

Arab-Americans and the Challenge of Faith

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After being quoted in the *New York Post*, I received a piece of mail that included statements such as, "You shroud head with your horrible ugly religion, go back to where you came from. This is the country of freedom. Your religion thinks of women in body parts, vaginas and breasts. You shroud head I can see you walking down the street." While I do not normally respond to hate mail, I thought this might be a teaching opportunity. I replied, "I usually don't answer hate mail but it may be of interest to you to know that I'm Presbyterian. I'm married to an Episcopal minister and my Christianity tells me not to hate people of other faiths." I received a long reply that disavowed fanaticism but was unable to shed stereotyping. It ended, "I can still see you with your shroud head."

This response fit all too well with my experience over the years of being perceived as a Muslim. It appears that there is no way I can eliminate the idea that because my last name is Haddad, because I speak about Islam, I must be a Muslim. Or if I say "I am Christian," Americans presume that I must be a convert from Islam. And I'm not.

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Arabs who emigrated to the United States came with little baggage: belongings and mementos stuffed into a few suitcases. But they also came with a lot of baggage. Like other immigrants before them, they brought their cultural heritage and the identities that were shaped overseas. Part of that heritage is a religious identity that is an important component of their ethnicity.

What kind of Christianity do Arabs bring to America? The Middle East is the cradle of Christianity and many Arab Christians point proudly to the fact that there were Arabs present among the multitudes on the day of Ascension. Christianity in the Middle East has a long history of survival against great odds, but it is also noted for its divisions. The early Christian community split over whether Jesus had one nature of two (between Monophysites and Dyophysites). When Constantine made the Byzantine (Orthodox) Church the official church of the empire, he set into motion the persecution of the Nestorians, the Assyrians, the Maronites and the Copts, all deemed heretics. Division again plagued the church as a consequence of the Great Schism that precipitated the Catholic/Byzantine split, as well as the proselytizing efforts of the Protestant and Catholic churches. Thus Christians from the Arab world arrive in the United States with the burden of a history of persecution and survival.

Upon arrival, Arab Christian immigrants found difficulty in locating a place to worship. The Orthodox attended services in the Russian or Greek churches because they shared the same theological perspective. Others

attended Episcopal services because of the agreement between the Anglican Church and the Orthodox churches. Eventually the Antiochian Orthodox Church established itself, and today there are hundreds of St. George Churches run by the Orthodox patriarchy in the United States.

Other Arabic speaking churches transplanted themselves from the Middle East. These include the Melchites, who follow the Byzantine rite but are affiliated with Rome. They believed that because they are recognized by Rome, they are an official part of the Catholic community of faith, but they found out that the Irish leadership of the American Catholic church did not think that they were good Catholics. In some cases, they were not allowed to hold their services even in the basements of Catholic churches, and had to hold baptismal and wedding services in the basements of Protestant churches. The Maronite Church, also affiliated with Rome, had a similar experience. Eventually both groups transplanted their hierarchies and established churches all over the United States. Other Eastern churches reconstituted in the United States by Christian immigrants from the Middle East include the Assyrian and Armenian churches, with their particular history of persecution and genocide, and, most recently, the Coptic Church of Egypt.

A very small minority of Christians from the Middle East are Protestant. They are a product of American, British and Irish missionaries. Upon arrival, they expected to be able to worship with American Protestant congregations. Two factors, however, impeded their integration. The missionaries were more evangelical than their sending churches, and the new immigrants found

American churches “too cold.” And they were also *immigrants* who experienced prejudice in the Presbyterian and Episcopal congregations. Many joined other churches, including 100 Arabic-speaking Baptist churches, and some eventually opened their own. There are now fifteen Arabic-speaking Presbyterian churches in the United States.

The churches in the Middle East have increasingly come to cooperate within the Middle East Christian Council, an umbrella organization that brings together all these Christian communities. The transplanted churches in the United States, however, operate as separate ethnic enclaves, trying to imbue their children with the ideas they brought and to indoctrinate them in the histories of their suffering. They appear, however, to be fighting a losing battle. The minister of the Arabic-speaking church in Washington, D.C. reported that Arabic-speaking churches are primarily “holding churches” for old people. They are also “feeder churches” as the young integrate into American congregations.

