

Perspectives on American Muslims and Their Islamic Identity

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US President Bill Clinton chose to send out Eid greetings to American Muslims and Muslims all over the world this year. Earlier in the holy month of Ramzan, Pentagon had also hosted an *Iftar* reception for Muslim servicemen in the US armed forces. That the 'Million Man March' organised by the African American Nation of Islam (NOI) in October, 1995 was widely covered by the American media is yet one more indication that Islam has arrived at the religious and political horizon of the United States.

One of the fastest growing religions, Islam would by the turn of the century become the second largest religion in US displacing Judaism. The nearly four million American Muslims (New York Times has in 1989 estimated their population at six million) comprise of native American Muslims – both African Americans and whites – as well as immigrants from all parts of the world[1]. Is Islam the primary identity of American Muslims?; and notwithstanding sectarian, ethno-national and racial differences, are American Muslim evolving into a cohesive community?

American Muslims and Homogenisation of Islam

American Muslims represent a microcosm of humanity divided into about one hundred sub-groups based on sects and schools of thought, nationality and race. African Americans, if one includes the followers of NOI and the Moorish Science Temple, constitute nearly half of the Muslim population followed by those coming from Arabic-speaking countries, Iran, Turkey and others. Majority belongs to Sunni Islam while Shia number about 20 percent. Nearly all schools of thought such as *Hanafi*, *Shafai* etc. are found among the *sunni* Muslims. The *Ahmadiya* sect is present not only among South Asians but also among whites and African Americans. Small groups influenced by *Sufi* ideas complete the Muslim mosaic in US.

Muslim population is increasing on account of immigration, conversion, 'reversion' and inter-faith marriages. It is estimated that 14 per cent of all immigrants since the 1980s are Muslims. Many African Americans entertain very unorthodox ideas and beliefs, however, imbued with 'Black nationalistic' ideas, many are claiming that they are 'reverting' or 'returning' to Islam, which was the religion of their African ancestors. Inter-religious marriages account for the preponderance of women among the native white American Muslims, whose total population is estimated to be over one hundred thousand.

In considering the issues of an Islamic identity and formation of a cohesive community especially among the immigrants Muslims, three sociological variables bear significance: 'context' of immigrations; 'opportunity structure' and 'reception' in the host society and 'religious triumphalism'. 'Context' is important because different waves of immigrants have brought to US

diverse ideas and beliefs about what it means to be a Muslim. They came representing the consensus of what their Muslim countrymen thought Islam is and should be at a given time. Hence, different immigrant groups continue to define Islam the way it is understood and practised in their country of origin. This is particularly true in regard to observance of religious festivals and rituals.

‘Opportunity structure’ and ‘reception’ in the host society continue to shape religious beliefs, values and practices as well as notion of a distinct community. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the first batches of immigrant Muslims came mainly from what was known as the Greater Syria, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Eastern Europe and Russia including Tartar Muslims. Numerically small and of hardly, rural background, they joined the labour force in the industrialising north-eastern parts of the US. Over a period of time, these Muslims ‘melted’ away into the broader Christian milieu for reasons such as their own ignorance about Islam, lack of priestly guidance and the fact that they were of white racial stock and got absorbed into the American population easily.

The second wave of immigrants came after the Second World War mainly from Turkey and countries of West, South and South-East Asia which were all experiencing a high tide of nationalism, and where the anti-colonial elites had already imbibed the European ideas of democracy, socialism etc. ‘Westernised’ in their outlook, many of them easily assimilated with the American pluralist culture. These immigrant Muslims insisted on leading an ethical and responsible life according to Islamic tenets but shed many of Islam’s cardinal practices such as pilgrimage (hajj), five-times a day prayer (salath) etc. Nonetheless, their liberal outlook created the bases of intersects cooperation such as common mosques and collective celebration of Muslim festivals, as well as prepared the ground for inter-religious dialogue.

With the liberalisation of immigration laws in the mid 1960s, there began a new and a larger flow of immigrants. Many of the immigrant Muslims today are from countries that are experiencing oil based prosperity and consequent pangs of economic–technological and social modernisation. Western educated and professionals in their training and often escaping authoritarian political conditions at home, the new immigrants assimilate well with the political and technological culture of the US. Coming from societies that are experiencing religious re-awakening and ethnic upheavals, religion is of great importance to them because it is a way of maintaining their culture in the host society.

