# *Imagining Ishmael: Introducing American Islamicism*

In April of 1997, a coalition of sixteen American Muslim organizations petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court to have a larger-than-life representation of the Prophet Muhammad sandblasted off the north wall overlooking the nation's central legal chamber. The Muslim groups took offense at the ivory marble statue that depicts a robed and bearded Muhammad with a curved sword in one hand and the Qur'an in the other. Part of the original Beaux-Arts architecture designed in the early 1930s by Adolph A. Weinman, the statue stands between Charlemagne and Justinian as one of eighteen great law givers of history. The presence of the frieze in such an official location, the Muslim leaders maintained, demonstrated insensitivity to Islamic prohibitions against displaying images of the Prophet, and the scimitar perpetuated stereotypes about Muslims as "intolerant conquerors." Deeply committed to removing the statue, they offered to pay the expenses for an appropriate replacement. Chief Justice William Rehnquist, however, rejected their request. He claimed that the figure represented an honor rather than a form of idol worship and that the sword was a general symbol of justice. He also noted that any alterations in the frieze would not only destroy the artistic integrity of the whole, but also violate a 1949 statute against the removal of statues from the Court's property. While he agreed with the literature handed out to visitors to the Bench that the "figure is a well-intentioned attempt by the sculptor to honor Muhammad," he nonetheless also agreed with the Muslim protesters that "it bears no resemblance to Muhammad."[1]

This ivory marble Muhammad and Rehnquist's defense of it are but recent examples of the ways in which U.S. Americans have long appropriated Islam as a resource for the definition of national culture. Rather than promote a better understanding of the religion of Islam or the interests of Muslims themselves, Americans have long pressed orientalist images of Islam into domestic service as a means to globalize the authority of the cultural power of the United States. On one level, the presence of the statue demonstrates the need to acknowledge Islam as an important world phenomenon as well as the desire to incorporate its exotic power within national

[1] Tamara Jones and Michael O'Sullivan, "Supreme Court Frieze Brings Objection; Depiction of Muhammad in 66-Year-Old Sculpture Offends Muslim Groups," *The Washington Post* (8 March 1997); Joan Biskupic, "From Two Friezes, Great Figures of Legal History Gaze upon the Supreme Court Bench," *The Washington Post* (11 March 1998).

genealogies. But the Supreme Court's refusal to act on this 1997 petition dramatizes the crucial injustice of the terms of inclusion. Recognition of Islam in the United States has been arbitrated largely by Americans from Judeo-Christian backgrounds who remain, for the most part, uninformed about and even antagonistic toward the ethos of Islamic belief. The statue in the Supreme Court monumentalizes Islam not as a major world religion (an act of veneration that would contravene the First Amendment) but rather as an outmoded system of juridical violence whose authority has been arrogated and superseded by American legal power. Indeed, in spite of the justified intent to honor Muhammad, the paradoxical logic of Rehnquist's defense of the statue demonstrates what Edward Said has noted in his influential *Orientalism* (1978) as "the almost total absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam."[2]

Islam has figured in the fashioning of North American cultural definitions since as far back as the first years of European settlement. Inaugurating instances in colonial British America can be seen through brief biographical sketches of the Virginian leader John Smith and the Quaker preacher Mary Fisher. The adventures in Muslim lands of these radically disparate individuals and the contrasting deployments of their intercultural interactions intimate the dynamic cultural work performed by even momentary encounters with Islamic difference. Early American negotiations with the Islamic world were epitomized by the journeys of Smith and Fisher and the ways their adventures were constituted into legendary performances that embodied gendered models of intercultural heroism.

John Smith gained experience and credentials fighting Turks in Ottoman Europe well before he ventured across the Atlantic and he prided himself as a hearty crusader against the Muslims.[3] After successfully launching incendiary devices against the Turkish armies in Hungary, for example, he reveled that "the lamentable noise of the miserable slaughtered Turkes was most wonderfull to heare."[4] *The True Travels*, one of the first secular autobiographies published in the West, describes how Smith vanquished three Turkish warriors during combative dueling in Wallachia in 1602, a feat for

[2] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), 26–7.

