Introduction: American Islam, Muslim Americans, and the American Experiment

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The conversation about where American Muslims fit into the larger fabric of American society far predates the election of Barack Hussein Obama to the presidency in 2008. To critically assess the anxiety over American Muslims as part of a historical chronology and continuum, we should start with the ratification of the United States Constitution.

The date was July 30, 1788. The site was North Carolina, and the occasion was the convention to ratify the proposed U.S. Constitution. The speaker on this occasion was a certain William Lancaster, who was a staunch Anti-Federalist. Lancaster spoke of what would happen not if, but when, a few centuries down the road a Muslim would be elected to the highest office in the land, the presidency of the United States of America.

> But let us remember that we form a government for millions not yet in existence. I have not the art of divination. In the course of four or five hundred years, I do not know how it will work. This is most certain, that Papists may occupy that chair, and Mahometans may take it. I see nothing against it.[1]

"Mahometan" was the common designation for Muslims back then, now considered derogatory, and was derived from the also obsolete and equally offensive "Muhammadan." In 1788 there were no Muslim Americans running for the office of the president. As far as we know, there were not even any Muslim citizens of the newly formed American republic – though there were thousands of slaves from Africa in America who came from Muslim backgrounds. As legal scholars have noted, the putative conversation about a Muslim president was a fear tactic used by Anti-Federalists

[1] Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution, as Recommended by the General Convention at Philadelphia, in 1787*, 5 vols. (Philadelphia, 1888), 4:215; cited in Denise A. Spellberg, "Could a Muslim be President? An Eighteenth-Century Constitutional Debate," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39:4 (2006): 485.

to put pressure on Federalists. In other words, the conversation about where Muslims fit into the fabric of the American politic was one that was concomitant with the passage of the U.S. Constitution.

The source of controversy was Article VI of the United States Constitution:

> The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; *but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States*. (emphasis added)

The issue of whether a Muslim could become the president of the United States moved from a theoretical debate "four or five hundred years" in the future – as the representative Lancaster had imagined in 1788 – to a very real campaign issue in Barack Obama's successful presidential run in 2008. The conversation in 2008 was about whether the presidential candidate Senator Obama, whose father was a secular Kenyan Muslim, was himself a Muslim. In spite of Obama having been a committed Christian, a regular churchgoer for decades, one who got married and had his daughters baptized in a church, a significant percentage of Americans believed – and continue to believe – that he was a Muslim. At the time of the 2008 presidential election, 13 percent of all Americans acknowledged that they suspected Obama to be Muslim;[2] other polls put the number closer to 20 percent. One study of people who voted for the Republican candidate, Senator McCain, in 2008 found that between 56 and 77 percent of those voters thought Obama was Muslim. It would be fair to assume that the overwhelming majority of those who mistakenly held this view also held this against the candidate Obama.[3] Insinuations and assumptions about Obama's "Muslimness" did not disappear during his presidency and had risen to 24 percent by 2010.[4] Even in 2012, one in three Republicans continued to believe, in spite of the available evidence, that Obama was Muslim.[5] It was ultimately the Republican Colin

[2] See the Newsweek poll: http://nw-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/pdf/1004-ftop.pdf.
[3] "Smearing the Opposition," http://news.msu.edu/media/documents/2010/08/a8099abf-c5dd-439f-95d5–64178e629848.pdf.
[4] Jonathan Alter, "The Illustrated Man," http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2010/08/28/alter-how-obama-can-fight-the-lies.html.
[5] Moustafa Bayoumi, "Did Islamophobia Fuel the Oak Creek Massacre?" *Nation,* August 10, 2012. http://www.thenation.com/article/169322/did-islamophobia-fuel-oak-creek-massacre#.

