CHAPTER 1

THE CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT OF COLLECTIVE BEHAVIOR

IT IS EARLY FRIDAY EVENING IN FAYZABAD, AFGHANISTAN, ON
September 13, 2010. As worshippers file out of their mosques,
angry young men stir the crowd into a protest and lead a march
toward the German military base at the outskirts of the city. As
they approach, the protesters become increasingly belligerent—
furious about the news they heard earlier that day. Young men
throw rocks at the gate. Guards respond with warning shots, but
the crowd topples the gate and pours into the base. Moments later,
five protestors and two military policemen lay critically injured.
The wave of protesters subsides, but the damage to the fragile re-
lationship between the foreign military installation and the towns-
people is dour. Though violence in Fayzabad is temporarily abated,
riots spread across Afghanistan in the next forty-eight hours. In
Jalabad, protesters burn a U.S. flag and chant "Death to Obama."
In Logar province, crowds yell "Death to America" and "Death to
Christians."

More than seven thousand miles away, Terry Jones prepares to
confront the gaggle of journalists camped outside his diminutive
congregation in Gainesville, Florida. Jones joined the Dove Out-
reach Center as a part-time pastor in early 2001. Unbeknownst to
his new parishioners, Jones was dismissed from his previous con-
gregation in Germany amid accusations of fraud. While the church
once attracted hundreds of parishioners, Jones's caustic sermons

about homosexuality and liberal media conspiracies estranged all but several dozen of them. Those who remained were unfazed by the pistol Jones wore on his hip while he preached—often launching into spastic motions and speaking in tongues. Indeed, several of Jones's remaining supporters followed him to joint protests with the Westboro Baptist Church—a Kansas congregation that became infamous for protesting military funerals, which they believed were God's punishment for America's acceptance of homosexuality.

Yet these stunts were but an overture. The September 11th attacks gave Terry Jones new cause. He read websites and books that warned these horrific attacks signaled an existentialist threat to the West, or a looming clash of civilizations. Muslims may present themselves as peaceful moderates, these sources claimed, but they are secretly a "fifth column" plotting to subvert the U.S. Constitution and establish a supranational Islamic empire under the guise of political correctness. Thoroughly indoctrinated, Jones panicked when President George W. Bush announced the United States was not at war with Islam but rather the apocryphal extremists who hijacked this religion to legitimate their violent political agenda. Jones took to his computer and churned out a polemic titled *Islam Is of the Devil.* He published the book and posted its title on a paper sign in the front yard of his church. In August 2009, Jones instructed two children from his congregation to wear tee shirts emblazoned with the slogan to their local public high school.

When the students were sent home for violating the school's dress code, Jones became even more incensed. He saw his opportunity to retaliate when plans were announced to construct an Islamic Community Center near the site of the World Trade Center attacks. Jones produced a YouTube video to announce the creation of "International Burn a Koran Day"—an event designed to commemorate the ninth anniversary of the September 11th attacks. This video soon reached a group of researchers monitoring anti-Muslim discrimination worldwide. The group alerted the Council on American Islamic Relations, a prominent Muslim advocacy organization that promptly announced plans to hold "Share the Qurʾan" parties to rebuke Jones. But this response only emboldened him; Jones

boasted that more than seven hundred people joined the Facebook group he created to publicize the event.

As the controversy escalated online, CNN elected to interview Jones. Other television stations and newspapers followed suit. By the end of the week, nearly every major American media outlet picked up the story. Jones became the focus of twenty-four-hour criticism on cable news networks, daily editorial pages, and a range of popular websites. A chorus of advocacy organizations denounced Jones, including the National Association of Evangelicals and the Anti-Defamation League. Jones even inspired the ire of President Barack Obama, ten other world leaders, and four supranational organizations. Yet it was the religious leader who proposed the construction of an Islamic center near Ground Zero who ultimately convinced Jones not to burn any Qurʾans that week.

