

Islamic Religion and American Culture

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East Meets West: Understanding the Muslim Presence in Europe and North America

Abstract

Taking a cue from the complex interaction between Christianity and the development of American culture in its early centuries and from the interaction between Judaism and American culture in the twentieth century, we explore the current experience of Muslims in America and search for clues as to the future interaction between Islam and American culture. I will concentrate on three areas: the influence of Islam on the culture of African-Americans, especially as it affected political and social developments; the interaction between American culture and Islamic traditions on the development of American Muslim organizations; and the social, cultural and educational trends among Muslim youth in America.

This paper explores the degree to which selective identification with American culture of movements like the Nation of Islam rejected identification with the broader culture, reflected a confrontation between Islamic values and American culture perceived from the viewpoint of an alienated minority group robbed of its identity.

American Muslim organizations have evolved remarkably over the past few decades. Until the 1980's most organizations were mosques, and there were few of those. There are now a number of formal Muslim organizations in various areas of endeavor. The sophistication of their organization and the degree of their influence are growing.

The most important determinant of the future of Islam in America is the Muslim youth. We ask to what degree the assimilationist tendencies of previous generations are being replaced by synthesis and/or confrontation and whether young Muslims are becoming more aggressive in questioning the degree to which particular traditions are truly Islamic mandates.

Introduction

Lay persons too often look at culture as a static thing. Such a perception leads to a “clash of cultures” mentality in which either “our” culture or “their” culture must triumph over the other. The understanding that cultures are living things that interact with and borrow, even sometimes embrace, that with which they interact allows us to better understand what is happening to the Muslim cultures in American society, and to American society as it interfaces with these cultures. I use the plural for cultures deliberately, since their nothing monolithic about the various Muslim groups: Euro- and Afro-American converts (or “reverts” as they prefer to be called), immigrants from various parts of the world, and the children of both groups.

I propose that any study of Islam in the West must neither ignore the interplay between religion and culture nor simplistically assume that either overwhelms the other. Taking a cue from the complex interaction between Christianity and the development of American culture in its early centuries and from the interaction between Judaism and American culture in the twentieth century, we explore the current experience of Muslims in America and search for clues as to the future interaction between Islam and the American culture. I concentrate on three areas: the influence of Islam on the culture of African-Americans, especially as it affected political and social developments; the interaction between American culture and Islamic traditions on the development of American Muslim organizations; and the social, cultural and educational trends among Muslim youth in America.

The Christian influence on early America was strong and is reflected in many aspects of American culture. Yet it was not unilateral, and the influence of the particular experience and environment of the Euro-Americans, including their contact with the indigenous peoples, profoundly affected cultural development, including the development of political institutions.

Consider, for example, the profoundly decentralized nature of American democracy. Democracy in the European states at the time of America’s founding, to the degree that it existed at all, was highly centralized. In Britain, the Glorious Revolution was democratic in that it was a transfer of national authority from the monarch to the parliament. The American democracy was decentralized not only to the degree that the states held powers, for example police powers denied to the central government, but the towns were directly governed by the people themselves, often in the form of town meetings, a form of direct democracy. Although the degree to which this self-governing authority existed varied (in Rhode Island the towns were virtually self-governing republics, while in Massachusetts they were under strong state supervision). Further, the voting franchise was limited to property-owning males and to some degree or another the selectmen had more power than the voting citizen. In many case it was the churches that actually held authority, but these churches were more democratically governed than the church institutions in Europe.

