, and Aisha; the Christian members: Grace, Trudy, and Cynthia; and the Jewish members: Lisa, Tamarah, Bridget, and Maia. These women belong to eight different Daughters chapters, some of which are newly established whilst others have been in existence for up to over a decade.

Six preset questions related to the Annual Gathering's focus on nourishment guided the discussion. Our designated discussion facilitator was Aisha, a first-generation Pakistani Muslim member who had been a member of the Daughters of Abraham ever since her daughter who used to be on the Steering Committee had encouraged her to join more than a decade ago. Aisha set the tone from the beginning. Looking around at the nine other women belonging to eight different Daughters chapters she remarked, "I'm very happy to see the Daughters of Abraham expanding!" The idea of expansion as a key goal for the Daughters of Abraham steered the conversation. Highlighting this emphasis was the women's collective response to a question about the most important ways that the Daughters of Abraham could nourish itself: "more members!" the women all agreed. Trudy elaborated on this sentiment:

I've become friends with the people in my group. The closeness that I feel in these relationships has raised my comfort level with other religions so much so that I have attended other religious services and have been comfortable doing so because I now know people from these traditions. Before being part of the Daughters of Abraham I would never have gone. It was unknown. So for me personally, participating has developed my understanding for other religions, for the people and their spaces.

Underlying Trudy's reflection is the idea that existing members would benefit from additional interreligious encounters whilst new members might have similar eye-opening experiences by forging such interreligious connections. It highlights the relational level as essential for fostering the interreligious understanding sought by

Daughters of Abraham's mission statement. As Aisha reflected, "I think that the Daughters of Abraham really shows the interconnectedness between humans, and this is key in our multi-religious world." Maia continued, "I think of the Daughters of Abraham as seeds. We nourish ourselves, and then we nourish others. We can spread our knowledge to other people and that has an impact." Maia gave an example of this ripple effect. Her daughter had chosen to go abroad to study in a region of Spain with a rich history of interreligious interaction between the "Abrahamic religions." Her mother's conversations about the Daughters of Abraham had awakened her interest in this subject matter. Maia's personal example prompted Didem, a young first-generation immigrant from Syria, to mention disrupting her college roommate's stereotype of Muslim women as oppressed and necessarily *hijab*-clad. "It taught me how important forming close cross-religious relationships is for changing perspectives about one another," Didem reflected. Thereby, she also summarized a red thread of the group discussion, namely the ability to interrupt religious stereotypes as well as change perceptions about the religious "other" through relationship-building.

The notion of nurturing friends, family, and ultimately the world by way of pointing to the interfaith relationships formed in the Daughters of Abraham also came to the fore during the group discussion. Especially so when the discussion facilitator asked, "Should the theme 'Nourishing the World' be taken literally or is it more about coexistence and peace? In other words, do you think the Daughters of Abraham is making a difference?" Grace took the prompt:

Well, the only question that it is possible for me to answer is, 'has the Daughters of Abraham made a difference to me?' In our contemporary context of violence, I think that it is important to stress commonalities in the context of reconciliation instead of differences in the context of power. Now when I sit at a dinner table, because of the Daughters of Abraham and because of the Muslim relations that

I've made, I am now able to interrupt stereotypes about Muslims. So yes...it has made a difference to me.

Grace captures a general sentiment found amongst members that their individual engagement in this women's interfaith book group can have an impact outside the bounded Daughters space if they transmit the understanding gained in the group about other religions and their practitioners. Specifically, they believe that doing so can break down religious stereotypes, and so contribute to peaceful coexistence.

The degree to which members look to take their learning about other religions beyond the personal relational level differs, though. During the group discussion, most of the women stressed the difference that it had made for them personally to participate in the Daughters of Abraham because it has made the religious "other" seem less "other." That is, the interfaith relationships formed in this group nourish members because they provide intimate knowledge about what it means to live as a Jewish, Muslim, or Christian woman in contemporary America. An implication of such knowledge is the consequent ability to interrupt religious stereotypes voiced outside the group. As Aisha neatly summed up at the end of the discussion, "by learning about other religions, you nourish yourself, and you take that to the world and thereby nourish that too." Members, then, understand the notion of nourishment as pertaining to the growth of interreligious understanding and building of interfaith relationships both within and outside their immediate Daughters group.

This understanding relates to the leadership's aspiration to increase the total number of Daughters chapters. The underlying intention of this aim is promoting the organization's overarching mission of fostering peaceful coexistence. The individual learning happening in the Daughters groups is "only" sowing seeds, as Maia suggested. The point is that members should use such learning to advance

interreligious understanding beyond the Daughters setting so as to contribute to generating peaceful coexistence on a bigger scale. In this manner, members can “nourish the world.”

The emphasis on relationships and nurture during the group conversation speaks to Daughters of Abraham’s exclusively female membership. These two concepts are conventionally considered key female gender characteristics. Butler’s theoretical framework of gender performativity elucidated in chapter 5 allows us to recognize that the women’s use of these concepts is yet another ambiguous performance of gender taking place in this interreligious encounter. On the one hand, the members’ stress on nurture and relationship-building demonstrates an adherence to conventional ideas about gender. On the other hand, their engagement with these characteristics is subversive. Explicitly because the Daughters’ appropriation of notions of nurture and relationships enables them to claim a place in the public sphere, which has traditionally been reserved for men. As such, it enables members to address religious prejudice found outside the bounded Daughters space. In other words, appropriating these conventionally female gender traits supports Daughters of Abraham’s vision of “nourishing the world.”

Both the leadership and ordinary members deem it insufficient to “only” nourish oneself with interreligious understanding and friendships through participation in the Daughters of Abraham, then. This nourishment should be applied on a wider scale. The relational level is considered crucial in this connection. Rachel, a Jewish Steering Committee member, expresses this sentiment when asked if interfaith dialogue should have a role to play in society:

I absolutely feel that it should. I think that the only way you can break a stereotype is by getting to know someone one-to-one, and by learning about other people and what their faith traditions are, and an awareness of the danger of the stereotypes that we deal with.

Rachel implies that individual interreligious relationship-building is indispensable for peace. In fact, she suggests this as the key approach. Thereby, she also conveys the leadership's idea about the great potential of the Daughters interfaith model towards reducing religious bigotry because it is based on such relationship-building.

This idea of creating ripples of interreligious understanding through relational bridge building captures the nurturing aspect underlying the organization's numerical expansion agenda. This agenda is, therefore, better understood not in terms of actual numbers of Daughters chapters, but in terms of the amount of people reached both inside and outside this setting. A web of relationships exists where such nourishment can happen: within the individual Daughters chapters, between the leadership and ordinary members, between members and their outside relations, and between Daughters of Abraham as a collective and the world at large.

An internal split exists between members who stress the nourishment gained from the relationships formed in the individual chapters and those wanting to move beyond the group level. In other words, some members stress the number of relationships established inside and outside their Daughters group whereas others emphasize the quality of the interreligious relationships built with their fellow group members. This division speaks to two overarching perceptions of Daughters of Abraham's collective identity. One view is of the Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith movement; the other of it as an independent book group about religion. Whilst both perceptions can work together, the difference lies in where the emphasis is placed. Generally speaking, newer members highlight the book group character

whereas the organization's founding members, its Steering Committee, and group leaders emphasize Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith movement that can contribute to generating world peace. This internal divide might be explained by the fact that longstanding members are typically looking for ways in which to move beyond individual learning, and such long-standing members are usually part of the leadership. That is, members tend to reach a point where they want to move beyond individual learning so as to feel that their participation in the Daughters of Abraham impacts outsiders too.

Reflecting on the organization's development since joining over a decade ago, the Jewish and Muslim co-leaders of group J convey the view of the Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith movement:

Hanna: This was Edie Howe's idea. It was a simple idea. It wasn't going to save the world. But it was going to expand the sense of... I just boosted a post on Facebook the other day; and this message is going to go to my friends and their friends, right? And that's kind of what has happened with these groups. That you don't actually have to be in the group, you just have to know somebody. I remember Danielle saying that she had been somewhere where people said something about Jews and she said, 'no no.' And I've certainly been somewhere where people have said something about Muslims, and I've said, 'no no.'

Danielle: And several members of the group have said that. Petra said that. And Mia said that, 'I had to step in.'

Hanna: You actually can't pay; you can't pay for that kind of... it just moves peace that much closer.

Talking about the Steering Committee's key aims, one of its Christian members, Anna, expresses a similar sentiment about the Daughters model being invaluable for promoting peace:

One of our goals is to build more groups. When we know each other, our stereotypes fade. You see the humanity in the 'other,' and this whole concept of the 'other' fades away. So that's what people need to do – get to know each other. If we can build understanding in a small way, in a small group, and you go somewhere and you tell people about it, and they say, 'oh I think that's a great

thing,' that's what we should do. That's a tiny miniscule contribution to a greater understanding. It makes me hopeful that it can be done.

All three leaders highlight the Daughters of Abraham model as an interfaith movement that provides a key approach to generating world peace due to its emphasis on relationships. At the same time, the women also acknowledge that this model cannot stand on its own. It cannot "save the world," but it can make a "tiny miniscule contribution to greater understanding." The three women display an awareness of the Daughters model as situated within a mosaic of informal, elite, and grassroots level interreligious activities. It is within this context that this women's interfaith book group can make a contribution to peaceful coexistence through its relational bridge building approach. The vision of Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith movement suggests that with membership comes an expectation that participants convey the interreligious understanding gained in the group to outsiders. The concomitant implication is that doing so can contribute to generating world peace. It raises a question about the extent to which Daughters of Abraham's collective self-understanding relies on this discourse about members' potential to impact the sociocultural context.

The notion of Daughters members being each other's religious allies helps answer this question. The Conservative rabbi, Helena, who leads group I, describes her membership as "life changing" because her participation has given her the tools to be an "ally" for her religious others. With being an ally, Helena means that she can speak out against religious prejudice. Expressly, the knowledge about lived religion gained via the interreligious relationships formed in her Daughters group enables her to do so. Helena's mission in life is "making the world a better place." She explains,

My activism is not marches. My activism is relational. It's about making real connections with others. It is a smaller activism, but a more sustained activism due to the relations built. I think interfaith dialogue is very powerful, and you never know where the ripples will be, so it's important to be involved in interfaith work, no matter how small.