Powell who offered a forceful refutation of the whole debate. Speaking of Barak Obama, Powell stated:

> Well, the correct answer is, he is not a Muslim, he's a Christian. He's always been a Christian. But the really right answer is, what if he is? Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country? The answer's no, that's not America. Is there something wrong with some seven-year-old Muslim-American kid believing that he or she could be president? Yet, I have heard senior members of my own party drop the suggestion, "He's a Muslim and he might be associated with terrorists." This is not the way we should be doing it in America.[6]

"Is there something wrong with being a Muslim in this country?" Colin Powell asked in 2008, and that question has hovered over the American Muslim community at least since September 11, 2001, and in many ways for much longer.

The present volume offers a scholarly overview of the state of research on American Muslims and American Islam and presents the reader with a comprehensive discussion of the debates, challenges, and opportunities that American Muslims have faced through centuries of American history. This volume also covers the creative ways in which American Muslims have responded to the serious challenges that they have faced and continue to face in constructing a religious praxis and complex identities that are grounded in both a universal tradition and the particularities of their local contexts. The book then introduces the reader to the many facets of the lives of American Muslims, which in turn can be understood only in their interactions with Islam's entanglement in the American experiment.

American Islam between the Era of the Founding Fathers and Today

Muslims have a long history of accommodation, engagement, resistance, and official acknowledgment in America. One of the first known acknowledgments came not in the aftermath of the horrific events of 9/11, or even as a result of the monumental 1965 immigration laws introduced under the Johnson administration, but much earlier, during the holy month of Ramadan in the year 1805. The host of the event, held

[6] "Meet the Press," transcript from October 19, 2008, http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/27266223/ns/meet_the_press/t/meet-press-transcript-oct/.

on December 9, was none other than the president of the United States and the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson. The Muslim guest was Sidi Soliman (Sulayman) Mellimelli, who was the envoy from the Bey of Tunis, a North African Muslim state. Dinner would have ordinarily been served at 3:30 P.M., but the president held that, to honor his guest's religious preferences, he would have dinner served "precisely at sunset."[7]

The legacy of this event was acknowledged in a more lavish ceremony held in August 2012, when President, Barack H. Obama held a White House Iftar dinner (meal to break a fast during the month of Ramadan) on August 10, 2012.[8] During his speech at the dinner, the American president pointed back to that early Ramadan dinner as proof for the centuries of the presence and inclusion of Muslim Americans as part of the fabric of American society:

> As I've noted before, Thomas Jefferson once held a sunset dinner here with an envoy from Tunisia – perhaps the first Iftar at the White House, more than 200 years ago. And some of you, as you arrived tonight, may have seen our special display, courtesy of our friends at the Library of Congress – the Koran that belonged to Thomas Jefferson. And that's a reminder, along with the generations of patriotic Muslims in America, that Islam – like so many faiths – is part of our national story.[9]

President Obama's reference to Thomas Jefferson's copy of the Qur'an is also apropos here, as it shows the intertwined roots of the American experiment and Islam. In 1765 a young Thomas Jefferson was studying law and sought to acquaint himself with a wide variety of legal traditions and natural law. He purchased for his own personal library the recently published two-volume translation of the Qur'an, called *The Koran, Commonly Called the Alkoran of Mohammed*, which had been undertaken by the British scholar George Sale.[10] It was his library that would in time form the basis of the Library of Congress.

[7] http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/inbrief/2011/07/20110729153019kramo.3508199.html#axzz24NUokU00.

[8] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/10/remarks-president-iftar-dinner.

[9] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/08/10/remarks-president-iftar-dinner.

[10] Jefferson purchased the 1764 second-edition printing of the George Sale translation. For a history of Jefferson's encounter with the Qur'an, see Kevin J. Hayes, "How Thomas Jefferson Read the Qur'an," *Early American Literature* 39:2 (2004): 247–261; also see http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/201104/thomas.jefferson.s.qur.an.htm.

