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Islam and Assimilation in the West

Religious and Cultural Ingredients in American Muslim Experience

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Abstract

This essay is an exploration into the social inevitabilities of culture shifts within the American Muslim community's self-understanding of their faith. Rather than a theological explication of the reasons Islam may or may not, or can or cannot, assimilate in America, my approach will be strictly sociological, thereby side-stepping the intricate dialectic of theological niceties in deference to the social realities of culture change. As a social psychologist, my duty is to acknowledge the inevitabilities of behavioral shifts brought about by social and cultural pressures resulting from immigration into an alien cultural *weltanschauung*, i.e., worldview. Therefore in this essay, I will explicate the meaning and nature of de-ethnicization and re-enculturation as I endeavor to disentangle religion from culture, recognizing that much of what goes under the flag of religious orthodoxy is really culturally mandated behavior and worldview. Because the assimilation process bears heavily upon the necessity for Muslim clergy in America to become professional by western standards, this essay explores the complexities of religious secularism as a way of becoming an "American" Muslim. Finally, I suggest liturgical and architectural "adjustments" to western modes of public worship and indicate linguistic niceties that will prove helpful in the assimilation process that I call the "Islamicization of America."

Introduction

In the following, I discuss the de-ethnicization challenge confronting contemporary American Muslims and their communities. I look at the decisions required in determining "what to keep" and "what to give up" in the Americanization process. I also discuss

assimilation as a movement from avoidance to adoption, the process which will bring about the integration of Muslims in America as Americans. Assimilation is inevitable and the sooner we recognize it, and the more systematic we are in identifying the factors involved in the process, the more manageable the experience will be for individuals and communities alike. The imam will be a major player in this process and his understanding of the issues will be crucial for a successful assimilation of Islamic faith with ways of being and living in the world as an American Muslim.

De-Ethnicization and Re-Enculturation: Disentangling Religion from Culture

Certainly our generation is faced with one of the great historical challenges of human migration, namely, the sorting out of those components of culture and religion which are indispensable and those which are, lamentably but necessarily, disposable (Morgan 2012b: 69-92). Not just theologians and politicians are involved in this culling out of what must be kept and what may, alas, be let go. Immigrant families directly feel the impact when moving from home to an alien culture that essentially celebrates another religion. The de-ethnicization process is inevitably linked to cross-cultural immigration (Morgan 2010a). America is the great testing ground for this phenomenon, which has occurred and will occur elsewhere. In America, however, the process constitutes a fundamental assumption of what constitutes “becoming an American” (Bowman and Haleem: 23).

The ease with which, for the most part, Italians and Irish and Germans and Poles made the transition from being predominantly Italian, Irish, German, and Polish to being conspicuously American was greatly facilitated by the fact that they were all, more or less, already immersed in the numerically dominant religion of America, namely, Christianity (and predominantly the growing Catholic Christianity) (Howe: 48). Relinquishing the language, the dress, and, to some degree, the cuisine, was eased by maintaining their long-held faith and worldview that provided a sound medium through which to interpret this New World. For immigrant Jews of the 19th century, the transition was not so easy. In addition to divesting themselves of the visible trappings of eastern European Jewish culture, such as styles of dress and speech, they were not able to or, understandably, unwilling to give up their ethnic identity as Jews and their Jewish religion, which exacerbated the transition to American culture (Morgan 2010b). They reluctantly but necessarily relinquished Yiddish; learning English became the great push within 19th century Jewish communities in America. The divestiture of the more conspicuously visible dress styles of eastern European village and peasant life (with the exception of wearing the *yarmulka*) followed quickly as well. The cuisine is usually the last of the cultural trappings to undergo either a banishment or a modification since food is consumed within the confines of the immigrant’s home and does not draw secular attention the way clothing styles and worship do. The emergence of Reform Judaism in America is the classic demonstration of the de-ethnicization and re-enculturation process. The life and work of Rabbi Isaac M. Wise constitutes the *sine quo non* of the embodiment of this process (Heller). This author has explored in some detail lessons that might be learned by Muslim religious leaders from this Reform rabbi (Morgan 2010b).