Dynamics Involved

Several dynamics of the process are evident and need mentioning:

(i) The large size and geographical concentration of American Muslim population is important. Nearly one third of American Muslims live in the three major metropolitan areas of New York, Chicago and Los Angeles; and if one includes cities of Detroit, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco, the percentage goes upto one-half [2]. Small ethnic enclaves for instance, Iranian Muslims in Los Angeles or West Asian and South Asian Muslims in New York are learning to share mosques presently numbering over six hundred and other religious resources with other co-religionists shedding in the process their ethnic and sectarian specificities and moving towards

cooperative community based action programmes such as common Sunday classes for religious instruction of their children etc.

(ii) Influence of the American culture and public education system is making the community leaders and clerics debate and evolve appropriate Islamic responses to issues like dating, dancing, dressing, public bathing; issues related to the status of Muslim women in contemporary American society including their education, professional pursuits etc.; and family related matters including abortion, polygamy etc. Besides, scholarly interest is beginning to highlight and develop principles or Islamic economics, taxation, political authority etc.

(iii) Prompting intra and inter-faith dialogue and understanding is the felt need to project the humanitarian and universalistic dimensions of Islam. So often, American media and political elites have projected Islam negatively. Political events in Muslim countries have so often been explained in religious terms. American Muslims specifically highlight the fact that Islam alongside Christianity and Judaism constitute the trinity of religions, which have similar philosophical and historical cultural roots. They want Islam to be added to the American ‘civic religion’, that is the Protestant-Catholic-Judaic traditions of American society[3].

The Question of Common Identity

Whether Islam is becoming the primary identity of American Muslims and whether they are moving towards the formation of a distinct community? Only some broad trends can be identified and tentative conclusions drawn:

(i) Admittedly, American Muslims are at present strung between their ethno-national and sectarian identities and the pull of *Ummah*. Trends of thought in Islam overseas in terms of articulation of faith and leadership besides flow of fresh immigrants are and will in the foreseeable future continue to challenge any emerging consensus on the meaning of Islam, and American Muslims will continue to formulate their religious and community based goals according to their ethnic and sectarian preferences.

(ii) Many other immigrants have also in the past, for instance the Jews and Catholics, experienced religious euphoria and triumphalism. The remarkable ability of religious and ethnic enclaves to survive in the American pluralistic cultural kaleidoscope is widely recognized. Contrary to popular expectations, American Muslims may as well succeed in retaining and reinforcing their ethno-national and sectarian diversities.

(iii) Robert Wuthnow has spoken of “restructuring of American religion: that is, a process whereby Islam may also enjoin Protestant-Catholic-Judaic traditions of American society[4]. With the growth of the Catholic and Jewish population since the 1930s, both religions came to be progressively added to the dominant Protestant ethos of American society.

(iv) Lastly, American Muslims may also experience social and political ‘structuring of ethnicity’[5]. Diverse immigrant groups for instance from Latin American and the Caribbean have been labelled as ‘Hispanics’. Diverse Muslim groups may also face similar “structuring” through legal enactments and judicial decisions, thus helping the process of community formation.

Do American Muslims have a political agenda? Can Islam be a force in the US political process? All immigrant groups have invariably experienced a 'time lag' in their politicisation and assertion of their political rights. The militant political agenda of African American Muslims is already part of the domestic political debate.

African American Muslims and Construction' of a Muslim Identity

The quest for an African American identity and empowerment has put Islam at the centre of struggle against the perceived white hegemonic discourse. The subordinate 'Black' racial category, it is argued, is the creation of the dominant white racist Christian America. Islam is the medium to 'deconstruct' that identity and set the religiously authentic and politically 'correct' agenda for the African Americans. In the quest for authenticity and empowerment, African American organisations such as the NOI and Moorish Science Temple have admittedly diverged from many of Islam's percepts and principles.

In searching for explanations of their experiences of the past four hundred years including importantly slavery. African Americans found that Islam was harmoniously integrated in many of the African societies from whence their ancestors were brought as slaves. It is estimated that nearly 10 per cent of all slaves brought to US were Muslims, many of whom distinguished themselves from other slaves for their exceptional skills, knowledge and literacy in Arabic. It is this Islamic heritage African Americans are retrieving when they claim to be 'returning' to Islam.

