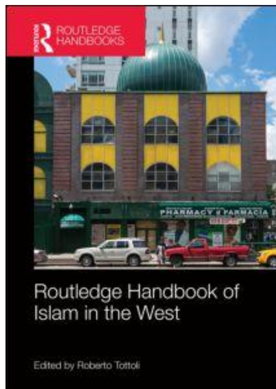
This article was downloaded by: *10.3.97.143*
On: 23 Sep 2023
Access details: *subscription number*
Publisher: *Routledge*
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: 5 Howick Place, London SW1P 1WG, UK



Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West

Roberto Tottoli

Islam in America

Publication details
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315794273.ch6
Kambiz GhaneaBassiri
Published online on: 20 Aug 2014

How to cite :- Kambiz GhaneaBassiri. 20 Aug 2014, *Islam in America from:* Routledge Handbook of Islam in the West Routledge
Accessed on: 23 Sep 2023
https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Part 1.2

Muslims in the Americas

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

This page intentionally left blank

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

6
Islam in America
The beginnings

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri

On a recent research trip to an East Coast mosque, a mosque employee who was interested in my research asked me, "Where do you begin your history of Islam in America?" I have been a professional student of religion long enough to know that when people casually ask me a question about my work they are not so much interested in my expert opinion as they are politely looking for an opening to share their own thoughts and convictions.

"I begin with the early European exploration and settlement of the Americas. Where do you think the history of Islam in America should begin?"

"Ah, you see … most people begin with slavery," he retorted, "but there were Muslims who came here long before that." He went on to explain that there were seamen as early as the ninth century who traveled westward from Muslim Iberia and West Africa, and they recorded their journeys, describing lands and peoples similar to those found in the Americas. Muslim scholars, he insisted, are uncovering archeological evidence of these voyages in South America today. "It's important to talk about these things," he advised me. "People talk about us as though we are recent transports here, and they need to know that that's not the case."

These claims are based on dubious readings of ancient Muslim geographies found in some popular histories of Muslims in America (Dirks 2006: 28–38). They tell us more about some American Muslims' desire to establish their own American foundation myth than about the activities of ancient Muslim sailors. Nonetheless, they are important reminders of the social and political stakes of narrating the early history of Islam in America for American Muslims, who, since the attacks of 9/11, have come under suspicion and feel like outsiders.

While there is no conclusive evidence to suggest a pre-Columbus Muslim presence in the Americas, the history of Islam in America begins in the context of early modern imperial and commercial rivalries and encounters that shaped the Atlantic world. Given the enormous impact the European discovery of the Americas had on the modern era, it is easy to forget that during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries European empires navigated along the coast of Africa and across the Atlantic in order to establish new trade routes that would circumvent the routes that went through Muslim-controlled territories in West Asia and North Africa. As Europeans conquered and colonized the Americas, an Atlantic world emerged, triangulating Africa, Europe, and the Americas through mercantile relations and imperial networks. Muslims from North and

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

West Africa were active participants in this triangle, and some of them ended up in America as slaves.

The extant evidence of the earliest history of Islam in America is scant. We mainly possess scattered information about the lives of individuals whose extraordinary lives or circumstances attracted the attention of Euro-American contemporaries. Some of these individuals were not identified specifically as Muslims but came from Muslim-majority territories. One of the earliest mentions of a person who came to America from a Muslim-majority region is Estevanico de Dorantes, "a black Arab originally from Azamor," Morocco (Cabeza de Vaca 1906: 144). Estevanico's life is the stuff of legends. He, along with his master, Andrés Dorantes, were on Pamfilo de Narváez's 1527 expedition from Spain to the northern Gulf Coast, which ended in a shipwreck. They crisscrossed the Gulf Coast for about six years, occasionally as lost wanderers but usually as captives among the natives. During this time, Estevanico often acted as a medicine man and at times served as an intermediary between the Spanish and the Native Americans. Later, the Spanish viceroy in Mexico, Antonio de Mendoza, purchased Estevanico from Dorantes, and appointed him to act as a scout and guide on a new expedition to the northern frontier of Mexico, where he was reportedly killed in 1539 by the natives of the Pueblo of Háwikuh (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 10–12).

In 1630, Anthony Jansen van Salee, also known as Anthony Jansen van Vaes and Anthony "the Turk," immigrated to New Amsterdam as a colonist of the Dutch West India Company. "Turk" was a derogatory term for Muslims at the time, and "van Salee" and "van Vaes" signified that Anthony was "from Salé" or "from Fez," Morocco. He was later joined by a possible brother or half-brother, who was also referred to by contemporaries as "the Turk" and "the Mulatto." Anthony was in all likelihood the son of Jan Jansz van Haarlem, a Dutch privateer in the Mediterranean who was captured in 1618 by North African Muslims and found privateering with the "Moors" more profitable than with the Dutch. He "turned Turk" and became Admiral Murat Reis in the fleet of Moulay Zaydan in Salé. In 1676, Anthony settled as a farmer and, at times, real estate entrepreneur in territories that eventually formed New York City (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 9–12). While there is no known record of Anthony's religious identity, one of his descendants, in the late nineteenth century, discovered family heirlooms that included a copy of the Qur'an and a copper teapot that he believed belonged to Anthony (McClain 1932: 71).

Further evidence of the possible presence of Muslims in seventeenth-century America was found in 1991. During the archeological exploration of the African Burial Ground in Lower Manhattan, some graves were uncovered that suggest some early African arrivals in America may have been buried according to Islamic customs (Mack and Blakey 2004: 13). As inconclusive as this evidence is in identifying the earliest history of Islam in America, it nonetheless reminds us that this history begins in the triangular relations between Europe, Africa, and the Americas that shaped the founding of America.