[3] Smith's accounts of fighting the Turks were long considered an extravagant fabrication. However, twentieth-century reevaluation of Smith's adventures has proven him to be so reliable about these experiences that he is viewed as "an authority on Hungarian history." Laura Polanyi Striker and Bradford Smith, "The Rehabilitation of Captain John Smith," *The Journal of Southern History* 28 (November 1962): 477. Philip L. Barbour, the editor of the works of John Smith, claimed: "Let it only be said that nothing John Smith wrote has yet been found to be a lie." *Three Worlds of Captain John Smith* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1964), xi.

[4] Philip L. Barbour, ed., *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith, 1580–1631*, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 3: 116.

which he was granted a coat of arms portraying three Turks' heads. Smith afterwards became "a prey to the cruel devouring Turke" and was sold into slavery to a genteel Muslim woman. She became enamored with Smith and sent the twenty-two-year-old infidel to her brother in Tartary to learn the arts befitting a gentleman. Intolerant of his thralldom to this Bashaw of Nalbrits, Smith "beat out [his] braines with his threshing bat," assumed the Bashaw's clothes, and escaped back to Christendom, eventually making his way to Virginia. Smith's experience in the Islamic orient prefigured his attitudes toward the people and places of America and foreshadowed his celebrated experiences with Pocahontas. When Smith anchored in 1614 off the peninsula in northern Massachusetts now known as Cape Ann, he named it Tragabigzanda after the Muslim lady who saved him and called three other coastal islands there the Three Turks. His distinctive cross-cultural experiences reveal how old world patterns of disdaining "others" were imported into new world spaces as a strategy to situate the strangeness of cultural difference. His narrative also demonstrates how control over the "infidel," often through violence, was constitutive of both Christian identity and noble masculinity. Smith's coat of arms, whose shield depicts the turbaned heads of the three Turks, appears in the corner of one of the earliest maps of "ould Virginia," which has the scrolled motto "Vincere est Vivere" – "To conquer is to live."

Unlike the belligerent Smith who plundered his way through Islamic lands, Mary Fisher, an intrepid proponent of Quakerism, ventured to the eastern Mediterranean in 1658 on a mission to preach the gospel to the Sultan of Turkey. Fisher was one of the first Friends to visit Boston where in 1656 the Puritans stripped and jailed her and burned her books. Exiled from New England, she turned her attentions to the Islamic world where she traveled to negotiate a singular audience with Sultan Mehmed IV in Adrianople. Her courage in testifying Christ's truth to the "Great Turk" rendered her anecdotal exploits into a legend narrated in many versions throughout the early American period, including George Bancroft's *History of the United States*.[5] Her faith and fortitude provided a model of Christian witness that exposed the noble receptivity of the Sultan and thus the power of female religious testimony and the potential for evangelizing Muslim peoples. Although Smith and Fisher engaged Islam for different purposes, and although narratives of their encounters functioned distinctly in American

[5] *History of the Colonization of the United States*, 15th ed., 3 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1855), 1: 452. Among these are two long poems that elaborate the drama of her visit: *Mary Fisher; or, the Quaker Maiden and the Grand Turk* (Philadelphia: Joseph Kite, 1840) and "Visit of Mary Fisher to the Sultan Mohammed IV. At Adrianople, 1658," in "Ruth Plumley," *Lays of Quakerdom, Reprinted from The Knickerbocker of 1853–54–55* (Philadelphia: The Biddle Press, 1855), 17–36. "Mary Fisher," in *American National Biography*, 24 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 8: 15–6. See also Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Gentle Boy" in *Twice-told Tales* (1837).