When we come to 21st century American immigrant Muslims, we encounter a similar challenge of assimilation where religion and culture are forced to disentangle themselves (Al-Qaradawi). Unlike the United Kingdom and western European countries, America has

enjoyed the influx of a middle-class professional movement, for which the predominant Muslim immigrant profile is of educated Muslims from the Middle East, Indonesia, and India. The UK and other European Union countries have, owing to their different histories of relationship with Muslim countries, a disproportionate percentage of poor, unskilled, and working-class Muslims. America, on the other hand, has enjoyed the immigration of the highest echelon of the Muslim immigrant community (Haddad). This socio-economic reality has placed the American Muslim community in a uniquely advantageous position of fostering a responsible and creative integration of western culture with immigrant culture, and has introduced the possibility of an ideological adjustment within Islam to accommodate but not diminish either their cultural heritage or their religious commitment (Nyang).

The disentangling of religion (transcendent reality) and culture (temporal reality) provides a hermeneutical tool for sorting through the plethora of ingredients found in both religion and culture and will, if carefully defined, assist the sorting-out process of what to keep and what must be relinquished. Let us then, for purposes of this discussion, employ the following definitions as operative tools for excavation. Religion is (1) a complex of behaviors and ideologies (2) consisting of rituals and myths (3) which appeals to a *transcendent legitimacy* (4) embodying a worldview and ethos (5) addressing the verities of life and existence and (6) conveying a dynamic level of psycho/social reality (7) which is self-validating to the individual and community. On the other hand, culture is (1) a complex of behaviors and ideologies (2) consisting of rituals and myths (3) which appeals to an *historico-temporal legitimacy* (4) embodying a worldview and ethos (5) addressing the verities of life and existence and (6) conveying a dynamic level of psycho/social reality (7) which is self-validating to the individual and community (Morgan 2007: 26, 39). These two terms as defined here provide us with a mechanism to assist the immigrant Muslim community in determining what must be disentangled – what is “religious” and what is “cultural” about the practice of the faith of Islam (Morgan 2010b). By identifying the root and core of the Muslim faith, and by recognizing those elements in the practice of that faith which are cultural rather than theological (those things that are historical and temporal in the practice and those things that are understood by the faithful to be transcendentally indispensable to the practice of the faith), a way can be chartered for the assimilation into another culture without jeopardizing either the core of the faith or that which is indispensably cherished in the culture (Khan).

Muslim Clergy and Professionalization: Educational Leadership in Transformation

As was true with immigrant rabbis of the 19th century in America, the transition from a traditional culture to a secularized western society such as America was then and still is a great challenge to rabbis whose rabbinical training took place prior to their arrival in New York (Knobel and Staitman). To have been trained as a rabbi in Poland, Austria, or Germany within the historic ghettos by Yiddish and Hebrew speaking teachers of great learning, but with a narrowly defined concept of rabbinic practice, did not serve well the young rabbi immigrant to America where the concept of a “professional clergy person” was profoundly different. The challenge confronted by any ethno-religious immigrant community is often felt most acutely by their religious leaders (Goren). The Jewish communities’ rabbis were overwhelmed with the disparity between their skills learned in the old countries and the demands of their immigrant communities in this country. Immigrant

Jews inevitably took on the expectations of their Christian counterparts (Fernea). Leading the Saturday prayers and teaching the Talmud during the week to youngsters was a far cry from what the wide Christian community expected of their clergy, Protestant or Catholic (Madison), who were expected to be highly educated in western learning, speaking, and writing. It was generally assumed that they were the embodiment of a classical education, offering not only scholarly sermons but leading in sophisticated and elaborate liturgy as well. Just as their Christian counterparts, immigrant rabbis were expected to function as counselors, skilled and trained in pastoral care, to families and individuals within the faith community.

Needless to say, eastern European trained rabbis had much to learn, and so it is with Middle Eastern and Indian imams coming to this country today. Their deep knowledge of the Qur'an and the Hadiths of the Prophet and a well-developed linguistic capacity in the pronunciation of the Arabic prayers in the Friday liturgy, but with little else in terms of training, will not satisfy the rising expectations of the westernized Muslim (Morgan 2012b). One of the striking deficits of immigrant clergy – Christian, Jewish, or Muslim – is a strong foreign accent that is decidedly off-putting to secular society as well as their own faith communities where English is spoken well and accent-free by the young. Cruel and unfair as it blatantly is, a Muslim religious leader speaking with a strong foreign accent inevitably and regrettably raises the fears of those who know nothing of Islam except the warped image portrayed by the popular media. The Muslim community does itself no favor by continuing to fail to cultivate American-born and reared imams to assume leadership of their communities (Morgan 2012b).