The degree to which this has been due to the model the colonists found in the tribal governance of the Iroquois Indians was recognized by President Bush (senior) when, in his declaration of November as national American Indian Heritage Month, he announced that “activities planned will focus on Native American contributions to this nation for the past five centuries such as the foundation of the U.S. Constitution that was based upon the government of the Iroquois Confederacy of Nations.”¹

“Out of fears that the Anglican Church might establish an American bishop, Presbyterian and Congregationalist ministers representing most of the colonies banded together with annual meetings and committees of correspondence.”²

Although the majority of the Europeans who first came to the colonies were Christians, they were of differing denominations, and more often than not denominations not known for their tolerance in their home countries. Forced into close proximity, circumstances forced them into a tolerance that many may not have otherwise welcomed. This is the process by which culture operates. In the same manner, the American Muslims, from their different schools, nations, races, and linguistic origins are now in a cultural milieu in which they must come to agreements where they can and be satisfied with tolerance where they cannot. As the more intolerant branches of the original *khwârij* discovered, the only alternative to tolerance is extinction and irrelevancy.

The Jewish experience also has some instructive developments. The early Jewish immigrants were concerned that their children would intermarry with the non-Jewish population and that they might lose both their religiosity and the culture of their ancestors. To a substantial degree both of these things have happened to the Jewish community in America. On the other hand, many elements of Jewish culture have become part of the American culture, not only in food, like the ubiquitous bagel, but in things like the influence of Jewish humorists on the entertainment industry. Even the replacement of Jewish devotion to the Torah with political Zionism may be a cautionary sign to Muslims of the risks that *taqwa* could be replaced by a zealotry for a “political Islam” that owes more to political ideology than Qur’anic values.

The Influence of Islam on the Culture of African-Americans

The African-American experience puts into sharp relief the issues of identity and assimilation and how they must be distinguished from the concept of values. Even as movements like the Nation of Islam rejected identification with the broader culture, including some its then-dominant values (such as white supremacy), it embraced other values such as the work ethic and entrepreneurship. We suggest that this selective

¹ Quoted by Bruce E. Johansen and Donald A. Grinde, Jr. in “Reaching the Grassroots: The World-Wide Diffusion of Iroquois Democratic Traditions, Pt. 3,” *Indian Time*, Vol. 20#15 (April 18, 2002). Pp. 10-11. <http://members.aol.com/miketben1/influence3.htm> (accessed 9/14/03).

² Michael Schudson, *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, ch. 1, (New York: Martin Kessler, 1998). <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0684827298/002-7212188-8585649?v=glance&vi=excerpt> (accessed 9/14/03).

acceptance of American values was a consequence of a confrontation between Islamic values and American culture perceived from the viewpoint of an alienated minority group robbed of its identity.

The main attraction of the Nation of Islam (NOI), as in the case of the Moorish Science Church before it, was that it offered to restore an identity to those who had been deprived of one. The lady who became Clara Muhammad originally introduced Paul Robert Poole, who would become Elijah Muhammad, to Wallace Fard may have been the hope that Islam would cure him of his drinking problem, but it what attracted Poole to Fard was that he had never met a black man like Fard before. Of course, Fard was Indian rather than African, but that made his embrace of his “blackness” all the more remarkable and compelling. The recruiting technique of Islam at the time of its maximum growth was the challenge to its targets that they did not know who they were. To this day, one of the most frequent questions put to me by African-American reverts is if I can help them to adopt a “Muslim name.” Even though less than half of the African-American reverts legally change their name, almost all adopt a “spiritual” name.

When we look at the teachings and practices of the early Nation of Islam, we see the overwhelming influence of cultural factors. The actual Islamic practices that are in forefront are the ones that answer the most severe problems confronted by the descendents of slaves in America, for example the teachings on sobriety and nutrition. We can see this even in the departures from actual Islamic teachings. Thus, the NOI members were not satisfied with abandoning pork and alcohol, but often became vegetarians.

