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978-0-521-61487-0 - A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order

Kambiz Ghaneabassiri

Excerpt

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Introduction

The history of Islam in America begins in the context of rivalries and encounters of the Atlantic world that shaped the American republic. The presence of Muslims in the territories that eventually formed the United States of America dates back to the earliest arrivals of Europeans in the Americas.¹ Muslims neither came to America in large numbers at that time nor did they play a primary role in colonizing the Americas. They were, however, deeply embedded in the commercial and political rivalries that led to the establishment of the Atlantic world. Given the enormous impact the European discovery of the Americas has had on the modern world, it is easy to forget that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, European empires navigated the Atlantic in order to establish new trade routes that would circumvent the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern trade routes dominated at that time by Muslim empires. Subsequently, as Europeans conquered and colonized the Americas, an Atlantic world emerged relating Africa, Europe, and the Americas through a triangle of mercantile relations and imperial networks. Muslims from North and West Africa were active participants in this triangle, and many of them ended up in America as slaves. Since that time, there has been a continuous presence of Muslims in America.

¹ Some popular histories of Muslims in America claim that Muslims came to the Americas as early as the late ninth century. Such claims are based on dubious readings of ancient Muslim geographers' mention of Muslims' maritime excursions off the Atlantic coast of the Iberian peninsula and Northwest Africa. They tell us more about some American Muslims' desire to establish their own American foundation myths than about the activities of ancient Muslim sailors. For an example of such claims, see Jerald F. Dirks, *Muslims in American History: A Forgotten Legacy* (Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications, 2006), 28–38.

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At the turn of the twenty-first century, the United States is home to about three million Muslims² who arguably comprise the most diverse Muslim population in any single country in the world. Not only have Muslims of varying ethnic and sectarian orientation from every corner of the world immigrated to the United States, but Americans of African, European, Latin, and Native American ancestries have converted to Islam as well. There are also a number of new religious movements within Islam in the United States (e.g., the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam). The United States is undoubtedly a microcosm of the world's Muslim population.

This book analyzes the abiding presence and diversity of Muslims in the United States by reference to its historical context. It demonstrates how Muslims have participated in American history by narrating the ways in which they have defined themselves and their religion in relation to changing conceptions of race, religious pluralism, and national identity in the United States. Given the enormous diversity found within the Muslim population in the United States, no one narrative can capture the

² The question of how many Muslims are in the United States is controversial. Since the U.S. Census does not ask questions about individuals' religious beliefs or affiliations, there is no official estimate of the number of Muslims in the United States. Estimates differ widely. As American Muslims have sought to become more politically active, the number of Muslims in the United States has become politicized. American Muslim leaders cite larger numbers to attract political attention to American Muslims as a voting block. Other groups that feel politically threatened by increased American Muslim political activity cite smaller numbers. In 2002, for example, a researcher for the Council of American-Islam Relations estimated that there are between 3,225,390 and 5,055,390 American Muslims (Mohamed Nimer, *The North American Muslim Resource Guide: Muslim Community Life in the United States and Canada* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 27), while the American Jewish Committee put the number of American Muslims around 1,886,000 (Tom W. Smith, "Estimating the Muslim Population in the United States" <http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=843637&ct=1044159>, accessed June 25, 2009). In my estimate, I rely mainly on polls conducted in the last decade by Gallup, the Pew Research Center, and American Religious Identification Survey. For an overview of these polling results see Pew Research Center, "Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream" (2007). In the absence of census data or any other type of concrete evidence, these surveys represent the only available scientific attempts at estimating the number of Muslims in the United States. Since they rely mainly on telephone surveys and many Muslims may be reluctant to discuss their religious affiliation over the phone (given the stigmatization of Islam in contemporary America), I have placed more stock in the larger estimate of the 2007 Pew Research Center study (2,350,000) and have rounded this up to the nearest million. Another reason for my rounding up these estimates is to account for cultural Muslims who would be reluctant to self-identify as Muslims because they do not regularly practice Islam but nonetheless would commemorate major events in their lives, such as weddings and deaths, in accordance with Islamic laws and customs.