In order for the Americanization process to occur to the advantage of the Muslim community two things must happen. First, immigrant imams should learn quickly what “professional” clergy means in America, and second, the American Muslim community, like the Jews before them, should establish an academically respected school of theology for the training of American imams for the American Muslim community (Morgan 2012a). To assure the Muslim community’s rightful place in American society, the imam must be elevated in the broader secular community by education as well as by liturgical endorsement. Any immigrant ethno-religious community will do itself no favors by ignoring the expectations of the broader secular society within which it finds itself seeking acceptance. The absence of any liturgical semblance of an “ordination” or “formalized installation” of the imam as the designated religious leadership of the masjid (mosque) may be a deterrent to the rightful recognition of the imam by the secular society in which they intend to serve. It should be stated unequivocally that there is nothing in the teachings of Islam that preclude the formalization, for purposes of satisfying the wider society, and installation of the imam as religious leader of the masjid. Importing imams from the Middle East is, at best, a stopgap measure unworthy of a strong, professionally and financially sound immigrant community (Morgan 2010c). Establishing an American institution to train young American Muslims to be American imams seems most practicable as well as desirable. Failure to do this will impede the assimilation process. Jews established both the Hebrew Union College of Cincinnati and the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York for the training of American rabbis, and the Catholic Church began to establish seminaries within dioceses for the purpose of producing American-educated priests. American Muslims should not ignore the

significance of this historical fact if they intend to be established and recognized as distinctively American (Osborne; Heller; Morgan 2010b).

Religious Secularism as Social Assimilation: Becoming an “American” Muslim

Religious secularism is a baffling concept, although it is recognized and studied within the behavioral and social sciences. The use of the term has grown out of the realization that a large percentage of Americans identify themselves as “spiritual” but decidedly not “religious.” This distinction, initially rather trivial and ill-defined, has taken on a level of sophistication in recent years owing to the reality that the number of Americans embracing a sense of their own self-defined “spirituality” while rather outspokenly disavowing any allegiance to institutionally organized religion is, in fact, a numerically substantial reality. Furthermore, this notion of being spiritual without the benefit of church or clergy reaches across religious traditions and cultural boundaries (Morgan 2006b). Popular culture expressed and embodied in the media, film, music, art, and consumerism generally has adopted the term, and we regularly find nationally reputable members of each of these expressive communities speaking of their spirituality while publicly abjuring religious institutional affiliation. To be an American means increasingly to be spiritually self-aware while distancing oneself from religious institutions. This is a phenomenon equally present within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Among Muslim youth, according to Omar Shahin, Executive Director of the North American Imams Federation, this phenomenon is growing by leaps and bounds, matching in many respects what has happened in the Jewish, Christian, Hindu, and Buddhist communities in America. Being an American Muslim no longer implies involvement in Friday prayers or the religious life of the *masjid*. Being attached to the faith community by virtue of merely casual uses of certain religio-cultural expressions, symbols, sensibilities, and ideological indicators is becoming the normative behavior of 2nd and 3rd generation Muslims in America. Assimilation implies being alike, looking alike, and doing alike, and the youth culture across the religious and ethnic spectrum in America has, to the understandable lament of the older generation of immigrants, chosen religious secularism over institutional allegiances.

Liturgical and Architectural Westernization: The English Language, Chairs, and Benches

Whether it is legitimate for a behavioral scientist, such as myself, to excuse himself from being theologically informed is left to the reader to decide. Nevertheless, and even at the risk of committing a theological blunder, I propose certain liturgical and architectural adjustments within the practice of Islam in America based on my knowledge of what both Christian and Jewish immigrants have chosen, with great success, to do over the past two centuries (Dolan). Rabbi Isaac M. Wise, who some consider the father of Reform Judaism in America, was flabbergasted at the archaic and retrograde liturgical and architectural insensitivity to the demands of a westernized American Judaica when, upon arrival from Eastern Europe, found the synagogues and temples not unlike the old country in both liturgy and in the construction of their houses of worship (Heller). “Where are the American Jews?” he lamented upon arrival in New York in the mid-1800s. He called for a gradual but effective transformation of Jewish worship, from the old country to the new, that responded to the more secularized and socio-cultural expectations of American society. Islam in

America might wisely ponder doing the same thing if it is, as with Judaism and Christianity, to become as common as apple pie. The Americanization of Islam is the price of assimilation, and assimilation is the price for doing business in America as a fully-recognized and accepted member of the community. There is nothing implicit in the faith of Muslims to preclude their becoming an integral part of the fabric of American culture any more than there was among immigrant Irish Catholics, Italians, Germans, or European Jews. The price of assimilation is the price of enculturation and integration.