Helena likes to relate a particular example to visualize her "relational activism." She recounts how several thousand people had gathered for the High Holidays at the temple where she works. In her sermon Helena had chosen to speak about standing up for a Muslim woman whom she did not know, but whose *hijab* gave away her religious identity. Whilst walking past the Muslim woman, a man loudly addressed Helena, "don't say 'hello' to her, she is a terrorist!" Helena's immediate reaction was to ignore the insult, but then, as she reflected, "I needed that woman to hear that I wouldn't take that, so I responded, 'she is no terrorist!'" Elaborating on her decision to react, Helena says,

It's important to me to be an ally to people who are pushed down. It's part of being a good human being. By relating this story about the Muslim woman during the High Holidays and encouraging other Jews to stand up against religious prejudice, I felt that I contributed towards changing the world for the better. This is what we do in the Daughters of Abraham – through the interreligious relations we build; we change the world one interaction at a time, one group meeting at a time. Those relations give us the tools to be each other's religious allies.

Most of the women whom I interviewed confirm Helena's sentiment that the personal insight gained through the interreligious relationships formed in the Daughters of Abraham is invaluable towards promoting peaceful coexistence. For instance, Bridget, the Jewish co-leader of group G, considers individual relationships the key to interfaith understanding. She believes that it is her obligation to be an "ambassador" of the three "Abrahamic religions." The knowledge gained about these religious traditions in her Daughters group allows her to speak out against prejudice. Bridget

believes that correcting misconceptions about Islam, Christianity, or Judaism can cause ripples of peace. Accordingly, the idea of relational bridge building has two dimensions. It involves talking about the interreligious learning happening in the Daughters of Abraham to outsiders, and it suggests a need to use such knowledge to interrupt religious stereotypes voiced outside this space. Both dimensions are considered essential for bringing about peace.

Helena and Bridget's statements indicate that being a religious ally is not a choice, but a responsibility that comes with participating in this women's interfaith book group. It suggests that one of the defining discourses of Daughters of Abraham's collective self-understanding is the leadership's vision of the group as an interfaith movement. Whilst not necessarily highlighting this vision, all of the women whom I interviewed, whether leaders or not, believe that interreligious grassroots activities can contribute to bringing about a more peaceful world. The Christian member, Leonore, who thinks that building individual interreligious relationships is "*the key to world peace,*" captures this sentiment:

If you want to go really big, if you want to go global, I would say that every one of the Daughters wants world peace, and we see what we are doing as a step in that, not that we will...we are like a butterfly in the Amazon: when it flutters its wings, it reverberates to the entire world, and we are all butterflies.

Accordingly, the leadership's vision of the Daughters of Abraham as an interreligious movement should be viewed as one of the key discourses framing the collective self-understanding. As such, it is one of the group discourses that members must support in order to be considered insiders.

With this discourse also comes at least an implicit acknowledgment of the mosaic of informal, elite, and grassroots level interreligious activities making up the

context in which Daughters of Abraham can contribute to peaceful coexistence. Moreover, many members partake in other interreligious activities either in their local community or in their jobs as teachers, academics, or religious leaders. Some are engaged in the study of religious texts; others organize interfaith summer camps for children. Some lead interfaith services; others teach college students about interreligious understanding. Some take part in marches promoting various social justice causes; others are members of committees working to facilitate better relations between their local religious communities. In short, many members are aware of different ways of working towards world peace that complement the Daughters model, either due to their own active involvement, or, one step removed, through learning about alternative interfaith strategies from their fellow group members or outside relations. With that comes a contextualized view of the contribution that the Daughters of Abraham can make to world peace.

When members elaborate on this great variety of interreligious activities, they also nuance the notion of generating world peace by way of numerically increasing the Daughters of Abraham book groups because it comes with an implicit acknowledgment that this interfaith model works for some but not all. The particular demographic primarily attracted to the Daughters model is retired, educated, politically liberal, suburban women. Consequently, the Daughters model is limited in terms of the kinds of people that it immediately reaches with its message of interreligious understanding. Some members have had to defend the fact that the Daughters model is not all encompassing, but as Ellen, a Christian member belonging to the original Daughters chapter, states,

There is no reason to diminish one model just because it's not at The White House. We need models that appeal to all sorts of demographics. The fact that

this is particularly suited to one group more than another is not a weakness; it's part of the design. It was designed by someone in her fifties who lived in the suburbs and who said, 'What's a comfortable format for me to break down some of the barriers that keep me from getting to know people from these other traditions?' And she thought if that was a comfortable one for her, then maybe it'd be a comfortable one for other folks like her.

Whilst it is unlikely for any group to be all-inclusive, the parameters established for membership can be more or less exclusionary, though. An obvious limitation of the Daughters model is that it includes women only. Nevertheless, on the organization's website, the Daughters express that they would happily assist with the formation of "Sons of Abraham" groups, meaning that this limitation could be countered (2016c).

Whilst the idea that the Daughters model primarily appeals to a certain demographic can to some degree explain who becomes involved in this interreligious encounter, additional boundaries of religion and sociopolitical attitudes have been put in place, which limit who in actual fact can become an insider. These boundaries serve to create and uphold a group identity. Part of this boundary drawing is the group discourse about members as religious allies and their obligation to create ripples of peace through relational bridge building. Explicitly, this discourse about being allies implies that members hold something in common and simultaneously suggests their difference from outsiders. Consequently, it creates boundaries for inclusion into this interreligious encounter. In the following section, I continue unpacking the boundary drawing done in this group by examining Daughters of Abraham's official membership criteria.

### *Limiting Otherness Through the “Abrahamic Religions” Framework*

Daughters of Abraham groups are open to Jewish, Christian and Muslim women for whom their religion informs their daily life. We welcome all women who self-identify as members of these three faiths and who are willing to share how this identity--with all its nuances and cultural diversity -- adds to the shape and texture of her life. Since we speak in our discussions about our own experience in the observance and practice of our religion we welcome women who can join that conversation. In order to have as much common ground as possible for our book discussions, we have chosen to be a group of women only from these three Abrahamic religions. Women who are agnostic, atheist, followers of Eastern faiths, Ba'hai, Mormon/Latter Day Saints, or Messianic Judaism understand a faith or ethical tradition, which are outside the scope of our mission (Daughters of Abraham 2016c).

Daughters of Abraham’s membership policy could simply be viewed as pragmatic: any group will have parameters for inclusion so as to attract people who are interested in its key topic. Yet, more complex reasons appear to lie behind Daughters of Abraham’s membership criteria. Explicitly, the exclusion of “non-Abrahamic religions” and non-religious people reveals how Daughters members perceive the group in relation to its wider context. That is, only including women who belong to the “Abrahamic religions” highlights religious commonalities, which connect group members when contrasted with outsiders who cannot live up to this standard. The official reason for only letting Jewish, Christian, and Muslim members join is “in order to have as much common ground as possible for our book discussions” (Daughters of Abraham 2016c). This emphasis on what is shared, I contend, ventures beyond the Daughters’ discussions of texts. Expressly, this stress serves to exclude those deemed much too “other,” and so to distinguish insiders from outsiders.

The exclusion of subgroups of the “Abrahamic religions” like Mormons and Baha’is underscores the organizational strategy to exclude those regarded as too different. A case could be made for both Mormons and Baha’is to be included within

this framework. On its official website, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints answers the question, “Are Mormons Christian?” with an “unequivocal affirmation.”<sup>74</sup> On the Baha’i community’s official website, it is stated that Baha’is believe that Abraham is a divine messenger amongst others like Moses, Muhammad, and Jesus.<sup>75</sup> Mormons and Baha’is, then, self-identify with the “Abrahamic religions” framework meaning that their inclusion in the Daughters of Abraham could be supported.

“We have enough to just get the three of us in the same room!” Deborah, a Jewish founding member who was involved in defining the organization’s understanding of the “Abrahamic religions” states when explaining why a somewhat narrow definition of this framework was deemed necessary. Deborah does, however, acknowledge that this limiting classification has been critiqued. In doing so, she also clarifies why less mainstream groups like Mormons and Baha’is would reject Daughters of Abraham’s definition of the “Abrahamic religions” framework:

I’ve a very close friend who is Baha’i, and she is just blown away that we can’t have her in the group. But if we have Baha’is in the group, then we have Mormons in the group, and we have “Jews for Jesus” in the group, and we decided that that would create too much dissention within the 3 camps (...) but my friend was really unhappy that she couldn’t join the group because she was like, ‘I’m a Daughter of Abraham!!’ And I’m like, ‘yeah you are, but the Muslims think you’re a heretic’ (...) So we’ve had to make a couple of strong choices in the beginning to say, you know, we don’t want to get into having Muslims, who have joined, have to be in coalition with people they think are heretics. It’s hard enough that a conservative Muslim might be in the room with a liberal Muslim and think that she’s being a heretic, but at least she’s identifying as Muslim.

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<sup>74</sup> Further information can be found on the following website: <https://www.lds.org/topics/christians?lang=eng&old=true> (Accessed: 05/02/2017).

<sup>75</sup> Please refer to the following website for further information: <http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/god-his-creation/revelation/> (Accessed: 05/02/2017).

Daughters of Abraham's membership criteria make the religious diversity found in the group manageable. The narrow definition of the "Abrahamic religions" enables a stress on commonalities because it provides a foundation for members to relate their personal religious worldviews to each other. This boundary drawing enables members to focus on what is familiar and, accordingly, supports the maintenance of "safe space" for engaging with the group's religious diversity.

It should be noted that it was only Deborah who recognized the exclusion of non-mainstream "Abrahamic traditions" during our interview. Everyone else readily subscribed to the group's definition of the "Abrahamic religions" as indicating more mainstream versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It suggests that members subscribe to a similar understanding of the "Abrahamic religions" framework as religious leaders and theologians partaking in conventional triologue settings. As discussed in chapter 1 concerning the history of formalized interreligious engagement, triologue initiatives that bring together Jews, Christians, and Muslims commonly use the perceived shared ancestor of Abraham as the foundation for engaging in dialogue. This perception of having a common religious root can generate a sense of familiarity, and so works to downplay religious differences. It makes the religious "other" seem less "other." Participants' self-understandings are, therefore, not challenged to the same extent as would have been the case if coming into contact with something fully "other" like Hinduism or indigenous traditions. Consequently, Daughters of Abraham's religious diversity does not stifle the collective exploration of religious commonalities and differences because members can always refer back to their shared ancestor and, thereby, emphasize sameness.