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varying experiences of American Muslims. As the following pages will lay bare, there is no single American Muslim experience. This absence of uniformity, however, should not be taken to mean that there is no historical continuity in Muslims' experiences in the United States. Muslims who found themselves in this country, whether as slaves, immigrants, or converts, have had to define themselves and to interpret their varying religious understandings and practices in relation to the dominant laws, conceptions of religion, and political and cultural institutions that have shaped American society through the years. They also have had to grapple with the diversity of Islamic beliefs and practices that they faced in the United States as they, as a minority group, formed relations with co-religionists from varying parts of the world. This experience of dealing with American social, political, and legal norms on the one hand and with diversity of Muslim beliefs and practices on the other has helped shape the contours of American Islamic history.

In rendering the story of how Muslims interpreted their roles and practiced their religion in the United States, I try to focus (the availability of sources permitting) on the communal relations they formed and the institutions they developed. It is my contention that nowhere is the contours of American Islamic history better seen than in varying Muslims' experiences of community and institution building in the United States. At each period of American history discussed in the following chapters, from colonial times to the present, Muslims in the United States have formed communal relations with both Muslims and non-Muslims, and whenever possible, they have sought to institutionalize these communal relations through the founding of local and national organizations designed to fulfill their religious and cultural needs and aspirations. Many of these organizations proved ephemeral and left scant records. Others, however, endured and played a role in shaping Muslims' experiences in the United States. Over the years, through the dynamic process of American Muslim community and institution building, American Muslims have effectively brought America (as a national concept) and Islam (as a lived religion) into relation with one another. The historical import of these local and national institutions and communal relations has been vividly evidenced in recent years in the way in which American Muslims have relied on them to weather the backlash from 9/11. It is thus not surprising (as I will discuss later in the epilogue) that the events of 9/11 and its aftermath accelerated American Muslim institution building and pushed American Muslims further into public life and civil service within their respective communities.

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It is worth repeating that my emphasis on the historical context of American Islam³ is not meant to suggest that there is a distinct American Muslim experience, but rather it is intended as an argument for a *relational* understanding of American religious history and modern Islamic history. American Muslims stand at the intersection of these histories, and their lived historical experiences give the lie to the notion that Islamic culture is intrinsically distinct from American culture. The phenomenon of American Islam blatantly contests the binary opposition assumed in the oft-repeated phrase, “Islam and the West.” This binary opposition has shaped not only how policy makers, pundits, and the general public think about the relationship between the United States and the Muslim-majority world, but it has also influenced much of the scholarship on Islam in America, which up until recently has been primarily sociological and anthropological, focusing on questions of assimilation and identity formation. The few historical studies have focused primarily on African American Muslims⁴ and on non-Muslim Americans’ perceptions of Islam.⁵ Operating on the implicit assumption that Islam and “the West” are essentially different, the bulk of the scholarship on Islam in America, whether immigrant or indigenous, however, has focused on how Muslims are faring in the United States rather than how they have actively participated in American history. Scholars have inquired, for instance, into how Muslims in the United States deal with the mixing of sexes, liberal democracy, religious bigotry, and, of course, the wearing of the veil. These inquiries have commonly centered on the question of how Muslims identify themselves in this inherently foreign society.⁶ One popular book on American Islam, for example, set out to answer such questions as:

³ I use American Islam not to refer to a type of Islam but to the variety of efforts through which self-proclaimed Muslims have sought to root their understandings of Islam within the social, political, cultural, and economic life of this country. As such, I do not understand American Islam to be either exceptionally unique or an adulterated form of Islam. Rather, I use it as a descriptive category for the variety of Islamic beliefs and practices that have developed in relation to the legal, social, political, and cultural norms of this country.

⁴ See, for examples, Michael Gomez, *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003).

