CULTURAL INGENUITY: STRENGTHENING THE MUSLIM AMERICAN IDENTITY

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CULTURAL INGENUITY: STRENGTHENING THE MUSLIM AMERICAN IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

Muslims in America must move beyond theological discourse and polemics to creating a dynamic apparatus that can promote indigenous and organic Muslim American culture and that accommodates ideological and cultural diversity. Muslims needs to move beyond attempting solely to correct their image and dispel stereotypes. While these are admirable goals, they cannot be the end goal for engaging in the creative arts, because such a narrowly defined, negative vision does not allow for an organic expression of the self. It is imperative that Muslims establish an artistic tradition in America, because to be an American Muslim is a creative process in itself. Laying the foundation for an expressive culture will ensure that Muslims celebrate their humanity and affirm their dignity, and they will then be free from having to define themselves in opposition to something else. A positive self-definition is what Muslims need.
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CHAPTER I

CULTURAL INGENUITY: STRENGTHENING THE MUSLIM AMERICAN IDENTITY, AN INTRODUCTION

The tragic events of September 11th thrust Islam and Muslims under the eye of public scrutiny. The American Muslim community’s immediate reaction was to break away from its policies of isolation. They retreated to the defence of their beloved Prophet and way of life, as their “mysterious eastern religion” was featured and debated on every major American media outlet and books linking Islam to violence, terrorism, and oppression flooded local bookstores. Unfortunately, post 9-11 literature has largely ignored a much more interesting by-product of those traumatic events—the vibrant debate within the Muslim American community regarding a reanalysis of what it means to be a hyphenated American-Muslim and the need to develop a unique American Muslim cultural identity that mutually embraces Islam and America.

Scholars like Robert Pape have critiqued the assumption that Islam is a cause of terrorism. Pape compiled a database of every suicide attack in the past 20 years and showed that the evidence challenges the
conventional arguments about suicide terrorism, proving that it does not stem from religion but from political conflict. He provides a pragmatic rebuttal to false perceptions of Islam by showing that people engage in violent activities for numerous reasons aside from religion.

Muslims in the West must play a pivotal role in redefining Islam and educating others. Part of this redefinition is to counter the stances of fringe groups that would like to see a monolithic interpretation of society. The Internet gives these groups a presence and amplifies their message, but the message is damaging and dangerous.

Ali Minai’s A Time for Renewal asserts that Muslims must reclaim their faith by launching “a vocal and successful reformist movement.”¹ Minai states that those who lament the fact that Islam today wears the face of militancy in the eyes of the world should keep this in mind: When those who are moderate do not speak as loudly as the militants, the militants speak for them too. The only

way to reclaim the enlightened aspect of Islam is to pursue
it aggressively.²

Muslims in the United States represent an intricate
mixture of creeds and cultures: immigrant and native-born,
devout and secular, moderate and fundamental, integrated
and isolated.³ America’s Muslims are far from homogeneous.
Two-thirds are immigrants; one-third are native born. Most
American Muslims are not Arab, and most Americans of Arab
descent are Christian, not Muslim. People of South Asian
descent—those with roots in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh,
and Afghanistan—make up 34 percent of American Muslims,
according to Zogby International. Arab-Americans constitute
only 26 percent, while another 20 percent are native-born
American blacks, most of whom are converts. The remaining
20 percent come from Africa, Iran, Turkey, and elsewhere.⁴

The voice of reason is truly immeasurable and it is by
far the most influential way to persuade society. Thus,
this mosaic of Muslims in America must move beyond

² Ibid.
³ Paul M. Barrett, American Islam The Struggle For The Soul of a Religion (New York: Farrar,
Straus and Giroux, 2007), 5.
⁴ Ibid., 6-7.
theological discourse and polemics. It must move towards creating a dynamic apparatus that can promote indigenous and organic Muslim American culture; an apparatus that accommodates ideological and cultural diversity. Muslims need to move beyond attempting solely to correct their image and dispel stereotypes. While these are admirable goals, they cannot be the end goal for engaging in the creative arts, because such a narrowly defined, negative vision does not allow for an organic expression of the self.
CHAPTER II

ISLAM AND CULTURE

In this section I will discuss the Islamic support of developing an individual culture unique to its time and place. I will be examining textual evidence, which supports the proposal of this thesis. It is important to establish the textual evidence taken from the Quran and hadith of the Prophet because of the prevailing myths in Muslim society about how culture is separate from religion and essentially antithetical to religion.

