

American Shi'ism and the Media

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The twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in the migration of Muslims to the American shores. The increased presence and visibility of Muslims in America means that Islam can no longer be characterized as a Middle Eastern or South Asian phenomenon. Given the fact that it is the fastest growing religion in America, Islam is now a very American phenomenon.

Scholars and journalists who have studied or written about Islam in America have limited their research to the majority, Sunni Muslims. Even in academic discourses and classes, most discussions equate Islam in America with the Sunni experience or with that of the indigenous African American Muslims. Very little has been written about the origins and experiences of minority groups within the American Muslim community.¹ This monolithic view has also obscured the proper recognition and understanding of the religious experience of a significant religious minority in America. This paper will initially examine the origins and contemporary experience of the Shi'ī community in America. It will also discuss how Shi'īs can better represent themselves in the media.

Like other immigrants to America, Muslims have been defined as alien. This categorization has become more entrenched since the events of September 11, 2001 and is directed at Muslims who, more than any other immigrant group, are more vulnerable to stereotypes and attacks.

¹ An exception to this is Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, *Mission to America: Five Islamic Sectarian Communities in North America* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993).

The Early Shi'is in America

The first significant wave of Muslims arrived in America between 1875 and 1912. They came from rural areas of what was then called Greater Syria, living under the rule of the Ottoman Empire.² Many of these immigrants who came from the Middle East were Christians; however, a small percentage was comprised of Sunnis, 'Alawis, and Druzes.³ Among the early immigrants who arrived at the American shores in the 1870s were Shi'is who accompanied other immigrants from the Middle East. These early immigrants settled in different parts of America. Some went to Ross, North Dakota in 1899.⁴ In all probability, there were some Shi'is present among the early Lebanese who settled in Ross.⁵ Other Shi'is settled in Michigan City, Indiana.

Among the migrants to Michigan City in the early 1900s was a passenger on board the Titanic. The famous ship, which sank in April 1912, carried at least three Shi'is, Fatima Masselmany and her two cousins, Mustafa Nasr and Yousif Wazli. Fatima was born in Tibnin in Lebanon whereas her cousins, who drowned when the ship sank, came from Bint Jbeil. All of them had planned to settle in Michigan City.

My research indicates that the Shi'is in Michigan City, Indiana, were among the first to construct a mosque in America in 1924. According to a booklet published by The Islamic Center

² In the late nineteenth century, Lebanese migrants migrated to Latin and South America too. See Darcy Zabel ed., *Arabs in the Americas*, chapter two.

³ Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford, 1987), 13-14.

⁴ On the different reasons why Arab immigrants came to America during the first wave see Darcy Zabel, "The Arab Diaspora in the Americas: Latin America, the United States and Canada," in Zabel ed., *Arabs in the Americas*, 6.

⁵ This was confirmed by a friend who saw grave inscriptions that indicate the presence of Shi'i figures among the early migrants.

of Michigan City, the center was first incorporated on April 26, 1914 under the name of “The Bader Elmoneer Society of Michigan City, Indiana.”⁶ Thus, it is correct to state that Shi'is have been on the American shores since 1880s.

The Events of 9/11 and Its Impact on the American Shi'i Community

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 revived prejudices of Islam as a religion that promotes the killing of innocent people and of Muslims as an inherently militant and irrational people. The media has represented the “absent Muslim other” and has sought to create a stereotypical representation of Islam and Muslims that have been impossible to ignore. In addition, the American global war on terror and the invasion of Iraq have invigorated stereotypes and suspicions against Muslims, especially those of Middle Eastern origins.

Since 9/11, Islamophobia and hatred towards Muslims have become legitimized and acceptable by-products of national media and American culture. This has left many migrants and second generation Muslims with a sense of alienation and marginalization. Furthermore, the vitriolic attacks on Islam and the Qur'an by some Christian fundamentalist groups have exacerbated the current conflict in America. Franklin Graham labeled Islam as a “very evil and wicked religion” whereas Jerry Vines, a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the Prophet Muhammad was a “demon-obsessed pedophile.”⁷ On public television, Jerry Falwell called the Prophet a pedophile and a terrorist.⁸ Such comments further amplified the prejudices against Islam and Muslims.