⁵ See, for examples, Timothy Marr, *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Thomas S. Kidd, *American Christians and Islam: Evangelical Culture and Muslims from the Colonial Period to the Age of Terrorism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁶ See, for examples, Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Adair T. Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987);

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Can Muslims become part and parcel of a pluralistic American society without sacrificing or losing their identity? Can Muslims be Muslims in a non-Muslim state that is not governed by Islamic law? [Conversely, i]s the American legal system capable of allowing for particular Muslim religious and cultural differences? within the Constitution's broader universal claims? Do the secular and/or Judeo-Christian values of American society make this impossible?⁸

The methodology implied in these emblematic questions is that by pinpointing an American Islamic identity one can assess the "Americanness" or "Islamicness" of Islam in America and thus know how "successfully" Muslims are coping with life in the United States. The answer to this question has obvious political implications given the contemporary preoccupation with "political Islam" or Islamism. Knowing how well American Muslims balance being both "American" and "Islamic" helps determine whether they ought to be regarded as a disruptive source in American society or, rather, as another thread in the colorful fabric of American society. For many scholars of Islam, there is a degree of *déjà vu* to such queries insofar as they echo similar questions asked by nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalists who sought to assess the compatibility of Islam with European modernity. In sum, determining whether or not a modern Islam or an American Islamic identity exists has been a stepping-stone toward assessing the degree of conflict we may expect between a "modern West" and a "Muslim Orient," between American society and the Muslims within it.

It should be noted that the binary opposition of "Islam and the West" has not only framed the way immigrant Muslims' experiences have been examined in the United States but also the study of African American

Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John Esposito, *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Jane I. Smith, *Islam in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) (Columbia University Press published a second edition of Smith's book as the present book went into production); Jocelyne Cesari, *When Islam and Democracy Meet: Muslims in Europe and in the United States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). For examples of scholarly works that counter this predominant trend in the study of Islam in America, see Bruce B. Lawrence, *New Faiths, Old Fears: Muslims and Other Asian Immigrants in American Religious Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002) and Edward E. Curtis, IV, ed. *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). As the title of Lawrence's book suggests, it addresses the question of assimilation, but rather than examining how American Muslims self-identify, it focuses on how American society and American Muslims have adapted to one another.

⁷ The veil is discussed explicitly as a symbol of these differences in the second part of the book, "North American Pluralism and the Challenge of the Veil."

⁸ Haddad and Esposito, *Americanization Path?*, 3.

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Muslims. Early scholars of the rise of Islam in black America generally explained the separatist tendencies of African American Muslim nationalist organizations, such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, in terms of their appropriation of Islam. As such, they overlooked the distinctly American influences, which as I will discuss in Chapter 5, shaped these institutions. In this scholarly literature, Islam as the binary opposite of “the West” helped explain the separatist tendency of “black Muslims.” Assuming that integration is the expected norm in America and that Islam is strange to the American experience, this scholarship attributed the black nationalism of the twentieth century to the outside influence of Islam, and it helped bring national focus to the Nation of Islam as the prototypical black nationalist organization of the twentieth century.⁹

Another discernable objective of much of the scholarship on Muslims in the United States has been to teach non-Muslim Americans about Islam in order to counter xenophobia and to make the case for American political, social, and cultural establishments to include Muslims within their purview. The above-cited book, for example, proclaims that Americans need to “realize that Muslims are ‘us.’”¹⁰ The most comprehensive textbook on American Islam to date argues: “That task [of making Muslims political and economic equals] will be easier to the degree that Americans know more about, and can come to better appreciate, the religion of Islam as a vital contributor to its religious landscape. This book is intended as one way to facilitate that task.”¹¹

The methodology employed to fulfill this task is noteworthy insofar as it is representative of the methodology that, up until recently, dominated American Islamic Studies in general. Such studies of Islam in America aim to “present the perspectives of as many American Muslims as possible and allow their voices to determine the important issues and illuminate

⁹ Two influential examples of such scholarship are C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994), originally published by Beacon Press in 1961; and Essien Udosen Essien-Udom, *Black Nationalism: A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1962). For other similar critiques of this scholarship see Susan Nance, “Mystery of the Moorish Science Temple: Southern Blacks and American Alternative Spirituality in 1920s Chicago” in *Religion and American Culture*, 12, no. 2 (2002), 125, and Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking toward the Third Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 121–128. Jackson’s critique is aimed at the later work of Richard Brent Turner (1997) and is at times unduly harsh for reading certain malicious intents in Turner’s work that are not evident in Turner’s text.

¹⁰ Haddad and Esposito, *Americanization Path?*, 3.

