

## II

### AMERICAN MUSLIM IDENTITY: RACE AND ETHNICITY IN PROGRESSIVE ISLAM

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Four hundred years of black blood and sweat invested in America, and the white man still has the black man begging for what every immigrant fresh off the ship can take for granted the minute he walks down the gangplank.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine a banner draped across the port of arrival to the United States' shores: "America: love it or leave it." Then imagine these new arrivals came on slave ships from Africa.

At the heart of highly political, sensitive, racist, or even the most casual discussions about American citizenship and identity is at least some notion about "choice." Overwhelmingly, Americans are composed of immigrants who came to America's shores by choice. While identifying with their previous cultural heritages, they want something here in America. They relish the possibilities of establishing a new identity within the complexity of American pluralism. This new identity integrates the dual components of previous culture and American citizenship. While Muslim immigrants to America occasionally reference their previous cultures using the hyphenated designation, the term "Muslim-American" poses a rupture in the clarity of this identity formula. Being Muslim does not represent belonging to one monolithic culture. For example: "Egyptian-American," "African-American," "Jordanian-American" all name a cultural background plus the new American identity. The designation "Muslim-American" appears to include all Muslims despite the variety of cultural heritages among them.

In the case of American Islam, the hyphenated formula might eventually become a symbol of unity. At the present, however, it obscures profound and

unreconciled differences across ethnic and racial backgrounds. It refers to an Islam that Muslims in America have in common, while simultaneously erasing latent and overt ethnic and cultural prejudices that have led to communication breakdowns and the hegemony of immigrant Muslim leadership and representation in the American Muslim context. These latent prejudices have yet to be directly addressed in community discourse, and this has resulted in further division. This essay looks at the issue of diversity in Muslim-American identities and particular concerns about the random ways that African-American Muslims are included and excluded.

I enter this discussion as an African-American Muslim woman whose experience with Islam and Muslims has not been limited to living in America. Gender, race, and class dynamics interface with matters of Islam and personal identification or empowerment in distinctive ways within each of the countries where I have resided. In the relationships between Muslims at the communal level, these dynamics create schisms incongruent with the pluralism idealized about Islam. In the larger context of progressive Islamic discourse, my concern has been focused on social justice. Some issues of social justice receive more attention than others in mainstream progressive discussions. Most often, the matter of gender hegemony is referred to, although not integrated and certainly not resolved, as part of progressive Islam. Matters of class or racial hegemony receive less direct attention. While references to Islam and culture abound, these are not focused on the relationships between the cultural identities of Muslims. Culture is one way to distinguish between essentialist articulations of Islam and its multi-variant manifestations throughout history and in various cultures.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of a progressive American Islamic discourse, attention to matters of race relations will not only need to address the power dynamics but also the problems of cultural assumptions and the lack of communication between immigrant and African-American Muslims. Ordinary communication problems at the level of exchanges between Muslims of different ethnicities lead to extraordinary misperceptions about the relationships between them. Misperceptions about the active roles fulfilled by various Muslims severely underestimate the real terms of Muslims' collective participation in establishing Islam in America. I have known many instances where immigrant Muslim women have handed over to their African-American sisters the organization of semi-public activities to benefit the community. While this implies some awareness of the more public role often played by African-American women, it simultaneously privileges immigrant women by shielding them from public scrutiny and censor. Furthermore, once the tasks have been initiated, African-American women are expected to hand over the fruits of their labor to male Muslims, the overwhelming majority of whom will be immigrants.

Leadership roles, authority, and public representation rest overwhelmingly upon the shoulders of male immigrants. In some instances, these roles have been

won after the efforts of a wide cross-section of Muslim men and women, immigrant and African-American. However, those who participate at the grassroots level are marginalized when it comes to the establishment of authority. Immigrant Muslims privilege their own status as authorities on the basis of their centuries-long heritage of Islam. "I used to be around a lot of Eastern Muslims," says Muhammad Abdul Rahman, a member of *Masjid ush-Shura*. "They would come over here and treat us like we babes in Islam. They thought they should be our leaders just because they could speak Arabic. They would come in our *masjids* and try to be our teachers."<sup>3</sup> It mattered little if the Islam these people inherited was one of mere cultural transference rather than personal religious devotion and study.