FIGURE 0.1. In the first image, John Smith is led into captivity to the Bashaw of Nalbrits by a "Drub-man" (interpreter); in the second, Smith effects his escape by bashing the Bashaw to death with a club. These images are panels seven and nine from an nine-panel illustration in *The True Travels, Adventures, and Observations of Captaine Iohn Smith, in Europe, Asia, Affrica, and America, from Anno Domini 1593 to 1629* (London, 1630). Panels four, five, and six feature representations of Smith subduing three Turks in jousting combat on horses, feats for which he was granted a shield with three Turks' heads on his coat of arms.

cultural history, they demonstrate how early encounters with Islam and its territories, while seemingly outside the province of early American studies, must be seen as a wider horizon that informed the invention of cosmopolitan gender roles as well as critical discourses about ethnic difference, societal behaviors, and the relevance of American cultural production to the concerns of the wider world.

Many Americans incorporated the pre-Christian heritage of the orient – including Judaism – as part of the ancient civilizations that paved the way for Christianity and were then superseded by its claims. The rise of Islam as an independent religion after Christianity and its power and persistence as a diverse and far-flung civilization created an intractable conundrum whose difference has both troubled and fascinated Americans of every generation. Unwilling to view Islam as a legitimate religious dispensation, Westerners from as far back as the Crusades have imagined it as a post-Christian provocation to which they have responded by devising an archive of ideological fictions aimed at defusing the heretical rivalry of what Edward Said has called its "*original* cultural effrontery."[6]

[6] Said, *Orientalism*, 260.

The religious core of such a distant challenge has resonated powerfully within American cultural expression and still sounds loudly today. *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism* documents distinctive aspects of the deep and dynamic domestic heritage of Islamic orientalism through the mid-nineteenth century. It unpacks the history and surprisingly vital diversity of selected instances when Americans interpellated orientalized images of Islam to articulate local knowledges and situations within a global context. In so doing it offers a critical history of cultural imagination that illuminates a more planetary perspective to a period of American Studies too often confined within concerns of the nation alone. The examination of the contours and careers of how Islam was represented within early and antebellum American cultural expression – in such varied forms as political theory, fictional imagination, religious belief, reform movements, and artistic creativity – reveals new insights into the transcontinental formulation of national conventions and aspirations. Historical and rhetorical encounters with Muslim places and practices provided an intercultural dimension of comparison that fostered a latitude for contesting a more global relevance for American agendas. It explores how views of Islam, even when misunderstood and kept at a distance, were transmuted within the alembic of American imaginations into cultural resources that citizens deployed in diverse ways to define, influence, revise, transform, and attempt to universalize the insularity of the national imaginary.

*American Islamicism* demonstrates that engaging with the Islamic orient has been a prominent interactive horizon throughout American history. It maintains that better understanding of the ways that Americans have imagined Islam in the past is essential if the dangerous disjunctures of the twenty-first century are to be surmounted. Interpreting instances of early American encounter with elements of the Islamic world exposes the habits of misperception and strategies of distortion that continue to hinder better relations between Muslims and non-Muslim Americans. The attacks of 11 September 2001, and the ensuing wars on terrorism and extremism are only the latest and most dramatic events to expand the global significance of Islam in the imaginations of Americans. The twentieth-century process of decolonization, including the breakup of the Soviet Union, helped to create a United Nations with almost one third of its members made up of states with predominately Muslim populations. The Middle East became increasingly important to the international interests of the United States during the Cold War because of its supply of oil and the challenge of pan-Arab nationalism. It has remained central because of the continuing spread of indigenous opposition to American power, including the United States' support of Israel, by such groups as Al Qaeda, Hamas, and the Iraqi insurgency. This increasing importance of Islam in world affairs has been propelled by recent wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kuwait and by continuing struggles in such long-standing areas of civil strife as Algeria, Sudan, Israel/Palestine, Lebanon,

Cyprus, the Balkans, Chechnya, Kashmir, Thailand, and the Philippines. Moreover, traditional definitions of national identities in Europe and North America have been challenged by the increasing political influence of large numbers of recent Muslim immigrants who now reside in these countries. At the beginning of new the millennium, more than six million Muslims comprise the largest minority group in Europe, Africa is evenly divided between Muslims and Christians, and in the United States the followers of Islam – almost half of whom are African Americans – outnumber the nation's Jewish population.