The influence of culture is most clearly seen in the most radical departures from Islamic teachings. The NOI taught that God was incarnated in the form of W. D. Fard and that white men are devils. Bilal Agieb³ has explained this contradiction to Islamic teachings was a cultural necessity because the black man in America had been raised to worship a white man as God. To attempt to teach him, in that era, that God is a being both transcendent and immanent, without color, and that all human beings are equally God’s creation and, except in their piety, as equal as the teeth of a comb would have elicited only a blank stare. The NOI teachings took a familiar model of the divine and turned it on its head. Most who joined the NOI have since become orthodox Muslims, but only after the old paradigm had been demolished by a process, the first step of which was an inversion. Although the view that blacks are subhuman is no longer as openly or as deeply held as it was in Elijah Poole’s time, the fact that Louis Farrakhan is more successful at obtaining new converts from the black underclass than Wallace Mohammed suggests that old racist cultural barriers linger on.

In fact, most of the new converts eventually move into orthodox Islam, as Agieb’s model suggests. Thus the American Muslim Society is much larger than Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam. Yet, the pattern suggests that identity precedes morality. One must be acknowledged to be a human being before one can be held to the rules that govern human

³ Bilal Agieb, private communication, c. 1992.

behavior. One must feel that he is a human being before he be bound to the rules that govern human behavior. That was the profound insight in Malcolm X's declaration: "We declare our right on this earth ... to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary."⁴

Unfortunately, the primacy of identity over morality can manifest itself in a negative manner, in which identity and morality become confused. This can be seen both in superficial confusion, such as when the convert believes it is necessary to adopt Arab or African clothing in order to be an authentic Muslim, or in profound confusion, as when the convert adopts the view that white people are devils.

The Development of American Muslim Organizations

American Muslim organizations have evolved remarkably over the past decades. Until the 1980's most organizations were mosques, and there were few of those. There are now a number formal Muslim organizations in various areas of endeavor. The sophistication of their organization and the degree of their influence are growing. Increasingly, these organizations fit into the weave of American culture rather than as a bulwark against it. In the process they affect the ambient culture around them.

The Muslim Students Association (MSA) is often the root of Islamic organization among the immigrant population. MSA alumni are frequently found in leadership positions of the current wave of immigrant-dominated organizations.⁵ Until the formation of the MSA in the 1960s, the only Muslim organization with an immigrant constituency was the Federation of Islamic Associations (FIA), which, notwithstanding its title was actually an Arab-American organization centered on traditional culture rather than religion.⁶

The large number of foreign-born students on American campuses resulted in a spontaneous outburst of local organizations through which Muslims at those particular campuses could congregate. In 1963 twenty persons assembled for the first convention of the "MSA of the US and Canada."⁷ By focusing on religious, as opposed to broader cultural, activity, the MSA attracted affiliates at a rapid rate.⁸ Shortly after the founding of MSA, the U.S. immigration laws were opened up, and many of the graduates of MSA decided to stay in the United States. Further, the new immigration laws supplemented their numbers with many non-student immigrants from the Muslim world. Abruptly,

⁴ See Malcolm X, "By Any Means Necessary" (New York: Pathfinder, 1990).

⁵ See Ilyas Ba-Yunus, "An American Journey Graduating from MSA to ISNA," *Islaic Horizons* (Sept.-Oct. 2003), 40-49.

⁶ Ba-Yunus, 42.

⁷ Ba-Yunus, 44.

⁸ Ba-Yuunus, 45.

challenges related to an emerging new community, one that would develop its own culture, began to be felt. A core group of MSA activists responded to the changing environment and, in 1982, the 20th annual MSA convention doubled as the first annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA).⁹

The development of a culturally American Islamic community is challenged by the cultural origins of the immigrant community. Not only do most mosques tend to be dominated by one or another ethnic group, but an informal network of MSA members “mainly from South Asian” formed a separate organization from ISNA, the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA).¹⁰

The Euro-Americans, true to their Euro-American culture, exhibit an individualistic approach to the generation of organizations. I mean that their own journey to Islam is an individual one, and they form their organizations for original voluntary associations with others. The association between Michael Wolfe and Alex Kronemer that led to Unity Production and the production of the television documentary “Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet” began when they sat in adjacent seats on a return flight from a conference in Saudi Arabia. Kronemer was praising some books he had read about the pilgrimage and learned that Wolfe was the author of those books.¹¹ This association exemplifies a narrow focus on a particular purpose or well-defined range of related purposes that characterizes American civil society institutions.