Coincidentally, the immigrant Muslim hegemony over leadership roles is also related to financial resources or class. Immigrant Muslims use international contacts as a source of funding to start and maintain some of their organizations or to build mosques and community centers. Undoubtedly, many immigrant Muslim communities have an overall economic advantage over the majority of the African-American communities. Indeed, many affluent African-American Muslims will gravitate toward certain affluent community centers and mosques of immigrant origin on the basis of class. While all mosques of some affluence are inclusive of members from lower income groups, affluent immigrant Muslims will not participate with the same fervor in grassroots mosques established by economically struggling African-Americans. "They come over here with their money and degrees and with an insular view of Islam," says Frederick Thaufeer al-Deen.<sup>4</sup> "For a people long considered second-class citizens within their own country, being treated like second-class citizens within their own religion is a sore point."<sup>5</sup>

Administrative styles also differ between immigrant and African-American Muslims in mosques, Islamic centers, and other community-based organizations. Most governing bodies and *ad hoc* committees retain for themselves the power of consultative counsel. In immigrant communities, the consultative bodies are fixed and formed by major financial contributors to the mosque establishment. Immigrant Muslim communities will more often exclude women except in supportive roles. Most are wives of other well-to-do men, and few will challenge the *status quo* or mainstream opinions on major issues. In African-American mosques, the imam himself is the head of the community. Should he refer to a consultative body, its membership is not fixed but organized on an ad-hoc basis relative to the issues that need to be resolved. Coincidentally, African-American Muslim consultative bodies are more inclusive of women, allowing them the power to contribute, vote, and challenge major decisions concerning community activities. Indeed, African-American Muslim women are often the ones to initiate the construction of a consultative body to address specific community needs. While the imam of most African-American mosques must maintain full-time employment elsewhere, immigrant communities hire foreigners (usually)

to serve exclusively as imams. The imported imam is often unfamiliar with current U.S. and local circumstances. More often than not, this also means that he is not well equipped to participate in and contribute to interfaith dialogues.<sup>6</sup> The imam is also not empowered to make decisions over the community, since he is an employee of those who hired him.

Between these two organizational styles, the question of representation is rarely confronted directly. I know of no Muslim community that intentionally organizes its leadership to reflect its membership with the express purpose of representing the actual demographics of the Muslim population in attendance at that mosque. The members most underrepresented at the administrative level are African-Americans. Consequently, their voice is marginalized in pluralist contexts outside of the mosques as well. Disagreements within the community may lead to the full departure of a body of African-Americans followed by the establishment of another Islamic center or mosque with very limited financial resources. Although this is a successful strategy for the proliferation of Islamic community organizations and mosques, it depletes the resources of an already less privileged body of citizens in the larger U.S. context. It also tends to produce greater fragmentation in the regional make-up of the Muslim community. This fragmentation is further represented in the degree to which regional Muslims form networks for coordinating symbolic occasions like 'Id celebration as well as for lobbying over shared political concerns in America.

Finally, these fragments result in contending claims over authority when the need arises for regional and national leadership representation. In no way are African-American Muslims represented in direct proportion to their percentage among Muslim Americans.<sup>7</sup> "When folk want to know about Islam, they have always gone to the immigrant community," gripes [Dr Aminah] McCloud. It is telling, she says, that after September 11, "who came to the White House to represent Islam? The immigrant community. The African-American community felt very dismayed."<sup>8</sup> This was blatant after the catastrophes on September 11 and the resulting national character of Islam in America as portrayed to the general American public was overwhelmingly male and immigrant. Many African-American representatives were silenced or marginalized. In some cases, this was done specifically because they were Americans and therefore could not assist in the nagging questions about the loyalty of Muslims in America to American interests over and above foreign interests.<sup>9</sup>

The enmity within the Muslim communities in America over issues of race and ethnicity seems to thrive on the casual neglect of direct confrontations and critical interrogation of the root causes and multiple manifestations of these problems. Although a theoretical interrogation is insufficient to effect a full resolution of the problems, it can act as a catalyst for seeking pragmatic approaches and real strategies toward resolutions. More importantly, a resolution may result when the goal of theoretical consideration is intimately connected to the practical. After all, no Muslim voluntarily confesses to racism, classism, or

ethnocentrism. All parties view these attitudes as inherent contradictions of Islam as based on its primary source, the Qur'an. Yet, Muslims in America engage in so many forms of ethnocentrism that these tendencies belittle the genuine integrity of Islam.