Jefferson's interest in Islam and "Oriental wisdom" more broadly was no passing fancy. He had begun the study of Arabic language and grammar and obtained many books on the history of Islam and Muslim civilizations. He had supported the establishment of academic programs for the study of "the Orient." Jefferson's primary interest in Islam was through the legal tradition, and in doing so he mirrored the concerns of the translator of the Qur'an, George Sale:

> If the religious and civil Institutions of foreign nations are worth our knowledge, those of Mohammed, the lawgiver of the Arabians, and founder of an empire which in less than a century spread itself over a greater part of the world than the Romans were ever masters of, must needs be so.[11]

In Jefferson's autobiography, he used language that indicated his desire to see this country not merely as a Christian country but as a home for all. His discussion of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom in 1786 makes this point emphatically:

> Where the preamble declares that coercion is a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, an amendment was proposed, by inserting the word "Jesus Christ," so that it should read, "a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion." The insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination.[12]

Jefferson's remarkable reference to religious freedom was not a one-time occurrence. In his "Notes on Religion," he had approvingly cited a passage from Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* that "neither Pagan nor Mahometan, nor Jew, ought to be excluded from the civil rights of the commonwealth because of his religion."[13]

Thomas Jefferson was not the only one of the Founding Fathers to engage with Islam. Without taking the Founding Fathers to be paradigms of universalist pluralism, one can situate them in a broad Enlightenment tradition that actually looked to Islam as a more "rational" religion and

[11] http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/201104/thomas.jefferson.s.qur.an.htm.

[12] *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (Washington, D.C., 1904), p. 67. The text of this statement can be accessed at the Library of Congress Web site: http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mtj1&fileName=mtj1page052.db&recNum=516.

[13] Cited in Barbara McGraw, ed., *Taking Religious Pluralism Seriously: Spiritual Politics on America's Sacred Ground* (Waco, 2005), p. 11.

offered fairly positive evaluations of the tradition. This evaluation of Islam as a "rational faith" was often an implicit critique of Christianity, especially its mysticism and alleged opposition to rationality. In other words, the praise of Islam was often a veiled critique of the Christianity they found in their own era, and an implicit prioritization of rationality over revelation as a means of access to the truth. Benjamin Franklin and George Washington can be counted among those including Islam in a list of religions to be accommodated. When George Washington was asked in 1784 what kind of workers should be hired to work on Mount Vernon, he responded by stating that they should hire the best workers, regardless of their background: "If they are good workmen, they may be from Asia, Africa or Europe; they may be Mahometans, Jews, Christians of any sect, or they may be Atheists."[14] Since the 1990s, American presidents have repeatedly come back to emphasize the notion of Muslim Americans fulfilling this promise of being hardworking and contributing citizens of this society.

In identifying the spaces and places for Muslim Americans in American society, it is important to point out the extent to which some of these early possibilities are there to be excavated and resurrected in our own age.

AMERICAN MUSLIMS IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Much has changed between the era of the Founding Fathers and our post-9/11 era of early twenty-first-century America. Thomas Jefferson's copy of the Qur'an, which eventually became part of the holdings of the Library of Congress, gained attention when it was used in the swearing-in ceremony of Keith Ellison, the first Muslim American elected to the U.S. Congress in 2007. Right-wing bloggers and alarmists saw the choice of the Qur'an (instead of the more commonly used Bible) as yet another slippery slope that would lead to the implosion of American identity and called Ellison unpatriotic and a threat to American values. The low point in these attacks came from the Virginia congressman Virgil Goode:

> I fear that in the next century we will have many more Muslims in the United States if we do not adopt the strict immigration policies that I believe are necessary to preserve the values and beliefs traditional to the United States of America.[15]

[14] George Washington, *Letters and Addresses* (New York, 1908), p. 257.
[15] http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/12/20/AR2006122001318.html.