Recently a number of Muslim organizations have been formed that focus on particular issues. These include the American Muslim Council, the Council on American Islamic Relations, the Islamic-American Zakat Foundation, the Minaret of Freedom Institute, and many others. In structure and function these resemble other American civil society institutions. These organizations tend to show a relatively broad range of cultural backgrounds in their key personnel. Thus, the American Muslim Council (which recently merged with the American Muslim Association) included among its executive directors both Arab immigrants and an Afro-American. The Board of Directors of the Islamic-American Zakat Foundation includes three Arab immigrant men, an Afro-American man and two Afro-American women. The officers and Board of the Minaret of Freedom Institute consists of a Palestinian-American man, a young Iraqi-American man, a young Pakistani-American man, male immigrants from Libya and Pakistan, and female immigrants from Lebanon and Bangladesh. In other words, the ethnic and gender mix increasingly resembles a Muslim subset of the American “tossed salad.”

The most exciting development, however, may be the federated organizations being formed by the intersection of all these groups. The Coordinating Council of Muslim Organizations in the Greater Washington Metropolitan Area (CCMO) was originally

⁹ Ba-Yunus, 48.

¹⁰ Ba-Yunus, 48.

¹¹ Unity Productions staffer, “Legacy of a Prophet: A movie aired in the US, at 8:00 on PBS tonight,” *Arab News* (Dec., 2002) <http://www.aljazeeraah.info> (accessed 9/17/03).

formed in 1985 in an attempt to unite Muslims over the dates of the Eid prayers. Although the Council frequently managed to come to a consensus at its annual meetings, the constituent organizations were almost never uniform in following the recommended date. On at least one occasion some member organizations split with some members using their mosque for the date recommended by the CCMO and others on an adjacent day according to the home country of the majority of their members. Yet the ability of the CCMO to organize a huge united prayer services at a single place on the same day was an impressive achievement.

In 2001 the organization held a meeting in which sweeping proposals were made to expand the scope of its activities to include social services, media relations, etc. Although some modest efforts ensued in fulfilling these intentions, the general view among area Muslims is that the organization fell short of its ambitions. On Sept. 7, 2003, the organization held a special meeting. This meeting was attended by dozens of delegates from an impressive variety of backgrounds. Racially, nationally, and ethnically the variety was representative of every major group in the Washington, DC area. There were, however, only two female delegates. This is no doubt a reflection of the fact that each organization was allowed only one delegate and one alternate and, unsurprising in any population, let alone a Muslim one, there was tendency for organizations to prefer sending a male representative.

Although it is premature to judge whether the CCMO will follow through on this burst of enthusiasm, the climate in the Muslim community after September 11, 2001 gives reason for encouragement. Notwithstanding the severe gender bias, the assembly of CCMO is more recognizably democratic than in the older Muslim organizations not only in the variety of the constituency, but also in the constitutional structure of the organization, which bears a closer resemblance to American federated civic organizations. This is, in part, no doubt due to the greater influence of participants steeped in the American culture.

CCMO and other organizations have a successful older sister to look up to in the United American Muslims Association in Chicago. Founded in 1988, this organization has been extremely successful in coordinating the large (estimated at 450,000 persons) and diverse Muslim community in the greater Chicago area.

A harbinger of a new trend in Muslim organizations is the appearance of organizations designed and run by young Muslims born or raised in this country. One example is the Council of American Muslim Professionals (CAMP). Founded in 1994, it bills itself as “the premiere networking organization for Muslims from many diverse backgrounds across North America. CAMP strives to provide exciting social, networking, as well as community events to foster personal and professional growth for its members.”¹² Meant primarily to provide a means by which young Muslims professionals may network with one another in the fashion of the Kiwanis clubs, the organization has occasionally included programs of religious significance on its agenda.