¹¹ Smith, *Islam in America*, xvi.

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the presentation of material.”¹² This approach, while *indispensable* for attaining an authentic understanding of how Muslims are self-identifying in the United States, is not conducive to an analytical interpretation of the phenomenon of Islam in America. By simply re-representing American Muslim representations of themselves and allowing their voices to determine the issues, this methodology stymies the self-reflexivity needed for critical analysis.¹³ It leaves the burden of evaluating the context and categories of scholarly analysis on the shoulders of the scholar’s subjects rather than the scholar himself. In doing so, this approach ironically fails to achieve its goal of debunking a superficial and politicized East-West dichotomy, which the phenomenon of an American Islam so blatantly contests. The irony is that by privileging Muslim voices in analyses of Islam in America, Islam and America are perpetuated as reified, mutually exclusive categories. The privileging of Muslim voices in scholarly explanations of American Islam necessarily devalues, if not excludes, the significance of other American voices (e.g., non-Muslim American immigrant voices, Christian African-American voices, mainline Protestant voices), which, through their interaction with American Muslim voices, have helped shape the historical phenomenon of American Islam. In short, scholarly burrowing into American Muslim articulations of their religious identity has dimmed the significance of the larger American and Islamic socio-historical context on which American Muslims have been acting for nearly four centuries.

Many scholars of Islam in the United States have sought to overcome the dichotomies between “Islam and the West,” “Islam and Democracy,” or “Islam and Modernity” that have long shaped much of the popular and scholarly discourses on modern Islam by familiarizing Americans or “Westerners” with “Islamic” beliefs, practices, and voices.¹⁴ In addressing this audience and its preconceptions about Islam, they have ended up evoking these conceptual dichotomies even while working to counter them. They have not reframed the discourse but have situated American Islam within it. In contrast to these approaches to the study of Islam in the United States, the organizing principle of this book is that American

¹² Ibid., xii.

¹³ I am not suggesting that Muslims cannot offer critical analysis of American Islam. My criticism applies to the uncritical representation of their understandings of American Islam as “analysis” in the existing scholarship.

¹⁴ I have in mind here particularly the works of Jane I. Smith, Yvonne Haddad, and John Esposito. Out of all these scholars, Professor Yvonne Haddad’s pioneering work did the most in the 1980s and 1990s to bring the study of Islam in America into the academy.

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Muslim history is a history of Muslim and non-Muslim American encounters and exchanges. These encounters and exchanges highlight how Islam and “the West,” far from being mutually exclusive categories, are lived traditions that have been varying thought and re-thought in relation to one another and to their respective historical contexts.

Decades of research and scores of researchers will be required before we know as much about the history of Muslims in the United States as we now do about the history of Jews, Catholics, or members of any Protestant denomination in this country. The present study is not intended as a synthetic culmination of the current state of the study of Islam in America. Nor did I set out to write an encyclopedic history.¹⁵ The contribution of this book lies in its development of an analytical, historical framework and periodization for the study of American Islam that underscores the *relational* nature of American religious history and modern Islamic history. It is intended as a commencement, an invitation to further historical inquiry into the presence of Muslims in America. To this end, I deliberately cite at length from many of the primary sources I have consulted, and I conservatively allow the available data for each epoch to drive my arguments rather than offer a theory of American Islam, whose polysemy we could begin to understand only after more years of research. My hope in adopting such an approach has been to demonstrate how the emerging subfield of American Islamic history not only challenges the predominant narratives through which Islam and “the West” or Islam and modernity are conceived but also provides fertile ground for the future development of new and innovative analyses.

¹⁵ Those interested in an encyclopedic work could consult Edward E. Curtis, IV, ed. *Encyclopedia of Muslim-American History* (New York: Facts on File, forthcoming).