Ellison's response was both firm and polite. He offered that Goode was mistaken both on Islam and on the constitutional rights of religious minorities in America. Furthermore, Ellison reminded Goode that Ellison's own standing as a Muslim was not due to immigration, as his ancestors had been in the United States since 1742: "I'm not an immigrant … I'm an African-American."[16]

Even more powerful words would come after the presidential election in 2008. Perhaps the most powerful declaration of support for Islam from an American political leader was the June 2009 speech of President Obama in Cairo. In this historic speech, Barack Obama began by offering:

> I have come here to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world; one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect; and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive, and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles – principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings.[17]

He then went on to cite from the Qur'an ("Be conscious of God and speak always the truth") and offered that he too promised to follow the spiritual and moral guidance of this verse and speak truthfully. He recalled many of the historic markers between Islam and America, including Morocco (a Muslim nation) having been the first to recognize the United States of America, John Adams's comments on the Treaty of Tripoli, and the election of Keith Ellison. In quite possibly the most emphatic statement of support any American president has ever made on behalf of Islam, he stated: "And I consider it part of my responsibility as president of the United States to fight against negative stereotypes of Islam wherever they appear."[18]

While there are the positive engagements with Islam, the overall trend in the country has been much more negative. An August 2010 study by the Pew Foundation found 38 percent of all Americans admitting to having "unfavorable" opinions of Muslims.[19] This unfavorable opinion also appeared among members of the U.S. Congress, including

[16] http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/21/us/21koran.html?_r=1.
[17] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6–04–09/.
[18] http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6–04–09/.
[19] http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1706/poll-americans-views-of-muslims-object-to-new-york-islamic-center-islam-violence.

New York congressman Peter King, the powerful chair of the House Homeland Security Committee, who openly asked whether there are "too many mosques" in the country.[20] At the time of King's statement, there were approximately 2,000 mosques in the country, compared to over 330,000 churches.[21] Muslim organizations wondered whether any member of the U.S. Congress would have stated with equal ease that there were too many churches or synagogues. Congressman King cited Islamophobes Steven Emerson (the discredited "terrorism expert" who falsely identified Muslims as being behind the Oklahoma City bombing committed by Timothy McVeigh)[22] and the equally notorious Daniel Pipes as his sources.[23] Not surprisingly, the congressman also stated that 85 percent of American mosques were controlled by Islamic extremists, and as such the majority of American Muslims represent "an enemy living amongst us."[24]

The issue of Muslims' presence in the broader fabric of American civic life has continued to occupy American media headlines and debates in the public sphere. Events from the 2010 controversy over a Muslim community center in New York City (the Park51 controversy) to a series of attacks on mosque building projects throughout the country continued to demonstrate the ambivalent status and perception of American Muslims in American society. The cover of *Time Magazine* in August 2010, rightfully so, asked "Is America Islamophobic?"[25]

It is worth noting that Muslim American leaders and scholars have responded to these controversies not only by defending their religious tradition but also by reminding people of American values and traditions. Hamza Yusuf, one of the most influential living American Muslim leaders and a white convert to Islam, wrote a powerful essay in which he traced his own family's lineage to his great-great-grandfather, Michael O'Hanson, who arrived in America from Ireland in the 1840s. Yusuf placed Muslims in this broader American genealogy by proclaiming that "Muslims are the new Irish" and encouraged Muslims

[20] http://thinkprogress.org/security/2011/03/10/149817/peter-king-too-many-mosques-fact-check/.

[21] http://features.pewforum.org/muslim/controversies-over-mosque-and-islamic-centers-across-the-us.html.

[22] On Steve Emerson, see "Meet An Islamophobia Network 'Expert': Steven Emerson," http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2011/08/31/308537/steve-emerson-investigative-project/?mobile=nc.

[23] For more on Daniel Pipes, see "Fear, Inc.," http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2011/08/pdf/islamophobia.pdf.

[24] http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/panelists/john_esposito/2011/03/islamophobia_draped_in_the_american_flag.html.