For centuries, Islamic civilization harmonized indigenous forms of cultural idioms with the collective norms of its sacred edict. The Arabic word ummah, often translated as “community” or “nation,” refers to the human community in a religious sense, to “ethnical, linguistic or religious bodies of people who are objects of the divine plan of salvation.”¹ To every ummah, God has sent a messenger. The word is derived from the root umm which means “mother.”² Thus, one could deduce that this nation is like a family, bonded by a strength that only a mother

² Ibid.
could provide. The term ummah is most often used to
describe the worldwide community of Muslims. However, the
global ummah has its subsets and cultural manifestations.

Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah of the Nawawi Foundation
describes this rich cultural mosaic. “[Islam] struck a
balance between temporal beauty and ageless truth and
fanned a brilliant peacock’s tail of unity in diversity
from the heart of China to the shores of the Atlantic.”

Islamic law aided in advancing this resource by not
impeding on societal and cultural factors.

Throughout history, Islam showed itself to be
culturally friendly and, in that regard, is similar to a
crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet,
and life-giving but –having no color of their own –reflect
the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow. In
China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked Malian.
Sustained cultural relevance to distinct peoples, diverse
places, and different times underlay Islam’s long success
as a global civilization.

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4 Ibid.
Chinese Muslims, for example, have a distinct appearance, dress, art, architecture, and poetry. In each country the religion became not only functional and familiar at the local level, but also dynamically engaging. Religion fostered stable indigenous identities and allowed Muslims to plant deep roots and make lasting contributions wherever they went.⁵

Daniel Abdal-Hayy Moore, an American convert, found inspiration in the Muslim Holy Book, the Quran, as a source for art. He says that, while it is true that the indigenous roots of American history are mostly Puritan Christian, we as Muslims can sing out the most loving belief in the Creator, His Messenger and His message. Muslims can do this in a way that is authentic, modern and American at the same time, and in no way betraying of the true spirit of Islam. After all, at the root of all humankind’s religious paths is an intense spiritual awareness capable of releasing the most profound songs of our hearts.⁶ Moore believes that “The diverse fertility of American culture is

⁵ Ibid.
such that a rich native should bloom, an art once
unmistakably Islamic, yet bearing our own brand of almost
naïve freshness and open experimentation.”

Many conservative elements in the American Muslim
community would disagree that Islam inspires one to pursue
the arts, but traditional Islamic discourse shows
otherwise. A hadith (traditional incident or saying of the
Prophet) narrated by one of the Prophet’s companions
states, as follows:

Once when the Prophet was entering Mecca to perform umra (small pilgrimage) with a group of unarmed
Muslims; their adversaries, the Makkan polytheists,
were closely watching them. A companion of the
Prophet, Abdullah bin Rawahah, was walking in front of
him, reciting poetry against the disbelievers, when
Umar stopped him and said, “O ibn Rawahah! In the
presence of the Messenger of God and in the Holy
sanctuary of Allah, you are reciting poetry?” The
Prophet said, “Leave him, o Umar. These couplets are
more forceful that the showering of arrows upon them.”

In Unity and Diversity in Islam and Islamic
Civilizations, Seyyed Hossein Nasr maintains that the
concept of tawhid (unity) involves both uniformity and
integration of multiplicity into unity, which consequently

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7 Ibid.