It is not until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that we encounter solid evidence of the presence of Muslims in America. Scholars of the African diaspora estimate that "tens of thousands" of African Muslims were brought to the territories that eventually formed the United States (Gomez 2005: 166; Austin 1997: 22). The heyday of this forced migration coincided with the *jihad*s of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in West Africa. These wars were led by Muslim reformers who dramatically increased the presence of Islam in West Africa and sought to purify West African Islam from native practices that they considered superstitious and heretical. These *jihad*s resulted in the establishment of a number of Muslim states in sub-Saharan Africa, the best known of which is the Sokoto Caliphate founded by the Fulbe scholar-warrior ʻUsman dan Fodio.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

Non-Muslims taken as captives during these wars were often sold into slavery, and, as Michael Gomez has argued, it seems that these *jihad*s were "responsible for nearly all of the captives coming from the interior" of West Africa. The African trade in humans, of course, did not commence with the transatlantic slave trade or with the West African *jihad*s of this era. Slave routes traversed the Sahara, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Indian Ocean for hundreds of years, reaching markets in North Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean, respectively. The transatlantic slave trade, however, altered the nature of the slave market, making it, by the time of the West African *jihad*s, an engine of the continent's economy. As a consequence, West African Muslim states established in this period depended heavily on the transatlantic slave trade and sought to monopolize slave exports (Lovejoy 2000). These *jihad*s, as Gomez has observed, were not "one long, uninterrupted Muslim march to victory. Non-Muslim populations fought back," and their war captives were often sold into the transatlantic slave market (Gomez 1994: 680).

We know very little about how Islam was practiced by enslaved African Muslims because slave owners were not interested in the native religions of their human property. The few African Muslim slaves who left us a historical record did so because they drew the attention of white Americans as a result of their ability to read and write Arabic.[1] Memories of some Muslim slaves on the Georgia Sea Islands were also preserved in interviews conducted with descendents of enslaved African Muslims in the 1930s (Georgia Writers' Project 1972 [1940]). Collectively this evidence shows that Islamic beliefs and practices were, on the one hand, a means of self-identification by which Muslims were distinguished and, on the other, a means by which Muslim slaves made sense of their new experiences and encounters and formed new individual and communal relations in antebellum America.

An example of how Islamic beliefs and practices distinguished Muslims from others could be found in the life of Job Ben Solomon (anglicized from Hyuba Boon Salumena in Fula or Ayyub bin Sulayman in Arabic), who was enslaved in Maryland from 1730 to 1733 and later emancipated and transported to England, where he became an agent of the Royal African Company in order to help promote English trade in gold and gum Arabic in the interior of Africa. While in Maryland, Job was known to "often leave the Cattle, and withdraw into the Woods to pray" (Bluett 1744: 19–20). In England, he at first refused to sit to have his portrait painted because of Islamic sensibilities toward the portrayal of human images as a potential form of idolatry. He only consented to the portrait once he was told that it was a means of remembering him (Bluett 1744: 50–1).

Georgia Writers' Project's interviews with the grandchildren of Muslim slaves also reveal that Islamic practices set Muslims apart in their environments. Katie Brown, for example, recalled:

> Magret an uh daughtu Cotto use tuh say dat Belali an he wife Phoebe pray on duh bead. Dey wuz bery phticluh bout duh time dey pray and dy bery regluh bout duh hour. Wen du sun come up, wen it straight obuh head an wen it set, das duh time dey pray. Dey bow tuh duh sun an hab lill mat tuh kneel on. Duh bead is on a long string. Belali he pul bead an he say, "Belami, Hakabara, Mahamadu." Phoebe she say, "Ameen, Ameen."
>
> *(Georgia Writers' Project 1972 [1940]: 154)*

Muslim slaves were also distinguished by their abstinence from alcohol and pork products. The Georgian plantation owner James Hamilton Couper described his head slave driver, Salih Bilali, as a "strict Mahometan; [who] abstains from spirituous liquors, and keeps the various fasts, particularly that of the Rhamadan" (Austin 1984: 321). Charles Willson Peale, who painted a portrait of Yarrow Mamout, recalled in his memoirs that "acquaintances of [Yarrow Mamout]

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

often banter him about eating Bacon and drinking Whiskey – but Yarrow says 'it is no good to eat Hog – & drink whiskey is very bad'" (Austin 1984: 70).

While Islamic beliefs and practices, in some cases, set Muslims apart from other slaves, Islamic beliefs and practices were not simple transplants from Africa nor did they survive unaffected by African Muslims' new circumstances. A close examination of the writings and practices of African Muslim slaves shows that the polyvalence of Islamic beliefs and practices allowed enslaved African Muslims to bridge racial, ethnic, and religious differences without eradicating them. By way of example, on December 29, 1828, Condy Raquet, a former US *chargé d'affaires* in Brazil, met 'Abdul Rahman in Philadelphia and asked him to inscribe the Lord's Prayer in Arabic. 'Abdul Rahman instead wrote down the first chapter of the Qur'an – *al-Fatiha* (Austin 1984: 190). This act could be interpreted as subversive or as a subtle form of resistance, however, Rahman was a man who had consented to help spread Christianity to Africa in exchange for the repatriation of his family and who had married a Christian woman whom he reportedly accompanied to church (Austin 1984: 187, 168). A more likely interpretation, however, is that in the poly-religious context of slave life in antebellum America, *al-Fatiha* was functionally polysemous for 'Abdul Rahman. *Al-Fatiha*, like the Lord's Prayer, is a scriptural prayer memorized for ritual citation in daily prayer. By writing down *al-Fatiha* when asked to inscribe the Lord's Prayer, 'Abdul Rahman was writing the Lord's Prayer that he knew and in the process founding common ground with Christianity and ascribing a new sphere of meaning to both *al-Fatiha* and the Lord's Prayer.