Most of the members whom I interviewed said that they prefer that the Daughters of Abraham involves the “Abrahamic religions” only, precisely because it enables them to focus on what is shared. The Jewish co-leader, Bridget, explains,

I wouldn't be opposed necessarily to learning more about Hinduism or Buddhism or other religions, but I think it makes it more manageable, and also I think it tends to promote the idea that we are focusing on the similarities, which if you added those other things wouldn't necessarily be as readily.

Lillian, a retired teacher at her local Catholic church, explains that because of the limitation to the “Abrahamic religions,” she has discovered, “how similar we are. That there are things that seem vastly different, that are not. Things, that our faiths talk about, that ‘doing to others as you would have them doing to you’ is primary in all three traditions.” The Jewish member, Leah, elaborates on the focus on similarities when asked whether she likes that the Daughters of Abraham only involves practitioners of the “Abrahamic religions:”

I can't say I dislike it...part of me says it'd be interesting to include other religions. Another part of me says, there is a certain fascination or a certain part about it that it really does contribute, that there's a common intellectual background to all the religions. What we call ‘the origin stories’ have a commonality to them, and it's very interesting to...like even in our last meeting there were certain passages that came up that were, ‘oh wait but that's from Genesis’ – ‘no this is in the Qur'an here’ (...) I think we'd lose that. It'd dilute it. It'd just become more about, ‘oh our religion does this.’

Limiting membership to the “Abrahamic religions” functions to accentuate connections cutting across the group's religious diversity. “Triangulation moments,” Deborah calls it when her Daughters group discovers religious connections. For example, “when there's a Christian book and the Muslim goes, ‘yep that's exactly what I would do.’ We are reading something about a Muslim person and the Jewish people go: ‘yep I do the same thing.’” Deborah finds such moments hysterical.

Evidently, this ability to search for religious commonalities and to find familiar themes, practices, stories, or characters in the three “Abrahamic traditions” is a central aspect of being involved in the Daughters of Abraham. Limiting membership to practitioners of the “Abrahamic religions” framework excludes too much “otherness,” and so enables this stress on religious connections. It creates a foundation for building interreligious relationships in-group.

Whilst most members enjoy being able to focus on similarities between the “Abrahamic religions,” Prisha criticizes the group’s shying away from dealing with difference. Prisha, a first-generation Shiite Muslim from India who is involved in other interfaith initiatives because her husband is an imam, expresses that only looking for commonalities is a lighthearted version of interreligious dialogue. She reasons,

There would not be three religions if there were no differences! So yes, you like to find the common, but then you also have to learn to accept the differences and agree that those differences are ok. I think if you learn to do that that is a better goal because what’s common is common. It is easy to accept what is common and nice.

Noor, a first-generation Muslim immigrant from Egypt, takes this argument further. She believes that the group’s limited religious diversity defeats the purpose of formalized interreligious encounters. Noor explains,

I think [the Daughters of Abraham] could be better...by becoming a little bit more diverse because I think it’s too exclusive almost, and I think that it, a little bit, defeats the purpose of interfaith work. Because part of the whole interfaith movement is: how do you actually bring people together of any faith or in reality of no faith? It’s: how do you promote peace? How do you promote understanding? How do you promote development? Education? This is the really good side of interfaith, is: how do you work with people that don’t necessarily believe in the same things that you do, and that that’s ok. That you can say that I understand it, and that it’s ok that you believe it (...) The exclusivity is a little bit

unnerving to me, a little. But I do like the group a lot (...) I enjoy the conversations. I enjoy the company.

By contending that the Daughters of Abraham defeats its own goal of promoting interreligious understanding due to its exclusionary membership criteria, Noor points to a paradox between the vision that Daughters of Abraham can contribute to world peace through relational bridge building and the fact that both its collective identity and its mission of fostering interreligious understanding are predicated on finding commonalities between the “Abrahamic religions.” It limits the group’s potential reach to practitioners of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Adding to this restriction is the fact that the Daughters of Abraham neither engages in social outreach activities nor discusses politics as an organization. Achieving world peace is tied to the global political situation, and so political issues cannot be avoided if wanting to progress with this aim. Moreover, without doing social outreach activities, the Daughters of Abraham will be hard-pressed to reach a large audience with its message of the value of interreligious dialogue.

Despite contending that the Daughters of Abraham defeats its key goal, Noor, nevertheless, continues to attend meetings because she personally gains pleasure from participating. Perhaps, then, the number of people influenced by Daughters of Abraham’s message of interreligious understanding is not that significant. What matters might be that individual members feel that their participation in the Daughters of Abraham is meaningful; that it is formative because it provides members with a greater understanding of their own and other religions; and that the Daughters generally feel that they are making a difference, irrespective of whether this difference happens on the personal level, on the micro-level, on the macro-level, or at all.

The exclusionary membership criteria draw boundaries for insiders and outsiders. They enable members to situate themselves in relation to each other in the group and in relation to outsiders. When members position themselves internally in the group by emphasizing religious commonalities through the “Abrahamic religions” framework, they situate the Daughters of Abraham as a group in relation to outsiders too. Their boundary drawing expresses the contemporary academic understanding of identity construction. Explicitly, it indicates that identity construction has to do with finding commonalities and differences within individual relationships or in relation to sociocultural discourses. In fact, questions of identity should be understood as being questions about “identification,” Stuart Hall argues (2000: 16).

As discussed in the previous chapter, how to understand the concept of identity has been a hot topic for debate within the Academy for decades. Its meaning has changed significantly: from the essentialist view that identity develops in a linear fashion before becoming static, it is now commonly agreed that identity construction is a dynamic and relational process located within a given sociocultural context (Hall 2000: 15 & Wetherell 2010: 4). Foucault’s essentialist argument that the self does not exist outside discourse helpfully underlines the self as interdependent (1984: 291). Foucault also clarifies that self-understanding is continuously negotiated within a social hierarchy of discursive practices. Specifically, an individual’s negotiation of different discourses to gain and uphold a viable identity involves comparing and contrasting one’s self-understanding to alternative expressions of self (Hall 2000: 16). Identity construction, then, requires an “other” because self-understanding comes about by subscribing to certain discourses and rejecting others. Identity construction both as it pertains to individuals and groups should, therefore, be viewed as a process of boundary drawing, of inclusion and exclusion. Such boundary drawing takes place

when members of a group define its collective identity. The only difference to individual identity formation is that with a collective self, several individuals define its character together. An additional relational layer must, therefore, be taken into account.

Daughters members' pointing to religious commonalities and, with that, the rejection of religious traditions deemed different or much too "other" is part of the boundary drawing done towards defining and maintaining a group identity. Besides highlighting similarities of religion, members point to commonalities and differences of sociopolitical attitudes in the process of constructing Daughters of Abraham's collective self. The next section continues to examine these processes of identity construction by illuminating members' use of the sociocultural context to establish boundaries for inclusion into this women's interfaith book group.

### ***Referencing the American Sociocultural Context to "Map" a Group Identity***

The Daughters' emphasis on what they share necessitates the rejection of difference. Explicitly, the collective stress on similarities within the group requires members not simply to define what they hold in common, but also how they differ from outsiders. This process entails "mapping" a collective self in relation to a more or less abstract "other." The concept of "mapping" refers to the "drawing of boundaries around a collective self" (Lichterman 2008: 86). It is a complex process of identity construction because it highlights two separate aspects of identity work, namely "the simultaneous definition of a group *and* its relevant social surroundings" (Lichterman 2008: 86). Consequently, a relational understanding of the construction

of a collective self is indispensable. The concept of “mapping” speaks to issues inherent to boundary work and maintenance such as belonging, inclusion and exclusion, insiders and outsiders, and by extension to both inter-group and intra-group dynamics. Paul Lichterman, a sociologist of religion, uses the concept of “mapping” to analyze how groups work to define their civic identities and relations with other groups in various concrete settings in the U.S.<sup>76</sup> In the following analysis, I appropriate the concept of “mapping” to explain the ways in which Daughters of Abraham’s group identity is defined in relation to “others” situated within the contemporary American sociocultural context.

The Jewish Daughter Lisa “maps” Daughters of Abraham’s collective self when talking about her motivations for becoming a member:

There was definitely a post-9/11 of: ‘Oh – My - God.’ People being ignorant, and judging, and ‘I’m not willing to build bridges,’ and making assumptions, just offend me. And to be part of something where we are actively trying to counter that, it means something (...) I want to invest in an organization that’s working to counter ignorance and stereotypes and narrow-minded...and also probably the...I guess...I don’t know if you call it sort of religious exceptionalism, you know, ‘we have a monopoly on the absolute truth.’

Lisa defines the Daughters of Abraham in opposition to religious fundamentalists perceived to be narrow-minded people who do not belong in this interfaith space. They are “the other” in contrast to whom Daughters members as a collective stands for open-mindedness, informed opinions, and the desire to connect across religious divides. Lisa’s “other” is somewhat abstract in the sense that she refers to people in general whom she deems ignorant. However, on other occasions, Daughters of

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<sup>76</sup> See Lichterman, P. 2008. “Religion and the Construction of Civic Identity” in *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 73, No. 1, pp. 83-104.

And Lichterman, P. 2012. “Religion in Public Action: From Actors to Settings” in *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 1, pp. 15-36.

Abraham's collective self is "mapped" in relation to a more concrete outsider.

Deborah demonstrates this more concrete mapping when explaining her motivations for participating in this women's interfaith book group:

I've a brother who's Republican. He was a Hippie and now he's a Neocon, and it's just like 'what!?' It happens a lot. It's people who didn't get their idealism fulfilled and they just slip back, and he is racist, sexist, you name it -ist. His daughter's gay, and I sort of knew it from the time she was gay, and he kept saying horrible things about lesbians, and I was like, 'you're really going to have to change your tune on that' (...) and he did. He actually wasn't horrible to her. His immediate reaction was, 'well Dora is not that pretty.' 'Okay, give me a break!' I'm like, 'leave me alone!' Anyway, I've a brother who is a jerk, and he said something really ignorant about Islam over the phone. And I just said, 'that's not so.' And he was like, 'of course it's so.' And I'm like, 'no, it's not. I can get you the written information that that's not how it works. Second of all, I know about fifty Muslim women, and not one of them would do that.' It was something really basic like 'oh Ramadan isn't so hard because you can eat until sunrise and eat after sunset and you can drink all day long.' And I said, 'no you can't.' It was something really basic (...) I'm interrupting this stuff constantly (...) that's my job: to interrupt ignorance to the extent I can (...) As a movement, one of the things we want to have happen is sort of eroding some of this ignorance and giving people some authority to actually interrupt it.