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Islam in the “New World”

The Historical Setting

In the late nineteenth century, Robert Bayles, president of the Market and Fulton National Bank of New York City, reviewed historical records of his ancestry. He discovered that family heirlooms, including a bronze pan, a copy of the Qur'an, and a copper teapot probably belonged to Anthony Jansen van Salee, also known as Anthony Jansen van Vaes and Anthony “the Turk.”¹ Bayles would have known that “Turk” was the contemporary and derogatory term for Muslim (regardless of ethnicity);² “van Salee” and “van Vaes” signified that Anthony was “from Salé” or “from Fez,” Morocco. Anthony immigrated to New Amsterdam some time around 1630 as a colonist for the Dutch West India Company. There, in what eventually became New York City, he settled down as a farmer and at times dealt in real estate. Upon his demise, he left behind four daughters, the youngest of whom, Eva, was an ancestor of Mr. Bayles.

Anthony at some unknown time was joined by Abraham Jansen van Salee, a possible brother or half-brother, who was also referred to as “the Turk” and “the Mulatto.”³ Anthony may be the first settler from a Muslim

¹ Edward Lee McClain, *The Washington Ancestry and Records of the McClain, Johnson, and Forty Other Colonial American Families*, vol. 3 (Greenfield, OH: Privately Printed, 1932), 71.

² On the derogatory use of the term “Turk” in New Netherland, see Jaap Jacobs, *New Netherland: A Dutch Colony in Seventeenth-Century America* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 449.

³ Hazel Van Dyke Roberts, “Anthony Jansen van Salee 1607–1676,” *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 103, no. 1 (January 1972), 25–27; Teunis G. Bergen, *In Alphabetical Order, of the Early Settlers of Kings County, Long Island, N.Y., from Its First Settlement by Europeans to 1700* (New York: S. W. Green’s Son, 1881), 154; McClain,

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background⁴ in the territories that eventually formed the United States, but he was not the first person of Muslim heritage to traverse America. From the time Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic, West and North Africans served as involuntary servants to Europeans arriving in the Americas. The most notable of them in early American history was Estevanico de Dorantes, “a black Arab originally from Azamor,” Morocco.⁵ Estevanico is recognized as possibly the first African and the first person of Muslim heritage⁶ to travel in the Southwest United States and the first non-native to enter the Zuni Pueblos in New Mexico and Arizona.

However scant, the history of Islam in America reminds us of the neglected fact that the early making of the “New World,” long before the rise of the Atlantic slave trade, included Africans alongside Europeans and Native Americans. West Europeans “discovered” the Americas while in search of new trade routes from the Atlantic Ocean to the Indian Ocean. It is too often forgotten that European voyages of discovery in the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were in large part intended to find new mercantile routes to circumvent the overland and maritime routes through rival Muslim empires – mainly the Ottoman (1299–1923) and Mamluk (1250–1517) Empires. Prior to Columbus, fifteenth-century Iberians established trading posts along the western and

The Washington Ancestry, 89 and 100; and Henry B. Hoff, “Frans Abramse van Salee and His Descendants: A Colonial Black Family in New York and New Jersey,” *New York Genealogical and Biographical Record* 121, no. 2 (April 1990), 65–66.

⁴ While Anthony Jansen may have had a Muslim upbringing as one would expect given his background, the extant sources, short of calling him a Turk, do not identify him as Muslim. It seems that his daughter, Eva, had been baptized. See Van Dyke Roberts, “Anthony Jansen van Salee 1607–1676,” 17. Also, when the colonial council banished him and his wife, Grietjen Reyniers, from New Netherland on April 7, 1639, it was said that they had broken their promise “to conduct themselves quietly and piously as behooves Christians.” See *New York Historical Manuscripts: Dutch, Council Minutes*, 1638–1649, vol. 4, trans. and annot. Arnold J. F. van Laer (Baltimore, MD: Genealogical Publishing Co., 1974), 47.

⁵ Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *Relación de los Naufragios y Comentarios de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Librería General de Victoriano Suárez, 1906), 144.

⁶ Estevanico’s religious identity is not known. As Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz have noted, although Estevanico Cabeza de Vaca referred to Estevanico as an Arabic-speaking native of Azemmour, he also identified him as a Christian. His explicit identification as a Christian may have had to do with a 1526 royal decree that required all owners of Spanish-speaking black Africans to acquire special permission to take their slaves to the Indies. See Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, *The Narrative of Cabeza de Vaca*, ed. and trans. Rolena Adorno and Patrick Charles Pautz, vol. 1 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 96n4.