The majority of Arabs in the United States are Christian – an estimated two million. There are an estimated one million Muslim Arabs, part of the growing 5-6,000,000 member U.S. Muslim community. Consequently, primary identity for Arab Muslims can fluctuate between the two foci of religious and national affiliation. While national groupings and Arab cultural, political, and professional organizations include both Christians and Muslims, parallel Islamic organizations tend to divide national groups and dissipate their effectiveness by focusing on Islamic issues.

Muslim identity in the United States has changed over time. The small number of Muslim migrant laborers who came in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lived on the margins of American society. The few who decided to stay sought to fit by assimilating. In the 1930s, they began to establish Islamic organizations. By 1950, there were 52 Islamic centers and mosques in the United States and Canada. Their members tended to refer to their mosque as "our church," the Qur'an as "our Bible," and their Imam as "our minister." Their buildings had very little distinctive Islamic architecture, perhaps a minaret, but basically they were as integrated into American society as possible.

There was a major shift in the composition of the Muslim community in the United States in the 1960s. The revocation of the Asia Exclusion Act opened immigration opportunities to South Asian Muslims from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan who arrived with a distinctive Islamic identity forged in the struggle over India and against Hindu supremacy. The Islamic institutions developed by this large educated Muslim community in the 1970s and 1980s became a magnet for Arab Muslims who were seeking to ground their children in the faith of the forefathers. The emigration of Arab Muslims to the U.S. in turn influenced Muslim identity formation here. The new immigrants tended to adhere less to a nationalist ideology and more to the Islamist ideology that developed as a response to Arab defeats by Israel and the perception of American unwavering support for Zionism.

Another factor that influenced the development of Islamic identity in the United States was the growing immigrant awareness of home grown Islam in the African-American community and the new prominence of figures such as Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X. The Arab immigrant community noted that some Americans were on the path of Islamization and proud of it. African-American Muslims were renouncing their “Anglo” names to assume Muslim names, instead. MacArthur became Ali, for example, in sharp reversal of their parents’ felt need to anglicize their names in search of acceptance – the way Mohammad became Mike or Mo and Rashid became Dick.

Another factor in the new emphasis on Islamic over Arab nationalist identity was related in part to the American interests of the time. Efforts were initiated to win Muslim college students in this country to the cause of combating communism. The concern was that the Arab Student Association on American campuses was turning Arab students into Nasserites, socialists, or Arab nationalists, uninterested in allying themselves against communism. By 1963, in part because of support from Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Muslim Student Association (MSA) was formed. The aim of the MSA was to create a core of Muslim leadership who upon their return, would support American policies and halt the spread of non-alliance and communism.

Those who joined the MSA were impressed by the teachings of Mawlana Mawdudi of the Jamaati Islami organization of India/Pakistan and Sayyid Qutb of Egypt. Qutb had lived in the U.S. for two years and was thoroughly turned off by America’s racism and support for the State of Israel. And although he

came to the U.S. as an agnostic, by the time he went back, he had become committed to the teachings of the Muslim Brotherhood. He became one of its most important ideologues and wrote *Milestones*,¹ which provides an Islamic response to socialist and capitalist ideologies. Sayyid Qutb reacted against the communist dictum that sought the eradication of all other systems and the uniting of the world under communism. He argued that Islam was the system designed by God for the welfare of humanity. His disciples asserted that Islam, the complete system cast into the world by God at the time of creation, set into motion a revolutionary process that would eliminate all other systems. This became a slogan of many of the Jihad movements overseas.

The estimated 10% of Muslims involved in the mosque organizations had a problem defining what their purpose was in the U.S., if they were not eventually to return to the Middle East and transform the rest of the Muslim world. The answer for those immigrants who were initiated through the Muslim Student Association in the distinctiveness of Islam as a bulwark against foreign ideologies and who decided to settle in the United States was that they were implants. They would maintain their distinction in the body politic; they would retain their imported Muslim identity in America against communism. They were here to convert America, to save America from its sins.