This increasing global presence has provoked an important cultural struggle in the United States over how Americans should best understand the cultures of Islam. One popular strain in this struggle has revived the long-lasting orientalist heritage, examined in this book, of vilifying the religion of Islam. This response emphasizes the need to contain the jihad of a "Green Peril" that has replaced the Soviet Union as the civilization that clashes most contentiously with the political and religious destiny of the republic. Another strain seeks to understand Islam more fully and provide more space for Muslims at the table of American pluralism. Politicians eager to avoid further alienation of the world's Muslims, including those in their constituencies, have publicly proclaimed the importance of Muslim mosques, imams, and holy days and lauded Islam as one of the world's great faiths with a civilizing tradition of peace-making that "fundamentalists" are seeking to destroy. Such liberal efforts are evidence of the emergent trend of viewing Islam as part of a larger Abrahamic faith or covenant – an important attempt to broaden the inclusivity of a Judeo-Christian tradition that was itself invented in the twentieth century.

The historical engagement of white Protestant Americans with Islam has been tremendously complex and varied, and this is apparent even in the names that have been ascribed to Muslims in the United States. Americans did not commonly use the term "Islam" before the twentieth century; rather, they called the religion "Mahometanism" or "Mohammedanism," itself an orientalist designation that gave undue centrality to the place of the Messenger Muhammad in the faith of Islam. Muslims were most commonly known as "Turks" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, although there were a variety of other protoethnic designations based on geography, including "Moors," "Persians," "Tartars," and "Malays." Other Muslims, especially the "Arabs" and "Bedouins," were also known in early America as "Ishmaelites" because Muhammad claimed descent from Abraham through Ishmael, his first son, who was born to Hagar, Abraham's bond servant. The most important religious festival in the Islamic calendar, 'Id al-Adha, commemorates Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Ishmael (Ismail) (in contrast to the biblical story of Isaac), and the pair are responsible for the construction of the Kaaba around which all Muslims circumambulate during the pilgrimage in Mecca. Ishmael is denied this primacy in the Book of

Genesis where he is deprived of his birthright after Sarah gave birth to Isaac through whom the Mosaic and Christian covenant has descended. Although Ishmael is promised in the Bible that his descendents would multiply and produce great nations, he is nevertheless cast out with his mother to wander in the desert. The United States is at a crossroads in its engagement with Islam, and the outcome depends on whether the figurative Ishmael remains a exiled wanderer in the desert whose "hands are against all men," or whether, following the lead of Herman Melville who made Ishmael the narrator of *Moby-Dick* (1850), he is naturalized as a symbolic agent of American diversity in the Abrahamic tradition.

Such attempts at patriarchal and biblical inclusion, however, may remain just another imperial appropriation of Islamic difference unless they enable a more engaged dialogue between non-Muslim Americans and diverse believers in Islam about the character of their faiths and the contingencies of their cultures. An essential step in moving beyond present impasses between the United States and the Islamic world is to analyze and understand more fully the complex historical legacy of orientalism that early Americans adopted from Europe and then developed within the specific matrices of their own cultural imaginations. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, leading Americans converted the religion of Islam into a resource for universalizing American power. In so doing, they forestalled deeper conversations with Muslims themselves and thereby created one of the greatest and lasting impediments to understanding Islam on its own terms. This tradition of Islamic orientalism that was elaborated in the place of dialogical understanding accumulated its own long and varied genealogy and generated deformed patterns of intercultural perception that were – and often still are – replicated with considerable complexity and versatility.

Even though today there are active American Muslim organizations and others willing to challenge unjust representations of Islam, the powerful historical templates that preceded and prefigured the mass inmigration of Muslims still shape in some ways the contours of how Islam is perceived and received within the United States. As a form of imaginative colonization, the heritage of Islamic orientalism has left conceptual traces and patterns of intercultural assessment that can be as established and as difficult to alter as the ravages of physical imperialism. While orientalist rhetoric acknowledges the existence of Islam and therefore broadens cultural boundaries, its employment can also authorize cultural imperialism by arrogantly translating Islamic belief and practice into a domestic polemic that serves and underscores insular agendas.