In comparing her interruption of prejudice based on knowledge about religion gained by participating in the Daughters of Abraham to her brother's conservative political views and concomitant bigotry, Deborah draws boundaries for who can belong to this interfaith book group. In doing so, she also conveys ideas about what values define the Daughters of Abraham as a group and which do not.

Both Lisa and Deborah's reflections illuminate the relational character of the "mapping" process by demonstrating that Daughters of Abraham's collective self is defined vis-à-vis outsiders. Deborah and Lisa "map" Daughters of Abraham's group identity by rejecting people who are considered to stand in stark contrast to the group's key aim of fostering interreligious understanding and relationship-building. Both of these comparisons highlight that which the Daughters of Abraham is not, and

concurrently show what the organization and its members are perceived to stand for: liberal sociopolitical attitudes, ideals of tolerance and open-mindedness, and an aim of promoting such values so as to ultimately generate world peace. Deborah and Lisa draw boundaries for inclusion, which go beyond the organization's official membership criteria that "only" exclude women who do not self-identify as Christian, Jewish, or Muslim. In doing so, they contribute to "mapping" Daughters of Abraham's collective self. Accordingly, Lisa and Deborah exemplify the contribution of individual members to the construction and maintenance of Daughters of Abraham's collective identity.

A group's identity will necessarily be defined in relation to located sociocultural discourses. Lisa and Deborah's dismissive comments about religious fundamentalists, racists, sexists, ignorant "others" not only convey that Daughters of Abraham is considered to be an organization that appeals to individuals who would reject such discourses, their reflections also demonstrate that Daughters of Abraham's collective identity is defined in relation to an "other" that is firmly anchored within the contemporary American sociocultural context. Explicitly, their references to American neo-conservatism and American religious fundamentalism that arose in the aftermath of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 reveal that this "other" is located within the group's sociocultural setting.<sup>77</sup> Deborah stresses the significance of a given sociocultural context for processes of identity construction when she, during our interview, prefaces her remarks about her brother with, "you're not going to understand this 'cause you're

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<sup>77</sup> Neo-conservatism arose in the U.S. in the 1970s among intellectuals who shared a dislike of communism as well as the 1960s counterculture. Neo-conservatives believe that multiculturalism – defined as an ideology respecting different religions and cultures and encouraging coexistence – undermines the traditional culture of any country that tries to put it into practice. Hence, cultural and religious diversity is looked at with disdain (Ball and Dragger 2016). Further information can be found by accessing: <http://www.britannica.com/topic/neoconservatism> (Accessed: 07/05/2016).

Scottish.”<sup>78</sup> Hence, I am deemed an outsider who, because I am not American, is perceived unable to understand her cultural reference to neo-conservatism. Overall, then, Deborah and Lisa clarify that Daughters of Abraham’s group identity is defined in relation to a socially located “other,” which takes a more or less abstract form.

A stress on commonalities is one way in which group members create a viable collective self. Members of any given group tend to “exaggerate the similarities within the in-group, and the differences between the in-group and the out-group” (Jenkins 2014: 114). Talking about her motivations for her continued participation in the Daughters of Abraham, Mary illustrates this dialectic between sameness and difference that works to establish an idea of “us and them:”

I’m often with Christians who don’t get me (...) they are very different. They don’t use my language (...) we don’t have a lot in common. Whereas I go to talk to these Jewish women and these Muslim women, and they get me! They’ve got the same fire, the same passion. They care about the same things. They are longing for justice in the same kinds of ways that I am. So that’s a wonderful part of Daughters for me: to be with these other women who share the things that make me tick, that really matter to me, my passions, my longings.

In contrast to other Christians with whom the founding member does not “have a lot in common” despite practicing the same religion, Mary sees her self in her fellow group members who belong to different religious traditions. She stresses perceived similarities in-group, and in the process she rejects that she could find such common ground outside the Daughters of Abraham setting. In doing so, Mary establishes a sense of belonging to this group that is based both on perceived similarities between its individual members and supposed differences to outsiders. According to the sociologist Richard Jenkins,

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<sup>78</sup> Ironically, I am not Scottish. Still, the obvious implication is that since I am not American, I am an outsider irrespective of my actual nationality.

Differences of opinion and more – of worldview, cosmology and other fundamentals – among and between members of the same community are normal, even inevitable. They are masked by a semblance of agreement and convergence generated by shared communal symbols, and participation in a common symbolic discourse of community membership that constructs and emphasizes the boundary between members and non-members. Thus members can present a consistent face to the outside world (2014: 139-40).

The consistent “common symbolic discourse” in the Daughters of Abraham relies on a pervading emphasis on similarities of religion, liberal sociopolitical attitudes, and gender.

A principle manner in which unity is stressed in the Daughters of Abraham is referencing the perception that members adhere to the same God because they all belong to the “Abrahamic religions.” The “same God discourse” functions to situate the Daughters of Abraham as a collective unit in relation to outsiders, explicitly because it creates this semblance of sameness that Jenkins mentions and, thereby, establishes boundaries for inclusion (2014: 139-40). It helps explain why members generally prefer limiting this interreligious encounter to practitioners of the “Abrahamic religions.” The following section elucidates what is meant by the “same God discourse,” and how it functions to “map” Daughters of Abraham’s collective self.

### ***Self-Selecting In or Out: Boundary Drawing Through the “Same God Discourse”***

The foundation for shaping a collective sense of self in relation to outsiders in the Daughters of Abraham is the organization’s “same God discourse.” This discourse provides a reason for excluding religions falling outside the “Abrahamic framework,”

and with it, a perception of membership as self-selective. That is, only a certain type of person would choose to become involved in the Daughters of Abraham. Those who do choose to participate are viewed as “the same” over against those who opt out, irrespective of whether these outsiders can in actual fact join based on the group’s official membership criteria. Thus, the “same God discourse” facilitates a sense of unity that supports the formation and maintenance of a collective identity. Grace illuminates what the “same God discourse” entails, and how it informs participation in this interfaith book group:

I remember going through a time in my own life feeling (...) if you really believe in Jesus Christ, and you really believe Jesus is God, then how is there room for anything else? And then it came to me: your faith, God has come to you in the form of Christianity (...) so that’s what you believe (...) but that’s only my story. God may be revealed to you in a totally different way, and I totally respect that (...) I think that’s the basis for having a chance to be there and sit in a room with people for whom God has spoken in different ways. The one God has spoken in different ways.

Members perceive this discourse of “one God for all three ‘Abrahamic religions’” as exclusive to the Daughters of Abraham. The Muslim Steering Committee member, Aya, explains how this outlook defines Daughters of Abraham’s collective identity:

We are the Daughters of Abraham in the sense that we have a common root, a common ancestor to look up to (...) the fact that Hagar and Ishmael were Abraham’s family, it is only within the more informed groups that it is accepted (...) so just the fact that the group identifies that, is being inclusive, is that thing that is needed to bring the group together as ‘the Daughters of Abraham’ (...) If you go to people who are not connected in the religious arena to other faith traditions, you are going to see that, hear that denial of the prophets and the history of Islam. They don’t accept it. So for it to be recognized and accepted as a part of the same tradition is a big deal. That is why the group is unique from that angle. I’ve heard within everyday stuff too that people don’t accept that: ‘oh you are talking about the same God!?’ ‘No. It’s your God. Our God is a different God.’ That kind of thing. And it’s a majority actually that think about it from that angle – the God of the Muslims is considered to be a separate God from the God of Christianity and Judaism. So when you talk about ‘the Daughters of Abraham,’

it actually shows a perspective that includes that vision of belonging and worshipping that same God that is worshipped by the Jews and the Christians and the Muslims (...) The recognition that it is the same God that is big, that is big!<sup>79</sup>

Evidently, there exists an impression that Daughters members are different from non-members because of their belief in the one God of the “Abrahamic religions.” Without holding this belief, it is considered impossible to be part of the Daughters of Abraham. This discourse, then, draws additional boundaries for inclusion because it suggests that Daughters members hold certain views deemed indispensable for interreligious dialogue to materialize. Moreover, it shows that membership is considered self-selective, which entails dividing people into those deemed suited for the Daughters of Abraham and those who are not. The “same God discourse,” then, advances the boundary drawing done by the organization’s official “Abrahamic religions” only membership criterion because it separates those who consider Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as different paths to the same God from those who do not.

Underlying the division into people deemed suitable for the Daughters of Abraham and people who are not is a sense of positive distinctiveness. If you adhere to the ecumenical “same God” vision, you can become an insider, you are “good enough” for the Daughters of Abraham. If not, you are unfit to become a religious ally. That is, only a certain type of person would choose to become involved in the Daughters of Abraham. It shows how Daughters members’ connection of the “same God discourse” to the notion of Daughters of Abraham membership as self-selective

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<sup>79</sup> Please refer to chapter 1 for an elaboration of the theological underpinnings for using the figure of Abraham in dialogue initiatives. It explains that the Daughters of Abraham has consciously chosen to reference Abraham as a uniting figure instead of pointing to difference by referencing the religious female figures, Hagar and Sarah. Whilst Hagar features prominently in Islam, Sarah is considered the first matriarch in Judaism and Christianity.

works to construct an impression of Daughters members as “the same” vis-à-vis outsiders, which ultimately results in the construction of a group identity.

Elsie, a Jewish member who joined the Daughters of Abraham a few years ago hoping to gain knowledge about Islam, exemplifies this process. When asked if interfaith initiatives can help alleviate the religious prejudice that followed in the aftermath of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, Elsie comments,

I don't know that our group will because we are all self-selective women that are already all kind of interfaith, non-judgmental...not just non-judgmental, but embracing. People who really need this sort of thing probably don't get it as much.

Elsie expresses an idea of “us and them,” Daughters members and non-members. The Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups might be “preaching to the choir,” as many members remarked during their interviews, yet this impression that Daughters members are “the same” when contrasted to non-members works as the basis for constructing a collective identity. In other words, this discourse of sameness “maps” Daughters of Abraham’s collective self. Thus, in a complex interrelated process, individual Daughters members identify with one another inside the group by pointing to outsiders, which in turn works to delineate the group identity.

