

## Islam in the American Diaspora

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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 is no longer to 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. Hence the familiar categorization of 'Islam and the West' should be reformulated to read 'Islam in the West.' As Islam becomes an integral part of the religious landscape of the West and Muslims become a visible and vocal part of the fabric of American society, the forceful and familiar characterization of Islam as 'the other' is slowly attenuated.

Scholars who study the phenomenon of American Islam tend to homogenize American Muslims. Those who restrict their study to this generalized analysis of Muslims in America tend to ignore the nuances that characterize and differentiate the diverse Muslim segments in America. The 'generalized approach' also assumes that all Muslims groups undergo a similar experience in America. It further postulates a monolithic Islam that expresses the 'normative Islam.' Hence any variant religious expression is perceived as an aberration that is to be ignored or even discarded.

This brief paper examines the experience of immigrant and indigenous American Muslims and the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001. To be sure, Islam in America is not a new phenomenon. Even before the advent of the Muslim slaves, there is some evidence of Muslim presence in America. The early wave of immigrant Muslims

came mainly from the Arab world between the years 1880-1890. Post-war immigrants, on the other hand, came from different parts of the Muslim world. They represent a wide array of linguistic, cultural and national origins.

### **The ‘Back-Home’ Islam Phenomenon**

The major characteristic of immigrant Islam is that it universalizes the particular; it imposes its version of Islam as the only possible construction of the Islamic ethos. Furthermore, it imposes the historically informed expressions of Islam as the standard of normativeness for Muslims everywhere. Thus, in the view of the immigrants, immigrant Islam is not subject to interpretation or reformulation. It can only be transferred from one location to another in an unadulterated form.

In addition, immigrants have recreated American Islam into a ‘back-home Islam.’ Immigrant Muslims have not only imposed their understanding of Islam, but also on who runs the mosques, what is an acceptable dress code, language, and political behavior. They have also imposed their authority on indigenous immigrant Muslims especially as many blacks had no authoritative spokesman to speak about Islam. Thus, the increase in immigrant Muslims meant that all that was alien to immigrants was seen as alien to Islam itself.

In addition, with the arrival of immigrants, American issues like affirmative action, racism, joblessness, education, exploitation of the blacks, and urban violence were replaced by foreign issues like Palestine, Kashmir, and lately Iraq. Even blacks who converted to Sunni Islam supported the immigrants in this shift.

## **The Events of September 11 and the American Muslim Community**

The terrorist attacks of September 11 revived prejudices of “Islam” as a religion that promotes violence and of Muslims as an inherently militant and irrational people. Muslims worldwide have had to endure discrimination and even acts of violence perpetrated by fringe minority groups. As Armando Salvatore argues, ‘the antagonisms are perpetuated by a growth industry of publications, audio-visual materials, internet sites, and pop cultures on both sides that frame the other as irrational and fanatical or imperialist and exploitative, respectively.’<sup>1</sup> The more that Euro-American discourses and policies attack and distort Islam and Muslims, the more fuel this provides to Islamic extremists to generate their own anti-Western rhetoric and provocations.

In addition, the American global war on terror and the invasion of Iraq have revived the stereotypes and suspicions against Muslims, especially those of Middle Eastern origins. Furthermore, the vitriolic attacks on Islam and the Qur’an by some Christian fundamentalists have clearly exacerbated the current conflict in America. They have posited and projected Islam as inherently violent, and incompatible with western values and norms. Such attacks tend to destroy rather than build bridges and engender hatred.

American Muslims have recognized the need to express themselves through a properly articulated intellectual discourse, so that they may be both physically and intellectually visible. They have sought to go beyond the history of hostility, caricature, and power struggles that have characterized relations between Christians and Muslims in the past. It is correct to state that the Muslims’ struggle in America has been not only to

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<sup>1</sup> Armando Salvatore, *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*, (Reading, NY: Ithaca Press, 1997), xvii.

co-exist with the other, but also to make themselves comprehensible in the American milieu, to de-mythify and de-code Islam and to challenge the negative characterization of Islam.

