

dominates the glass table in front of him, next to a couple of stacked pizza boxes. He is spending the night at his friend Ajaz Abbas' house, watching TV, chewing on dates, and always bringing the conversation back to women. Being Muslim doesn't change the fact they are young men in a sexed-up culture. Yes, Islam imposes restrictions on interactions with women, but that doesn't make the subject less attractive. Women are the forbidden fruit — you can't touch or taste, but you can't stop talking about it.

Young Muslims can't spend time alone together, so many talk over the phone — men are sometimes listed under female names in women's cell phones — or message each other online.

"I never call you?? What bout you punk?" reads a girl's message on Caleb's page at TheFacebook.com, a popular Web site among college students. "You have absolutely no excuse now. And don't give me that BS about you not 'feeling comfortable'. :-P What have you been up to foo?"

Caleb and Ajaz talk a lot about marriage. The restrictions on dating make it hard for Muslim men not to look at women as potential partners. After graduating from college, Caleb wants to marry a Muslim woman or one interested in converting. They would pray together, make the pilgrimage to Islam's holy city of Mecca and fast during Ramadan as husband and wife.

Caleb is aware he joined a faith under intense scrutiny and is upset at the media for "demonizing Islam." Sept. 11, he says, was "so un-Islamic it's not even funny." There are crazy Muslims out there, he says, but that doesn't mean something is wrong with Islam.

"He didn't exactly pick the best of times to convert, but it's part of his personality,"



Caleb and Ajaz Abbas play video games in Ajaz's apartment.

his father says. "He likes to stir the soup to see what happens." It's Caleb's nature to be attracted to controversy when it's paired with injustice and prejudice, Robert adds.

Caleb follows the Quran without judging others — Muslim or non-Muslim, everyone is responsible for his or her own actions, he says before telling one of his favorite stories: One time an African ruler asked Ali, Prophet Muhammad's cousin, how to govern his people. Ali wrote back, saying there are two kinds of people in the world: brothers in religion and equals in creation. In the end, everyone has to answer to God.

"I believe there are Christians who will receive the best and Muslims who will receive the worst," he says.

By focusing on his own path, Caleb says he put distance between him and his parents — largely to prevent suffering if he won't see them in the afterlife. "It's like a long-distance relationship — you don't want to get too attached and then risk

losing someone." Susanne is not worried — she believes parents should trust their children to figure out life for themselves. And the relationship with her son is as good as it's always been. "We still go to movies and hold hands," she says.

While Susanne doesn't engage Caleb in discussions about religion, his father does. Caleb's truth may not be his father's truth, but Robert is happy to see his son struggle and develop his own intellectual ideas.

To be a good Muslim, Caleb gave up Skittles, his favorite candy, and traded the burgers at Steak 'n' Shake and Hardee's for grilled cheese and fries — all because they had pork ingredients. Trying to figure out what is halal (allowed) in the American culture and what is haram (forbidden) requires continuous inquiry.

"Islam is a way of life," Caleb says. "It's not like going to church on Sunday. It's every second of every minute of every hour of every day in your life."



Caleb and Ajaz pray in Caleb's bedroom early in the morning on April 10. The friends stayed up all night playing video games and fell asleep after morning prayer.