As was clarified earlier, questions of identity should be understood as being questions about “identification;” hence, identity construction revolves around finding similarities and differences (Hall 2000: 16). The needed rejection of an “other” creates an idea of insiders and outsiders – either you subscribe to a group’s dominant discourse or you are deemed “out.” Deborah clarifies that this process takes place in the Daughters of Abraham when she states,

We are not for everybody. So there are people who will come in and break against the paradigm, and either they will get with the paradigm or they won't. We've never had to throw somebody out. They just figure out that they don't belong, and they self-select out.

Daughters of Abraham's group identity, then, is based on members being able to point to what they are not. This ability to collectively negate certain discourses allows members to affirm one another in why they, therefore, belong within Daughters of Abraham's interfaith paradigm. Jenkins argues, "group membership in itself (...) is sufficient to encourage members to, for example, discriminate against out-group members" (2014: 114). Those who do not "get with the paradigm" or subscribe to the "same God discourse" are quickly deemed to be outsiders, who could never understand Daughters of Abraham's key goal of peaceful coexistence. Too much difference, then, is not allowed inside the group because it would break against the idea of members as "the same," which is necessary for constructing and upholding a viable collective self.

To sum up, the inclusion of the "Abrahamic religions" only in the Daughters of Abraham serves to create a collective self-understanding that is based on the ability to point to that which the members hold in common in contrast to outsiders. This "mapping" of Daughters of Abraham's group identity, then, involves creating boundaries for inclusion and exclusion in relation to a more or less concrete "other" located within the contemporary American context. Some dissenting voices or Daughters "misfits" question the group's discourses of sameness, though; hence, they challenge the group identity narrative. It is these dissenting voices to which this chapter now turns.

### *In-Between Insider and Outsider: “Misfits” Breaking with the Group Paradigm*

I until very recently did not say very much at the meetings. And I still don't speak as much as others do (...) because I'm not sure there is a God and because everyone else is sure as far as I can tell (...) certainly the non-Jewish members have a very deep-seated faith, which I respect and admire (...) but I don't have that faith so...I've not wanted to come across as being critical, or I'm not sure what the right word is, but I have some *difficulty*, and I've not said this in the group, I don't think...there is so much questioning in Judaism, and from what I understand that doesn't exist at all in Islam, and I have some difficulty with that. I don't believe that forensic medicine is in the Qur'an, I don't believe, I mean I can't, it makes no sense to me! (...) But I don't say that in the group because I don't want to offend anybody (...) One of them once made a statement that there were only three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; the others Hinduism, Buddhism, they are not...so I sat there just kind of biting my tongue because I don't believe that's true, but I don't want to say anything so...and I don't believe that one has to have a faith and be religious in order to live a moral life (...) and I don't believe in an afterlife (...) so that just makes it hard for me sometimes in the group, and I do tend to be very quiet (Lilith).

Lilith, a cultural Jew around seventy, differs from most Daughters members because of her doubt in the existence of God. This significant difference in a group based on the sharing of personal experiences with living religion everyday alienates her from her fellow group members. Moreover, it makes her hesitant to speak up at Daughters meetings because doing so would highlight difference. In other words, Lilith would contradict the overarching group paradigm that emphasizes sameness if she were to challenge the opinions of her fellow group members. According to Lichterman,

Participants collaborate in keeping a group style normative in a scene. Their collaboration is patterned partly by participants' expectations, their background knowledge regarding 'what kind of group this should be' within that scene and is not open to endless innovation. Thus, group style can constrain how people express religious claims or identities, not as a formula but a rough sensibility regarding what is appropriate (2012: 27).

Lilith exemplifies this self-imposed silencing. She has conceivably learnt the fundamental group discourses like the “same God discourse,” which must not be

transgressed in the Daughters of Abraham. Instead of challenging this narrative of sameness and, thereby, risk hurting others, Lilith bites her tongue. Consequently, she upholds the semblance of agreement necessary in order for the group to be able to present a united front to the outside, albeit this semblance is form, not matter.

Lilith, then, refrains from disrupting the collective narrative of sameness in the group. Still, her self-imposed silencing results in her feeling that she does not truly belong. She is an insider in the sense that she is a member of the Daughters of Abraham and has learnt the collective discourse about the group's open-minded members who believe that participating in this interfaith book group contributes to generating world peace. At the same time, she falls outside the group parameters for inclusion because she does not believe in God and because she does not highlight commonalities between Judaism and Islam, rather, she accentuates difference. Consequently, Lilith complicates the neatly drawn boundaries for inclusion into the Daughters of Abraham.

Lilith is not the only member whose voice is constrained by the normative group discourses. In fact, members are seemingly acutely aware of the need to subscribe to the organization's overarching goal of unconditional interreligious understanding in order to be considered an insider. Dinah, the Christian leader of group H, is questioning her two-year membership because of her ambivalent feelings about being a religious ally to Muslims outside the Daughters space. Dinah explains,

I learnt early on that in Islam no one speaks for the religion (...) and that has been in some ways helpful and also not a help in me trying to explain to my friends and family why moderate Muslims are not speaking out against terrorism. So at first I would say to my friends and family: 'well that's because there is no one that is charged with it. That's just the way they are set up.' And even my husband pushes back on me and says: 'you know, that may be the way they prefer it to be (...) but they have an obligation in the world now to come forward and speak up.'

And I have to say that I understand everybody saying that and feeling that way, and I'm beginning to feel that way, and it's frustrating for me...it scares me that I feel that way...because I think being part of this group you really can't feel that way. And if I were to leave that would be why I leave because sometimes I feel that I can't stand up for them (...) It troubles me, it really troubles me, and I don't know how to make it make sense in my head.

Dinah finds herself falling outside the dominant group narrative that stresses sameness between Daughters members irrespective of religious affiliation. Daughters of Abraham's group discourses that serve to uphold a viable collective self, then, prompt Dinah to perceive herself as an outsider. Specifically, her view of Muslims clashes with the collective identity that emphasizes members as being united in a shared perception that they all believe in the one God despite adhering to different religious traditions. Because she cannot reconcile her self-understanding with the group identity, Dinah occupies an ambivalent position between insider and outsider. Actually, Dinah can be considered as an "other" in opposition to whom Daughters of Abraham's group identity is defined because she questions the collective obligation to show unfaltering understanding for one's religious "others." She cannot be a religious ally.

As a group leader, Dinah should in theory be one of the more prominent advocates for the Daughters model. Yet, she questions the defining group discourses because she cannot live up to the "same God" vision, which is a primary one of these. Her inability to wholeheartedly support the Daughters model might have to do with the fact that she has only been a member for a few years, which is not particularly long considering that some Daughters chapters have existed for over a decade. Generally, more longstanding members are fiercer advocates of the vision of Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith movement. The fact that Dinah does not know where to position herself because she challenges the collective emphasis on sameness,

on the one hand, indicates the rigidity of the boundaries created for inclusion into the Daughters of Abraham. At the same time, the fact that both Dinah and Lilith have been able to self-select in and so partake in this seemingly tightly controlled interreligious encounter also suggests that the parameters for inclusion can be bended in practice. Thus, the boundary drawing done by Daughters members is more complicated than simply self-selecting in or out based on whether or not one supports the key discourses of sameness of religion and sociopolitical attitudes defining the collective self-understanding.

“Misfits” like Dinah and Lilith fall in-between insider and outsider, belonging and not belonging to the Daughters of Abraham interfaith community. They complicate the “mapping” of Daughters of Abraham’s group identity by questioning its boundaries for inclusion and exclusion. Because they transgress the normative group style, they could potentially disrupt the emphasis on commonality that appears crucial for the maintenance of Daughters of Abraham’s collective self-understanding as a group for sociopolitically liberal Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women who believe in the same God. Furthermore, these dissenting voices could question the organization’s approach to promoting peaceful coexistence. However, Lilith and Dinah’s decisions to remain silent mean that the semblance of agreement is upheld. Consequently, Daughters of Abraham “misfits” are considered to belong to the collective self by their fellow group members, although, they privately recognize falling outside what is deemed acceptable for being considered suited for inclusion into this women’s interfaith book group. Thus, the line between insider and outsider, inclusion and exclusion, is seemingly difficult to explicitly transgress; perhaps because doing so would mean risking being categorized as much too “other” and so unfit for membership. Daughters of Abraham’s group identity, then, is shaped by

discourses constructing an environment that only allows for a tightly controlled diversity of religion, gender, and sociopolitical attitudes.

It is noteworthy that it was only Lilith and Dinah who admitted to falling outside the parameters set for inclusion into this women's interfaith book group during their interviews. Seeing as the women whom I interviewed volunteered their time, maybe it is only natural that they would be enthusiastic about this interreligious encounter. Still, it is likely that at least some other members find themselves falling outside the neatly prescribed collective discourses to which one must, at least, appear to adhere in order to remain an insider of the Daughters of Abraham. However, if any such members existed, they chose to remain silent about any such potential transgressions of the boundaries set for inclusion. This silence could be explained in two ways. It could indicate an acute awareness of the parameters for inclusion shaping Daughters of Abraham's collective self-understanding. At the same time, the fact that members overwhelmingly spoke positively about their experiences with participating in this group could simply be because most of the Daughters have found a format for interreligious engagement that suits them, precisely because of the parameters set for inclusion that ensures a tightly controlled diversity of religion, sociopolitical attitudes, and gender, and so allows a stress on what is shared.

### ***Conclusion: Daughters of Abraham's Collective Self-Understanding***

This chapter underscores this thesis' running theme that being able to point to similarities of religion, sociopolitical attitudes, or gender is essential for prompting engagement with Daughters of Abraham's religious diversity on both the individual and the collective level. Daughters of Abraham's group identity is generated by

individual members' collective adherence to the three key parameters set for inclusion into this interfaith book group. These parameters are: the "same God discourse," Daughters members as supporters of liberal sociopolitical values, and members as religious allies. This final group discourse relates to the vision of Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith movement that can contribute to creating peaceful coexistence through its relational bridge building model. The uses of concepts of nurture and relationships to describe the group's potential impact on its sociocultural context highlight another subversive use of conventional gender attributes taking place in this exclusively female interreligious encounter. Such subversive performances of gender have been highlighted throughout this thesis.