However much American orientalist discourse may attempt to represent the *topos* of the Islamic world, it is ultimately a complex configuration of cultural ideologies that reveals more about the constitution of American imaginations than it does about the character of Muslim beliefs. This study therefore highlights the lowercase term *islamicism* to clearly register this

variance between orientalist codes and Islamic faith. On a basic level, then, islamicism is merely a short form for Islamic orientalism, which confines the enormous geographical expanse of orientalism to its Muslim boundaries and constituents and its ancient dimension to its post-Islamic chronology. But it is also a useful counterpoint to the notion of *islamism*, which Western social scientists and policy makers have applied since the 1980s to describe the political agendas and ideologies of Muslims committed to establishing states that enforce social programs run on strict Qur'anic injunctions. Islamicism has discursive parallels with islamism in that both tend to essentialize Islam in ways that often prevent critical analysis of the diversity of Muslim peoples, the contingency of their cultures, and the complexities of their beliefs. Islamicism thus can validate distorted conceptions of Islam that islamists may use to justify more vigorous (and violent) challenges to what they see as the corrupt injustices of Western cultural imperialism.

This study of islamicism, nevertheless, focuses neither on affirming understandings of Islamic belief nor on analyzing islamist political action – both ventures within the academic province of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies. It rather articulates the cultural connotations given to Islamic belief and behaviors by early Americans who ignored or rejected the religious claims of Islam. Islamicist idioms are best conceived as a transnational discourse referencing Islamic history and Muslim practices whose source lies neither in the Qur'an nor in Islamic theology but rather in the cultural imaginations of non-Muslims.[7] Islamicism constituted for many Americans what Pierre Bourdieu has called a "disposition" – an internalized and often unconscious structure of symbolic power that interpreted Muslim beliefs and behaviors in ways that habitually "misrecognized" the self-interest inherent in such a project.[8] The concept of a disposition is especially useful to the examination of islamicist practices because the term also suggests the dislocation of Islam from the latitudes of its historical expression and its transposition within performative moments of domestic cultural generation. Images of Islam have long provided elements of the integral process of constituting the worldly import of American situations. This book analyzes instances of islamicist cultural rhetoric as revealing transnational expressions that helped to define the broader contours of how early Americans from the white Protestant elite tried to find their home in the world.

[7] It is important to note, however, that the term "islamist" is itself an islamicist construction, in that it has been ascribed by Western scholars to certain Muslims and did not emerge as a category of self-affiliation. The intention of replacing "Islamic" with "islamist" was a genuine attempt to distinguish between Islamic religious practice and the political agenda of Muslims seeking to increase Islam's societal role, often with the goal of forming an Islamic state.

[8] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53. The concept of "disposition" bears some similarity to what Edward W. Said calls in *Orientalism* the "enunciative capacities" elicited by a "latent orientalism" (221–2) and in *Culture and Imperialism* "a structure of attitude and reference" (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1991), xxiii.

Islamicism remains, for the most part, a mirage for allowing a deeper understanding of the ethos of Muslim belief, but it nevertheless has provided a powerful reservoir of global rhetoric and imagery that Americans have regularly appropriated to authorize and to criticize cultural constructions of national mission, religious faith, moral behaviors, ethnic identity, and gender performance. The chapters of this book recover examples of how the cultural resources of orientalized Islam figured frequently within diverse and contrasting American archives from the colonial era through the middle of the nineteenth century. This study demonstrates that islamicism, as a practice of the *domestic* figuration of the foreign, constitutes a multivalent and largely unexamined dimension of transcultural definition that a variety of Americans have consistently focused upon to orient – quite literally – the direction of their national project, the morality of their social institutions, the shape of their romantic imaginations, and other important aspects of cultural work and play. Many Americans drew upon orientalist conventions to deal with the intractable difference of Islam in an attempt to counteract its threat as a contending ethos. Islamicist imaginations transformed the alien threat of Islamic difference into indigenous cultural capital that worked in complex ways to universalize American practices. These imaginary compensations provided rhetorical resources that other citizens exploited to share in the exoticism of oriental Islam by domesticating its alterity as a resource of significant power for globalizing their own cultural enterprises. As a constituent element of the hybridity of American cultural identities, therefore, islamicism needs to be seen as part of the long and variegated process through which Americans from the United States have aspired to build a global and historical status as a progressive civilization.