Some in the leadership saw two options: the Mennonite model or the Jewish model. The former was perceived as isolationist, maintaining its separation from mainstream America and affording the community the luxury of celebrating its identity and culture. The latter was seen as reflecting a small

religious minority of about 2% with such a great impact on the society that the U.S. defines itself as Judeo-Christian rather than simply as a Christian country. Could America define itself as Judeo-Christian-Muslim, they asked?

The exclusionist teachings of Mawlana Mawdudi and Sayyid Qutb were not practical in the American environment. They ignored important verses in the Qur'an that emphasize pluralism. These include such verses as: "Had God willed, he would have created you as one nation" (S. 16:93). It is God's will that there are many systems and nations. Another verse says: "We have created you as tribes and nations that you may know one another" (S. 49:13). It doesn't say that you may kill one another or wipe each other out. Yet another verse says, "compete in righteousness" (S. 2:148). "To each we have appointed a divine law and a path. Had God willed, he would have made you one community, but that he might try you by that which he has revealed to you. Therefore compete with one another in good works. To god you will all return. Then he will inform you about that in which you differ" (S. 5:48).

The Muslim community in the United States, including the alumni of MSA, has increasingly emphasized the pluralistic nature of Islam. Muslims are not only exploring new ways of cooperating with Christians and Jews. They are also learning to deal with the diversity within the Muslim community itself. Sunnis and Shiites, including a variety of sects and heretical groups, all transplanted to the United States, are still learning how to relate to each other and to African-American Muslims. While the mega mosques include diverse national, ethnic, sectarian and linguistic communities, some areas are

beginning to see the development of ethnic mosques and language mosques. For example, in Northern Virginia there are three different Afghan mosques serving various tribal and linguistic constituents.

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Morocco, and, later, Iraq, funded the construction of some U.S. mosques in the 1980s. Most of the funding came to a halt in the early 1990s. At the beginning of the Gulf War, the ambassador of Saudi Arabia called American Muslim leaders to a meeting at a Chicago hotel and asked them to sign a document expressing support for American intervention in Saudi Arabia. With the exception of the leader of the African-American Muslim community, they all refused. Suddenly, overseas funding for the construction of mosques, for support of Islamic education and for the publishing of Islamic books in the United States, ceased. The Islamic Society of North America, which had over 350 mosques under its umbrella, stopped operations; it lacked funds even for the telephone operator. This abandonment by overseas benefactors liberated American Muslims, who realized that they were prospering in America and could afford to support their own institutions. Since then there has been a major push for mosque development in the United States. It is a home grown mosque movement, self confident and self-sufficient, and has had a profoundly transforming impact on the community.

Once Muslims gave up on dependence on overseas funds, they realized that they were not an implant but a transplant. All at once they had become American. Instead of talking about themselves as Muslims living in America, they started talking about themselves as American Muslims. A survey done

during the 2000 elections found that 97% of the imams of the mosques said they wanted to participate in the political process and be part of America. From being a foreign body in America they went to wanting to be totally integrated into America. Now, after Sept. 11, the question they are facing is how much they have to give up so that they will be accepted as part of America.

There was a major shift in the 1960s. The federal statutes excluding Asians were revoked, and the Asian brain drain brought Muslim immigrants from Pakistan and India. This was contemporaneous with the African-American revolution and especially the prominence of Mohammad Ali and Malcolm X. The Arab immigrant community, some of which was in its third generation here, suddenly saw African-American Muslims who were renouncing their name as MacArthur and becoming Ali, rather than their parents who renounced their name as Mohammad and became Mike or Mo. Now there were Americans who were on the path of Islamization and proud of it. But this led to tension because Muslim immigrants decided the African-Americans were not real Muslims.