The parameters for inclusion also carve out a distinct profile for the Daughters of Abraham book groups within the wider context of interreligious encounters. The collective identity is defined in contrast to what the Daughters of Abraham and its members do not stand for, namely narrow-mindedness, intolerance, and religious absolute truth claims. Such discourses are related to a more or less concrete "other" situated within the group's contemporary American sociocultural context. The processes of "mapping," that are done in relation to outsiders, work to create and maintain a viable group identity. This is the case because these exclusionary measures construct an environment that only allows for a tightly controlled diversity in terms of religion and sociopolitical attitudes. These parameters, therefore, limit the demographic possible to reach with the Daughters interfaith model to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim women subscribing both to a vision of one God and liberal political values. Although such boundaries can be silently transgressed, failing to subscribe to the group's main discourses means occupying an awkward position in-between insider and outsider. Still, keeping too much "otherness" out of the group

allows members to emphasize what they share, which supports interreligious relationship-building in-group. Accordingly, the parameters for inclusion that frame the collective self-understanding of the group contribute to accomplishing Daughters of Abraham's mission: fostering interreligious understanding on the personal level.

## **CONCLUSION: Learning from the American Women's Interfaith Book Groups, the Daughters of Abraham**

This thesis' in-depth ethnographic case study of the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups has made an original and significant ethnographic contribution to the broad theoretical field of interfaith and intercommunity relations and more specifically to the study of women's interreligious encounter as it pertains to "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations." The ethnographic approach taken in this thesis to study an example of women's interreligious encounter has allowed for an in-depth understanding of the ways in which individuals negotiate issues of sameness and difference of religion. It has illuminated how the Daughters of Abraham interfaith encounter influences individual and collective identity negotiations with resulting understanding of religious self and "other." Finally, it has clarified the interrelation of macro- and micro-level power dynamics on such understandings involving the influence of issues such as gender, ethnicity, race, and nationality.

Secondly, this thesis has made a theoretical contribution to the analytical frameworks at play in studying "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations" by demonstrating that these categories fail to adequately account for the nuance, complexity, and diversity characterizing lived experiences of such relations and the associated religious identity categories, "Jewish," "Christian," and "Muslim." Specifically, my thesis problematized these analytical categories by demonstrating the complex manners in which actively engaging with religious diversity can unsettle, affirm, and expand understandings of what it means to identify as "Jewish," "Christian," or "Muslim" through its exploration of the identification processes taking place in the Daughters of Abraham as a result of chosen engagement with issues of

religious difference and sameness. This in-depth case study showed that the meanings applied to identifying as “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim” in the Daughters of Abraham are situational, dynamic, and diverse, sometimes even contradictory; and hence, no uniform or static definition can be applied to these religious identity categories. Similarly, my thesis’ elucidation of the nuanced and varied approaches taken by Daughters members to their religious “others” underscored the multivalent character of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations.” Consequently, the theoretical framework of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” might be useful as an umbrella term to guide scholars in studying interfaith and intercommunity relations as they pertain to the “Abrahamic religions.” However, at the same time, my thesis’ ethnographic analysis has illustrated the intricacy of defining the inter-religious and intra-religious relations in the Daughters of Abraham and the countless outcomes of navigating these relations for ideas about religious self and others; and in doing so, it has demonstrated that the analytical categories at play in studying “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” cannot account for the nuance defining lived experiences of such encounters or the associated religious identity categories. This complexity does not invalidate the use of these categories for analysis, but it does remind us that generalizations cannot be made about interfaith relations, religious communities, religious practitioners, or religious traditions. Moreover, it implies that we cannot talk about a general state of interfaith or intercommunity relations because the dynamics informing such encounters are complicated and context-dependent. It also cautions against uniform and fixed interpretations of the religious identity categories “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim.” Finally, by identifying that the analytical categories at play in studying “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” are problematic because these cannot adequately account for the nuance defining the lived experiences of interfaith

encounters, my thesis has additionally highlighted a need for more ethnographic studies situated within the broad theoretical field of interfaith and intercommunity relations. Such studies could help further unpack the intricacy of defining and applying the framework of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” for analysis.

My thesis set out to provide in-depth understanding of the women’s interfaith book groups, the Daughters of Abraham, by answering questions about how members engage with the group’s religious diversity; how participation in the Daughters of Abraham is reflected in members’ self-understanding and the understanding of the “other;” and what can be learned about power dynamics and about boundary drawing from the women’s accounts of their participation in the Daughters of Abraham and from their group meeting interactions. Specifically, chapters 1 and 2 provided the background for the identification processes and power dynamics defining the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups by examining the history of interfaith and intercommunity relations as they pertain to the “Abrahamic religions” as well as their expression in Daughters of Abraham’s local geographical setting, the Greater Boston Area. Thereafter, the ethnographic data chapters 3-8 highlighted the fluid and diverse negotiations of identification taking place in the Daughters of Abraham that were shown to be influenced by various macro-level contextual factors. These chapters also illuminated ways in which engaging in interfaith relations impact understandings of what it means to identify as a “Jewish,” “Christian,” or “Muslim” woman in contemporary America. Specifically, chapter 3 showed that interfaith relations are defined by the parameters set for such engagement by highlighting Daughters of Abraham’s intragroup dynamics as bound up with ritualized patterns of action, explicitly socializing over food followed by discussion of books about the “Abrahamic religions.” Chapter 4’s focus on the organization’s use of texts to

establish boundaries for engaging with issues of religious diversity demonstrated the impact on the group dynamics and the boundary drawing done in-group. At the same time, it also emphasized the power held by both individual Daughters members and literary “others” to upset, confirm, and redefine the organizational parameters set for navigating the interfaith relations found in the group. Chapter 5 commenced elucidating the numerous meanings applied to the religious identity categories “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim” by focusing on the gender aspect of the Daughters of Abraham interfaith encounter reserved for women. Specifically, it highlighted how the Daughters connect across religious differences because they are able to share particularly female experiences with religion. Chapter 6 highlighted the nuance with which the religious identity categories “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim” are understood by individual practitioners and demonstrated the impact of engaging in the Daughters of Abraham interfaith encounter on such understandings. The importance of accounting for nuance in studies of these identity categories was, thereby, additionally clarified. Specifically, this chapter’s elucidation of the multiple meanings applied to the religious identity categories “Jewish,” “Christian,” and “Muslim” problematize their use as analytical categories because it underscores that lived experiences of such identification are dynamic and varied; and hence, a fixed uniform meaning cannot be applied to these categories. Making sure to recognize the complexity defining the related analytical framework “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” was subsequently emphasized in chapter 7 due to its examination of a fundamental interreligious dynamic in the Daughters of Abraham that positions Muslims as “different” from Jews and Christians, at least on the leadership level. Individual members’ negotiations of this interreligious group dynamic illustrated more fluid understandings of such relations. Accordingly, it highlighted that lived

experiences of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” are context-dependent and diverse. It accentuated the impact of interreligious dialogue towards diversifying and advancing ideas about religious self and others too. Moreover, it demonstrated that macro-level discourses about religion, ethnicity, and race with their resulting power dynamics influence micro-level interfaith relations. Finally, chapter 8 illuminated how individual Daughters members make use of sociocultural discourses in order to define the group’s collective identity; thus, emphasizing interfaith relations as situational and, by extension, underlining the importance of acknowledging local conditions when using the theoretical framework “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” to analyze examples of interfaith and intercommunity encounters.

This thesis has illuminated several main themes by engaging with its key questions about the processes of identification and boundary drawing taking place in the Daughters of Abraham. First, this thesis highlights that interreligious interactions complicate understandings of what it means to identify as an American Muslim, Jewish, or Christian woman. Second, it shows that individuals creatively engage with issues of sameness and difference that come to the fore in inter-religious and intra-religious dynamics. Third, the “safe space” of the group, generated through a set structure and (perceived) commonalities, is important for prompting engagement with religious diversity. Fourth, the ability to point to collectively perceived commonalities of religion, gender, or sociopolitical values is essential for encouraging engagement with religious diversity, and resulting interreligious understanding. At the same time, this collective emphasis on sameness can highlight difference occasioning various tensions, which challenge interreligious relationship-building. And finally, members get to know each other as more than their religious identity categories.

This thesis also brought to light numerous tensions arising on various levels of interaction within and in relation to the Daughters of Abraham. First, the organization's emphasis on inter-religious commonalities brings out intra-religious differences that can complicate the maintenance of a coherent sense of religious self because that which is supposed to be "the same" is illuminated to be "other." It highlights the complexity defining identity construction and suggests that the intra-religious dimension of inter-religious encounters must also be taken into account in order to fully understand these processes. Second, on the leadership level Muslim members are placed in a position of difference vis-à-vis non-Muslims, but when it comes to creating and maintaining a collective identity, all members irrespective of religion are defined as "the same" vis-à-vis outsiders. A tension also exists between the way in which the leadership rigidly positions Muslims as "different" to Jews and Christians and the creative individual approaches taken to understanding religious "others" that sometimes result in breaking down rigid ideas of difference. It suggests that the power dynamics found in the group are influenced by the sociocultural context where Jews and Christians are in a relative position of power to Muslims due to the different immigration histories of these religious communities. These histories additionally explain that the national identity is bound up with ethnicity and religion and, therefore, contributes to reinforcing such unequal power dynamics. Nevertheless, the variety in the individual approaches taken to understanding the "other" in the Daughters of Abraham indicates the possibility to challenge and even overcome unequal sociocultural power dynamics, at least on the micro-level.

Furthermore, at first glance the organization's aim of "nourishing the world" seems paradoxical because the Daughters interfaith model is predicated on members being able to point to what is shared between the "Abrahamic traditions" as well as

for women only. Nevertheless, one of the main group discourses encourages members to engage with outsiders through relational bridge building and to challenge religious prejudice voiced outside the Daughters space. The amount of people exposed to the organization's message of interreligious understanding is thereby envisioned increased. On the other hand, the exclusionary measures taken to who can in fact become an insider of this women's interfaith book group appear to clash with the organizational goal to communicate its vision of interreligious understanding to as many people as possible. According to the formal membership criteria, any Jewish, Christian, or Muslim woman may join the Daughters of Abraham. However, key group discourses to which individuals must subscribe in order to be considered an insider draw additional boundaries for inclusion, namely the "same God discourse;" Daughters members as supportive of liberal sociopolitical values; and members as each other's religious allies. The latter discourse relates to the vision of Daughters of Abraham as an interfaith movement. Some members break with the parameters set for inclusion, though, thereby challenging the rigidity of these discourses. Consequently, ideas about insiders and outsiders, belonging and not belonging, are more nuanced than at first glance. By extension, the organization's goal of fostering interreligious understanding applies to a greater and more diffuse audience than suggested by the official membership criteria's definition of an insider.