¹² CAMP home page (9/9/03) <http://www.campnet.net/> (accessed 9/17/03).

Trends Among Muslim Youth in America.

There can be no more important determining factor for the future of Islam in America than the direction taken by Muslim youth. Until recently most young Muslims assimilated to the degree that included secularization. Most abandoned their Muslim identity completely and most of the others lost their religious faith even if they still identified themselves as cultural (or in John Esposito's paradoxical, but revealing, term "ethnic") Muslims. Even the most obvious religious injunctions, such as the prohibition of intoxicants was ignored by the majority of Muslim youth. This is no longer the case. Yet at the same time that young Muslims are becoming more reluctant to abandon their Islamic heritage they are becoming more aggressive in questioning the degree to which particular traditions are truly Islamic mandates. Increasingly women are teaching in the Islamic schools, serving on the governing boards of Muslim organizations, deciding for themselves whether or not the headscarf is truly a religious mandate.

In my appearance before a meeting of CAMP, I felt I could actually see young people at fork in the road between assimilation into the secular model of "ethnic Islam" and integration in a manner that combines American culture with Islamic religion.

The seriousness with which young American Muslims approach the question of their Islamicity is promising, but there is no certainty as to what the final outcome will be. The social, cultural and educational trends among Muslim youth in America is a mixed signal. Having been raised in this country since I was five days old, I believe that I have a natural affinity with their point of view. I will briefly enumerate some of the conflicts they confront, and hope to address them at greater length in another venue.

Despite the prominence of music in their home cultures, many of the immigrants and some converts have subscribed to a claim that music, or at least Western music, is *harâm*. The role of music in the culture of American youth, however, is enormous. Young Muslims, mainly Afro-Americans, played a significant role in the development of rap or hip-hop music. This might seem ironic to those who conceive of "gangsta-rap" as an extreme example of the impiety of Western music, but it strikes me as a logical attempt to reconcile Muslim culture with Western culture. The one form of music that no Muslim dare to oppose is the melodic recitation of the Qur'an. Its rhymed prose has influenced the rhythmic mode of Muslim public speaking. It is a short jump from that style of speech to the rhythms of rap. The background music has been deconstructed so that it is no longer clearly the suspect "stringed" music of the West but rhythmic sounds one jump from the permitted percussion that dominates the music of some Muslim cultures.

The rhythmic rhymed prose patterns from Islamic culture are found in the sermons of Afro-American Christian preachers (think Jesse Jackson) as well as in the Nation of Islam. Unsurprisingly, many successful Muslim rap artists were members of the Nation of Islam (e.g., Public Enemy) or influenced by the NOI (e.g., Native Deen). Now mainstream Muslims rappers like Des Moines' Sons of Hagar are gaining attention.¹³

¹³ D. Parvaz, "Muslim Rap: Local Group Rhymes About Islam, Mideast Politics," *Seattle Post-Intellencer* (Feb. 17, 2003) http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/pop/108750_muslimrap.shtml (accessed 9/22/03).

Muslim actor/rapper Mos Def does not portray women as objects in his songs and forbids the consumption of alcohol at his concerts.¹⁴

Muslim youth are less prone to the habits of voluntary ethnic segregation of their parents. They easily make friends with Muslims of other races and ethnic origins. By the same token, they also easily make friends with Jews, Christian, and secular or even anti-religious people that they meet in school, in the neighborhood, or at work. If their parents attempt to prohibit such friendships by insisting that they are *harâm*, they are more likely to drive a wedge between their children and Islam than between them and their friends.

Children of immigrants are gradually adopting a broader interest in professional pursuits than their parents might wish. Many parents retain the views inculcated with the standards of their homelands as to what constitutes a worthwhile profession push their children into engineering or medicine, and perhaps seek to encourage their daughters to seek marriage and children over some other profession. More young Muslims are now going into law and journalism despite these pressures, but we still have a long way before they enter sciences like physics or astronomy, let alone the powerful but, to Muslims, disreputable, entertainment industry.