In addition, the new Muslim arrivals were beginning to have a different identity, in part because of the American policy of combating communism. In the early 1960s there was one campus organization of Arab-American students, the Arab-American Student Association. By 1963, in part because of support from Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Iran, the Muslim Student Association was formed. The concern was that the Arab-American Student Association was turning Arab students coming to the United States into Nasserites, Marxists,

socialists, and nationalists, uninterested in allying themselves against communism. The Muslim Student Association, which eventually had a special group called the Muslim Student Association Persian-Speaking Group, received the blessing of the U.S. administration. The idea was that this group was going to go back and put a halt to the spread of non-alliance and communism. Ironically, part of the Persian Speaking Group, people who were all graduates of Berkeley, were the ones who took the American hostages in Teheran.

One of the students who came to the U.S. on an American government scholarship in the late 1940s was an Egyptian named Sayyid Qutb. He was thoroughly turned off by America and although he came to the U.S. as an agnostic, by the time he went back he was committed to Muslim brotherhood. He then wrote an important volume called *Milestones*² that is a response to socialist ideology. It argues that Islam was meant to eradicate all other systems. Now nobody had ever talked about Islam as a system, as opposed to a divine revelation from God.

The Koran says, "Had God willed, he would have created you as one nation." It is God's will that there are many systems and nations. Another verse says, "We have created you as tribes and nations that you may know one another." It doesn't say that you may kill one another or wipe each other out. Yet another verse says, "Compete in righteousness because on the Day of Judgment all the various nations will appear before God and the one that is most righteous God will smile upon."

Sayyid Qutb reacted against the communist dictum about eradicating all other systems and uniting the world under communism. His Islam was one that said, "Islam was cast in the world by God from the beginning of creation and it's a revolutionary process that is going to wipe out everything else, so that eventually Islam will supercede and will never be superceded." This became a slogan of many of the Jihad movements overseas.

People who have been socialized on that ideology continue to come to the United States. I have heard some of them say, "We have immigrated to the United States and we are learning about pluralism." Initially, I thought they meant how to live with Christians and Jews. What they were talking about, however, was how to live with other Muslims, because there is such a diversity of Islams: Sunni and Shiites and various sects and heretical groups, all transplanted to the United States.

These groups are still learning how to relate to each other as well as to African-American Muslims. There are still diverse communities within the mosques. Many communities are beginning to see ethnic mosques and language mosques. For example, in Northern Virginia there are three different Afghan mosques because they literally can't talk to each other: they don't speak the same language.

Many U.S. mosques were funded by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Morocco, and, later, Iraq. But at the beginning of the Gulf War, the ambassador of Saudi Arabia called Muslim leaders to a meeting at a Chicago hotel and told them to sign a manifesto expressing support for American intervention in Saudi Arabia.

With the exception of the leader of the African-American Muslim community, they all walked out. Suddenly, the money to support the building of mosques in the United States, to support organizing Sunday schools and publishing books, disappeared. The Islamic Society of North America, which had over 350 mosques under its umbrella, didn't have money to pay for the telephone. A few years later people said, "We don't need them. We can do it ourselves. Let us see what we can do." Since then there has been a major push for mosque development in the United States. It's home grown, and as a result the community's identity has been transformed.

When the first groups came to the U.S., America still defined itself as insistently Anglo, and they all tried to fit in. Although the concept of the melting pot existed, Arabs were considered unmeltable; Muslims, especially so.

Later on, it became acceptable to have a hyphenated identity: Jewish-American, Arab-American, Irish-American, Italian-American, and so on. There were parallel developments in the American Muslim community. Those of the immigrants in the 1960s who were initiated through the Muslim Student Association and accepted the idea of Islam as a bulwark against the spread of communism began to see themselves as implants. They were here as a strange body in the body politic of America. They expected to stay Muslim in America. They began to talk about their options and whether to follow the Jewish model or the Mennonite model. The Mennonite model is one of dressing differently, having your own little groups that have nothing to do with America, and some opted for that. Others began to look at the Jewish model as a possibility: a

small minority of about 2% with such a great impact on the society that the U.S. defines itself as Judeo-Christian rather than simply as Christian. Could America define itself as Judeo-Christian-Muslim, they asked?