#### A TEXTUAL LOOK AT MATTERS OF RACE AND ETHNICITY IN ISLAM

The Qur'an is the major source of inspiration in the development of ideas and practices in Islam. An important two-part claim might best describe the Qur'anic precedent. The Qur'an supports and acknowledges difference between peoples but does not use those differences as a standard of judgment for human worth. Surat al-Hujurat 49:11-13 states

Oh you who have attained to faith! No men shall deride (other men) ... and no women [shall deride other] women: it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves. Be conscious of God. Oh humankind! Behold, We have created you all from one male and one female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily the most noble of you in the sight of God is the one who is the most deeply conscious of God.<sup>10</sup>

In the first part of these verses, the Qur'an supports the idea of unity by exhorting the human family to respect and safeguard the dignity of one another.<sup>11</sup> This is followed by the second claim, to affirm distinctions between peoples using the collective terms "nations" and "tribes." It is important that the human collective is divided into categories as explicitly mentioned here. These divisions also determine certain aspects of behavior and identity. Since the Qur'an recognizes these aspects of identity, they are significant to human beings' social purpose and well-being. Human beings belong both to the larger collective and to smaller collectives. In acknowledging this, the Qur'an affirms that these are appropriate features of identity formation. More importantly, this verse uses these groups as part of the basis for an interconnection or "knowing one another." Overall, however, the Qur'an asserts a single evaluative standard: *taqwa*. "Verily the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is [*atqa-kum*] the one who is the most deeply conscious of Him." It does not support the notion that group membership is the standard of evaluation for nobility and worth.

Despite direct affirmation of distinctions between groups, the ultimate evaluative criterion for a person's worth is *taqwa*, moral consciousness of Allah, involving both an internal and an external component. *Taqwa* as defined by Fazlur Rahman is "a mental state of responsibility from which an agent's actions proceed but which recognizes that the criterion of judgment upon them lies outside."<sup>12</sup> In both its consciousness and action aspects, *taqwa* is part of responsible morality and agency within the larger framework of Islam, which neither limits nor excludes particular group membership. Hence, in the earlier

part of the passage, the Qur'an specifically orders men and women not to deride each other, since "it may well be that those [whom they deride] are better than themselves." Ultimately goodness is not based on a group identification.

The Muslim-American configuration of identity claims to transcend problems of race or ethnicity, but because ethnicity is unclear, attitudes and practices of ethnocentricity are obscured and overlooked. In the politics of Muslim communities, organizations, institutions, and public representation, some parties claim more rights than others. These uneven and unreciprocal practices occur within group interactions, at the level of selective participation in community activities as well as in the selection and recognition of leaders. Meanwhile, all Muslim parties in America also claim to adhere to Western standards of universal human rights that explicitly prohibit disparity on the basis of race or ethnicity. In other words, despite the assumption of ethnic parity in the Qur'an and in the human rights standards in the U.S.A. (through which American Muslims also claim their rights), an equitable system of moral evaluation is *not* consistently operative in the North American Muslim communal context.

#### BRIEF HISTORY OF ISLAM IN AMERICA

The first Muslims in America were slaves taken primarily from West Africa. "For three hundred and fifty years, Muslim men, women, and children ... were sold in the New World. They were among the first Africans shipped and among the very last. When they reached the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, after a horrific journey, they introduced a second monotheistic religion ... into post-Columbian America."<sup>13</sup> "When the first Africans were shipped to the New World, beginning in 1501, Islam was already well established in West Africa."<sup>14</sup> Although Muslim slaves are an important historical reference today, Islam did not survive the American slave experience except in some customary practices whose origins in Islam would become obscured.

Later, after the end of slavery, the first collective movements towards complete human dignity for blacks in America referred to Islam as a part of a religious heritage that directly challenged post-slavery racist practices and attitudes in American policies. For some, Islam was also used to directly refute the Biblical justification for the slavery practiced in Christian America. Despite all this, slaves were only permitted to practice Christianity and this would remain the single religious choice among African-Americans for some time after the end of slavery. Historically, Islam represented the first viable and sustained religious alternative adopted by African-Americans.