⁶ I am grateful to Ron Amen of the Arab American Museum in Detroit for making a copy of the booklet available to me.

⁷ Amir Hussain, “Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue,” in Omid Safi ed., *Progressive Muslims*, 261.

The prejudices, stereotyping of and attacks against Muslims and Islam ignore the multiplicity of voices and nuances prevalent within Islam. They also ignore that fact that Muslims are multivocal and hold different views. Since 9/11, in the media and the eyes of many Americans, all distinctions between Muslims have been obliterated. Distinctions between Shi'is and Sunnis, moderate or conservative, Christian or Muslim Arabs have been effaced. Instead, all Muslims and Arabs have been grouped together as the enemy other.

Like other Muslims, American Shi'is have been held equally responsible for the terrorist attacks even though none of the terrorists were Shi'is. They have had to apologize for acts they did not commit, and to condemn acts that they never condoned. Shi'is feel that they have been found guilty by religious association, drawn into a discourse on terrorism and associated with a group (al-Qa'ida) which would, ironically, exterminate them if it could. Indeed, there is no record of any Shi'i group committing an act of terror in America. Neither have Shi'i mosques or institutions been funded by foreign movements.

For the Shi'i community, the ramifications of 9/11 have been varied. Many Shi'is who I spoke to stated that the events of 9/11 have exposed the true terrorists. Before the attacks of 9/11, many Americans associated Shi'ism with acts of terror and militancy, especially after the Iranian hostage crisis and the taking of American hostages in Beirut in the 1980s. However, 9/11 showed that the true perpetrators of terror were extremist groups like al-Qa'ida, who base their ideology on Wahhabism.

⁸ Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street*, 85.

Stereotyping in the Media

The American media has vastly enhanced and promoted Islamophobia which means an increased anxiety about Islam. Islamophobia is premised around concepts of threat and fear. One way of promoting Islamophobia is to make Muslims as "the other." They are seen as outsiders, a threat to American values and norms.

It is also important to realize that the media is not monolithic. It uses different tools to promote a certain image. A cartoon, for example, is a very powerful and important tool in the media arsenal. It communicates briefly yet powerfully. It is easier to see than to read. Hence, cartoons utilize symbols, i.e., objects or images that represent something else. The cross, for example, represents the suffering or crucifixion of Christ. Symbols are brief yet they create an association with well known objects or concepts. This leads to stereotyping a group that is connected with the symbol.

The effect of stereotypes is to assign a group in a specified role. As such, stereotypes tend to promote characteristics of a group that are different from normal society. So for example, in the American media, African Americans are often depicted as impoverished and criminals whereas Mexicans are seen as bandits and illegal. FBI agents, lawyers, doctors, and reporters, on the other hand, are white males. Stereotyping a group also means that "the other" that lies within "the other" is hidden since the whole group is clustered in a particular compartment. Thus Shi'is who are a minority within the Muslim community, are not generally mentioned since they are subsumed and voices silenced by the Muslim other.

A good example of how Muslims are portrayed in the American media is the film "The Siege". Two Muslims appear in the movie, one of them who works for the FBI, the other is a terrorist. Interestingly, in the movie, the good Muslim is the one who does not do anything

associated with Islam whereas the terrorist invokes Islam all the time and prays before he kills. The obvious message from this is that Muslims who do not observe Islam or are invisible are the good Muslims. On the other hand, *wudhu* and *salat* are symbolic acts of terrorists. As such, they are contrary to American norms.

In many ways, the media defines what Muslims are not and also what they should be. The subtle message coming from the media is that Muslims need to reform so they can become like "us Americans". They should endorse and reflect our values and social choices.