Tragically, most of this criticism did not reach Afghanistan. Instead, many Afghans watched in horror as Iranian satellite news inaccurately reported that hundreds of Qurʾans were burning across the United States. This misinformation quickly spread across Afghanistan and other Muslim-majority countries via text messages, word of mouth, and social media. Bloody riots erupted from Palestine to Indonesia. By the end of the week, at least twenty people lay dead and hundreds more were critically injured. While no Qurʾans were burned in the United States that week, an untold number were accidentally incinerated during riots on the other side of the globe.

• • •

The Qurʾan burning affair was an opportunistic move by a marginal pastor who seized his moment for media celebrity. Yet this radical stunt was inspired by a rapidly expanding network of civil society organizations whose influence runs much deeper. These think tanks, religious groups, and social movement organizations not only captivate the media. They also raise hundreds of millions of dollars, testify before the Senate and House, train federal counterterrorism agents, and coordinate grassroots campaigns to shift American public opinion against Islam. Meanwhile, the much larger group of civil society organizations who believe Muslims are a peaceful

group fighting against apocryphal extremists exerts only modest influence upon the representation of Islam within the American public sphere. Several of the most prominent Muslim American organizations now face pervasive allegations that they tacitly condone—or even endorse—terrorism.

How did a small group of anti-Muslim organizations commandeer the collective identity of Islam across so much of the American public sphere?[1] To answer this question, this book does not explore theological debates about the "true nature" of Islam. The cacophony of competing messages about Islam that have emerged since the September 11th attacks is truly overwhelming. They range from venerable Muslim theologians who insist Islam unequivocally condemns violence against civilians to groups such as Al-Shabaab—a Somali terrorist organization that believes all Muslims must engage in violent struggle against non-Muslims. Parallel debates about gender and Islam continue to unfurl across the globe as well. When France banned religious headdresses within public spaces, for example, many applauded the move as an attempt to reduce gender inequality within Islam. Yet many Muslim feminists countered that hiding their faces enables them to avoid being judged based upon their beauty alone.

Instead of entertaining such theological and normative debates, this book examines how collective actors compete to shape shared understandings of Islam within the American media, the policy process, and everyday life. In so doing, it provides a new theory of how collective actors create cultural change after major historical ruptures such as the September 11th attacks. The concept of culture is notoriously vague within the social sciences. Though culture often refers to a fixed set of beliefs or traditions transmitted across multiple generations of people, cultural sociologists use the term to refer to the more malleable mental scripts people use to understand the world around them on a day-to-day basis.[2] In this tradition, this book analyzes shared understandings of the values, beliefs, and allegiances of Muslims within the American public sphere since the September 11th attacks.[3] These shared understandings are manifest within newspapers and television programs, legislative debates, social media sites, and public opinion at large.

More than one hundred religious groups, social movement organizations, nonprofit entities, and other civil society organizations are currently struggling to shape shared understandings of Islam within the United States. This diverse set of civil society organizations is drawn to the issue because of the considerable stakes involved. Whether Muslims are understood as part of an inclusive "us" or a restrictive "them" not only shapes cardinal debates about American identity. Shared understandings of Islam also drive critical policy decisions about the use of violence and the sacrifice of civil liberties. Ontological and physical security are also tightly linked within urgent public discussions about immigration, foreign policy, and the prevention of future terrorist activity. As the Qur'an burning affair illustrates, shared understandings of Islam are also avid travelers. While positive representations of Islam within the American media reinforce America's reputation as a paragon of religious freedom abroad, the far more numerous negative representations of Muslims within the public sphere validate the narrative of extremists who claim the United States is at war with Islam.