Another African Muslim slave, 'Umar ibn Said, who was viewed by his contemporaries as a convert to Christianity, likewise understood *al-Fatiha* to be interchangeable with the Lord's Prayer. In his autobiography, he wrote (in broken Arabic):

> At first, [as a] Muhammad[an]. When praying, [I] said: "Praise belongs to God the Lord of the worlds … [the rest of *al-Fatiha*]." Yet now, when praying, the saying of our Lord Jesus the Messiah: "Our Father, who art in heaven … [the rest of the Lord's Prayer]."
>
> *(Said 2011 [1831]: 74)*

By presenting these prayers as interchangeable, 'Umar did not syncretize Islam and Christianity; rather, he established a poly-religious common ground that maintained the distinctness of each religion while at the same time allowing him to step in and out of both. He apparently sought common ground with Christianity within his own Islamic worldview. In his autobiography, while acknowledging that he and his master's family, the Owens, were brought up with different scriptures, he asked, "God, our Lord, our Creator, and our Ruler, the Restorer of our state … open my heart to the Gospels, to the path of guidance." He followed this with a phrase from the Qur'an, "Praise belongs to God, the Lord of the Worlds" (Qur'an 1:2, 6:45, 40:65), and then went on to quote the Gospels, "Because the Law (*shar'*) was made for Moses and grace (*al-ni'ma*) and truth (*al-haqq*) were for Jesus the Messiah" (John 1:17; Said 2011 [1831]: 72, 74). In this passage, 'Umar simultaneously stepped in and out of both the Qur'an and the Gospels by appealing to a conception of God shared by Muslims and Christians as the Creator, Lord, and Ruler of all of existence. Tellingly, he cited a verse from the Gospel of John that would not offend Muslim religious beliefs, ignoring both preceding and proceeding verses that describe Jesus as the Son of God or as the Word made flesh. While clearly aware of the differences between Islam and Christianity, 'Umar's focus on their commonality allowed him to enter into a communal relation of sorts with the Owens.

Another use of Islamic practices in forming communal relations with non-Muslims was found in the plantations of Georgia, where interviewees of the Georgia Writers' Project remember

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

their ancestors making "funny flat cakes," which they called *saraka* or *sadaqa* (a form of voluntary alms in Islam) and distributed to the kids on special occasions. The interviews do not explain the intent behind the distribution of *sadaqa* cakes, but they clearly had a communal dimension to them. That *sadaqa* was given to children demonstrates a use of Islamic practice to forge new communal relations with the next generation, with whom African Muslims did not have clear kinship or tribal ties. The fact that their grandchildren, many years later, recalled *sadaqa* as a "flat cake" and did not associate it with Islam suggests that African Muslims' use of this practice was not intended necessarily to create an Islamic community but rather to sanction Islamically the existing community in which they participated (Georgia Writers' Project 1972 [1940]: 137, 155, 173).

Islamic practices were distinctive but nonetheless a feature of everyday life among African Muslims in antebellum America. Muslims adapted their practices to their new context, and used Islam to participate in a poly-religious and multi-ethnic community. The extant evidence, however, suggests that they never formed communal institutions and practices that could ensure the continuity of Islam among their descendents. Their demise thus marked the end of an era in the history of Islam in America.

The next wave of Muslims, estimated at around 60,000 (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 135–50), arrived voluntarily in the United States between the 1880s and 1910s from Eastern Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East. They arrived at a time of great changes in American society stemming from the emancipation of slaves, increased immigration, industrialization, and urbanization. These changes called for a rethinking of American identity as they altered not only the social and religious landscape of America but also its economic and political power structures. In the antebellum period, Anglo-American Protestants had not felt a necessity to assert their preeminence in society. Their cultural, political, and economic dominance was palpable in all aspects of American life. After the Civil War, however, not only was there more ethnic, racial, and religious diversity in the country but there were also new classes of elites emerging from these varying communities in urban centers throughout the United States. Industrial capitalism allowed for the emergence of a *nouveau riche*, cosmopolitan class. This new post-Civil War era was characterized not by poly-religious practices, but by religious competition over the cultural authority to define America's national identity and to lay claim to its economic, industrial, and scientific advancements.

During this time cultural authenticity was sought by conflating industrial development, commercial capitalism, Enlightenment ideals, the white race, and Protestant Christianity to argue for the superiority of Anglo-American, liberal Protestantism. I refer to this in shorthand as the conflation of race, religion, and progress with a caveat; race, religion, and progress were not seen as separate entities that could be conflated with one another at this time. It is only in hindsight that we see them as discrete categories that were conflated together to define what it meant to be American. In the late nineteenth century, this conflation reached a triumphant pitch under the influence of social evolutionary ideas developed around the works of Herbert Spencer and Charles Darwin.[2] The Congregationalist minister Josiah Strong, for example, cited Spencer in his bestseller *Our Country*, arguing that the mixing of the Aryan races in America "will produce a more powerful type of man than has hitherto existed. … [T]he Americans may reasonably look forward to a time when they will have produced a civilization grander than any the world has known" (Strong 1885: 172). Strong went on to associate America's successes with divine providence and liberal Christian ideals of liberty and individual rights. He wrote:

> It was the fire of liberty burning in the Saxon heart that flamed up against the absolutism of the Pope. … This mighty Anglo-Saxon race, though comprising only one-fifteenth part of

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

> mankind, now rules more than one-third of the earth's surface, and more than one-fourth of its people. … Does it not look as if God were not only preparing in our Anglo-Saxon civilization the die with which to stamp the peoples of the earth, but as if he were also massing behind that die the mighty power with which to press it? … The physical changes accompanied by mental, which are taking place in the people of the United States are apparently to adapt men to the demands of a higher civilization.
>
> *(Strong 1885: 159–61)*

Strong's Anglo-Saxon vision of America struck a chord with popular nativist opposition to the increased ethnic, racial, and religious diversification of the United States at this time. As historian William Hutchison observed, "Neither he nor most of his readers felt any doubt about just who it was that *our* [in *Our Country*] referred to" (Hutchison 2004: 139).

The conflation of race, religion, and progress was not only popularized in the late nineteenth century by noted elites, it was also extravagantly performed at world fairs, the most important of which was the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. The perceived relation between race, religion, and progress was unmistakable in the Columbian Exposition's spatial ordering of Chicago's Midway. The Teutonic and Celtic races represented by German and Irish villages were situated closest to the appropriately named White City. In the middle were the "semi-civilized" worlds of the Muslims and other West and East Asians. At the opposite end of the White City were the "savage races" of Africa and Native Americans. The didactic message of the fair's evolutionary ordering of space and time was not lost on contemporaries. "What an opportunity," wrote the *Chicago Tribune*, "was here afforded to the scientific mind to descend the spiral of evolution, tracing humanity in its highest phases down almost to its animalistic origin" (November 1, 1893: 9).

A number of congresses were held at the Exposition to discuss varying aspects of human progress. One of these, titled World's Parliament of Religions, brought representatives of varying religions to Chicago to discuss the contributions of "world religions" to advancements in the modern world. This Parliament aimed for followers of different religions to be heard in their own voice, but there is no doubt that the expectation was that when Americans heard these differing voices, their superior opinion of their own faith would be reinforced. The chair of the Parliament, John Henry Barrows, stated in his introductory remarks that "the members of this Congress meet, as men, on a common ground of perfect equality. … But no attempt is here made to treat all religions as of equal merit." He further asserted that the very fact that the Parliament was planned and realized by American Protestant Christians, who possess the ability, the foresight, and the religion "fitted to the needs of all men," shows the superiority of their faith:

> Christendom may proudly hold up this Congress of the Faiths as a torch of truth and of love which may prove the morning star of the twentieth century. … Justice Ameer Ali, of Calcutta, … has expressed the opinion that only in this Western republic would such a congress as this have been undertaken and achieved.
>
> *(Seager 1993: 24–5)*

Even though the Parliament intended to put all of humanity on equal footing, Barrows and others believed that once white, Protestant Americans spoke about their faith and its contribution to human progress – as evidenced by the industrial, scientific, and aesthetic wonders on display at the White City – they would convince others of the superiority of their religion.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

The conflation of race, religion, and progress, which underpinned the articulation of a white, Protestant American national identity at this time, significantly affected the history of Islam in America through governmental efforts to exclude non-whites and non-Protestants from the America body politic. Such efforts included not only Jim Crow laws but also restrictive immigration and citizenship laws. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which suspended Chinese immigration for ten years and barred Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized. This act was renewed and remained effective until 1943. In 1917, Congress instituted a literacy test for all new immigrants and established the Asiatic Barred Zone. Since by this time elementary education had become common in northern and Western Europe and since East Asians were barred from entry into the United States, the literacy test was intended primarily to restrict immigration from predominantly non-Protestant parts of Europe and secondarily from Western Asia and Africa. Finally, the Immigration Act of 1924 established quotas that favored northern and Western European countries: "The annual quota of any nationality shall be two percentum of the number of foreign-born individuals of such nationality resident in continental United States as determined by the US Census of 1890, but the minimum quota of any nationality shall be 100." This restriction heavily favored immigrants from Germany and Great Britain, with a quota of 51,227 and 34,004, respectively. All countries with a significant Muslim population outside of the 1917 Asiatic Barred Zone were given the minimum quota of 100 persons.

Muslims' entry into the United States was further restricted by the Immigration Act of 1891, which added "polygamists; or persons who admit their belief in the practice of polygamy" to the inadmissible classes. Between 1909 and 1917, 73 out of 2,457 Indians were barred from entry into the United States on account of their religion permitting polygamy (Das 1923: 13). In 1920, the Indian missionary of the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, Muhammad Sadiq, was detained for seven weeks because he adhered to a religion that allowed polygamy. He successfully argued for his release by explaining that while Islam permitted polygamy, it did not command it, and since Islam obligates its adherent to obey the laws of the land where they reside, Muslims in America were forbidden from having multiple wives (Sadiq 1921).