To get messages across powerfully cartoons use caricatures. Here artists focus on features of an individual and exaggerate that feature so as to attain publicity. They often use a recognized symbol such as a prolonged nose or a bomb. The caricatures are then exaggerated and utilized to depict an entire group. Gradually, the caricature becomes a stereotype. For example, the Danish cartoon depicts not only the Prophet (SAW) but uses the symbol of a bomb as a turban, indicating that those who wear turbans are associated with violence.

Similarly, cartoonists and other forms of the media subjugate Muslim women by denying them any representation in Islam except under oppression. It is as if women play no role in Islam apart from being oppressed. The media image is gendered since a fanatical Muslim man is often countered by a submissive and oppressed Muslim woman. The American media also lumps Muslims together. It never projects Muslims as ordinary smart Americans who hold important positions in the American corporate industry. Muslims are never seen as CEOs, astronauts or nuclear scientists. Rather, the media shows them as strangers, either from Arabia, Iran or Pakistan who drive taxis and plot against the government.

It is time that Muslims draw their own cartoons and caricatures to show the diversity inherent within Muslims. They need to counter western stereotypes and show that rather than the

sameness based on stereotypes, Muslims are to be depicted with same nuances that Christians and other groups are.

Shi'ism and the American Media

Since Shi'is are in a minority within the Muslim minority in America, they have less access to power, and privilege in the public sphere.⁹ Since they have been recently established, Shi'is had fewer resources, institutions, and, most importantly, access to power and influence in the public sphere. Thus, it is the Sunnis who define and represent Islam in America.

Sunni domination and representation of American Islam is visible in many domains. When the State Department or the media want to talk to Muslims, in most cases, it is to the Sunni institutions and mosques that they turn. Likewise, Sunni centers tend to have more access to the media than Shi'is do. When the press reports that American Muslims offer special night prayers in Ramadhan (called *tarawih*), the average non-Muslim reader or viewer naturally assumes that Shi'is offer these prayers too. Infact, Shi'is do not offer the *tarawih* since they maintain it was a *bid'a* introduced by 'Umar, the second caliph. When a newscast reports that a Muslim can divorce his wife by reciting the triple divorce, it is referring to a distinctly Sunni practice, one which Shi'is reject.

This has been the Shi'i dilemma of minorityness in America. Not only have the Sunnis represented Muslims, Sunni practices have been assumed to be normative, embracing all Muslims, whether Shi'is accept them or not. It is the Sunnis who speak on behalf of the Muslim community. Not only have the Shi'is been subsumed, they have been presumed to speak the language of the majority Sunnis. Shi'i voices have been drowned by Sunni ones. During the

⁹ Bruce Lawrence, *New Faiths*, 13.

course of the twentieth century, Shi'is have learned that being a minority means, in the American context, being the invisible other within the other.

For various reasons, Shi'ism has recently attained much attention in the press. For the Shi'is, the need to depict a positive image of Islam in general and Shi'ism in particular became more acute after the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the ensuing hostage crisis. This was because Americans had associated Shi'ism with militancy and terrorism. The emergence of Hizbollah after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the subsequent capture of American hostages in Beirut further exacerbated the situation for American Shi'is who had to counteract the negative publicity that Shi'ism received in the media. In addition, the gulf war created an awareness of the presence of the Shi'is in various Arab countries.

Increasingly, the American media has become aware that Islam is not a monolithic entity and that there are many dividing lines within the Muslim community. They know that Muslims hold a variety of opinions on multitudinous issues, and they want to hear a wide range of Muslim voices. Consequently, many journalists want to hear both Sunni and Shi'i voices.

The Shi'is need to self-represent rather than being represented by the Sunni majority. Especially after the American invasion and occupation of Iraq and the concomitant awareness of Shi'ism, Shi'is need to counter the negative images the media has about Islam. Shi'i institutes across America have engaged in dialogue with their non-Muslim counterparts. The Islamic Education Council of Maryland organizes annual inter-faith events that discuss topics affecting other faith groups in America. It issues press releases and is constant contact with the American media on Islamic issues.