8 Yusuf Islam. “Islam Sings.” In Taking Back Islam American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith,
stems from the Divine Unity. Islam embraces so many cultures and yet functions as a unified civilization. In his writings Nasr establishes the relationship between unity and diversity in Islam as both religion and civilization. He responds to the common misapprehension that, because Islam is based on unity, it is hostile to diversity. By examining Islamic history, culture, and civilization he is able to show that Islam encompasses multiplicity. The challenge of Muslims today, Nasr believes, is to preserve the message of unity without trying to reduce Islam to a force of uniformity.

According to Dynamics of Cultural Diversity and Tolerance in Islam, “In precept and in practice, Islam is capable of accommodating a broad range of views, attitudes, and interpretations.” Islam presents the motivation and potency for performing human deeds that are idiosyncratically “human in the deepest sense: to bring the human being nearer to God and to respecting the sanctity of

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10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid, 29.
human relationships, which should mirror the attributes of the divine.”

In traditional Islam, wherever Islam went, it brought first the significance of unity, a unity whose foundation wanted to amalgamate both the individual and society without destroying cultural and ethnic differences. The coming of Islam never had a leveling consequence. Rather, it rejuvenated and reformulated preexisting cultures in the framework of Islamic civilization and according to Islamic values. Classical Islamic civilization provides many examples of this principle of “unity-through-difference.” For example, wherever Islam proliferated throughout Africa, local cultures such as those of Nigeria and Senegal were both Islamized and preserved so fruitfully that in the nineteenth century many Christian missionaries would write home that Muslims were accommodating many local cultural practices of the Africans, such as veneration for nature.

Once a group of Ethiopian converts began to dance with drums and spears in the Prophet’s mosque in celebration of

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 32.
15 Ibid.
an annual Islamic festival. The companion ‘Umar attempted to stop them; the Prophet intervened and urged them to continue. In one hadith, he said to them: “Play your games, sons of Ethiopia, so that the Jews and Christians know that there is flexibility in our religion.” During times of celebration, during the Muslim holidays and at weddings, singing and dancing were permitted. By this and similar acts, the Prophet set the precedent of affirming cultural differences and made it clear that, for non-Arabs, entering Islam did not oblige them to give up their own cultural norms.16

The following verse was sent down to the Prophet on the eve of his migration to Medina, where his legislative activity began.17 “Accept from the people what comes naturally for them; command what is good by custom; and turn away from the ignorant without responding in kind” (Quran, 7:199).18 The Prophet did not destroy the indigenous cultures and subcultures of pre-Islamic Arabia; he lived in

17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
harmony with them, correcting what was unsound and replacing it with what was advantageous.\footnote{Ibid.}

Another example of the Prophet’s toleration of Arabian sub-cultural norms was his practice of propagating the Quran in several principal dialectical variations of Arabic.\footnote{Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, “Living Islam With a Purpose,” *Nawawi Foundation* (2007): 32.} Throughout Arabia, the Arab tribes understood the Meccan dialect of the Prophet’s tribe, Quraysh, which served as the linguistic standard.\footnote{Ibid.} The Prophet’s use of the seven dialectical variations was not something that was deemed necessary, but it was a gesture of respect to the Arab tribes, which acknowledged the integrity of each tribe’s cultural identity.\footnote{Ibid.}

The Prophet’s attitude toward the cultural norms of the Arab tribes and other ethnic groups constitutes a major precedent and a basic standard in Islamic law.\footnote{Ibid.} Because the Prophet gave broad endorsement to diverse cultural conventions and did not alter them except when necessary,
Abu Yusuf, the principal student of Imam Abu Hanifa, regarded Islam's openness toward other culture as the Prophets Sunnah—what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, or silently approved of. Abu Yusuf's position contrasts sharply with some Muslims today who regard the Sunnah (narrowly defined as details of dress and personal behavior) as an alternate for culture.

Islamic legal theory regards sound cultural norms as constituting an independent and authoritative source of Islamic law. The noted Hanafi jurist al-Sarakhsi stated: "Whatever is established by good custom is equally well established by sound legal proof." Another jurist from the Maliki School, stated, "It is obligatory to let people follow their customs, usages, and general aspiration in life. To hand down ruling in opposition to them is gross deviation and tyranny."