They have found several Africans among the earliest followers of Prophet Mohammad (PBUH) and their contribution in the spread of Islam having been acknowledged by the Prophet himself. One such inspiring figure in the easily history of Islam is Bilal Ibn Rabah – one of the first Muslims, a close companion of the Prophet and Islam's first *muezzin*. Bilal has tremendous symbolic significance for African American Muslims, so much so that many identify themselves as *Bilalians*. Louis Farrakhan Muhammad, presently the leader of NOI quotes the *hadith* that is, the 'sayings of the Prophet: "I heard the footsteps of Bilal going into Paradise ahead of my own".

He didn't mean his own personal footsteps. He was white. He was an Arab. And he was saying that it is the Blacks who are going to lead the Arab world back to their faith that they had forsaken, and lead them into the Paradise their God promised to them by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the Quran[6].

The question of race in the American society and quest for an ethnic identity and empowerment remain central to the phenomenon of African embracing Americans Islam. In 1913, Noble Drew Ali (Sharif Abdul Ali) had established the first Moorish Science Temple at Newyork, N.J. He was certainly influenced by the pan-Islamic and pan-Africanist ideas spreading in Egypt, Sudan and other north African countries at the turn of the twentieth century. He conferred on the African Americans a new ethnic 'American Moorish' Identity, and 'Asiatic Nation' lineage and Islam as a global non-European religious tradition. Thereby, he was questioning the 'black' as a racial category. "They gave him a name, then defined it as something inferior to theirs"[7].

In rejecting the idea of a White Christian God and American public authority, which is claimed to be based on Christian ethos, African American Muslims, more appropriately those who are labelled as 'Black Muslims', have appropriated ideas and symbols from Islam and pan-Africanism but added their own political compulsions to their understanding of Islam. This is how the idea of El Mahdi recurs again and again. Noble Drew Ali claimed himself to be El Mahdi; so did Elijah Muhammad of NOI and some smaller groups like the Ansaaru Allah community also believes in El Mahdi. NOI was established in 1930 in Detroit by the mysterious Arabian wanderer W.F. Muhjammad, also known as Farad Muhammad. Apart from the claim that Elijah Muhammad is the El Mahdi who has arrived to "return the so-called Negro to self-knowledge", central to Elijah and NOI are the ideas about a black material God, the African, American as the 'Original Man', made of divinely substance and the nearness of the doomsday as the battle-lines between the 'good' (Blacks) and the 'evil' (Whites) are being drawn on American soil[8].

Intense criticism from Muslim countries and *ulemas* and increasing interaction with other Muslims have brought a gradual change in the perception of NOI and other such organisations. This is best exemplified in the transition of Malcolm X into El Hajj Malik El Shabazz. Malcolm X took not only the Arabicised Muslim name but also changed his separatist militant outlook and left NOI after performing *hajj* in 1964.

Reflecting on his experiences in Mecca, Malcolm X wrote:

For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spell bound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by the people of *all colors*..... Perhaps if white Americans could accept the oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept *in reality* the Oneness of Man..... Each hour here in the Holy land enables me to have greater spiritual insight into what is happening in America between black and white [9].

The 'mainstreaming' of NOI accelerated particularly after Elijah's death in 1975. His son and successor Wartin Deen Muhammad; who had studied at Al Azhar University in Cairo, merged NOI into orthodox *sunni* Islam, and set up the American Muslim Mission (AMM) – presently the largest of the African American *Sunni* Muslim organisation. Besides, there was recognition of American civic and public authority. "The Constitution of the United States is basically a Quranic document. Its principles were presented to the world over 1,400 yeas ago by Prophet Muhammad," announced Warith Deen Muhammad[10].