HOW CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS CREATE CULTURAL CHANGE

Large-scale shifts in shared understandings are rare. As sociologist Ann Swidler writes, most historical periods can be described as "settled times," when culture is relatively fixed—reproducing shared understandings according to the status quo.[4] Yet social scientists have long observed that major crises or unprecedented events such as the September 11th attacks disrupt this equilibrium.[5] These "unsettled periods" entail bursts of cultural change that give new meaning to social categories such as "us" and "them." This is because crises—by their very nature—challenge the legitimacy of dominant groups responsible for the reproduction of the status quo and embolden others who wish to redefine it. When an unruly mob stormed the most heavily fortified prison in Paris in 1789, as sociologist William Sewell Jr. describes, this unprecedented act was a catalyst for both the French Revolution and the emergence of the

modern nation-state itself.[6] Though Sewell and others have documented the disruptive power of crises, very little is known about the mechanisms of cultural evolution—or how societies settle into a new status quo after major crises such as the September 11th attacks.

This book provides the first comprehensive theory of how civil society organizations create cultural change after such major crises. While a vast literature explains how civil society organizations recruit new members or mobilize financial resources during such periods, the cultural consequences of collective behavior remain largely unexplored.[7] One exception is the concept of resonance, or the notion that civil society organizations create cultural change by developing discourses that resonate or "fit" with mainstream discourse.[8] This concept was developed via in-depth case studies of civil society organizations that succeeded in creating broadscale cultural change. Yet for every successful civil society organization, there are far more that fail to achieve even a modicum of public recognition.[9] Inattention to these negative cases is not simply a methodological faux pas. Rather, it highlights the circular reasoning of the concept of resonance: *Do civil society organizations succeed in shaping shared understandings because their messages resonate with mainstream discourses? Or do civil society organizations become mainstream precisely because of their success?* Put differently, do civil society organizations shape the trajectory of shared understandings by building upon existing beliefs, or by gaining the power to produce a wholly new conventional wisdom?

To address this puzzle, this book introduces an evolutionary theory of collective behavior and cultural change. One of the chief advantages of this theory is that it recognizes the heterogeneity of organizations that compete to shape culture after major crises. These include social movement organizations, advocacy groups, think tanks, religious organizations, interest groups, voluntary organizations, political action committees, philanthropic foundations, and academic institutes—to name but a few. Failure to examine the entire spectrum of such organizations, it will soon become clear, results in a myopic perspective of collective behavior and cultural change. No single organization can shape the evolution of

a cultural environment—rather the process of cultural change requires complex interaction between the entire population of collective actors competing to shape shared understandings. Therefore, this book analyzes all civil society organizations—or nonstate and nonprofit organizations—competing to shape shared understandings of Islam.[10]

The notion that civil society organizations compete within broader environments is certainly not a new one. For example, classic studies analyze how collective actors compete for limited resources such as financial contributions.[11] While such structural features of organizational environments are well understood, the "cultural environment" they inhabit has not yet been charted. The cultural environment is a new concept employed throughout this book to map the range of cultural messages collective actors produce about a topic such as Islam. For example, one corner of the cultural environment described in this book is occupied by civil society organizations that believe all Muslims are secretly plotting to overthrow the U.S. government. At the other extreme are civil society organizations that believe Islam is inherently *less* violent than the Judeo-Christian tradition. As later chapters describe, the majority of civil society organizations fell somewhere in between after the September 11th attacks—arguing that most Muslims are peaceful but a small minority are violent extremists.

Most important, the concept of a cultural environment enables differentiation of "mainstream" and "fringe" civil society organizations. *While many studies use the term "mainstream" to describe organizations that regularly receive public attention, this book employs the term to refer to the representativeness of a civil society organization's message vis-à-vis the broader cultural environment, or the entire population of civil society organizations competing to shape shared understandings of Islam—both within and outside the public sphere.* Fringe organizations, by contrast, are characterized by peripheral messages about Muslims that are shared by few other organizations within the cultural environment. Distinguishing mainstream and fringe organizations using the entire spectrum of civil society organizations competing to shape shared understandings of Islam is critical because it enables analysis of whether civil society

organizations succeed because their discourses are popular or mainstream, or if they *become* mainstream throughout the struggle to create cultural change after major crises.