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 33.
27 Ibid.
The word “custom” as used in the maxim “custom has the weight of law” refers to acceptable cultural norms.\textsuperscript{28} Jurists define “custom” as “matters that are firmly established in practice and frequently repeated in people’s lives and acceptable to sound natures.”\textsuperscript{29} Reference to “sound natures” is associated with the Islamic belief that people are intrinsically good and gifted with basic intuitive knowledge of God, good and evil, benefit and harm.\textsuperscript{30}

In a normative state, people adopt cultural norms suitable for themselves and the circumstance, time, and place in which they live.\textsuperscript{31} Thus, the purpose of cultural conventions is to obtain benefits and ward off harm.\textsuperscript{32} From the perspective of Islamic law, indigenous cultures and subcultures are linked to the wellbeing of the social groups that have adopted them.\textsuperscript{33} For this reason, Muslim
jurists regard Islam’s endorsement of diverse cultural norms as an instance of its overriding commitment to acquiring benefits and protecting from harm.34

Cultural conventions make up a fundamental part of identity and have a strong hold over their people.35 Islamic law expresses this reality in the form of the legal maxim: “Custom is second nature.”36 Customs are so deeply ingrained that it is difficult to distinguish them from their intrinsic disposition.37 Therefore, it is all the wiser, from the standpoint of the law, to leave customs unchanged insofar as possible.38

Some Muslims challenge the validity of indigenous customs by citing the hadith: “Whoever imitates a people belongs to them.”39 The hadith condemns servile imitation of others; it does not condemn healthy cultural interaction or

34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
the mere resembling of other people.\footnote{Ibid.} The value of such interaction is especially clear when it is done for laudable reasons like living harmoniously with others and building bridges of understanding and cooperation.\footnote{Ibid.}

Furthermore, it is indisputable in the light of a body of authentic hadith that the Prophet himself often wore non-Muslim clothing that were given to him as gifts from Byzantium, Yemen, and other distant regions.\footnote{Ibid.}

When introduced to this maxim, “custom has the weight of law,” some American Muslims worry about which indigenous customs are acceptable and which are not.\footnote{Ibid.} In certain cases, their responses reflect the culture of modesty in which many of them grew up.\footnote{Ibid.}

It should also be noted that the word “culture” has taken on a pejorative meaning for many Muslims in America, especially those who come from immigrant families.\footnote{Ibid.}
“Custom has the weight of law” cannot be invoked to change what is clearly obligatory or prohibited in the Prophet’s law. The law categorically repudiates detrimental and degenerate customs. However, as has been seen, Islamic law has an open-minded attitude toward customs in general, and, when judging cultural norms, it prefers to err on the side of leniency and not rigidity. The presumption of permissibility also applies to indigenous customs; customs too must be presumed acceptable until proven otherwise.

Another maxim states: “Permissibility is the basic rule in customs.” As before, the burden of proof that a particular customary convention is susceptible falls exclusively on those who repudiate it, not on those who affirm it. Nevertheless, in borderline cases, the law prefers to err on the side of leniency. The applicable maxim in this regard states: “The basic rule in customs is exemption,” meaning that they are exempt from blame.

Accommodation of indigenous cultures made it possible for

46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 34.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
Islam to take root wherever it spread in Africa and Eurasia. Muslims learned new systems of weights and measurements. They adopted and enriched local languages. In addition to the Islamic lunar calendar, Muslims adopted solar and astral calendars to determine the seasons and the best times for planting and harvest.

Throughout the pre-modern period, local expressions of Islam bore witness to indigenous cultural creativity. When Islam entered Indonesia, Muslims found that the standard Islamic call to prayer did not always serve its purpose. The human voice could not carry well in the dense Indonesian rain forests. Muslims adopted the local convention of communicating through “talking” drums.