Illustrative of this rather obvious point is the use of the English language in liturgy as well as the use of chairs and benches in the prayer rooms of the masjids. Be it far from this author to impinge upon the sacredness of the Arabic language and its central place in the practice of Islam. That being said, one does not have to be a Qur'anic scholar to know that the Friday worship need not be solely and exclusively in Arabic, which is not prescribed in the Hadiths of the Prophet (Al-Qaradawi). There are portions of worship that must be said in Arabic and the imams are fully aware of that, but other portions may and should be said in the language of the culture in which Muslim worship is occurring. If and when (and let it be soon) the imams serving in the masjids of America are born, raised, and trained in America lead Friday worship, why not and should not their liturgy be celebrated in English? Furthermore, could not spoken English be without a foreign accent, a thing that is often troubling to the visitor enquiring of Islam (Bowman and Haleem)?

And why, in a Western society like America, must every male be expected to sit on bended knees on the floor in the house of worship? Granted, allowances are made (sometimes and somewhat reluctantly) for the aged, infirm, and stiff of joints by providing them with a chair, but the conspicuous display of such an exception often results in that individual opting not to attend the worship at all. If exceptions are allowed owing to health and age, why not allow everyone the exception because in America we sit in chairs or on benches when worshipping in synagogues and churches? English prayers and sermons listened to and participated in while sitting on benches is an American given, and there is nothing in Islam to forbid this practice. In the medieval cathedrals of Europe peasants were expected to stand throughout the entire worship service, but when the Pilgrim Fathers came to this country there was no question but that everyone, rich and poor, male and female, adult and child, would have a bench upon which to sit for prayers and worship. One should not simply assume that the mystery and majesty of Islamic worship would be in any way diminished by such western adjustments. The attraction and accessibility of Islamic worship would be greatly enhanced for the western enquirer and visitor, unaccustomed to sitting on the floor on bended knees.

One more concern has to do with the requirement that worshippers must do so barefooted, or without shoes. This is, of course, not a Qur'anic directive but one that derives from ethno-cultural concerns about cleanliness (Al-Qaradawi; Doi). The washing of the body before prayers is a similar point of consideration, but for our purposes the westernized masjid community might consider doing what Christians and Jews did hundreds of years ago, namely, dispense with the barefoot requirement in deference to the realization that in America such a cultural legacy is out of place in a society that emphasizes personal cleanliness. The exposure of the shoeless foot is more offensive than the possible dusty floor of the house of worship. Jesus washed his disciples feet because they were dirty and the act

symbolized humility. In 21st century America, dirty feet are unacceptable whether at the mall or in the house of worship.

Furthermore and in conclusion, this simple furniture adjustment would make it much more conducive for women and men to sit together with their families during worship (Fernea). The old, tired argument that there would be an inappropriate exposure of women's bodies during prayer if men and women worshipped together would be summarily dismissed by getting up off the floor and sitting respectfully and humbly on benches or chairs. No one in western society would presume that sitting in a chair or on a bench precludes either respect or humility, and an added advantage would be that whole families could sit and worship together (Shahin). The Jews faced this dilemma when they came from 19th Eastern Europe. With the introduction of benches and common gender family worship, Judaism was transformed in this country from the domain of the old men sitting in the synagogue to that of a family faith experience. The results have been remarkably positive for Judaism and the prognosis could be likewise for Islam (Stowasser). Religious secularism and spirituality without religion would be more likely challenged with families worshipping together as a family at Friday prayers. The American expression, "The family that prays together, stays together," has merit in this particular situation.

Linguistic and Nomenclatural Niceties in Erosion: Say "Hello," not "As-salaamu"