The ideal of America as a white, Protestant nation at this time was also evident in naturalization procedures. The Naturalization Act of 1790 granted citizenship only "to aliens being free white persons." Congress amended this law in 1870 to give citizenship "to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent." The ambiguities surrounding the racial status of Turks, Indians, and Levantine Arabs resulted in challenges to their eligibility for citizenship. Levantine and South Asian immigrants responded to these challenges by trying to insert themselves into the matrix of race, religion, and progress that shaped America's national identity. They argued in courts that they too are "white" or members of the Caucasian race. Levantine Arabs further asserted that if they were denied citizenship, Jesus Christ, who was born in their homeland, would have to be considered non-white. In 1915, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Levantine Arabs were indeed "white," but this did not settle the citizenship status of non-Levantine Muslim immigrants with darker skin tones. In 1923, the US Supreme Court unanimously denied citizenship to Bhagat Singh Thind, a World War I veteran from Punjab, India. In 1942, a Michigan District Court denied citizenship to Ahmed Hassan from Yemen. The court argued that Arab Muslims were of sufficiently different culture that they could not be considered "white" within the meaning of the Naturalization Act of 1790 (*In re Ahmed Hassan*, 48 F. Supp. 843). The issue was raised again as late as 1944, when a Massachusetts District Court upheld the citizenship of Mohamed Mohriez from Yemen (*Ex parte Mohriez*, 54 F. Supp. 941). The Massachusetts court, reflecting the national mood at the time of America's entry into World War II, argued that exclusionary immigration policies contradicted

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

America's liberal democratic principles. In light of the racist atrocities the Nazis committed in the name of racial superiority, the conflation of whiteness, Protestantism, and progress as a predominant means of defining American national identity became much less defensible.

The conflation of whiteness, Protestantism, and progress in American national identity, which manifested in terms of restrictive immigration and citizenship laws, hampered the presence of Muslims in the United States, but ironically it also opened doors for distinctive American manifestations of Islam, particularly among spiritual seekers and African Americans. The strong association made between religion, race, and material progress turned some Americans who saw themselves both as rational and spiritual to look to the "East" in search of "scientific" forms of spirituality and metaphysics. Chief among these was the Theosophical Society, which sought to assimilate science and "Eastern" religions into a new "Western" religious discourse (von Stuckard 2005: 122–32). Theosophists, thus, served as intermediaries between liberal Protestants and the "East," providing intellectual means and social networks through which the imagined religious other could be embodied. Indeed, the sole spokesperson for Islam at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, was a Theosophist and an American diplomat who converted to Islam around 1888 and, with the support of some Indian merchants, went on to found the American Islamic Propaganda in New York City in 1892.

Webb was a spiritual seeker in the sense that he believed in an immortal soul and spiritual existence but was disillusioned by the notion of salvation through the church. He recalled that in his youth he enjoyed the "sermons preached by God Himself through the murmuring brooks, the gorgeous flowers and the joyous birds" more than "abstruse discourses of the minister" (Webb 1892: 24). He encountered Islam primarily in Sufi writings, from which he concluded that Islam instantiated a "rational" and "universal" religion (Webb 1893: 26–7). In his missionary newspaper, *Moslem World*, he addressed himself to "progressive people in nearly all large American cities" and admonished them that "the time has now arrived for the spread of the true faith from the Eastern to the Western Hemisphere. [Islam's] adoption as the universal religion seems only a question of comparatively short time" (May 12, 1893). Webb disassociated his "spiritual" understanding of Islam from its "exoteric" dimensions, which he rationalized as laws that could be shown to be "thoroughly applicable to all the needs of humanity" rather than as divine commands. He focused on "the spirit that prevailed among the Moslems of the higher [spiritual] class" and on an unnamed "spiritual truth" taught by Muhammad that "every man who knows anything of the spiritual side of religion ought to know" (reproduced in Seager 1993: 275–6).

Webb's mission misjudged the depth of anti-Muslim sentiment in the United States. His appeal to Islam was ridiculed in newspapers as a "fad for those curiously constructed beings who are always chasing after new and strange doctrines" (*Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 25, 1892). Some in the audience of the World's Parliament of Religions hissed at his speech. "Cries of 'Shame' greeted him when he spoke of polygamy," reported the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "but there was enthusiastic approval when he said that the Mussulman daily offers his prayers to the same God that the Christian adores" (September 21, 1893).

The Sufi Order of the West, founded by Inayat Khan, is another example of how the material success of the United States in the early twentieth century paved a way for "Eastern" religions to enter into the middle and upper classes as repositories of "old-world" spirituality in the modern world. Inayat Khan came to the United States with his brother and cousin in 1910 as Indian musicians. They performed in varying circles, including among spiritual seekers involved with the Vedanta Society. Inayat Khan eventually formed the Sufi Order of the West and fashioned himself as a bridge between a spiritual, mystical "East"

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

and a materialist, rational "West." In a redacted autobiography, he recalled that he "found among the people [Americans] love for [spiritual] knowledge, search for truth, and tendency to unity," but he also lamented that "commercialism" and the "reign of materialism" in "the West" made working for a "spiritual Cause … like traveling in a hilly land, not like sailing in the sea, which is smooth and level" (Khan et al. 1979: 84, 112).

While propagating his spiritual teachings, Khan found both his skin color and his Islamic heritage an impediment. In 1923, he was detained on Ellis Island because "the quota of Indians was completed for that month." One of his white disciples had to intercede on his behalf to free him (Khan et al. 1979: 106). He described his confrontation with the conflation of race, religion, and progress in America thus:

> There is still to be found in America a prejudice against colour which is particularly shown to the Negroes. … They think Negroes are too backward in evolution to associate with. … An ordinary man in America confuses an Indian with brown skin with the Negro. Even if he does not think that he is a Negro, still he is accustomed to look with contempt at a dark skin, in spite of the many most unclean, ignorant and illmannered (*sic*) specimens of white people who are to be found there on the spot. … The prejudice against Islam that exists in the West was another difficulty for me. Many think Sufism to be a mystical side of Islam, and the thought was supported by the encyclopedias, which speak of Sufism as having sprung from Islam, and they were confirmed in this by knowing that I am Moslim (*sic*) by birth. Naturally I could not tell them that it is a Universal Message of the time, for every man is not ready to understand this.
>
> *(Khan et al. 1979: 87–8, 113)*

Inayat Khan sought to transcend his race and the stigma of Islam by deliberately framing his teachings in the context of a metaphysical discourse on "universal religion" in which Islam became the accidental religion of his birth. In one of his earliest biographies published by the Theosophical Publishing Society, he was said to have outgrown the legalism of his Islamic heritage and discovered the "inner truth" of existence through esoteric Sufism (Khan 1914: 7–15).