In speaking about creating an indigenous Muslim culture in the United States, it must be emphasized that such a culture would not be a monolith, nor would it necessarily develop along the lines of the dominant culture.
American culture, like all others, is a complex of many coexisting subcultures. They complement, compete and have the same relation with the mainstream culture. Endorsement of American culture means being open-minded toward all the expressions of indigenous culture. As emphasized before, the maxim “culture has the weight of law” forbids rejection of any cultural or subcultural legacy; the maxim allows American Muslims to adopt or to adapt as long as it is not detrimental. Our attitude should remain consistent with Islam’s assumption that customs are permissible, beneficial, and good.

Islam’s refusal to reduce this unity-in-diversity to mere uniformity, far from weakening the faith, has been a major cause of its strength through the ages. There are pervasive cultural and theological expressions of unity in global Islam: calligraphy, geometric patterns,
arabesques, and concepts of architectural space. The sacred and traditional arts of Islam are no less steeped in this tradition of unity through diversity. It is an undercurrent that springs from deep wells of history. Although Islam was a unitary civilization in its earliest phase, as it spread it spawned variants that led to a bipolar civilization.

The classical medieval Christian civilization of the West was unipolar, with a single, centralized Church and a unifying formal language, Latin, which was used for both the liturgy and intellectual discourse. The vernacular languages such as Provencal, Catalan, and Spanish were not widespread in the Middle Ages and thus had a limited cultural and intellectual impact. The difference was that, in the Islamic world, while Arabic remained the sole sacred language; Farsi and Arabic were used for both scholarly and daily discourse.

59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 34.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
In the later period of Islamic history, from the fourteenth century onward, a third pole of Islamic civilizations emerged—the Turkish and Ottoman. These civilizations had cultural affinities to the Persian world, and religious and political affinities to the Arab world.\textsuperscript{64} Other distinct zones emerged: the Malay, Chinese, and sub-Saharan African cultures joined an Islamic cultural domain that encompassed the Arabic, Persian, Turkic, and Indian realms. Each had its own languages and cultures yet all were distinctively Islamic and part of one Islamic civilization.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
CHAPTER III

THE IMAGE OF MUSLIMS IN AMERICA, POST 9/11

The advent of the September 11th terrorist attacks placed Muslims in an extremely vulnerable position. The backlash was severe and old stereotypes were reinforced for western society. This section will cover the specific challenges Muslims faced after 9/11 and the intricacies of the backlash. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 had a tremendous impact on the world and they single-handedly changed the American Muslim community. The attacks stirred Muslims worldwide to condemn terror in the strongest terms, and motivated them to clearly display to humanity who Muslims are and what they stand for.

Why was 9/11 different from other tragedies, and why did it have such a profound impact on Muslims? Many Muslim commentators described how the community had already witnessed shocking massacres, including the slaughter of large numbers of Muslims. Why was 9/11 more momentous? Many Muslims resent the constant demands to condemn terrorism or disavow the violence committed by other

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Muslims, when people of other traditions are not forced to do the same. Muslims feel as though they are on the defensive, trying to prove themselves to those around them. As a result, much of the activism generating from the Muslim American community tends to be reactive. Regardless of whatever might have emerged as an outcome of 9/11, the reality is that this tragic event forced Muslim Americans to put aside their differences and make clear to their fellow Americans that Osama Bin Laden and his ilk were not representative of Islam nor Muslims. Muslims in America, and all over the world, were forced to reflect on a small band of people who hijacked their religion on that tragic day. September 11th was different from other massacres and acts of terror, especially for American Muslims. The terrorist attacks set up a dichotomy for many Muslims in America—not only did they grieve for the deaths of their fellow Americans; they felt the stigma of sharing the same religion as the attackers. As a result, many Muslim Americans lost confidence in their government because of the political backlash that would ensue after the attacks, such as racial and religious profiling.