Especially after the American invasion of Iraq, Americans have gone beyond asking questions such as "why do they hate us, and why are Muslim women oppressed?" The themes

covered in the media now are as diverse as they are fascinating. Topics that are typically covered include issues like authority and scripture, challenges in the American milieu, holy days, and Islamic fundamentalism. American media also want to know more about the relationship between Black and immigrant Muslims, Muslim perspectives on issues like abortion, gay marriages, aging, and euthanasia. In fact, it is possible to detect an evolution in the media from basic issues (terrorism, women's rights) to more sensitive and controversial topics.

The challenge for Shi'is is to introduce distinctly Shi'i themes and figures in their conversation. They need to introduce their sheroes and heroes. Figures like Imam 'Ali, Fatima, and their daughter Zaynab have to feature more in conversations. They have also to make the media aware of what it means to be a Shi'i Muslim in America, and that the demonization of Islam, increasing surveillance of Muslims, and restriction of civil liberties have been extremely painful for all Muslims. They also make it clear that Shi'is have been drawn into a battle (the war against terror) that they are not a part of.

For the Shi'is, it is very important that Shi'is have their own outlet where they can represent themselves. An important form of outreach is satellite Television. Currently, several Shi'i satellite channels reach the American audience. Most of these are either in Persian or Arabic. The exceptions are: Salaam TV, Ahlul-bayt TV and Press TV. Salaam TV broadcasts from Los Angeles in both Persian and English. So far, its programming has consisted of a series of English lectures, supplications, and programs in Persian that appeal to devout Shi'is. The programs are neither captivating nor intellectually engaging and have not touched upon the substantive issues that impact the American Shi'i community, especially the needs of the younger generation. More importantly, since most of its English programs are in the form of interviews and lectures delivered in Islamic centers by Shi'i imams, Salaam TV has not been

able to reach out to a Western audience. Salaam also suffers from a dearth of financial resources that are required to sustain a wide range of programming. Due to these factors, Salaam TV has not been able to exploit the tremendous potential at its disposal and has, so far, been not been able to reach out to the non-Muslim community.

Ahlul-Bayt TV is broadcast from England and is free on satellite TV. It is an important platform to reach a non-Muslim audience. However, although its contents are entirely in English, its programming is geared toward a Shi'i audience. It consists of a series of interviews, lectures and discussion on various religious and social issues. It features a section on women, converts (or reverts) and various lectures by various scholars and public speakers. Significantly, the program is speaking to the converted and may actually be turning people off Shi'ism. Especially in the months of Muharram and Safar, the channel features Shi'is beating their chests and weeping. While enacting such rituals are important for the Shi'i community to perform in the mosques, presenting these to a non-Muslim audience can have the effect of turning them **away** from Shi'ism. The message should be positive and simple. Shi'ism is rooted in the concept of standing up to injustice and oppression. It is also based on a special kind of charismatic leaders who have inherited authority from the Prophet (SAW) himself. However, such concepts have to be presented in a way that would attract non-Muslims to the Shi'i ethos. In addition, journalists and editors watching scenes such as people wailing and cutting themselves can use such images to promote a negative and violent image of Shi'i Islam. Let us be clear, Shi'is have more opportunity to speak in the West than in most Muslim countries. More Universities want Shi'i studies to be taught unfortunately there are very few Shi'i professors available. It is upto the community to seize this opportunity.

Conclusion

Religious communities often show the preponderance of their faith rather than seek accommodation when confronted with an alien faith. However, existence in an American pluralistic milieu has forced Shi'is to seek an appropriate response to religious and interfaith diversity. Shi'is have realized that they cannot afford to isolate themselves. Especially since the events of 9/11, along with peoples of other faiths, American Shi'is have searched for a global ethic that can provide a basis for interreligious relations among people of diverse spiritual commitment.

We need to understand the role of Shi'i Muslims in weaving the religious as well as social tapestry of America and to see several gaps – between religion and culture, the gap between religion and politics, religious loyalty and ethnic identity and the lacuna between normative religious texts and the reality of American life. With time, these gaps will be filled. It is here that the challenge for the next generation of Shi'is lies.