While Inayat Khan and Webb looked to "the East" for the spiritual antidote to "Western" materialism and found their efforts impeded by the stigma associated with race and Islam, others looked to Islam as a means for African Americans to turn the table on white, Christian America through a conflation of Islam, the black race, and progress. The Ahmadiyya Movement and its first missionary, Muhammad Sadiq, who arrived in the United States in 1920, made an influential articulation of this conflation. The Ahmadiyya touted Islam as "the only religion for the uplift of humanity in both the Eastern and Western worlds" (*Moslem Sunrise* (1924) 3(1): 20). However, when Sadiq was introduced to the United Negro Improvement Association through Muhammad Duse, an Egyptian author and pan-Africanist, he found among African Americans some of his most ardent followers (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 206–7). By 1923, the Ahmadiyya mission was in large part directed at African Americans:

> My Dear American Negro … the Christian profiteers brought you out of your native lands of Africa and in Christianizing you made you forsake the religion and language of your forefathers – which were Islam and Arabic. You have experienced Christianity for so many years and it has proved to be no good. It is a failure. Christianity cannot bring real brotherhood to the nations. Now leave it alone. And join Islam, the real faith of Universal Brotherhood which at once does away with all distinctions of race, color and creed.
>
> (Moslem Sunrise *(1923) 2: 263, cited in Turner 2003: 129)*

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

Sadiq's message resonated among African Americans. Some, such as Wali Akram, who founded the First Cleveland Mosque, eventually broke away from the Ahmadiyya Movement, which deviated from the beliefs of the majority of Muslims by acknowledging its founder, Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), as a prophet and the awaited Mahdi or Messiah, and centralized religious authority within his spiritual lineage in South Asia.

Alongside the Ahmadiyya mission in the 1920s and 1930s, new religious movements emerged that used Islamic beliefs, rites, and symbols to define a black Muslim national identity through which African Americans could participate in America's prosperity. Chief among these groups were the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, both of which saw a lack of national unity as an impediment to the progress of African Americans and propagated Islam as a religion that not only ensured the salvation of humanity but provided a discipline and a structure through which African Americans could shed the social stigma of their color and unite to advance economically as a community. In a society where race, religion, and progress were conflated, Noble Drew Ali, the founder of one of these pioneering movements known as the Moorish Science Temple, linked racial and religious identity to an "American Moorish" identity, arguing that a positive national identity was requisite of African Americans' progress in America. "The object of our Organization," he wrote, "is to help the great program of uplifting fallen humanity and teach those things necessary to make our members better citizens" (Ali 1928: 12). These "things" could be summed up as American middle-class values of honest hard work, sobriety, dedication to family and community, and entrepreneurship. "A beggar people," Noble Drew Ali taught, "cannot develop the highest in them, nor can they attain to a genuine enjoyment of the spiritualities of life" (Ali 1928: 13–14).

The founder of the Nation of Islam, Wallace D. Fard (also known as Master Fard Muhammad),[3] similarly conflated race, religion, and progress by teaching that African Americans were a godly race descended from the tribe of Shabazz. They had been stolen from the Holy City of Mecca about four centuries ago by whites. Fard's mission was to restore blacks to their original religion, language, and culture through Islam and in doing so restore them to their original divine nature. Like Noble Drew Ali, he sought to instill discipline and middle-class values in his followers in order to uplift them in American society. He preached obedience to God's will, sobriety, and abstinence from alcohol and pig products. These ills, he taught, were part of the "tricknology" used by Caucasian devils to enslave blacks and keep them illiterate, economically destitute, and ignorant of their true selves (Beynon 1938).

Both Noble Drew Ali and Master Fard Muhammad were prophetic figures who, like prophets in general, sought to universalize their particular experiences through religion. Through an eclectic mixing of healing practices, nationalism, entrepreneurialism, prophecy, and Islamic symbols and rites they sought to universalize African American experiences in order to reconfigure the conflation of race, religion, and progress to free blacks from the social stigma of their skin color. Prophecy was crucial in this process because, unlike white Protestants, Noble Drew Ali and Master Fard Muhammad could not point to military, scientific, and industrial achievements to celebrate African American civilization or progress. Their conflation of blackness, Islam, and progress rested on a prophetic argument for their divinely endowed potential for "civilizational" progress. Not only did their appropriation of Islamic symbols, myths, and practices lend divine authority to their prophetic claims, but Islam also provided a non-Christian, non-white context in which their prophetic teachings became sensible as an African American religion.