In this way, the metaphor of a cultural environment captures the dynamism of cultural change. Because civil society organizations routinely enter or exit cultural environments—or shift their messages over time—an organization that is at the fringe during one period may become part of the mainstream at another, and vice versa. Hence, the process of cultural change is not unlike a powerful stream that runs through the cultural environment. This cultural mainstream gains momentum as smaller tributaries feed it. Yet this same momentum also creates powerful currents, rip tides, and eddies that redirect the mainstream as it cascades down an irreversible path through history.[12]

Though it is defined by the range and distribution of cultural messages, the metaphor of a cultural environment does not assume the primacy of cultural processes over social structure. To the contrary, this evolutionary perspective illuminates the interpenetration of cultural and structural processes. The emergence of a cultural mainstream may result from long-standing social networks between civil society organizations, or vice versa.[13] Mainstream civil society organizations with popular messages often succeed in shaping shared understandings precisely because their cultural messages reflect the interests or concerns of broad constituencies. Or, civil society organizations that share similar cultural messages may develop social networks with each other in order to promote their shared interests. Regardless of the direction of causality, the interpenetration of cultural and structural processes consolidates the power of the mainstream. Mainstream organizations enjoy influence not only because their cultural messages are familiar, but also because they enjoy vast social networks or financial resources necessary to publicize their messages through media outreach, advertising, public forums, large protests, or sophisticated social media campaigns.

The consolidation of social resources by civil society organizations with mainstream discourses may also propel other groups toward the fringe of cultural environments. Fringe organizations

might occupy peripheral positions within cultural environments precisely because of their inability to mobilize social resources—or because of their frustration with the popularity of mainstream cultural messages themselves. One classic study of the civil rights movement even suggests that the very existence of fringe organizations bolsters mainstream organizations' monopoly upon social resources. This is because fringe groups such as the Black Panther Party enable mainstream organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to present themselves as moderate alternatives to the masses.[14]

But if the consolidation of structural resources guaranteed the capacity of mainstream organizations to create cultural change after major crises, fringe organizations would never breach the public sphere. The evolutionary theory presented throughout this book avoids this overly deterministic reading of cultural change by recognizing the critical role of social psychology. Too often, social scientists treat cultural messages as lifeless, disembodied objects that either compete for legitimacy based upon their intrinsic merit, or become popular because they are produced by collective actors with extensive financial or social resources.[15] Yet cultural messages do not speak for themselves.[16] Instead, civil society organizations perform cultural messages before the public in press conferences, television interviews, and newspaper editorial pages. There, these organizations compete to satisfy the public's appetite for drama. While students of collective behavior have recently examined how displays of emotion help civil society organizations recruit new members, it remains to be determined how such social psychological processes shape the broader cultural consequences of collective behavior.[17]

THE ARGUMENT

The principal contribution of this book is a new theory that explains how cultural, social psychological, and structural processes combine to shape the evolution of shared understandings of social problems in the wake of crises such as the September 11th

attacks. Such events provide fringe organizations with the opportunity to exploit the emotional bias of the media. Media amplification of emotional fringe organizations creates the misperception that such groups have substantial support and therefore deserve reprimand. Yet when mainstream organizations angrily denounce the fringe they only further increase the profile of these peripheral actors within the public sphere. This unintended consequence creates tension and splintering within the mainstream—but also gives fringe organizations the visibility necessary to routinize their shared emotions into networks with more powerful organizations that help them raise funds that consolidate their capacity to create cultural change. From this privileged position, these once obscure organizations can attack the legitimacy of the mainstream precisely as it begins to tear itself apart. With time, these countervailing forces reshape the cultural environment—or the total population of groups competing to shape public discourse about social problems—and fringe organizations "drift" into the mainstream.

