Profile: Jen'nan Read
A Public Scholar Emerges

During the 2008 presidential campaign when Barack Obama was falsely accused of being a foreign-born Muslim, news organizations ranging from the Kuwait News Agency to *The New York Times* to BeliefNet.com called on a young sociology professor to help explain the implications for his candidacy and for America. "I was taken by surprise," says Dr. Jen'nan Ghazal Read of the intensity of the controversy she was drawn into as a cultural commentator virtually overnight.

The smear campaign included the distribution in electoral swing states of an inflammatory DVD called *Obsession: Radical Islam's War on the West.* The video was filled with scenes of Muslims flying planes into buildings, bombing people, burning American flags and screaming with homicidal rage, according to Dr. Read. It landed on citizens' doorsteps along with their newspaper, free of charge.

Watching this campaign within a campaign unfold, "I saw the need for real information in the public arena," says Dr. Read. "I'd been doing research on Muslim Americans for a long time and I realized I should share what I knew more widely. I needed to be more of a public scholar. It was now or never."

An associate professor of sociology and global health at Duke University, Dr. Read was named a Carnegie Scholar in 2006 to study "Multiple Identities and Muslim-American Political Incorporation." She was among 20 scholars named that year, all of whom received grants earmarked for Muslim-centered studies during the program's second year of focusing on Islam.

"I've always had a deep interest in understanding why people do what they do,"

Dr. Read says. Her passion for studying people, as well as the research funding and media training she received from Carnegie Corporation, have positioned her to replace a muddle of myths and misunderstandings about Muslim Americans with factual clarity and a calming voice.

At a time when national polls continue to show that Americans have an unfavorable view of Islam, Dr. Read has quickly become a leading authority on Muslim Americans and Arab Americans. At 36, she is already well established as a public scholar and an academic star.

Jen'nan Read was born in the U.S. to an American mother and a Libyan father who had met in college. Her first name is "somewhat Arabic," according to Dr. Read: "Jenna in Arabic loosely translates into 'garden in heaven.'" Although not a Muslim American herself, she is half-Arab and reads, speaks and writes in Arabic. Her family background, life experiences and scholarly research all contribute to her nuanced understanding of Muslim Americans and Arab Americans.

As a child, she spent time both in the Middle East, where her father was a businessman, and with her mother's family in Texas. "I grew up on an airplane," Dr. Read says, only half-jokingly.

At 14, she was living with her parents and younger brother on an oil compound in Libya when the Reagan administration bombed Tripoli in retaliation for suspected terrorist activities. "It was terrifying," she recalls. "I saw explosions. I couldn't go to school. There were nightly blackouts. We tried to figure out what was going on by listening to the Voice of America on shortwave radio."

After fleeing Libya, the hub of her world became Texas, where she went to undergraduate school at Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls. As a freshman scrambling to pay her own way through college, she worked three jobs while remaining ardent about her studies, especially sociology classes taught by her mentor, Dr. Emily LaBeff.

"Jen'nan took off like a rocket," recalls Dr. LaBeff, who currently chairs Midwestern State University's sociology department. "I had her for a few courses, including Introduction to Sociology and Sociological Theory. She fell in love with sociology. She was already talking about researching Arab Americans. By sophomore year, she knew she was getting her Ph.D. The president of the college—*everyone*—knew this girl was special. We didn't do much more than just stand by and applaud."

After graduating summa cum laude as Midwestern State University's class president in 1995, she chose the University of Texas at Austin for her doctoral studies. There,

fueled by her interest in Arabic, she pursued her interest in researching Muslim Americans and Arab Americans. Women's labor trends and lifestyle choices—and how culture influences both—were among her areas of inquiry. "I went in open-minded," Dr. Read says of her research approach. "I was eager to discover the real stories behind the stereotypes. Graduate school gave me the tools and the confidence."

For her master's thesis, Dr. Read interviewed 24 devout Muslim women in Austin, half of whom wore veils and half of whom did not, for her case study of identity negotiation entitled "To Veil Or Not to Veil?" published in the scholarly journal *Gender & Society* in 2000. The women talked candidly about their decision, citing a wide range of influences. The veiled women spoke of faithfulness to theological edicts, a desire to avoid unwanted male attention, and a sisterhood of the veil (their friends were veiled so they were too). Some of the unveiled women questioned whether veiling was a religious requirement and even voiced feminist wrath about rules foisted on them by men. The women felt free to talk to her, Dr. Read says, "because their community was open to a scholar asking questions. I had the right credentials."

Her illuminating studies of veiling and other Muslim American topics became more relevant than ever in 2001, the year she received her doctorate. As Dr. Read herself has written, national awareness and interest in Muslim Americans skyrocketed after the terrorist attacks on September 11.

Yet despite all the media attention surrounding Muslim Americans, who are thought to number somewhere between four to six million, their fellow citizens continue to conflate Arab ethnicity with Muslim religion—and Muslim religion with Islamic fundamentalism. This is worrisome for all Muslim Americans and can be even more so for veiled women, who are highly visible and therefore vulnerable to racial profiling and discrimination.