The first movements among African-Americans to combat experiences of racism in America were primarily nationalist and pan-Africanist. They were quite secular in nature. Then "(i)n the first decades of the twentieth century, African-Americans began to actively form communities that defined themselves

as Islamic."<sup>15</sup> These were alternative religious and spiritual articulations to address the problems of identity and race in America. Although these articulations would in many cases adopt symbols and history from global Islam, they would not sustain the integrity of Islamic dogma involving belief in one supreme transcendent God, Allah, and in the prophecy and living example of the Prophet Muhammad. However, these variant references to Islam eventually led to the large conversion movements among African-Americans. Studies of one development of African-American Islam trace the movement from the early configurations of the Moorish Science Temple, through the Nation of Islam, ending with the Muslim American Society under the leadership of Warith-Deen Mohammad today. Alongside this development of African-American Islam with multiple identity reformulations through the Nation of Islam, African-Americans also became Muslim through other sources of inspiration and information. One leading source of information for African-Americans was the immigrant communities. For example, in northeastern U.S. cities in the early part of the twentieth century, the Ahmadiyyah movement spearheaded a significant movement specifically addressed to African-Americans.<sup>16</sup> Although African-Americans did not become Ahmadis they used this introduction to Islam to study and practice orthodox *Sunni* Islam, eventually setting up their own communities between the 1950s and 1970s. In the 1970s, attempts to integrate various indigenous and immigrant Muslim communities began in earnest.

As it relates to identity, Muslim immigrants to North America have a varied history in this context. Three major phases of immigration differently affect the extent to which Islam itself played a factor in immigration to and integration into America. Like every other immigrant group to America after the African slaves, Muslims come to America seeking better opportunities. These opportunities are overwhelmingly defined in concrete terms of materialism and American civil liberties. The first groups of immigrants that concern us came from Arabic-speaking countries in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth. Many were not Muslim but all came to America for purely secular reasons. Muslim and non-Muslim Arab immigrants linked with each other through shared cultural experiences as Arabs. Such links persist today.<sup>17</sup> Some efforts to maintain Islam were minimal and cultural at best. Efforts to establish Islam as a feature of an American subculture among Arabic-speaking immigrants were nonexistent. Such efforts would not take root and become widespread even among the earlier immigrants until subsequent waves of Muslim immigration.

A change in U.S. immigration laws in the 1960s opened the doors for a larger influx of Muslims who would come with greater emphasis on sustaining aspects of their cultural and ethnic identity and origins, including Islam. More Arabic-speaking immigrants followed and large numbers of South Asian immigrants began to arrive. The increase in South Asian Muslim immigrants would

eventually lead to a stronger effort among immigrants to form a distinctive American Muslim identity. For one thing, the overwhelming majority of South Asian Muslims to come to North America were economically well off. They came with the expressed interest of pursuing professional development and material progress for themselves and their children. Islam was an intimate part of their cultural identity, and was also emphasized in their efforts to preserve their culture, since the faith was not in conflict with their material aspirations.

Except for the Ahmadiyyahs, banished as heretical from Pakistan in the 1960s, South Asian Muslim immigrants showed little or no interest in propagating Islam among the general American population except for some white women who either converted to Islam before or during marriage or were married despite their lack of conversion. Very few white American males would enter Islam until the development of strong Sufi movements in America in the 1970s and 1980s. Even today, Caucasian American converts are overwhelmingly female, with some estimates as high as eighty-five percent.

Islam as a feature of American communities took off in earnest during the 1970s. This public emergence was primarily local, in the form of establishing more mosques and community centers. The Muslim Student Association (MSA) started in 1963 at a number of campuses across the U.S.A. and Canada. As an umbrella organization, MSA worked with Muslim students in the universities as well as with Muslim community organizations. By the 1970s, other national immigrant and African-American institutions were organizing or re-organizing. Such movements would continue and proliferate into the 1990s.<sup>18</sup>

The national-level institutionalization of collectives with an explicit Islamic identity component is a key indicator of the movement among Muslims in America toward greater inclusion in American public life. As these organizations and institutions proliferate, they indicate the spread of Islam and the growth of Muslims' interest in their citizenship as Americans. They also indicate some of the schisms among Muslims. To be sure, these schisms are not merely on the basis of race and ethnicity, but also relate to perspectives on Islam and specific issues of concern to Muslim collectives. In any case, all such organizations represent a claim to autonomous identities simultaneously as Muslim and American. The need for national recognition is often indicated by the titles given to these groups and by the nature of their operations. The use of the word "American" implies at some level that they are representatives of Muslim or Islamic interest in the American context. U.S. officials rarely inquire about their real constituency, even if noted by the organization itself. The conflict between their respective perspectives on Islam as well as the ethnic homogeneity of the participants indicate that these groups do not reflect a consensus of Muslims in the U.S.A. Yet, many of these groups continue to project themselves as representative. In a crisis like that following September 11, 2001, contention among the organizations surfaced about how accurately they represented their American Muslim constituency.