The evolution of cultural environments is particularly powerful because it is largely invisible. None of the civil society organizations that inhabit the cultural environment can view it in its entirety because of its sheer size, complexity, and ever-shifting boundaries. Instead, they rely upon powerful institutions such as the media to communicate the contours of the cultural environment back to them. The inevitable distortion that occurs throughout this process sets in motion a chain of irreversible events in which mainstream organizations inadvertently transform their environment through their very attempts to prevent it from changing. Meanwhile, such distortion enables fringe organizations to disguise themselves as part of the mainstream until such deception becomes real—or until the irreversible cultural, structural, and social psychological processes just described transform the contours of the cultural environment outside the media as well. These broad shifts continue to shape the evolution of media discourse in turn, but also the ways in which policy makers and the broader public understand social problems—as later chapters of this book describe.

STUDYING CULTURAL CHANGE WITH BIG DATA

Studying how cultural, social psychological, and structural dimensions of collective behavior combine to shape shared understandings of social problems after major crises presents formidable methodological challenges. To begin, the evolutionary theory just described demands data on the full range of cultural messages, social networks, financial resources, and emotional valences of all civil society organizations vying to shape shared understandings of Islam across a broad historical period. What is more, the theory does not suggest cultural, structural, and social psychological factors combine to shape the transition out of major crises in linear fashion. Instead, this study demands a process-oriented design that explains how shifting relationships between civil society organizations and their environment shapes the emergence of broader social forms—in this case, shared understandings of Islam.[18] To this end, this book offers a mixed-method approach grounded within the new wave of "big data" research—or the remarkable increase in text-based data available via the advent of the Internet, the digitization of media and political texts, and the rise of social media.[19] In total, the book explains how 120 civil society organizations competed to shape shared understandings of Islam following the September 11th attacks through analysis of more than three hundred thousand press releases, newspaper articles, television transcripts, nonprofit tax forms, legislative documents, and social media messages.[20]

A second major obstacle to studying how civil society organizations create cultural change after major crises such as the September 11th attacks is to avoid the circular reasoning that has plagued previous studies. Tracing the evolution of the cultural mainstream requires not only analyzing organizations that succeed in shaping shared understandings of Islam, but also placing these collective actors within the much broader population that fails to breach the public sphere—or the entire cultural environment.[21] This book overcomes the circular reasoning of previous studies by using plagiarism detection software to compare all press releases produced

by civil society organizations about Islam after the September 11th attacks to the very large sample of newspaper articles, television transcripts, legislative debates, and social media messages just described. This new technique identifies not only *whether* civil society organizations breach the public sphere, but also *how much* influence they exert upon shared understandings of Islam once there. This is because the software outputs both quantitative counts of the number of words reproduced verbatim or paraphrased by the media from the press releases and hyperlinks that enable careful qualitative inspection of such overlap to ensure that the influence of civil society organizations is direct, and positive.

While the plagiarism detection analysis produces a novel measure of the key explananda of this study—how civil society organizations influence shared understandings of Islam within the American public sphere—additional data are needed to identify how cultural, structural, and social psychological factors combine to produce this outcome. To this end, this study employs a suite of mixed methods, including in-depth interviews with the leaders of civil society organizations; qualitative content analysis of the texts they produce; social network analysis of overlapping board structures between organizations; quantitative analysis of fund-raising patterns; and qualitative case studies that trace the influence of anti-Muslim organizations in the policy process and everyday life. Further details about these data and the methods used to analyze them are available in the Methodological Appendix.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

Though the goal of this book is to explain the evolution of America's understanding of Islam after the September 11th terrorist attacks, it begins with a brief history of the dozens of civil society organizations that worked to shape the representation of Muslims within the American public sphere before this landmark event. These include a diverse array of African American and immigrant Muslim organizations, as well as Jewish, Christian, and nonreligious civil society organizations that became involved in public discussions

