

Muslim and Interfaith Charities in Central New York: Multiculturalism and the Politics of Difference

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While Muslim and Arab Americans comprise diverse populations spanning different ethnic and religious groups, United States policy since 9/11 encourages the American public to imagine a community of Muslim / Arab / Middle Easterners that is a threat to homeland security, challenging everything from America's Christian identity to its capitalist free markets. Ascribing a person membership to this deviant imagined community trumps her citizenship claims, and as a result thousands of Muslim and Arab Americans have been detained, deported or profiled since 9/11, even though very few are ever prosecuted in the courts. Islamic organizations have also been unfairly targeted. Dozens of Muslim charities have recently been closed down or had their assets frozen because they conducted charitable work in regions where designated terrorist organizations operate, ultimately being punished for distributing food and medicine or constructing schools and hospitals. This targeting of Muslim charities not only curtails important humanitarian work, but also limits Muslim Americans' expressions of faith. One response to this climate of fear has been an increase in the number and scope of interfaith charitable organizations since 9/11. This ethnography focuses on recent developments within the Muslim charitable communities in Central New York, exploring two cases: the closure of a prominent local Muslim charity in 2003 and the workings of an interfaith charity formed after 9/11. My research is based on archival research, unstructured interviews with religious activists in Central New York, and participant observation of a key interfaith initiative. This interfaith charity helps to remedy socioeconomic injustices and promotes social solidarity, however I will explore whether or not contemporary theories of multiculturalism suggest that further transformative practices may still be necessary to remedy the deeper social injustices against Muslim and Arab Americans that are related to US foreign policy in the Middle East.