## OVERCOMING OR RE-INSCRIBING ETHNOCENTRISM AND RACISM?

Before his death in 1967, Malcolm X would draw two important conclusions as a direct consequence of eighteen weeks of travel in the Middle East and Africa. First, he concluded that the problems of non-white peoples were identical against the capitalist racial hegemony of colonialism, and that all non-whites were more or less in the same circumstance *vis-à-vis* white supremacy. Secondly, Malcolm said, "America needs to understand Islam, because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem."<sup>19</sup> Malcolm believed the Muslim world and Muslim society were color-blind. "On a superficial level, it appeared that Malcolm X, like other naïve observers of Islamic countries, believed that this area of the world was free of the evils of racism. However, more substantively, we must ask ourselves how such an astute observer of human affairs could have missed the patterns of racial separatism that had such deep roots in the Islamic world."<sup>20</sup> How are both these perspectives simultaneously true?

Malcolm's comments reflect the duality of experience among Muslims in their own countries and those who come to America. When I have lived and traveled in the Muslim Middle East, North and South Africa, South and Southeast Asia,<sup>21</sup> as an African-American woman, I have felt an extreme affinity with Muslims of color. Despite this international feeling, the politics of racial and ethnic hegemony is blatant in my own home country, where I continually experienced a sense of "otherness" setting me apart from Muslim immigrants and their descendants. The contrast between these two experiences leads me to assume that there is an important factor in the American context that tends to engender this double standard. Although Muslim communities in America endeavor to hold collective and racially diverse activities, meetings, and celebrations, there are still persistent ethnic and racial sentiments that prevent us from sustaining radical pluralism in our communities.

Furthermore, these problems of race and ethnicity in American Muslim communities prevent us from achieving effective unity for overcoming larger external obstacles to our empowerment as a single religious minority in America. Indeed, it is often at the national level where the negative consequences of these yet unreconciled problems are most glaring. Various Muslim organizations continue to form on the national level. Each vies to be recognized by non-Muslim authorities and accepted by the Muslim masses as representative of Islam in America. However, racial parity in American Islam seems as illusive as gender parity globally. Often, leaders of national Muslim organizations and institutions are uninterested in gaining grassroots-level cooperation or acceptance, since they find the diversity among Muslim perspectives too tedious to overcome before they move forward with their agenda. Meanwhile, few grassroots organizations rise to achieve national recognition.<sup>22</sup>

Historically, many new mosques or splinter organizations and Muslim centers were formed on the basis of ethnicity; none would directly reject other Muslim

ethnicities, however. According to the *Mosque Report* issued by CAIR (Council on American Islamic Relations), there is still great fluidity between cultures in the mosques and community centers across America.<sup>23</sup> Understandably, each collective gathers around shared symbols, past experiences, and perspectives on Islamic praxis as a basis for mutuality and understanding. But such sharing is not necessarily as Islamic as it is cultural or ethnic in origin. When others outside the dominant ethnic or racial group are present at collective gatherings, the distinctions between history, culture, and Islam often go unobserved or without comment. Sometimes what is shared are the distinctive languages or dialects, diet, or other customs.

## AFRICAN-AMERICANS AND ISLAM

The overwhelming majority of African-Americans gravitating towards Islam are drawn to its humanizing articulation of social justice as well as to the divine nature of the Qur'an. As already mentioned, the extent to which actual experiences of racial justice are affirmed in the living reality of Muslim community relations is varied.

Historically, African-Americans had already experienced the abuses of power and denial of full civil liberties in the United States. Immigrant Muslim Americans have become direct victims of these abuses in a dramatic way since September 11, 2001. The African-American communities are the best place for Muslims to gain constructive insights about such U.S. abuses of power, and about strategies to combat them. Before September 11, 2001 few opportunities were offered Muslims to discuss these insights among themselves. There is need for substantive organized forums to allow meaningful dialogue along these lines and to benefit all Muslims in America. Before September 11 immigrant Muslims did not equally experience these abuses of power. Perhaps now they will see a greater imperative in addressing inter-community antagonisms and negative ethnic relations with African-American Muslims for the express purpose of addressing the larger systemic violations of civil liberties.

Each ethnic group of Muslims in America has collective experiences that act as references points and root metaphors to reinforce fundamental lessons about Islam. For African-American Muslims these references often relate to aspects of their pre-Islamic past. For example, references are made to the negative effects of drinking alcohol or to women's experiences when adopting immodest forms of dress. Overwhelmingly, the disruption of our African cultural heritage as enforced by North American slavery creates a particular identity reference. The American slave experience is the primary shared feature for all African-Americans, whether Muslim or not.