The 10% or so involved in the mosque organizations had a problem defining what their purpose was in the U.S. if they were not eventually returning to the Middle East and transforming the rest of the Muslim world into a bulwark against communism. Their answer was that they were here to convert America, to save America from its sins.

Once they decided to stay, they found their children becoming American. And in the 1990s, when they gave up dependence on overseas funds, they realized that they were not an implant but a transplant. Suddenly they had become American. Instead of talking about themselves as being Muslims living in America, they started talking about themselves as being American Muslims. A survey done during the 2000 elections found that 97% of the imams of the mosques said they wanted to participate in the political process and be part of America. From being a foreign body in America they went to wanting to be totally integrated into America. Now, after Sept. 11, the question they are facing is how much they have to give up so that they will be accepted as part of America.

Question (about Arab-Americans using the law to counter discrimination)

Michael Suleiman: I'd like to comment about the fact that very few Arab-Americans have filed discrimination suits. I know of a few people who thought about it but in the end their reasoning was as follows: Arab-Americans are

discriminated against. There is basically bias against them. If they put in a request to say, "I was discriminated against," and if they lose, then they are going to find it very difficult to find a job somewhere else: "You're a troublemaker, we don't care for you very much already and this is going to be against you." And therefore they decide to lie low. It's different when you have an atmosphere that is supportive. There is the very strong societal feeling, for example, that Jews have been discriminated against. If you are a Jew and feel discriminated against then you file, and people accept that, thinking, even if you lose, that there probably was evidence to support your case.

In 1998 I did a survey of activist Arab-Americans, asking them what the most important issue facing the community was. The largest percentage, 44.8%, said it was bias and prejudice, as opposed to 19.8% who named the Arab-Israeli conflict.

They feel that they are not part of American society and the body politic; they don't feel that they are Arab-American. And before they can move toward thinking of themselves as American Arabs, what is needed is a significant move to reduce the bias and discrimination and to include Arabs and Muslims in the United States in the history of this society.

Hussein Ibish: The ADC has been involved in a number of very successful law suits in recent years and we've seen some major judgements. Last year an Arab-American man got a \$ 3 million judgment against United Airlines.³ That's a substantial employment discrimination victory, and it's only one of a number. There are quite a few lawsuits by Arab-Americans in the works. Remember

that civil suits take a long time. Some pending suits are newer, including some serious cases resulting from post-September 11. There have recently been twelve incidents involving at least twenty-five people who were thrown off airplanes because of racial profiling over a three or four day period, and those incidents have already resulted in at least four major law suits filed with courts around the country. One of the things we try to do is tell people about successful law suits and urge them that this is the way to go. But Professor Suleiman is right: there's a generalized sense of disempowerment leading to a reticence to see political problems as soluble. There's a reticence to believe in the possibility of politics, to join national organizations and to believe in the cumulative affect of political action; to believe that if you give somebody a check, if you write a letter, even if you don't see a direct result, in the end there'll be a cumulative effect. It's hard to appreciate the glacial pace of political development and law in a society as complex as this. The sense is that there's nothing that can be done and the whole deck is stacked against you and why bother.

Yvonne Haddad: When anti-terrorism legislation was passed after the Oklahoma City bombing, profiling followed, and oddly enough, the profile was not of Timothy McVeigh but of Arabs. Of course that scared the community.

¹ Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (rev. ed.) Karachi: International Islamic Publishers, 1981.

² Sayyid Qutb, *Milestones* (rev. ed.) Karachi: International Islamic Publishers, 1981.

³ *Abu-Aziz v. United Airlines Inc.*, Calif. Superior Court, No. 762924 (March 27, 1997). Ahmad Abu-Aziz was the victim of ethnic harassment and when he complained to his superiors, no

action was taken for four months; then Mr. Abu-Aziz was fired. A jury awarded Ahmad Abu-Aziz \$2,990,000., which included \$2,670,000. in punitive damages.