Must one say "*as-salamu alaykum*" to a brother or sister Muslim in order to be a good Muslim or to be faithful to Islam? Might this greeting function linguistically (and possibly subconsciously) to separate a Muslim from a non-Muslim? Might it be somewhat and even exclusivistic to do so? The Arabic expression is beautiful and bespeaks an allegiance to Islam by virtue of being spoken in Arabic, but most Muslims in the world are not Arab and Arabic is not their native tongue (Haddad). In spite of its elegant beauty, the Arabic language is not and will not become a universal language. Except for special religious and familial occasions, Jews have ceased the use of "shalom" as the obligatory greeting between Jews in America. Is there a cultural distancing of Muslims from non-Muslims that results from the use of the Arabic greeting rather than an English expression such as "Hello"? I have been scolded for not understanding that within the African American Muslim community, personal names that are Arabic sounding are crucial to the newly converted to Islam. I have been duly corrected but fail to understand the emotional attachment to the name change, particularly among African American Muslims. I am willing to concede that argument. However, is it necessary for all American Muslims to elevate the Arabic-sounding names of their children in order to secure their allegiance to Islam? Granted, the Irish prefer Patrick and the prefixes to their surnames are inevitable indicators of their Irish heritage (Doi; Goren). The surnames of most Muslim immigrants are not Arabic; they are India, Indonesian, or Eastern European, and the adoption of the name of the Prophet as a part of an American Muslim child's name seems right and proper. However, the continual use of Arabic-sounding first names seems to suggest, rightly or wrongly, that there is an eagerness to distance oneself from American culture. Religio-cultural names have become or are imbedded in American culture itself, such as Patrick or David owing to Christian history or the Jewish Bible, and this will continue. Only time will tell whether the same will happen with Arabic names. In the meantime, young

Muslim families may ponder the advantages of assimilation when they name their children (Morgan 2010a).

Islamicization of America as an Inevitability: Everyone Knows a Muslim

Clearly, Islam is being Americanized (Nyang). For good or ill, only time will tell, but that it is happening is indisputable. The price being paid by Islam is the price of assimilation and assimilation is the price, as we have been saying, for doing business in America. How to hold on to what counts, what is valuable, what is central and meaningful to the Muslim individual and the Muslim family is what we are exploring here (Shahin). That some things will have to be given up in the de-ethnicization process and the re-enculturation of the immigrant Muslim community is unquestionably true. The determination of what is indispensable and what must be given up is the challenge Muslim communities and its leaders are confronting (Morgan 2010b). Lest we forget our own immediate history, not only is Islam becoming more American, but America is becoming more Muslim! (Bowman and Haleem). This reality, which cannot be denied, must be recognized, lauded, and embraced. The integration of Irish Catholics and Eastern European Jews has changed the face of this continent forever and for the better (Howe; White). The assimilation of Muslims from all over the world into American society will likewise prove to be mutually beneficial. Striking a balance between the Americanization of Islam and the Islamicization of America will be a great asset to our future as a people and a nation.

Concluding Remarks

The Americanization of Islam is an inevitability. It is going to happen. It is happening right now. The Muslim community and its clergy are confronting a situation of immediacy and urgency. The Islamicization of America will happen, but it will follow, not lead, the Americanization process. It can even be argued, albeit ironically, that terrorists did American Muslims a major favor, though unintentionally, when they elevated the American Muslim community to a national agenda. Before 9/11, Muslims in America were, by and large, left to themselves, working as physicians, engineers, attorneys, teachers, and professionals of all kinds. They went about their daily lives without much bother or concern, and, unfortunately, without a deeply instilled sense of attachment to other Muslims and other Muslim communities. 9/11 changed all of that, not unlike what Wounded Knee changed for Native Americans who, prior to that event and the rise of the American Indian Movement, thought of themselves only in terms of their tribal attachments.

The Americanization of Islam has to do with acculturation and assimilation. Realizing the gradations of “adopting versus adapting,” of modifying and blending versus “drifting” in cultural attrition, is American Muslims most important challenge. An immigrant culture struggling to hang onto its own traditionalist identity may find that adopting some new ways is simply not possible and, therefore, will find themselves fighting change at every point. Assimilationists will find that, even though adopting new cultural modes may not be easy or convenient, adapting new cultural modes of being in the new environment will serve them in good stead. Creative integration calls for blending the old ways with the new, the way “things were always done” with the way “things as they are to be.” Dialogue among the youth and the elderly constitutes a matrix for meaningful and viable “adaptation” (Shahin;

Stowasser). Imams engaged in the process of assimilation will be wise to facilitate interactions and discussions, as difficult as that may on occasion be for both groups, between old and young.

This process need not degenerate into a cultural drift away from the fundamental structures of the Muslim community if responsible leadership is exercised. Conflicts and concessions may be negotiated by empowering the old and the new, the young and the elderly of the community, in this work of creatively responsible assimilation. Raising and perpetuating a solid middle-class generation of American Muslims is the goal and the convergence of the *Americanization of Islam* and the *Islamicization of America*, and is crucial if Islam hopes to find itself happily at home in America.

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