In addition to Muslim missionary efforts and the formation of prophetic African American religious movements, the first half of the twentieth century also saw the building of Islamic communities and institutions by immigrant Muslims from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

South Asia. These immigrants generally came to labor in factories or farms. Many took up peddling (Naff 1985). They generally identified with co-ethnics rather than co-religionists because of social and political prejudices against Muslims. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many Muslims changed their names to more Christian-sounding names to ward off any unfavorable attention at points of entry. A. Joseph Howar, a successful businessman in Washington, DC, came to New York in 1903. In 1975, he told a reporter, "My true name is Mohammed Asa Abu-Howah. But people I met on the boat told me I'd better change my name. They said it labeled me as a Muslim, and no immigrant officer would allow a Muslim to enter the United States. … I made my American name A. Joseph Howar. That's how I was naturalized in 1908" (Harsham 1975: 14–15).

A lack of recognition of their religious identity, however, did not stop Muslim immigrants in this period from practicing their religion to the best of their abilities, and as their numbers increased and their finances improved, they also began building institutions and organizations to address their varying religious and social needs. As early Muslim immigrants aged and died in the absence of their family members, a pressing concern for early Muslim immigrants was the provision of Islamic burials. In 1918, for example, Turkish and Albanian Muslims in Biddeford, Maine got together to purchase a burial plot in Biddeford's Woodlawn Cemetery for their co-religionists who had died from the Spanish Flu (Rost-Banik 2004). Syrian and Turkish Muslims in Cleveland, Ohio founded the Association of Islamic Union of Cleveland in 1918 "to foster social relations and solidarity among the Moslems" and to purchase a burial plot in Highland Park Cemetery (Grabowski 2005; Dannin 2002: 98). And long before South Asian Muslims built their mosque in Sacramento in 1947, they formed the Moslem Association of America in 1919 in large part to establish proper burial grounds in central California for their deceased co-religionists (Das 1923: 89; Leonard 1992: 83).

In 1907, Eastern European Muslims founded the American Mohammedan Society in Brooklyn, New York (Ferris 1994: 211). Contemporaries in 1920 regarded it as "the only real mosque" in New York City (Aijian 1920, 40), and it maintained this reputation until the late 1930s. Between the world wars, mosques were build in such diverse places as Michigan City, Indiana; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Ross, North Dakota; Highland Park, Michigan; Chicago, Illinois; and Cleveland, Ohio (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 183–9). The practice of Islam within these institutions was often improvisational and adapted to local circumstances. The variety of social, religious, and political activities in which Muslims engaged can be gleaned from the activities of a remarkable Sudanese immigrant and missionary named Satti Majid, who appointed himself "Sheikh of Islam in America."[4] In 1920, Satti initiated the Detroit chapter of the Kizilay, or the Red Crescent, and purchased plots for Muslim burials at Roselawn Cemetery. In 1928, he registered the Society of Africans in America with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Other organizations attributed to him include the Islamic Benevolent African Society and the African Moslem Welfare Society of America (Abu Shouk et al. 1997: 189–191). In a 1935 interview with *al-Balagh* newspaper in Cairo, Satti explained that the impetus for organizing Muslims in America was a call for subscriptions from subjects of the Ottoman Empire to bolster its navy:

> We organized the first meeting for this in order to collect donations. … When I saw the number of Muslims, I realized that religious duty necessitates undertaking what God has obliged us to do by way of prescribed prayers, the fast of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage to the sacred House of God. … We established a society by the name of Islamic Benevolence Society in Detroit, Michigan, and our first act was to build a mosque there next to Henry Ford, the giant of the automobile industry. Then we organized another society in this city

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

> by the name of Islamic Union, and all of these societies worked together to spread the message of Islam under my leadership. We continued to work as such until 1914 when the war started and the organizations assisted with the aid of those who had been afflicted in the Ottoman State.
>
> *(August 14, 1935, reproduced in Aḥmad 2005: 117–22)*

By 1919, Satti had clearly come to see himself as the pastoral representative of Muslims in America. In a letter he wrote to the French Embassy in that year on behalf of 300 Syrian Muslims who wished to repatriate to Syria but could not afford to do so, Satti identified himself as "the imam and sheikh of Muslims, who speaks on behalf, and is a missionary of the religion of Islam in this country of freedom, the United States" (Aḥmad 2005: 134–5). In a 1921 letter to the British Consulate General on behalf of Yemeni sailors who had served the British during World War I and were desolate and jobless in New York City, Satti introduced himself as "the leader of Muslims in the state of New York" (Aḥmad 2005: 137). Satti also proselytized among African American Muslims and was particularly offended by the teachings of Noble Drew Ali. He left the United States in 1929 to attain a *fatwa* from al-Azhar against him and have himself recognized as the official missionary of al-Azhar in the United States. Scholars at al-Azhar granted him the *fatwa* but deemed him unqualified to lead a mission. Unable to garner funds for his return, he kept up communication with some of his followers in America but eventually returned to the Sudan.

The diverse activities of Satti Majid along with the various institutions Muslims built in this period attest to how African Americans and West Asian and North African immigrants participated in building America in their own vision despite social prejudices and legal restrictions. The history of Islam in America at the turn of the twentieth century, just like the history of Islam in colonial and antebellum America, thus calls attention to the relations formed between peoples of diverse regions and backgrounds that shaped local communities in America despite exclusionary laws and visions of America as a white, Protestant nation. The story of the beginnings of Islam in America is, at its heart, a story of how forces of homogeneity as well as diversity have shaped America and American Islam.

Notes

I would like to thank Katie Lantz for her assistance in preparing this chapter.

1 For a discussion of the historical importance of Arabic in antebellum America, see Alryyes (2011).
2 It should be noted that Darwin himself disavowed any relation between his biological findings and social evolutionary theories espoused by Spencer.
3 The identity of the founder of the Nation of Islam is shrouded in mystery. For some varying theories of his origins, see Gomez (2005: 277–8).
4 My account of Satti Majid's activities are based on Abu Shouk et al. (1997), Abusharaf (2002: 17–32), and Aḥmad (2005).