Especially since September 11, both Muslims and Christians in America have realized that it is better to speak with, rather than about, the other. The increased dialogue and interaction between Muslims and Christians represent a significant paradigm shift, from attempts at conversion of to those of conversation with the other. It has to be remembered that for most members of the Muslim community, dialogue between people of different faiths, in an environment of mutual respect and acceptance, is a relatively new phenomenon. In their own countries, Muslims did not, generally speaking, feel the need to dialogue or converse with the other. Hence, engaging in dialogue with non-Muslims is a relatively new experience for most Muslims, since many of them are accustomed to preaching Islam and to refuting the beliefs of others.

Muslims in America have also recognized that they cannot afford to live in impregnable fortresses and that living in a pluralistic milieu requires an active engagement with the other. The events of September 11 also proved to the American Muslim community, if any proof was needed, that pluralism in America is a social reality that it cannot escape from. In fact, many Muslims have become more visible, vocal, and extrovert while others have stressed their American rather than homeland identity.

Due to the activities of terrorists, American Muslims have come to the realization that both their Islamic identity and American citizenship are at stake. The Muslim community has acknowledged that the silent majority syndrome has to end simply because Muslim acquiescence has encouraged an extremist expression of Islam. It is the

extremists who have spoken on behalf of Islam as their acts of violence have drowned the silent voices of the Muslim majority. Thus, many Muslims have felt the need to integrate themselves in the mainstream American society so as to make their voices heard. This indigenization of American Islam represents a silent revolution that many Muslims have been engaged in since September 11, 2001.

The process of the indigenization of American Islam is intertwined with the construction of a distinctly American Islamic civic identity. The indigenization of American Islam does not mean the Arabization of Islam; rather, it means broadening its institutions and interpreting its message so that it is suitable to the American Muslim without sacrificing its doctrinal integrity. Thus, it is correct to state that indigenization is an internal process, one that cannot be imposed from abroad.

This indigenization process has become important so to assert an indigenous, American expression of Islam. This expression has taken different forms. Muslims have joined forces with various peace and anti-racist movements. Muslim groups have also engaged in various social programs like food drives and have sought to help homeless Americans.<sup>2</sup> For example, in October 2003, a new campaign called Ramadhan action for human rights was launched in Denver. In addition, since September 11, mosques have facilitated “open mosques” hours and have tried to become more “people friendly.” Non-Muslims have been invited to visit the mosques at their convenience.

In some cases, Muslims have expressed their patriotism in more tangible ways. American flags have been visible outside mosques, Muslim houses, and cars. The

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<sup>2</sup> A good example of this is the social programs of the Muslim Intent on Learning and Activism (MILA), a group established in Denver in 2002. Providing food to indigent and homeless Americans are among the many community outreach activities it performs it also.

American Muslim civic identity can be also discerned from a recent advertisement placed by The Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR) in some newspapers. It shows a Muslim girl, wearing a headscarf, stating quite proudly, "I am an American, I am a Muslim." Interestingly, the American identity precedes the Islamic. Rather than focusing on American foreign policy, Muslims now tend to concentrate more on reconstituting their identity as American Muslims. In all probability, this is because as the second generation of Muslims in America identify with and assimilate in American culture, they develop a sense of patriotism leading to a greater politicization of the community and a sense of American national consciousness. Furthermore, Muslims have realized unless they become more vocal, they could become foreigners in their adopted homeland.

Thus, it is correct to state that the events of 911 have created tension within the American Muslim community. Muslims have sought to indigenize and even domesticate Islam, and to foster a distinctly American Muslim identity. In many instances, even immigrant Muslims have changed their agendas to focus more on domestic issues. In addition, 911 has also split the Muslim community as moderate Muslims have turned against those who do not share their liberal and reformist agendas. However, a discussion of this topic lies beyond the purview of this short paper.