Two years after Elijah's death however, Farrakhan resurrected NOI saying that Elijah "never intended for us to follow completely what is called orthodox Islam", and has pointed out to the prevailing racism in the Muslim world itself as to why mainstream Islam can never be a sufficient solution for African Americans. A gradual process of 'Islamisation' since the 1980s has however brought NOI closer to mainstream *sunni* Islam. NOI has accommodated itself to Islamic *orthopraxy* that is *hajj*, *salath* and fasting during the month of *Ramazan*. Farrakhan and others have however refined their criticism of orthodox *ulemas* for instance, for their insistence on *taqlid* and have called for *ijtihad* that is reasoning based on Quran and *hadith* to face the modern-day challenges and problem. In the final summation of his differences with orthodox Muslim scholars, Farrakhan argues: "We shall see who is misguided". It is "the scholars of the old world of Islam"

who “must be reformed. They must be guided back to the right path” by “the people that Allah has chosen”[11].

Apart from the gradual ‘Islamisation’ or NOI and other so-called ‘Black Muslim’ organisations, significant is their programme for socio-cultural and economic revitalisation of the African American Community. In a sense, Malcolm X was a forerunner of the neo-conservatism of President Ronald Reagan. He had called upon the African Americans to reject the ‘Welfare’ dole-outs; established the African American schools; established Fruit of Islam (FOI) – a voluntary force that has played an extremely important role in the removal of drugs and crimes from the streets of inner cities and African American ghettos – and talked of the role of women and family values in the revival and revitalisation of the community[12]. NOI under Farrakhan has revived the programme to build an African American economic infrastructure, which includes the people organised and working for Economic Rebirth (POWER). Addressing the US Congress, Farrakhan said:

Let our Black brothers out of prison, give us your poor... give them to me- Let my people go... We can reform the convict, you can’t. We reform the drug addict, you don’t. We reform the alcoholic and the prostitute. You don’t. We take the poor and give them hope by making them do something for themselves. You don’t. We are your solution[13].

After shunning electoral politics, NOI decided to jump into the electoral fray indirectly by supporting the candidacy of Jesse Jackson in the 1984 presidential election. In 1990, NOI fielded two of its candidates in the Congressional elections. “We need a Muslim politician”, said Farrakhan.

Gradual ‘Islamisation’ process and accommodation with the American political process have brought NOI and other African American organisations to the centre stage of both American Muslim community and American political process. Farrakhan and other NOI leaders travel frequently to Muslims countries; many of African American Muslim youth are studying in Islamic universities and African American Muslims have set up their own schools, generally known as sister Clara Muhammad schools, to inculcate Islamic values among their children. While the question of race remains important and differences with orthodox Muslim scholars persist, African American Muslims have developed even a stronger sense of being part of Ummah. While creating a host of meeting ground and bases of common action programme, the social and religious agenda of African American Muslims differ widely from that of the other American Muslims. In the end, Islam continues to be defined as pluralistically as ever and Muslims remain a collection of communities.

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7. Richard Brent Turner, "What Shall We Call Him? Islam and African American Identity", *Journal of Religious Thought* (Washington, D.C.), Vol. 51, No. 1, Summer Fall 1994, pp.25-51.
8. Louis E. Wright Jr., "Elijah Muhammad's Political Thought on God and Authority: A Quest for Authenticity and Freedom", *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. 51, No. 2, Winter Spring 1994-95, pp 47-45, For an authoritative account of NOIC see, E.U. Essien-Udon, *Black Nationalism A Search for an Identity in America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).
9. Quoted in Chariswaddy, *The Muslim Mind* (London: Longman, 1982), p. 115. Abd Al-Rahman Azzam, the first Secretary General of Arab League who had hosted Malcolm X in Mecca narrated the following incident: "I knew nothing of his coming on pilgrimage. He was stopped at Jeddah airport because he had nothing to show that he was Muslim. There was still the business of the court that judges the credentials of pilgrims. Twice I interfered. I said, 'The man says, la ilaha illa Allahu, 'There is no God but God,' and says he is a Muslims. What more do you want?' I think Prince Faisal sent them a message not to make such trouble about it. He received his certificate, and was allowed to go on to Mecca." p. 113.
10. Quoted in Mattias Gardell, n.6, p.55.
11. Ibid., p. 58.
12. Samory Rashid, "Islamic Aspects of the Legacy of Malcolm X", *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* Vol. 10, No. 1, Spring 1993, pp. 60-71.
13. Quoted in Mattias Gardell, n. 6, p. 65.