2 Ibid.
But the finger pointing was not the greatest misfortune that was imprinted in the American Muslim consciousness by 9/11. In the months after the attack, there were at least six ways in which racial profiling was practiced against people who appeared to be of "Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim" descent. First, more than 1,100 non-citizens were detained within two months of the attacks. The total number of detainees is unknown, because the government stopped releasing this figure after November 8, 2001; estimates range up to as many as 2,000. The U.S. Department of Justice launched a dragnet, conducting more than 4,000 investigatory interviews of male non-citizens between the ages of 18 and 33 from "Middle Eastern" or "Islamic" countries or from countries with some suspected ties to Al Qaeda.

Also, the Justice Department has required 82,000 students, employees, and men over sixteen years of age to enroll in a "Special Registration" program. Men with temporary visas from twenty-five countries, all of which

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
have predominantly Muslim populations (with the exception of North Korea), must report to the INS to be fingerprinted and photographed. This "Special Registration" program led to the detention of nearly 1,200 people during the first two months of the program and significantly increased distrust of the government amongst Arab and Muslim communities. Airport officials, airlines, and passengers have also enforced racial profiling against travelers appearing to be Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim. Many men have been kicked off of airplanes and passengers have refused to fly with men who appear Arab or Muslim.6 Since 9/11, there have been over 1,000 incidents of violence: homes, businesses, and mosques firebombed; individuals attacked with guns, knives, fists, and words; women with headscarves beaten, pushed off of buses, spat on; children in school harassed by parents of other children, by classmates and by teachers.7

Pew Research Center conducted a study in 2007, which was the first-ever nationwide survey to attempt to measure rigorously the demographics, attitudes and experiences of

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Muslim Americans. According to this poll, a majority (53%) of Muslims have reported that life has become more difficult in the U.S. after attacks.\textsuperscript{8} According to the study, this view is prevalent amongst the highly educated and wealthier Muslims. The study also shows that more than half (54%) of Muslim Americans believe that the government’s anti-terror efforts single out Muslims for extra surveillance and monitoring.\textsuperscript{9}

Whether the aftermath described above directly led to the unity of the American Muslim community is complicated by the Black American Muslim factor. The people under attack were not Black American Muslims, but the relatively and perhaps identifiably "un-American" Muslim immigrants. No one can question the "Americanness" of a Black American Muslim. The same Pew Research study found that Muslim Americans (both indigenous and immigrant) are assimilated, happy with their lives, and moderate with regards to many of the issues that have been so-called divides between the


\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
western and Muslim worlds. Despite this fact, the “typical” appearance of American Muslim people aroused suspicions from their fellow Americans. In a talk after September 11, Professor Sherman Jackson posed the following hypothetical scenario to an audience at the University of Michigan.

Dr. Jackson said, “Imagine a black Muslim man who bombed a local KKK office in the Michigan area. How many people would believe that he committed this crime because he was motivated to do as a Muslim? How many people would believe that he committed this crime because he was motivated to do so as a black man?”

Not surprisingly the audience believed that the person committed this crime because he was black. If an immigrant Muslim had committed this crime, undoubtedly the media would have characterized it as an act of terrorism by Muslims. The reaction by this audience reflects the

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10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
12 Sherman Jackson, interview by Muizz Rafique, 2008, Washington, DC.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
attitude that many people in American society held and that the media intensified: the Muslim to be feared was the scary foreign-looking kind. With such a large number of Black Muslims, how could 9/11 be an event of common suffering?

Although the backlash was primarily against the foreign-appearing Muslims, the Black American Muslim community could still sympathize with the plight of their fellow Muslims. Black Americans had already suffered centuries of discrimination and racism prior to September 11. The immigrant population was now beginning to feel what it was like. Interestingly enough, 9/11 galvanized both the indigenous and immigrant communities in an unprecedented way. The immigrant community was now organizing at a very effective grass roots level. The Black American Muslim community was slowly being represented in mainstream Muslim groups. Their knowledge and expertise in starting a grassroots civil rights movement was no longer going unnoticed. Although elements of such activism existed before 2001, the immigrant Muslim community finally understood what Black Americans had
endured.
CHAPTER IV

ISLAM IN AMERICA

In order to fully understand the impact Muslims can have on mainstream western society, it is crucial to examine the role Muslims have played in the media and arts. The participations of Muslim artists are invaluable to the creation of an indigenous American Muslim culture. In this chapter I will highlight the history of such an involvement in which I argue later on is fundamental to the state of Muslim culture in America.

