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Speaking for Ourselves: The American Muslim Identity

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Today, there are few places in the United States where one does not find Muslims living and working. Muslims in America constitute 3% of the American population. America's Muslim community represents a great many movements and identities. It includes native American Muslims – both African-Americans, as well as immigrants from all corners of the globe. Muslim population is steadily increasing on account of migration, conversion and inter-faith marriages. The rise in Muslim numbers resulted in the development of institutions catering to the needs of community. The past decade was one of unprecedented accomplishment for Muslim community around the US. However, 9/11 events were clearly a blow to Islam. Despite the assurances given by President Bush, Muslims in America are confronted with all sorts of problems. Media is largely responsible for the post 9/11 biases against the Muslim community. American Muslims are challenging their neighbours perceptions of Islam as a foreign faith and of Muslims as fiery fundamentalists or bomb-lobbing terrorists. The image problem appears to be their biggest challenge in the US. Muslims are not only taking on stereotypes, they are taking on the status quo, as it was few Christians and Jews before them.

The presence of Muslims in the Americas in the pre-Columbus era is well established. While there were some Muslims among the African slaves who came to work in plantations in the American south in the 18th and 19th centuries, very few retained an Islamic identity. In the first decade of the 20th century, the first batches of immigrant Muslims came mainly from Syria, Albania, Bosnia, Eastern Europe and Russia including Tatar Muslims. Over a period of time, these Muslims 'melted' away into the broader Christian milieu chiefly because of their own ignorance about Islam. As they were of white racial stock, they got absorbed into the American population easily. After the end of World War I, the demise of Ottoman Empire resulted in a second wave of immigration from the Muslim Middle East. Significant number of Muslims decided to move to the US for political as well as economic reasons. The third identifiable period of immigration after the second world war saw increasing number of Muslims arriving in the US, now from countries well beyond the Middle East. Westernized 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 some of Islam's cardinal principles. Their liberal outlook created the bases of intersect cooperation such as common mosques and collective celebration of Muslim festivals. With the liberalization of US immigration laws in the mid 60's, there started a fresh and longer flow of Muslim immigrants.

Coming from societies that are experiencing religious reawakening and ethnic upheavals, religion is of great importance to them because it is a way of maintaining their cultures in the host society. The post war revolutions and political upheavals in the Middle East led to an exodus of political refugees from the Arab countries. A single thread that links all the waves of immigrants to the larger tapestry of immigrants descending on American shores is their common quest for success in what has popularly been believed to be the “Land of opportunities”. The children of the prosperous Muslim immigrants of the 1960’s and 70’s are coming of age, and with them arrives a new culture that is a blend of Muslim and American institutions. At home, it is a generation committed to maintaining its Islamic heritage while finding a niche in the New World.

The US is said to be “a nation of immigrants”, a melting pot for all races and ethnic identities, but racial prejudice, particularly in the period before the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, certainly existed. For many years, then the response of many Muslim immigrants was to attempt hide their religious and ethnic identities. Gradually, as the Muslim immigrant community became much larger, much better educated and much more articulate about its own self understanding, attempts to blend into American society have given a way to retaining a sense of one’s own religious culture. Present – day immigrant Muslims continue to face challenges as residents of the US. Among these, the predominant issues include, the maintenance of a an Islamic way of life in a secular society, and particularly the impact of this society on Muslim children, overcoming negative stereotypes and images which hamper the abilities of the Muslim community to make its needs heard and being heard on issues of foreign policy in which Muslim community has particular strong sentiments.

Despite the growing number of community institutions, one question that has often been a subject of intense discussions and debates among Muslims is the identity of Muslims in America. One school of thought believes that the Muslim communities and their Islamic identity should be understood in the context of their historical experiences. The second group argues that Islamic identity is an un-hyphenated identity. Once a person joins the fold of Islam, he or she leaves behind all traits of previous identities whether ideological, racial or ethnic. Another school of thought maintains that there is nothing wrong with accepting a hyphenated Islamic identity and in the US, it should be an American Muslim identity. This identity is defined as a commitment to the values of pluralism, democracy, liberty and human rights as guaranteed in the US constitution, as well as the commitment to the goal of making Muslims an effective part of American pluralism. It is also defined as a moment to understand Islam through its original text without the contamination of historical and political experiences.

American Muslims appear to be moving into another stage of identity in which issues like occupation, dress, acculturation, relationship among different racial and ethnic Muslim groups as well as with other American Muslims are being confronted and resolved in new and creative ways. Growing Muslim-American political consciousness may be the surest sign of assimilation. The new generation realizes that to protect its rights as Americans and Muslims it has to speak out.

The book under review is a bold attempt in this regard. It is a book by American Muslims, basically for an American readership, Muslim and non-Muslims alike. It aims at demolishing certain myths about Islam and Muslims in America. Its main premises are:

1) On the one hand Islam is constantly being defined to the American public by non-Muslims. On the other hand, it is defined by a small group of Muslim extremists and terrorists, whose actions and rhetoric are taken to represent the teachings of Islam. It is time for American Muslims to speak for themselves.

2) Islam is not an alien or hostile religion. It is an indigenous part of American pluralism, with long historical roots in the US. The ideals of Islam, in terms of liberty and justice, are compatible with a strong sense of pluralism to the founding principles of America, “as a nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all”.

3) Patriotism means cherishing the ideals upon which the nation was founded and built, such as deep respect for individual liberty, religious freedom, a democratic principle, and a quest for justice based upon the rule of law. Muslim obligation, in terms of politics is to provide an honest, ethnically-based critique of nation’s policies.

Is Islam the primary identity of American Muslims? Are American Muslims evolving into a cohesive community? How can they integrate in a manner as to be able to influence their own destinies without losing their cultural identity and their basic values? How do they replace Judo-Christian traditions with Islamic-Judo-Christian traditions? How do they establish Islamic institutions, which often challenge the way of life and social structure of American society? How do they institute Islamic priorities in environments that are alien and even hostile to Islam? Do American Muslims have a political agenda? Can Islam be a force in US political processes? The volume seeks to find answers to these and similar questions.

The authors strongly believe that American Muslims’ identify with the American values of democracy, human rights, justice and pluralism not only through their citizenship but through their religious identity as well. They rightly argue that Islam promotes these values and hence Muslims are at home with the American political system. However, they are often disappointed with what they see as a discrepancy in American ideals and American domestic and international policies. They look around for a Kennedy or a King in modern day America. The need for better understanding between Islam and US is greater than ever before. The US is arguably the best place on earth to be Muslims. American multicultural democracy, with its guarantees of religious freedom and speech, makes life easier for Muslims than in many so-called Islamic states. American Muslims are in a unique position, who can offer solutions for the Ummah’s problems as they gather together their large pool of talent and advanced educational resources. American Muslims should develop requisite institutions in US, as well as get involved in collaborative efforts in the Muslim world. The remarkable ability of religious and ethnic enclaves to survive in the American pluralistic and cultural Kaleidoscope is widely recognized American Muslims may as well succeed in retaining and reinforcing their ethno-natural and sectarian diversities. The existence of a Muslim public sphere where Muslims can think freely to revive and protect Islam is America’s gift to Muslims. Muslims must value and cherish what America has to offer them. They must engage the system to empower themselves to strengthen it in return.