Bibliography

Abu Shouk, A., Ahmed, I., Hunwick, J.O., and O'Fahey, R.S. (1997) "A Sudanese Missionary to the United States: Sātti Mājid, 'Shaykh al-Islam in North America,' and His Encounter with Noble Drew Ali, Prophet of the Moorish Science Temple Movement," *Sudanic Africa* 8: 137–91.

Abusharaf, R.M. (2002) *Wanderings: Sudanese Migrants and Exiles in North America*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Aḥmad, 'A.H.M. (2005) *Satti Majid: al-da'iyya al-islami al-sudani bi-Amrika, 1904–1929*, Khartoum: Manshurat al-Khartum 'Asimat al-Thaqafa al-'Arabiyya.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6

Aijian, M.M. (1920) "Mohammedans in the United States," *Moslem World* 10: 30–5.
Ali, D.N. (1928) *Moorish Literature*, n.p., in The Moorish Science Temple of America Collection, New York Public Library's Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
Alryyes, A. (2011) "Introduction: 'Arabic Work,' Islam, and American Literature," in Alryyes, A. (ed. and trans.) *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said,* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 3–46.
Austin, A. (1984) *African Muslims in Antebellum America: A Sourcebook*, New York: Garland Publishing.
——(1997) *African Muslims in Antebellum America: Transatlantic Stories and Spiritual Struggles*, New York: Routledge.
Beynon, E.D. (1938) "The Voodoo Cult among Negro Migrants in Detroit," *American Journal of Sociology* 43: 894–907.
Bluett, T. (1744) *Some Memoirs of the Life of Job, the Son of Solomon, the High Priest of Boonda in Africa*, London: Printed for Richard Ford.
Cabeza de Vaca, A.N. (1906) *Relación de los Naufragios y Comentarios de Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca*, vol. I. Madrid: Libreía General de Victoriano Suárez.
Dannin, R. (2002) *Black Pilgrimage to Islam*, New York: Oxford University Press.
Das, R.K. (1923) *Hindustani Workers on the Pacific Coast*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
Dirks, J.F. (2006) *Muslims in American History: A Forgotten Legacy*, Beltsville, MD: Amana Publications.
Ferris, M. (1994) "To 'Achieve the Pleasure of Allah': Immigrant Muslim Communities in New York City 1893–1991," in Haddad, Y.Y. and Smith, J.I. (eds.) *Muslim Communities in North America*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
Georgia Writers' Project – Savannah Unit (1972 [1940]) *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*, ed. Mary Granger, New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.
GhaneaBassiri, K. (2010) *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*, New York: Cambridge University Press.
Gomez, M.A. (1994) "Muslims in Early America," *Journal of Southern History* 60: 671–710.
——(2005) *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Grabowski, J.J. (2005) "Turks in Cleveland," in *The Encyclopedia of Cleveland History*, ech.case.edu/ech-cgi/article.pl?id=TIC (accessed November 8, 2012).
Harsham, P. (1975) "One Arab's Immigration," *Saudi Aramco World* 26: 14–15.
Hutchison, W.R. (2004) *Religious Pluralism in America: The Contentious History of a Founding Ideal*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
Khan, I. (1914) *Sufi Message of Spiritual Liberty*, London: The Theosophical Publishing Society.
Khan, I. et al. (1979) *Biography of Pir-O-Murshid Inayat Khan*, Madras: East–West Publications.
Leonard, K.I. (1992) *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjabi Mexican Americans*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
Lovejoy, P.E. (2000) *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 2nd ed., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
McClain, E.L. (1932) *The Washington Ancestry and Records of the McClain, Johnson, and Forty Other Colonial American Families*, vol. 3, Greenfield, OH: Privately Printed.
Mack, M.E. and Blakey, M.L. (2004) "The New York African Burial Ground Report: Past Biases, Current Dilemmas, and Future Research Opportunities," *Historical Archaeology* 38: 10–17.
Naff, A. (1985) *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
Rost-Banik, C. (2004) *Woodlawn Cemetery – Muslim Burial Ground*, Cambridge: The Pluralism Project, www.pluralism.org/research/profiles/display.php?profile=73366 (accessed November 8, 2012).
Sadiq, M. (1921) "No Polygamy," *Moslem Sunrise* 1: 9.
Said, O. ibn. (2011 [1831]) "The Life of Omar Ibn Said, Written by Himself," in Alryyes, A. (ed. and trans.) *A Muslim American Slave: The Life of Omar ibn Said*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 48–79.
Seager, R.H. (1993) *The Dawn of Religious Pluralism: Voices from the World's Parliament of Religions, 1893*, La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing.
Strong, J. (1885) *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*, New York: The Baker and Taylor Co.

Turner, R.B. (2003) *Islam in the African-American Experience*, 2nd ed., Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

von Stuckard, K. (2005) *Western Esotericism: A Brief History of Secret Knowledge*, London: Equinox.

Webb, M.A.R. (1892) *Three Lectures of Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb*, Madras: Hasan Ali, Lawrence Asylum Press.

——(1893) *Islam in America: A Brief Statement of Mohammedanism and an Outline of the American Islamic Propaganda*, New York: Oriental Publishing.

Downloaded By: 10.3.97.143 At: 21:01 23 Sep 2023; For: 9781315794273, chapter6, 10.4324/9781315794273.ch6