African-American Muslims are intimately linked with other Americans through the history of horrific racial slavery in the Americas and with the development pains of American pluralism in the period before the Civil War,

through the civil rights movement, and even up to present. As part of their collective heritage, slavery links all African-Americans, not just African-American Muslims, in a unique way and affects our identity and relationship to America. There is never an issue for African-Americans about being "American." They never wanted to come here in the first place. Since immigrant Muslims do not share this experience, it sets them apart from the African-American experience. African-Americans read the history of Islam in America first through the slave trade: it has been estimated that as many as one-third of the slaves were from Islamic central Africa. This is part of the psychological claim to Islam among Muslim Americans of African origin. No such long running, painful, and unique "American" identity affiliation exists for immigrants, no matter how many generations they claim in America. Immigrant Muslims, who stress the origins of Islam in America with their own immigration during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, overlook this important early feature of the American Islamic past.

In 1999, Oxford University Press published a book titled *Muslims on the Americanization Path*.<sup>24</sup> The very title reveals the presupposition of the volume and further accords priority to immigrant American Muslims, for whom being Muslim is presumed and Americanization must be an intentional operation. Such an articulation is impossibly prejudiced against African-American Muslim first- and second-generation converts, for whom being American is presumed and Islamization is the voluntary and intentional operation. True to the title, the contents primarily focus on immigrant Muslim concerns. One section of the book is titled "Americans towards Islamization"; all the chapters in this section focus on African-American identity. By implication, Islam is unconditionally granted to Muslim immigrants and a goal to be aspired to for Americans. Meanwhile being an American is normative for African-Americans and Islam is aspired towards. This is the crux of the contrast between African-American Muslims and immigrant American Muslims. "If African-American communities are to be included in the same text with other Muslim groups, then I believe more is needed to indicate how Black Muslims and those other groups interrelate."<sup>25</sup>

#### IMMIGRANT MUSLIMS

Though outside the immigrant Muslim community in America, I speak from within my limited experience as a Muslim American and among other Muslims worldwide. I have also entered the domestic and cultural environments of Muslims in North and South Africa, South and Southeast Asia, and the Middle East. My observations are brief, subjective, and relative to the task: national-level discourse on inter-ethnic relations. I have felt welcomed in many homes and public halls when I have visited lands with large Muslim populations who enjoy a long heritage of Islam. Attention was lavished over me as a guest in the home

of extended families. I was comforted in many ways. This has led me to criticize my own African-American brothers and sisters as hosts in America. Perhaps we inherited a struggle for well-being in a culture that robbed us of our roots and heritage, leaving us displaced in this our new home. Our experiences of extended family have been ruptured since slavery. This has led us to form more diverse and complex community relations to facilitate our survival. It is not customary to put the visitor before us.

The private lives of African-American Muslims are sometimes closed to those who descend upon America, especially those who come to master a place of their own within it. Although this may seem a small matter, it bears upon our relationships with immigrants, who view America as a land of opportunity among non-Muslim Americans. Muslims who enter a substantial Muslim population in other countries do not expect to assume leadership or representation roles. Such deference and etiquette is neglected in the context of American Islam. It is as if Islam has no native presence, so outsiders must be its representatives at the national level. These observations have symbolic significance in the conflicts between indigenous and immigrant Muslims in America.<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, many immigrant Muslims still see Islam as an ethnic identity. Collective experiences refer to or are drawn from back "home," such that a crisis in identity for the children of immigrants is viewed as a need to send the child back home. Even after a few generations have passed, the necessity to connect with the cultures of their origins marks the immigrants' foundational experience as something other than America. African-Americans look back only to past struggles in America. Immigrants have no such American identity affiliation. Thus, a kind of superficial Americanness is sometimes reflected. The claim to America is still recent and the past that calls is still other than America. They have yet to establish a lasting American legacy. For this reason, the general American population still identifies immigrant Muslims as foreigners. In the case of an international crisis, immigrant Muslims identify with foreign interests. In the case of a national crisis, they are clearly targeted for racial profiling and negative stereotyping that violate public civil liberties. This has become most blatant since the crisis of September 11, 2001.<sup>27</sup>