about Islam during the Arab-Israeli War, the Iranian hostage crisis, and other high-profile events involving Muslims. This broad historical perspective highlights the emergence of mainstream civil society organizations that produced positive or neutral messages about Muslims in the decade before the September 11th attacks, alongside a small group of fringe organizations with predominantly anti-Muslim messages. Readers who are primarily interested in the theoretical and methodological innovation of this book may wish to skim this chapter even though it provides important context for the chronological narrative about the evolution of shared understandings after the September 11th attacks that unfolds in subsequent chapters.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 examine how civil society organizations shaped shared understandings of Islam within the U.S. media in the wake of the September 11th attacks. These chapters identify broad trends in media influence using the aforementioned plagiarism detection technique and illustrate them via qualitative interviews with the leaders of civil society organizations and in-depth content analysis of media documents. Chapter 3 charts the contours of the cultural environment inhabited by civil society organizations in the immediate aftermath of the September 11th attacks. While the vast majority of these organizations continued to produce positive or neutral messages about Islam, this chapter shows that journalists were heavily influenced by the emotional appeals of a small group of anti-Muslim organizations—despite their meager social and financial resources.

Chapter 4 explains why the impassioned warnings of anti-Muslim fringe organizations overshadowed the dispassionate condemnations of terrorism produced by mainstream organizations with superior financial and social resources after the September 11th attacks. Moreover, it explains how the rise of anti-Muslim fringe organizations within the mass media provoked angry responses from mainstream organizations that only called further attention to these once-obscure actors within the American public sphere. Finally, this chapter explains how consternation about whether and how to respond to the continued rise of the fringe created tension and splintering within the mainstream and thus

further opportunity for fringe organizations to advance their peripheral cultural messages within the media.

Chapter 5 explains how anti-Muslim organizations leveraged their newfound standing within the public sphere to forge social networks with powerful civil society organizations and amass vast financial resources between 2004 and 2006. In so doing, anti-Muslim organizations crept from the fringe to the mainstream of the cultural environment as their once peripheral messages spread across more moderate organizations and inspired others to join the struggle to shape shared understandings about Islam. This transformation resulted from the routinization of their emotional energy into a field of terrorism experts, a sophisticated media strategy that resulted in several best-selling books and an influential documentary film, and partnerships with groups that splintered from the mainstream during earlier periods.

Chapters 6 and 7 discuss the consequences of the rise of anti-Muslim organizations for public policy and public opinion. In so doing, these two chapters also discuss two alternative explanations of the rise of anti-Muslim organizations within the public sphere: that their ascendance was facilitated by political connections and that their message simply reflected a groundswell of public anger about Islam. Chapter 6 explains how anti-Muslim organizations leveraged their newfound media influence to cast mainstream Muslim organizations as terrorist sympathizers before U.S. policy makers. Though mainstream Muslim organizations once enjoyed private audiences with the Bush administration, this chapter explains how anti-Muslim organizations succeeded in excluding them from much of the construction of U.S. counterterrorism policy. It also explains how anti-Muslim organizations contributed to the abrupt increase in anti-Muslim rhetoric within the Republican Party during the 2008 presidential election, and provoked legislators in thirty-two states to introduce bills that would prevent the use of Islamic law within U.S. courts several years later. Finally, chapter 6 describes the influence of anti-Muslim organizations upon the training of federal and local counterterrorism terrorism agents and police forces.

Chapter 7 asks whether the influence of anti-Muslim organizations within the media and policy process extends toward the broader public and everyday life. Though public opinion of Muslims became *more* favorable after the September 11th attacks, subsequent years witnessed a marked increase in anti-Muslim attitudes among the American public that mirrored the rise of anti-Muslim organizations within the public sphere. Data from popular social media sites suggest the surge in anti-Muslim civil society organizations was at least partly responsible for the transformation of the American public's understanding of Islam. Finally, this chapter details the growth of mosque controversies within the U.S. inspired by fringe activists—including the high-profile controversy about the construction of an Islamic center near the site of the September 11th attacks and the Qur'an burning controversy that followed.

The book's conclusion, chapter 8, summarizes the evolutionary theory of how civil society organizations shape the evolution of cultural environments in the wake of major crises such as the September 11th attacks and discusses the international implications of the rise of anti-Muslim messages within the American public sphere. The next chapter begins, however, with a description of the place of Muslims in American society more than one decade before—on September 10, 2001.