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Citation

Leonard, K. I. (2004). American Muslims Race, Religion and the Nation. *Isim Newsletter*, 14(1), 16-17. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/16925>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

American Muslims Race, Religion and the Nation

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In each of the three largest American Muslim communities, the African Americans, Arabs, and South Asians, race has been a major and controversial issue. Each of these groups encountered racism in America and tried to escape from it, but in different ways. The earliest movements of African Americans toward Islam in the early twentieth century, the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, both asserted "Asiatic" racial identities, explicitly rejecting slave, Negro, and/or African identities in many ways. Noble Drew Ali proclaimed his followers to be "Moorish Americans" and Asiatics, and Elijah Muhammad proclaimed his followers to be Asiatic-Blacks. Indicating that the Asiatic claim was not without its own confusion, not only whites (always), but "Brother Moslems from the East" (sometimes) were barred from Nation of Islam temples.

The early Arab immigrants, mostly Christians but some Muslims too, came from the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century and were often referred to as "Turks," while they called themselves Lebanese or Syrian Lebanese. As Turks, they too were designated as "Asiatics" (Turkey was then called Asia Minor) and were treated in a contradictory fashion in terms of eligibility for naturalized citizenship. People from the Middle East were "white" in successive census racial classifications, but in 1910 the Census Bureau classified them as "Asiatic." Since citizenship in the United States was until the mid-twentieth century restricted by racial designation to whites and blacks, the latter added in 1870 after the Civil War, this posed a problem. Just as the Chinese and Japanese had been denied citizenship as "Orientals", "Asians", and "Mongolians", Arabs were twice denied citizenship, declared not to be "free white persons" in 1909 and 1914 (the latter case involved a "Syrian of Asiatic birth"), although both decisions were reversed on appeal. South Asian immigrants, including Muslims from India or Hindustan, were similarly first called "Hindus", a geographic rather than religious marker in the early twentieth century. The South Asians were denied citizenship in 1923 by being termed "non-white" although they were admittedly Caucasian. In the census, South Asians have had varying separate designations. Among South Asians today, including Muslims, there are disagreements about whether to identify and affiliate as whites or non-whites, and the same is true for Arab Muslims.

A new kind of radicalisation based not on physical features but on religion is currently underway. This new identity that is being embraced by some academics invokes an Arab phenotype. In a U.S. Department of Transportation memo issued in October 2001 outlining guidelines for airport security personnel, for example, the guideline stated *not* to single out passengers who were "Arab, Middle Eastern, South Asian, Muslim and Sikh" for questioning. Note that these are linguistic, national-origin, and religious, not racial categories in the traditional sense.

The notion that Muslims are being newly constructed as a racial group seems attractive for some as it provides a possible rallying point, since movements of resistance and empowerment in the United States have traditionally been organized along racial lines. But such movements have also been organized along religious lines, and in the case of Islam, its religious beliefs and, better yet, its practices often do challenge racism and counter racial divisiveness in America. While the established religions in America, like Islam, are multiracial and multicultural, some

Muslims in the United States have attempted to carve out identities that challenge evolving national norms, identities that often are at odds with those imposed on them by other Americans. Through a review of three key areas of tension, the constructions of race, religion, and the nation, it can be argued that American Muslims may very well be making their greatest contributions to American pluralism.

immigrant religious groups have been analyzed as becoming "white" by moving into the mainstream. But this is perhaps not the strategy American Muslims will want to adopt—the African American component of the community, some 30-40% of the U.S. Muslim population—is already racialized, but as black, not as Arab. Islam is strongly committed to racial equality, and since American Muslims can make a strong

positive contribution to American society in this area, one needs to think carefully about the facile construction of Muslims as some new kind of racial category. Discrimination against religious groups also has a long history in America—why ignore the more obvious and accurate category of religion as the target of current prejudice?

Religion

Moving from race to religion, one needs a quick survey of American religious history and significant recent changes. Euro-American Protestantism, male-dominated, prevailed from the founding of the country. Relatively recently, Catholics and Jews have become part of the mainstream religious culture, the national civil religion. Some have written about this in terms of race: how the Irish became white, how the Jews became white; others have written about it in terms of economic and social strategies, of ways of using opportunities.¹ As the argument goes, the Catholics earned recognition and political power by building a separate sub-culture, while the Jews empowered themselves and achieved recognition and respect through their successful participation in mainstream educational institutions. (Arguably, African American Muslims and some immigrant Muslims are doing the former, while the most ambitious, highly educated new immigrant Muslims are doing the latter).

The ideological and organizational nature of the American religious landscape has changed significantly in the last few decades. First, denominations, so important in the mainline Anglo-Saxon Protestant world, have become less significant as people become more highly educated, intermarry, and move to new neighbourhoods with different local churches; Christians now change their denominational or church affiliations relatively easily. Second, despite male domination of religious structures and dialogues, it is argued that women in America constitute the majority of participants in Christian religious activities and institutions.² Third, as denominations decline, there has been a rise of special purpose groups organized along conservative and liberal lines, a polarization between conservative and liberal religious groups leading to passionate mobilization and new coalitions on public issues such as homosexuality and abortion. Fourth and finally, the public dimensions of religious culture in America, despite the separation of church and state, have grown in importance, as specialists in religious studies and American history testify.