Since most Americans garner their perception of Islam only from sensational television programs and local media coverage, which continue to "other" the native cultures of Muslim origins, they view affiliation with these cultures as problematic. Indeed, many Americans view immigrant Muslims as brothers and sisters of foreign terrorists and associate them with the perpetuation of extreme forms of gender inequality and abuse. In the recent September 11 crisis, the question of loyalty to America brought all those with foreign interests and connections under wider suspicion. Many immigrant Muslim leaders and spokespersons were quick to associate themselves with mainstream America to offset this perception.<sup>28</sup> Others advocated the need to turn more attention

toward national interest as a form of salvation. President Bush was emphatic – “You are either with us or against us” – about the war on terrorism. Muslims were appalled at the blatant acts of terrorism in the U.S.A. and elsewhere, and many immigrant Muslims were quick to express their support for American patriotism, which itself quickly got out of control.

Meanwhile, African-Americans who have been raised with a basic suspicion of white American sincerity about non-white peoples and cultures have generally tended towards a higher degree of counter-cultural confrontation. After the September 11 crisis, immigrant Muslims were given a hefty taste of this double standard and could no longer assume that the civil liberties they had come to America to experience would always be extended towards them. In this way, they came closer to understanding the experiences of African-Americans than at any other time. This led to more efforts to forge cross-organizational alliances among Muslim groups and individuals of different ethnicities. Although more efforts are needed and must continue for the sake of intra-community coalition building, it is too easy to return to old patterns of ethnic exclusivism when conflicts of interests arise or when opportunities for national-level recognition are offered.

#### CONCLUSION: SUGGESTIONS TOWARDS A MORE HARMONIOUS INTRA-ISLAMIC COLLECTIVITY

A concerted effort is required now to heal past hurts between Muslims in America, hurts that tap into racial, ethnic, and class divisions. We need greater levels of objective dialogue, shared experiences, and collective practices. Within the greater context of progressive Islam, this means a need for discourse about inter-ethnic relations as part of our dialogue to engage the particularities of culture and history of all our communities. Only through engaging these particularities can we hope to reach a more pluralistic understanding of Islam. In the context of Islam and America, this means stressing the plurality that is inherent in both. By “plurality,” I mean acknowledging and engaging differences without an attempt to impose hegemony.

First, at a fundamental level, when Muslims in America identify themselves they should include their specific ethnic origins until such a time as the new American Muslim reality becomes racially balanced and inclusive. Just as African-American Muslims have been specified since the middle of the twentieth century, so should all other groups of Muslims clarify their ethnicity alongside their American citizenship and membership of Islam. Furthermore, the tendency thus far has been for some Muslims to identify themselves as Muslim Americans, then proceed to make statements that are specific to their own ethnic origins and exclusive particularly of African-American Muslims.

Muslims in America comprise African-American descendants of slaves, Asian Americans, Hispanic-Americans, and Euro-Americans as well as immigrants

from Muslim countries in the past century from well over thirty countries. In discussion among us as well as presented to the non-Muslim public, more descriptive identification is called for under the umbrella term “American Muslim.” A Pakistani American Muslim or an American Muslim of Lebanese origin should describe themselves thus. While this does not limit their desire to be identified as American, it also has the advantage of highlighting their connection to the area from which they have emigrated. Such a self-designation is also less likely to be offensive to many in America, since many erroneously presume the term “American” refers only to whites. This would especially benefit those who have submerged their ethnicity under either the title “American” or “Muslim” when representing Islam in America and would reflect the true diversity of American Islam.

Within Muslim communities, an important dimension of racial healing must result from organized forums that specifically address inter-community and inter-ethnic relations. Only since September 11 has race become directly related to intra-community Muslim dynamics among national organizations at the public level. However, these urgent public conversations about racial dynamics have not been preceded by integrated discussion about race relations, particularly discussion aimed at repairing long-standing conflicts. By planning and participating in meetings focused on conflict resolution within the context of ethnic concerns, Muslims in America may be able to face some of the double standards that have prevailed. Only then can we move forward to develop strategies for comprehensively erasing them. Race and ethnicity need to be among the topics focused upon in papers, presentations, and panels at national-level conferences and conventions. The model of directly confronting our internal racial attitudes follows the patterns practiced in America following the civil rights movement. Such a model brought effective resolution to both attitudes and practices. Racial sensitivity programs were eventually developed and utilized in businesses and other companies in order to confront dormant racist attitudes with information and public censure.