Dr. Read's studies continued at Rice University, where she was a postdoctoral fellow in sociology and health from 2001 to 2003. Dr. Read says she has always been interested in how inequality affects people. Her studies at Rice helped her better understand how inequality works because "health is arguably the ultimate indicator of inequality," she observes. Investigating the health issues of Arab women living in the United States and Middle Eastern countries is among her continuing research interests.

In her current faculty position at Duke University, Dr. Read is valued for her interdisciplinary focus in both sociology and global health. "Her scholarship cuts across boundaries," says Michael Schoenfeld, Duke University's vice president for public affairs

and government relations. "Jen'nan is an intellectual who helps connect disciplines that might not have been connected before."

What made her want to study politics as a Carnegie Scholar? "It was an outgrowth of my interest in wanting to know where Muslim Americans fit into the larger American landscape," Dr. Read replies.

That breadth of vision did not escape the notice of Carnegie Corporation's external and internal reviewers as they read "Multiple Identities and Muslim American Political Incorporation," Dr. Read's proposal for becoming a Carnegie Scholar in 2006. "The reviewers focused on both the high quality of the proposal and the remarkable track record of this young scholar," says Patricia Rosenfield, director of the Corporation's Scholars Program.

"A terrific project, both sensible and sophisticated, and a very impressive scholar," said one reviewer. "Read's approach is intelligent, penetrating and competent," said another. Looking at Muslim-Americans' political participation through the lens of their personal religiosity, as Dr. Read had proposed, would surely shed new light on an important subject, a third reviewer declared.

Dr. Read's recent works, written with Corporation support, have appeared in a range of publications, from scholarly journals to newspaper opinion pages to the blogosphere. Perhaps her most significant contribution has been the seminal article "Muslims in America," which appeared in the American Sociological Association's journal, *Contexts*. Dr. Read was the first to systematically use information from two large, nationally representative data sets on Muslim Americans to examine racial and ethnic differences in their political participation.

Her *Contexts* article accomplishes the double purpose of delineating and deciphering the factors affecting the political assimilation of Muslim Americans today. "Being a Muslim is less important for politics than how Muslim you are, how much money you make, whether you're an African-American Muslim or an Arab-American Muslim, and whether you're a man or a woman," Dr. Read writes. It's one of many examples of how she conveys crucial information in a crisp and engaging way.

Dr. Read has won many awards for her work over the years, from the Southwestern Social Science Association's Best Graduate Student Paper Award to grants from foundations including Russell Sage, Annie E. Casey, and Borchard. "Jen'nan is a star," says Duke's Schoenfeld. "She's persuasive and articulate without pushing a particular point of view—an ideal citizen and scholar."

Of her leap from academic writer to international commentator, Dr. Read says,

"It's been exciting to get out of my safety zone." She credits Carnegie Corporation with helping to hone her communications skills during a Corporation-sponsored media training workshop she attended in Washington, D.C. "The workshop brought different Carnegie Scholars together with the media," she recalls. "I used to be hesitant about disseminating my views anywhere but in academic journals. But the media doesn't read those journals."

To reach a wider audience, Dr. Read says she is willing to make the sacrifices involved in being a public scholar. "I learned about give and take—that a two-hour interview may only result in a single quote," she explains. "The phone calls with reporters can be exhausting and distracting. But they are worth it."

With encouragement from both Duke University and Carnegie Corporation, her public scholarship continues to take many forms, from writing articles to being interviewed on the BBC. "She gives powerful speeches and has a talent for writing op-ed pieces," says Rosenfield. Duke University's news office has assisted Dr. Read with media outreach efforts with the aid of a Corporation grant.

Also exciting, says Dr. Read, is the "opportunity to educate on a personal basis—my work colleagues, my neighbors. I have the basic facts. I can provide a richer understanding in lay terms."

Her studies underline the fact that sweeping generalizations about Muslim Americans simply don't fit very well. The U.S. Muslim population is the most ethnically diverse in the world, Dr. Read notes. Contrary to popular belief, most are not Arab: About one-third are South Asian, one-third are Arab, one-fifth are U.S.-born black Muslims (mainly converts) and a small but growing number are U.S.-born Anglo and Hispanic converts. Roughly two-thirds are immigrants to the United States, but an increasing segment comprises second- and third-generation U.S.-born Americans. The vast majority of Muslim immigrants have lived here for 10 years or more.

Some live in poverty and have poor English language skills, but most do not. U.S. Muslims tend to be highly educated, politically conscious, and fluent in English. On average, they share similar socioeconomic characteristics with the general U.S. population: one-fourth have a bachelor's degree or higher; one-fourth live in households with incomes of $75,000 a year or more, and the majority are employed.

U. S. Muslims resemble their fellow Americans in another way: They are not uniformly religious. Like American Christians and Jews, Muslims living in the United States range from ultra-conservative to ultra-liberal and from devout to non-practicing. They are, in fact, far from being members of a monolithic faith.

Perhaps most important, Dr. Read's studies reveal that Muslim Americans dream the same dreams for their children as do other Americans. They want to be part of the democratic process of a great nation and, increasingly, they are contributing to that process as volunteers, voters and lawmakers. "It's time," says Dr. Read, "for politicians and the rest of the American public to see Muslim Americans as they are."