Reviewing the history of American Muslims in the present national context of an expanding but increasingly politicised civic religion, we see that from early on the African American Muslim movements were separatist ones, in tension with religions well-anchored in America. African American Muslims tried to locate their religious roots abroad, in Morocco or the Middle East. But they were often denied recognition as part of world Islam, and, in some immigrant Muslim circles and for some African American Muslim groups, this denial continues.³

Arab Muslims, in particular, have more recently argued for the inclusion of Islam as part of Western civilization and the American mainstream religious scene. They argue this not only on the basis of numbers (Muslim leaders claim there are about as many Muslims as Jews in the U.S.), but, and more importantly, because Islam is one of the three religions of "the book," the historically connected Abrahamic religions, and is therefore an integral part of America's expanding national religious landscape. American Muslim discourse positions Islam as a partner with Judaism and Christianity, emphasizing the religious teachings and values shared by the three monotheistic religions. One needs to ask not only what this argument means for the many other religions in America now, the Buddhists, Hindus, and smaller groups (the Buddhists are arguably as numerous as Muslims and growing equally fast), but what it means for secular people who dislike the emphasis on religion in the civic arena and its intrusion into national political rhetoric. Whatever one's position, it is clear that religious diversity is being recognized as never before and is becoming part of the multicultural agenda at all levels of public life.

American Muslims share in most of the historical trends with regard to religions in the U.S. It is not clear whether Muslim denominations such as various Shias and Sufis are declining in importance, but certainly as the numbers within these smaller groups increase they seem to be establishing separate institutions in the U.S. rather than reducing the importance of boundaries. The key role played by women is being increasingly recognized by American Muslims. In the early decades among Arab Muslims, the energy and activity of women was key to the establishment of major mosques in Detroit and Toledo. The U.S. is the centre of the "gender jihad," one of the most exciting developments in American and international Islam, to my mind, and the feminists (my term) writing about Islamic law and jurisprudence include indigenous and immigrant Muslim women, African American, Arab, South Asian, and others. In another area, we see the relevance of the special purpose religious coalitions across denominational lines, as most of the national American Muslim political and religious coalitions try to link Sunnis, Shias, and others as they focus on pressing issues of the day. Previously, these coalitions were more conspicuous on the conservative end of the political spectrum as Muslim groups at both local and national levels talked about Muslim family values, American immorality, and issues like homosexuality, marriage and divorce. But now, after 9/11, the liberal end of the political spectrum is being embraced as American Muslims, along with others, emphasize civil rights, justice, and the freedom of speech and assembly.

The nation

Finally, looking at American Muslim constructions of the nation, a subject already implicit in much of the above, we turn again to history. African American Muslims, in the early Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam, explicitly opted out of the nation. They gave up their citizenship rights and obligations including voting and service in the military; separatist tendencies stemming from those formative years remain in some movements. While African American Muslims judged the US more harshly than other Muslims, they were also the most socially engaged group, in a mosque-based survey that was part of a major national survey involving forty denominations, with the Muslim component sponsored by four organizations, CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations), ISNA (Islamic Society of North America), ICNA (Islamic Circle of North America), and the Ministry of Imam W.D. Mohammed.⁴ Even Louis Farrakhan's Nation of Islam clearly grounds itself in the U.S. and works to change the nation.

The Arab Muslim immigrants who came in the late nineteenth century and whose descendants became citizens engaged successfully in local and state politics in places where they had settled in large numbers. However, many of the post-1965 Muslim immigrants took several decades to decide whether or not to become American citizens. But once the decision to take citizenship and participate in American politics at all levels was made in the late 1980s by some national Muslim leaders, it was enthusiastically implemented. There is an exciting history of religious and political American Muslim groups building professionally-organized movements, sometimes in competition with each other and sometimes acting in concert for common goals. Critiques of American foreign policy and orientations to nations of origin dominated the early goals of many of these organizations, but a shift was underway well before 9/11, a shift towards the rights and responsibilities

The 14th
annual Muslim
Day Parade
on Madison
Avenue in
New York,
29 September
2002

Image
not
available
online

of Muslims in this country, towards the issues they judged crucial and the contributions they could make to the nation.

This shift to full citizenship and participation in the nation has brought some new tensions among American Muslims. For example, some American Muslims have greeted Bush's faith-based initiatives with enthusiasm, while others fear the dominance of Christians. More importantly, after 11 September 2002 the American media and mainstream politicians including the President have helped bring liberal Muslims into the public arena as new spokespeople for Muslims, spokespeople not based in the established American Muslim religious and political organizations.⁵ But the nature of the national civic religion and its politicization are issues of greater significance than before. An insistence on the civil rights and freedoms possible in the United States is now a matter of urgency, a matter at the top of the agenda for many in this country, including and perhaps even especially Muslims.

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Notes

1. Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).
2. Women have increasingly exercised moral authority in both religious and civic institutions: see Ann Braude, "Women's History Is American Religious History," in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A Tweed, 87-107 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
3. W.D. Mohammed's American Society of Muslims is recognized as part of the Sunni or mainstream Islam: he has changed the group's earlier beliefs and practices.
4. This information was released through CAIR, the Committee on American Islamic Relations: Ihsan Bagby, Paul M. Perl, and Bryan T. Froehle, *The Mosque in America: A National Portrait. A Report from the Mosque Study Project* (Washington, D.C.: Council on American-Islamic Relations, 2001).
5. For further discussion of this important point see: Karen Isaksen Leonard, *Muslims in the United States: the State of the Research* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2003).