In addition to more direct racial confrontation to ferret out latent attitudes of discrimination and prejudice, the Muslim communities should establish festive occasions or community gatherings to celebrate specific cultural diversity. For example, celebrations like a Palestine week or an Indonesian potluck would help us to nurture our diverse cultural heritages in particular and as a part of Islamic and American pluralism. It is equally important to recognize the need to share the specific heritage of our plural “nations and tribes” as part of the Qur’anic mandate to establish *taqwa* as the basis of evaluation among us. Greater *taqwa* within our collective Islamic experiences should empower us to confront one of the most divisive aspects of our American Islamic experience. Once this aspect has been properly focused upon and eradicated through the moral imperative of *taqwa*, we can move towards a greater collective contribution to America, and humanity as a whole.

## ENDNOTES

1. Malcolm X, quoted in *Bearing Witness: Selections from African-American Autobiography in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Louis Gates, Jr (New York: Pantheon, 1991), 144.
2. For example, Bassam Tibi, *Islam between Culture and Politics* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).
3. Quoted in Michelle Cottle, "Native Speakers – African-American Muslims, and Why Its Hard to Be Both," *New Republic*, November 19, 2001, [www.tnr.com/111901/cottle111901.html](http://www.tnr.com/111901/cottle111901.html)
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Another essay in this volume, "Muslims, Pluralism, and Interfaith Dialogue" by Amir Hussain, specifically engages the need for pluralism in the North American Muslim community.
7. African-Americans form the single largest ethnic group of Muslims in America – some forty-two percent of the total population. See Fareed Nu'man, *The Muslim Population in the United States: A Brief Statement* (Washington: American Muslim Council, 1992), 16.
8. *New Republic*, November 19, 2001.
9. One notable exception since September 11, 2001 was the public representation of Hamza Yusuf as a white American, who must have appealed to the general white non-Muslim American population by allowing them to share in his identity as neither foreign nor black.
10. Translation modified from Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Anadulus, 1980), 794.
11. Muhammad Asad includes a *hadith* from the Prophet in which he states, "Behold! God has removed from you the arrogance of pagan ignorance [*jahiliyah*] with its boast of ancestral glories. Man [*sic*] is but a God conscious believer or an unfortunate sinner. All people are children of Adam, and Adam was created out of dust."
12. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 155.
13. Sylviane Diouf, *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York University Press 1998), 1.
14. Ibid, 4.
15. Aminah Beverly McCloud, *African-American Islam* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 9.
16. Fareed Nu'man, *The Muslim Population in the United States*, 23.
17. The Arab Defamation League (ADL) is a national organization addressing Muslim and non-Muslim concerns in America.
18. Some examples include: Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Islamic Medical Association (IMA), the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers (AMSE), the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS), American Muslim Council (AMC), American Muslim Mission, Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), Center for American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT).
19. Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine, 1965), 340.
20. Richard Brett Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 215.
21. See my descriptions of multiculturalism in Malaysia: "An Islamic Perspective on Civil Rights Issues," in *Religion, Race, and Justice in a Changing America*, ed. Gary Orfield, (New York: Century Foundation, 1999), 159.
22. It should be noted that the most extensive grassroots organizations in Muslim communities are women's organizations primarily started and run by African-American women, even though the African-American Muslim woman is highly marginalized in the overall leadership of American Muslims.
23. <http://www.cair-net.org/mosquereport/>
24. Linda S. Wallbridge in her review of another volume, *Muslims in America* edited by Haddad, noted that "Islam is a religion of a diverse population in America. It is not simply

- the religion of immigrants." And "[T]o have indigenous communities discussed in the same ... collection of articles with Arab and other immigrant communities can be confusing. One is not often sure whether the experiences spoken of are those of Black Muslims, Muslims in America, as a whole, or only certain groups of Muslims." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 112, 1992, 721.
25. Ibid.
  26. The term "indigenous Muslims" is used to represent Muslim converts, even though the word "convert" is erroneously applied to their descendants; and the term "immigrant Muslims" is used to designate those Muslims who immigrated in the last century, and continues to be erroneously applied to their descendants.
  27. Women in the foreign-looking traditional *hijab*, even if African-American, were lumped into this profile.
  28. For just one example, see the list of quotes on the website of the U.S. State Department, which brought together many statements by Muslim voices talking about the harmony – even identity – of the American political system and Islamic ideals: <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/muslimlife/speakup.htm>. One quote, from Dr Muhammad Muqtedar Khan, Director of International Studies at Adrian College states, "The U.S. Constitution describes the perfect Islamic state. It protects life, liberty and property."