The boundaries set for inclusion indicate the need for "safe space" to encourage individuals to engage across lines of difference. The Daughters of Abraham uses food and books to provide "safe space," thereby prompting members to engage with the group's religious diversity. The fact that members are able to highlight commonalities of gender and religion also helps in this connection. In fact, Daughters members forge interreligious relations based on shared experiences of

being a (religious) woman in contemporary America. Whether referencing particularly female experiences is a common characteristic of the group dynamics at play in women's interreligious encounter remains unclear. The set structure of books and food and the ability to highlight sameness generate "safe space" in the Daughters of Abraham, but how do other groups create this environment that prompts engagement with religious diversity? Is "safe space" necessarily indispensable for generating interreligious understanding? These would be interesting questions for future studies to explore.

The parameters set for inclusion into the Daughters of Abraham make it pertinent to ask whether women's interreligious encounters generally speaking are exclusionary by nature? Conventional formalized interfaith dialogue amongst religious leaders and theologians can be criticized for its limited gender diversity and its exclusion of anyone who cannot engage in scriptural reasoning. However, similar challenges could be made to the Daughters interfaith model. The boundary drawing done by pointing to similarities and differences of religion, gender, and sociopolitical attitudes works to create and maintain a collective identity by excluding that which is deemed too much other. It ensures a carefully constructed and tightly controlled diversity. Moreover, because the Daughters model primarily attracts a particular demographic, it is also limited in terms of class, education, age, ethnicity, and race. Whilst some of these limitations are granted unintentional, it still suggests that both conventional and women's interreligious dialogue models exclude that which is deemed too different. It begs the question whether any model for interreligious understanding can or should be all encompassing, but also if formalized interfaith activities primarily attract individuals from certain socioeconomic and religious backgrounds. In other words, do models of interreligious understanding by definition

discourage the engagement of individuals from certain socioeconomic strata? If interfaith dialogue is reserved for a limited segment of society, it suggests wider and more practical implications for these initiatives' overarching goal of promoting interreligious understanding and, by extension, world peace. It suggests a need for different social and political actors to combine efforts if looking to advance this aim. Future studies might want to evaluate whether and how such efforts take place with their potential strengths and weaknesses for engendering peaceful coexistence. Another research possibility would be examining interfaith relations that involve more demographically diverse communities. Such studies could consider interfaith and intercommunity relations between individuals from different generations, class, and/or education backgrounds. Such examinations could bring out dimensions pertaining to interfaith and intercommunity relations that the study of the demographically very bounded Daughters of Abraham encounter cannot. For example, they could illuminate how individuals and communities deal with diversity at large – are commonalities somehow found in order to navigate difference or can people engage across lines of difference without pointing to common ground?

The exclusionary character of models for interreligious understanding speaks to bigger questions concerning the issue of diversity, specifically the extent to which people actively engage across ethnic, cultural, religious, political, and socioeconomic lines. Do individuals actively seek out diverse spaces, or do they remain within tightly controlled encounters of diversity like the Daughters of Abraham space? What might stop people from crossing lines of difference? More generally, how much difference can we hold together in our lives? For instance, some of the engagements with religious diversity in the Daughters of Abraham hinge on members' ability to point to their perceived shared ancestor Abraham, which is enabled by the group's inclusion

of the “Abrahamic religions” only. It would, therefore, seem that being able to point to similarities is indispensable for prompting engagement with religious diversity. It raises the question whether we always need to be able to find some similarities with the “other” in order to engage in dialogue? A more contained question for potential future research would be how participants in interreligious groups involving religious traditions outside the “Abrahamic framework” engage with issues of sameness and difference?

The emphasis on commonalities of religion, gender, and sociopolitical attitudes in the Daughters of Abraham raises the question whether the interfaith relations negotiated in this interfaith encounter are, in fact, more accurately described as “intra-religious” instead of “inter-religious.” Studies into intra-religious communal relations could help shed light on such classifications. By extension, they could expand on the analytical categories used to account for self-understandings and relations between individuals identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim. That is, analyses of select Jewish, Christian, or Muslim communities in a variety of settings could illuminate how intra-religious relations influence individual and collective ideas of belonging. Such studies could also highlight the impact of contextual factors on the ways in which individuals relate to each other so as to, moreover, elucidate the distinctive traits informing religious communal identities. For example, what defines contemporary “American Muslimness” or “Scottish Jewishness?” Examinations of intra-religious relations could make an interesting comparison to research on interreligious encounters by providing insight into issues of sameness and difference of religion occurring from negotiating intra-religious dynamics. Depending on the extent of intra-religious diversity, it might be relevant to ask the opposite question to that posed in regards to the Daughters of Abraham encounter, namely if some “intra-

religious relations” could be more appropriately defined as “inter-religious?” Such a question would be particularly relevant if differences in sociopolitical attitudes prove prevalent since such values inform identification processes.

The underlying sentiment of interreligious dialogue, namely that participants are looking to advance peaceful cross-religious relations, challenges Daughters of Abraham’s claim to be an apolitical organization. The group’s overarching goal of fostering interreligious understanding and relationships looking to confront discrimination, xenophobia, and bigotry, can be considered a political act in and of itself, especially considering the boundary drawing done by members to keep out individuals who hold conservative sociopolitical views. The top-down control over “appropriate” reading material and “suitable” discussion of such also attests to this boundary drawing in regards to the sociopolitical perspectives allowed in-group. Participation in the Daughters of Abraham, then, implies taking a stand for certain values and should, therefore, be considered as a type of activism. As such, membership is political by nature.

A parallel can be drawn to women’s shared reading practices of the past. The studying and discussion of texts in the historical literary salons sought to promote women’s education. It challenged the patriarchal gender norms of the time, meaning that the women’s membership was an act of resistance against unequal power dynamics based on gender. The Daughters’ discussions of books, fiction and non-fiction, about religion could simply be viewed as the group following the conventional format for interfaith dialogue that centers on textual analysis. However, participation in this all-women’s book group should be considered with a view to the past because it facilitates a space where particularly female experiences with religion take center stage. Consequently, women’s voices are highlighted, which remains

unusual both within religious settings and in the general public sphere. Accordingly, participation in this women's interfaith book group can be considered as a feminist stand for gender equality.

Nonetheless, ambiguity defines the performances of gender taking place in the Daughters of Abraham. Specifically, the numerous references made to the concepts of nurture and relationships show ambivalent, even contradictory, performances of conventional female gender characteristics. On the one hand, members subscribe to these norms by embracing them in their references to motherhood, their nurture of each other through food and friendship, and members' idea of "nourishing the world" through relational bridge building. On the other hand, the Daughters subvert conventional gender norms both by highlighting particularly female experiences with religion and when they use these concepts to claim a place in the traditionally male-dominated public sphere to voice their message of peaceful coexistence. Adding to this complexity is the fact that most members are self-declared feminists. The Daughters' ambiguous gender performances express the contemporary context where gender identities are in flux. It suggests a plurality of understandings of being a woman and, therefore, indicates a level of complexity that cannot be captured by one term like "Feminism." As such, what it means to the individual to identify as a (religious) woman, or a feminist, has to be qualified in order to understand lived experiences of performing gender in contemporary America.

It is important to acknowledge that the Daughters of Abraham is situated within the post-9/11 American sociocultural setting. Accordingly, the examined power dynamics, boundary drawing, and identification processes found in this interreligious encounter are necessarily connected to this particular context. Thus, my in-depth case study of this contemporary interfaith encounter situated in Boston,

Massachusetts between women self-identifying as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim highlights interfaith and inter-community relations as context-dependent. It underscores that accounting for the local conditions in which interreligious encounters take place is essential in order to understand the intricacy defining interfaith dynamics. By extension, it disrupts straightforward definitions and applications of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” to the examination of specific examples of interreligious interactions between individuals and communities belonging to the “Abrahamic religions” framework. Consequently, it would be worth conducting additional ethnographic studies of “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations” both inside and outside the American context so as to advance knowledge of interplays between the macro- and the micro-level with the impact on interfaith and inter-communal relations.

This thesis’ elucidation of the multifaceted understandings of religious self and “others” expressed by individual Daughters members indicates the complexity of defining “Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations.” This complexity is furthered by the intricate manner in which the women negotiate their identification within and as a group when engaging in interreligious dialogue. It demonstrates that no all-encompassing definition can be applied to the religious identity categories “Jewish,” “Christian,” or “Muslim.” Moreover, it emphasizes how engaging in formalized interfaith dialogue contributes to illuminating such diversity. The focus on the Daughters of Abraham interreligious encounter permits this understanding by highlighting the distinctive ways in which the women within and as a group engage with issues of religious difference and sameness.

This thesis’ ethnographic material and discussion has, thus, made an original and important contribution to the broad theoretical field of interfaith and

intercommunity relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims in two central manners. One, it has provided an in-depth understanding of the Daughters of Abraham's particular interfaith encounter that engages women self-identifying as "Jewish," "Christian," and "Muslim." Two, it has made a theoretical contribution to the analytical categories at play in studying "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations." That is, my thesis' ethnographic study of a women's interreligious encounter has highlighted the intricacy of defining the elements involved in both the practice of interfaith dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims as well as the analytical categories that can be used to study such relations. Accordingly, my thesis has demonstrated that using ethnographic methods to analyze interfaith and intercommunity relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims can unpack the complexity defining lived experiences of such engagements as well as the related theoretical framework "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations."

Nevertheless, ethnographic studies of women's interfaith encounter are virtually non-existent. This thesis has contributed to closing this gap by using ethnographic methods to advance knowledge about women's interreligious dialogue. The feminist lens taken to this study has supported this contribution to knowledge by permitting a focus on women's particular experiences with interfaith relations. Additional studies of women's interreligious encounter within and outside the American context as well as dialogue between the "Abrahamic religions" and/or other religions could provide greater insight into the dynamics at play in women's interreligious dialogue. They could contribute to illuminating the influence of such relations on understandings of self and perceptions of the "other."

Finally, my thesis has also pushed disciplinary discourses by speaking to the following interlinked areas: Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations, formalized

interreligious dialogue, interreligious encounters on the grassroots level, women's interreligious dialogue, a book group approach to engaging with religious diversity, and interreligious encounters in the American context post-September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. It is the hope that this in-depth case study of the Daughters of Abraham interfaith book groups will inspire future ethnographic studies of women's interreligious encounter and "Jewish-Christian-Muslim relations" so as to advance our understanding of both.