[25] http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2011936,00.html.

to take heart and follow the example of previous ethnic and religious minorities who successfully became a part of the American mosaic. It was surely no slip of the tongue when Yusuf identified the city that his great-, great-grandfather arrived in, Philadelphia, as "the Mecca for Irish-Americans" in the 1840s. As Keith Ellison had done before Yusuf, in referring to his own family's long lineage in America, Yusuf was also pointing out the intertwined nature of American and Muslim identities.[26]

FRAMEWORK OF THE VOLUME

Clearly, more than ever, we are in need of accurate and accessible discussions that portray the full complexity and subtlety of vibrant Muslim communities and advance the discourse beyond the often shallow and sensationalist journalistic accounts. The present volume brings together scholars in the continuously growing field of scholarship that addresses American Islam. While many of the popular discussions of American Islam deal with American Muslims as only partially "Americanized," as a "problem," or in a situation of crisis, this volume also speaks of the many opportunities that exist in Muslim communities for exploring new discourses and practices in areas such as new emerging religious authority, arts, gender, pluralism, and citizenship.

It is also important here to explain the title of this volume: *The Cambridge Companion to American Islam*. The choice of this title reflects use of a term now common in the scholarly literature, one that supports the claim that American Muslims have indeed forged their own version of Islam (one of many "Islams," alongside Iranian Islam, Turkish Islam, Egyptian Islam, etc.). This American Islam is at the same time a vision and a reality on the ground. Muslim communities, discourses, and practices have had an impact and significantly helped shape the American religious landscape at least since the 1900s. Conversely, American religion, politics, and culture have had an even more significant impact on the formulation of Muslim American practices, institutions, politics, and communities. The title "American Islam" implicitly rejects the assumption that Muslims are somehow a temporary or simply migratory phenomenon in America, as implied in terminology such as "Muslims in America" or "Islam in America."

[26] Hamza Yusuf, "Amid Mosque Dispute Muslims Can Look to Irish Catholics for Hope," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 16, 2010, http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2010/0916/Amid-mosque-dispute-Muslims-can-look-to-Irish-Catholics-for-hope.

As for the human beings who inhabit and animate this American Islam, the contributors to the volume refer to "American Muslims" and "Muslim Americans." The two terms are of course related but carry slightly different valences. The term "American Muslims" locates Muslims as part of a global community (the *ummah*) and then focuses on the American members of that global community. The term "Muslim Americans," on the other hand, begins with the genus of Americans and then locates the group marked as Muslim within that broader American umbrella. Some contributors prefer one term over the other, while others use them interchangeably, and in the variation of their usage is demonstrated both the significance of terminology ("What's in a name?") and the varied and negotiated approaches to the subjects of study and their complex identities.

It also needs to be pointed out that "American" is here used in its most limited geographic understanding as designating the borders and boundaries of the United States. This focus on Islam and Muslims in the United States is a concession to the limits of an edited volume and the expectation of comprehensiveness as well as depth and breadth of coverage. There are, of course Muslim communities in Canada, and Muslims have also had a continuous presence in the Caribbean and South America. Muslims in Canada have had some similar but also some vastly different historical experiences as part of the fabric of American society, and the editors thought it cumbersome and confusing to compel the scholars who wrote for this volume to include, compare, and differentiate between U.S. and Canadian Muslims. This is even truer for Caribbean and South American Muslims with their diverse and complex local histories. There is surely a need for subsequent studies of the whole North American and South American Muslim contexts, but including them here would not have done justice to any of the countries, regions, and communities.

The geographic focus on the United States has been paired with a set of basic premises that each contributor to the volume was charged to incorporate into her or his chapter. These premises reflect developments in the fields that contribute to the study of American Islam, while simultaneously pushing the boundaries imposed on many of those fields in the past.

The first of these premises focuses on the necessity to include gender as a category of analysis in all aspects of the study of American Muslims. As women compose roughly half of the American Muslim population (even if this was not always the case in the past), their presence, contributions, and frequent absence from documents and historical narratives