The most serious obstacle to the integration of Islamic religion and American culture is, in my opinion, the issue of dating. Personal relationships are very important to all human beings. Sexual relationships are extremely important to young adults, and they are natural. Islam has never disapproved of sexual activity, it has only confined it to within marriage. American culture has never been comfortable with the notion of sex. Ronald Reagan probably spoke for many American when he wrote: "Even in marriage I had a little guilty feeling about sex, as if the whole thing was tinged with evil."¹⁵

One of the most serious flaws in the American culture is the notion of "adolescence." It is the practice of identifying as children people considered in all previous cultures as young adults. Because of the role extended schooling plays in training young people for their place in the industrial system, young people of marrying age in America are discouraged from marriage. Unsurprisingly, this denial of a natural institution has resulted not in chastity until a delayed marriage, but in fornication and unwed mothers, and may perhaps also be a contributing factor to the proliferation of deviant sexuality. Most Muslims have abandoned the marriage traditions of their homelands without embracing the American system, leaving their children in a difficult situation at a time that hormones are raging.

A few pioneers have solved this problems for themselves by assisting their children in finding mates while they are still young and providing extended family support so that even if they have children before graduating from college, they, both male and female,

¹⁴ Catherine Donaldson-Evans, "Muslim Musicians Rap About Islam," *Fox News* (10/14/02) <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,65540,00.html> (accessed 9/21/03).

¹⁵ Reuters, "Revealing Letters From Reagan: New Book Tracks Years of Prolific Correspondence," *Washington Post* (9/22/03) A4.

can finish their schooling. This is neither the “arranged marriage” of the old world, in which the bride or groom has little if any say, nor is it the unchaperoned dating of the new world, but a collective enterprise in which the principals have the main say and in which the families play a supporting role. These innovative practices are not widely known and thus not been widely followed. They deserve to be the subject of sociological studies in order to assess their success at permitting young people to complete their education without having to sacrifice either their chastity or sexuality. Such a study should compare the rates of single parenting, divorce, educational levels, and professional success, as well as the health and welfare of the children in such families against the broader population, both Muslim and non-Muslim, immigrant and non-immigrant.

Conclusions

American culture has its strengths in its respect for the individual, the flexibility of its civil society, and the restraints it attempts to place on the arrogance of political power. It has its weakness in its vulnerability to sacrifice family and personal morality to the appetites of commerce. The religion of Islam, based on the willing submission of the individual to the Divine Will is an appropriate religion for such a society. The Divine Will, as articulated in the Qur’an reveals the principles by which the welfare of the individual and the community are harmonized. Thus, Muslims should be able to find an important place in American society, using the framework for institution building and for individual advancement to make use of the strengths of American culture and to help overcome its weaknesses. Gradually, not without opposition and obstacle, that is what American Muslims are doing. The obstacles include attachments to the cultures of our home countries—or in the case of Afro-Americans to a mythical culture—or the active opposition of a fearful native population that sees Islam as a threat to the status quo.

The challenge to the integration of Islamic religion with American culture is to be able to disentangle scriptural commandments from cultural accretions. I have great hope that Muslims may achieve this for two reasons. The diversity of the American Muslim community, racially, by national origin, ethnically, makes untenable the confusion of culture and religion that has entrenched the stagnation of so much of the Muslim world. On top of that, the rising number of Muslims born in America means that it is only a matter of time until the Muslim community is dominated by indigenous Muslims who are already integrated into the American culture. To paraphrase an old saying, you could take them out of America but you couldn’t take America out of them. Either they will have an American understanding of Islam, in which case they will expand its integration into and influence upon the American culture, or they will have no good understanding of Islam at all, in which case they will become secularized as have so many Muslims, Jews and Christians before them. We, my fellow children of Adam, are the *khulufah*, and the choice is ours.