The place of the Islamic world in the cultural consciousnesses of Americans from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries was more prominent than today's citizens and scholars have previously supposed. This was in part because the Ottoman (or Turkish) Empire, the political center of the first orient to be encountered by Westerners moving east, was still a formidable political reality in world affairs – even if its power rested more on its past grandeur than on its declining contemporary clout. Indeed, the Ottoman Empire was losing territory and military power at a corresponding rate to the expansion of the size and power of the United States. American Protestant agents sought to establish their republican system and moral culture, linked in many minds with a clear sense of political destiny and religious mission, as one fit to replace (even if only symbolically) the decadent and outmoded Turks, whom many viewed as a despotic and satanic opposition. Moreover, this focus on a distant empire projected an exotic stage at once older and beyond the Europe from which the United States had declared its independence. This transcendence of an increasingly partisan and divided transatlantic heritage, combined with the general absence of Muslims within domestic political constituencies, rendered the Islamic world a global matrix

for imagining more universal fantasies of nationalist enterprise. By countering a primary contender of Christian millennialism and republican government, the rhetorical resources of islamicism projected a global difference against which U.S. citizens of various domestic denominations and parties could distinguish a common but diversified national ethnos.

The recurrent cultural images of Islam circulating during the colonial period and inherited and enhanced by Americans in the early national period frequently stood in opposition to many qualities that citizens of the United States affirmed in their own bid for moral legitimacy as an emerging civilization. While Islam signified antichristian imposture, America promised Christian purity; while Islam meant barbaric despotism, America cherished enlightened democracy. In the minds of many Americans, Islam produced immoderate sensuality rather than public chastity, easy indolence rather than hard work, and irrational fatalism rather than progressive reform. This clean oppositional dualism attests to the mythical dimension of orientalism as a strategy of positioning the worldly relevance of American civilizational aspirations. The first two chapters of this book demonstrate how islamicist constructions of despotism and antichristianity in a wide variety of cultural expressions formed an inherent part of the process of reinventing republicanism and projecting Christian millennialism. Chapter 1 examines an interdisciplinary array of early national cultural expression that explores the conjunctures between "foreign" policy with Muslim leaders and islamicist constructions of despotism as an antirepublican political category. Chapter 2 investigates how Islam was figured within the powerful intellectual tradition of biblical eschatology and how this prophetic discourse affected the views and success of the first Protestant missionaries to Muslim lands. Some of the salient power of islamicism in early American cultural history emerged from the concurrence of Enlightenment and religious worldviews in inventing a common yet removed oriental opposition that bridged the gap that often separated republican liberty and redemptive Christianity, the two strongest strands of the imagined national mission.

*American Islamicism* demonstrates how this ideological opposition between the United States and the Islamic world was complicated and qualified by the application of islamicist dimensions to various domestic situations and through proliferating moments of intercultural contact. In its oppositional form, the Islamic world served as a distant mirror of foreign alterity that revealed and embodied anti-American models deployed to caution citizens about their excesses and remind them of the worldly importance of their enterprises. This book also explores the intricate interplay between three other valences of islamicism (which I call domestic, comparative, and romantic) to elaborate its vibrant dynamism as a dislocating global presence within the cultural politics of the early United States. A diversity of Americans appropriated these rhetorical resources within domestic discursive situations to articulate a complex variety of cultural work and play in a broad range of different ideological registers. A primary strategy of many Protestant