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## **APPENDIX A: Thematically Divided Guiding Interview Questions**

Description: I used these questions to guide my interviews with Daughters of Abraham's leadership and ordinary members, not as a set questionnaire. Thus, this sheet of thematically divided questions was my personal memo that I could draw on to prompt conversation if it came to a halt or to steer the conversation to relevant topics.

### **1) ORIGINAL AND ONGOING MOTIVATIONS**

#### Steering Committee:

- What are the overarching aims for Daughters of Abraham (DOA)?
- How would you describe DOA today?
- What are DOA's visions for the future?
- What do you hope that individual members take with them from their DOA involvement?
- Why should women become involved in interfaith activities?

#### Individual Members:

- How did you hear about DOA?
- What attracted you to DOA?
- Why did you decide to become a member of DOA instead of/in addition to other interfaith or women's group?
- Has being part of DOA lived up to your expectations?
- What incites you to continue to attending meetings?
- Do you remember your initial thoughts about DOA? In what ways have your original ideas about DOA been confirmed or differed from your actual experiences?
- Would you encourage other women to become involved in DOA or in another women's interfaith group? Why/why not?

### **2) CHALLENGES TO RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEW, CHALLENGES TO SELF**

- What brings value to your life?
- Does your religion influence your everyday life? Could you give me an example?
- Why do you adhere to Judaism/Christianity/Islam (delete as appropriate) and not another religion?
- What has being part of DOA taught you about your own faith?
- What is your experience of engaging with women from other religions?
- Did you have any knowledge of or exposure to the other Abrahamic religions before becoming a DOA member?
- What have you learned about other religions in DOA? Has this new knowledge impacted your daily life in any way?

- What are the key lessons you have learned from participating in DOA?
- Has your involvement in DOA influenced your everyday life?

### 3) **WOMEN-ONLY: GENDER DYNAMICS IN DAUGHTERS OF ABRAHAM**

#### a) Gender Identity

- Do women face any specific challenges in American society today? Do you find support through your DOA membership to face or overcome such challenges?
- Do you consider yourself a feminist? Why/why not?

#### b) Women-only setting:

- Did the fact that DOA only consists of women influence your decision to become a member?
- Do you think that it makes a difference in terms of understanding each other's viewpoints that you are all women? (Could you expand on that/in what ways?)

#### c) Women's Interfaith Relations

- How would you describe your relationship with the other women in your group?
- What unites you and the other women in your DOA group? What divides you and the other women in your DOA group?
- How would you describe the interactions you have in DOA?
- What is the favorite book(s) you have read together; why is this your favorite? What have you learnt from your book discussions?
- Do you talk about issues that are unrelated to the assigned book? – what issues?
- What do you feel comfortable sharing at DOA meetings? Are there some issues that you feel uncomfortable discussing?
- Do you ever disagree? Can you give me an example? (How) are such disagreements solved?
- Do you use each other for advice or support? Can you give me some examples?
- Do you (regularly) participate in each other's lives (i.e. outside DOA monthly meetings)? – Could you give me some examples?

**CONCLUDE Interviews with Overarching Questions** (Everyone): Do you think that interfaith dialogue has got a role to play in society? Has interfaith dialogue got a role in the U.S. at the moment?

**FINAL QUESTION:** Is there anything else you would like to add?

## APPENDIX B: Daughters of Abraham's Sample Book List

Description: This list of recommended reading compiled by Daughters of Abraham's leadership is one of the lists readily available on the group's website.<sup>80</sup> Divided into the organization's four main book categories, it gives a good impression of the kinds of texts discussed at Daughters meetings, including the political sentiments expressed concerning interreligious interactions and the "Abrahamic religions."



### *Sample Booklist*

#### **Jewish:**

- o Number Our Days, by Barbara Myerhoff. A study of aging through a portrait of elderly Jews in Venice California. Describes ethical Jewish culture through the lives of this mostly immigrant community.
- o The Ritual Bath, by Faye Kellerman. Detective fiction with an orthodox Jewish woman and her policeman/love interest. Start with this book, then read the "Rina Lazarus" novels in order, so that you understand the development of the interfaith relationship between orthodox woman and the Baptist policeman.
- o As a Driven Leaf, by Milton Steinberg. Historical fiction based on Judea in the time of the Roman occupation. Examines the tension between religious life and secular high culture.
- o The Red Tent, by Anita Diamant. A retelling of the life of the Biblical character Dinah through her childhood, short marriage, and adulthood.
- o At The Entrance To The Garden Of Eden, by Yossi Klein Halevi. Jewish Israeli journalist spends time getting to know and worshipping with Muslims and Christians.
- o Tales of the Hasidim, by Martin Buber. Martin Buber has assembled and translated a comprehensive 2-volume set of stories from the early and late Hasidic masters. Organized by master, with historic introduction and reference material.

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<sup>80</sup> Daughters of Abraham's Sample Booklist is available online:  
<https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&pid=sites&srcid=ZGVmYXVsdGRvbWFpbXN0ZXN0ZG9mYXxneDpkMTRkYzBmMTM4MmJlZDY> (Accessed: 30/11/2016).

- o Joy Comes in the Morning, by Jonathan Rosen Contemporary American tale of a woman who is a rabbi who falls in love with a secular Jewish man. Issues of faith, ethics, creating a Jewish home, observance of rituals, the balance of public, rabbinic life and family life.
- o Rambam's Ladder by Julie Solomon. A study of the teachings of Mamonides about giving and how these principles can be practiced today.
- o The Far Euphrates by Aryeh Lev Stollman. Post World War II/Holocaust childhood of a Jewish boy in Canada, told with Biblical and Kabalistic language and imagery. Its about understanding life and death, intellect and finally faith.
- o A Tale of Love and Darkness by Amos Oz. It covers the history of modern Israel from the vantage point of a participant.
- o Holy Days, by Lis Harris. A secular Jewish writer spends a year with a Brooklyn Hasidic family.
- o The Chosen by Chaim Potok. Fiction about a relationship between a secular and Orthodox Jewish young man set in New York in the 40s and 50s.

### **Christian:**

- o Cloister Walk, by Kathleen Norris A married Protestant Christian woman spends two 9-month periods living with a celibate society of Benedictine monks. She discusses the life of having one's days lived in an environment of frequent, scheduled prayer and one's year marked by the saint days as well as other festivals. She also discusses celibacy and women's history through the stories of the saints and the life stories of the nuns and monks she gets to know.
- o Travelling Mercies, by Anne Lamott. Memoir of finding faith and trying to live it.
- o Lying Awake by Mark Salzman. Fiction about a nun/mystic who faces serious illness and difficult decisions.
- o Evensong by Gail Godwin. The heroine of Father Melancholy's Daughter, now a minister herself, must deal with a series of challenges to her marriage and her ministry.
- o The Screwtape Letters by C.S. Lewis. Senior devil advises his apprentice on how to corrupt the soul of a hapless young man. A good view of Christian ideas of evil and temptation.

- o Things Seen and Unseen by Nora Gallagher. Liturgical year as seen by a woman who returned to faith as an adult Christian in the Episcopal tradition.
- o The Seville Communion by Perez Reverte Arturo Rome-based priest learns about the importance of the local parish in a murder mystery set in contemporary Spain. The city of Seville is a starring character in the story.
- o Open Secrets by Richard Lischer Lutheran minister describes his first parish in his first year of ministry.
- o Gilead: A Novel, by Marilynne Robinson. Letter to a son from a father covering the time of the American Civil War and the generations beyond.

### **Muslim:**

- o Border Passage, by Leila Ahmed Egyptian woman's memoir of growing up in an Egyptian/Turkish family in the 50s, going to college in England, and understanding the complex identity of Egyptian women in her time.
- o Believing Women in Islam, by Asma Barlas. A feminist study of Islamic texts that uses the Qur'an as a primary source.
- o The Rock, by Kanan Makiya. Historical fiction based on the viewpoint of a Yemenite Jewish man who converts to Islam during the Prophet's lifetime. He witnesses the Islamic takeover of Jerusalem and the building of the Dome of the Rock.
- o Even Angels Ask by Jeffery Lang. Memoir of finding faith and trying to live it.
- o The Crusades Through Arab Eyes by Amin Maalouf. History of invasion by European infidels in the middle ages, know to Westerners as “the crusades.” This book describes the politics and culture present at the time of the Christian invasion and occupation.
- o The Hadj by Michael Wolfe. American convert to Islam visits Morocco and goes on the Hadj.

### **Read more than one for a discussion:**

- o Poems of Arab Andalusia. Amazing 13th century poetry.
- o An Audience of One, Majid Mohiuddin. Contemporary Muslim Poetry.
- o 19 Varieties of Gazelle, Naomi Shihab Nye. Contemporary poems about the Middle East.
- o Video: Islam In America, Christian Science Monitor, produced by Lindsay Miller. Demonstrates the Five Pillars of Faith through interviews with American

Muslims. At the same time, the history of Muslim communities in American is shown.

- o Storyteller's Daughter by Saira Shah. European-raised Muslim journalist has the opportunity to visit her Afghani homeland while covering the beginning of war years there.
- o Islam: The Straight Path by John Esposito. Thorough review of Islam. More historical, philosophical than it is social or practical.

### **Involving more than one faith:**

- o The World's Religions, by Huston Smith. We read the chapters on the three Abrahamic faiths to establish a common background from which to begin our dialogue.
- o Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain, by Maria Rosa Menocal. Tells of a time and place – from 786-1492, in Andalusia, Spain -- that is largely and unjustly overshadowed in most historical chronicles. It was a time when the three cultures – Judaic, Islamic and Christian – forged a relatively stable, though occasionally contentious coexistence.
- o Daughters of Abraham: Feminist Thought in Judaism, Christianity and Islam edited by Yvonne Yazback Haddad and John Esposito
- o Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths by Bruce Feiler A review of the Biblical and historical Abraham.
- o Healing Israel/Palestine by Michael Lerner. Rabbi Lerner reviews the history of the area, the development of Zionism and then outlines his plan for peace in the area.
- o A History of God by Karen Armstrong. A comprehensive history of religious thought from Abraham to present.
- o Common Prayers by Harvey Cox. About an interfaith, Jewish/Christian marriage. Written through the eyes of a well-informed Christian husband who celebrates the Jewish liturgical year with his Jewish wife and child.