Muslims in America have been silently creating sub-cultural identities over recent decades around mosques, in Islamic schools, at home, and on college campuses.¹ Many of these developments have proven to be productive. The American Muslim experience has endured enough triumphs and enough tragedies to produce a lot of great art. It was common for many Muslims to pursue ‘safer’ careers such as medicine, engineering, but this is changing. There are already people in the Muslim community who have great artistic talent and are finding ways of using it. The forthcoming generation has produced a number of noteworthy

Muslim American writers, filmmakers, poets, fashion designers, rap artists, and stand-up comedians. I will discuss these artists later in this chapter.

Through pop icons, rap stars, and comedians, these entertainment personalities speak the language and connect to the next generation of American Muslims. Another forthcoming trend has been cross-cultural and interracial marriages. In the Quran it states that, “O mankind, We have created you all from a single (pair of a) male and female and made you nations and tribes so that you get to know one another; verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most mindful of Him. God is All-Knowing, All-Aware.”\(^2\) This dispels the notion that many Muslims view themselves as dissimilar in terms of ethnic backgrounds, and accordingly they perceive one another as one entity, Muslim American, rather than for example, Syrian, Pakistani, or Egyptian. Dr. Abd-Allah states, in other ways too, the young generation shoes the signs of cultural maturity and is connecting on positive levels often unthinkable to their parents. Many of them are comfortable with their American identity, while cultivating

\(^2\) (Al-Hujurat 49:13)
a healthy understanding of their religion, pride in the past, connection to the present, and a positive view of the future.³

Music

Playing to sold-out crowds across the United States, British singer Sami Yusuf has often been called “the Muslim Bono.” He sings in English, Arabic, Turkish, and Urdu, sometimes weaving all four languages into one song.⁴ He has sold over one million copies of his debut album, and his second album ‘My Ummah’ has sold more than three million copies worldwide. The Independent magazine in the UK has called him “…the biggest name in Muslim Music – anywhere.”⁵ His songs are typically devotional and often recreate traditional Muslim poetry. He is popular among listeners who wish to have strong religious themes in their music, but because it has a pop flavor, even those that may not be the observant in the practicing sense appreciate his music.

³ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
Muslims have also appeared on the rap scene. Islam has influenced hip hop since it entered the Black Muslim community in the twentieth century. Contemporary Muslim rap groups like Jurassic 5 weave Muslim themes into their music. Mainstream rappers like Mos Def and Lupe Fiasco have incorporated Islam into their music. Lupe is open about being Muslim; although, his songs are not about Islam. Rather, he subtly includes Islamic symbols into his music, disseminating them to an American popular audience.\(^6\) In 2006 Lupe used Persian-inspired writing on the cover of his *Food & Liquor* album.\(^7\) “For this album and single Lupe was nominated for three Grammy Awards in 2007 (Best Rap Album, Best Rap Solo Album, and Best Rap Song).”\(^8\)

Mos Def is a twice Grammy-nominated musician, and an Emmy and Golden Globe Awards-nominated actor who started becoming well-known during the 1990s. Mos Def is open on the subject of being Muslim, and links hip hop to Qur’anic recitation: “both use rhyme schemes and other poetic devices to compress large amounts of information into a few

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\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Ibid.
easily memorized words." In addition to linking his art with spirituality, Mos Def incorporates Arabic words and Islamic themes of God and unity into his lyrics. His second album, _Black on Both Sides_, begins with the *bismillah*, a Muslim invocation and the opening to each *surah* (chapter) in the Qur’an: “In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.” As with Lupe, the Islamic symbols Mos Def uses in his music reach an enormous audience. Both Lupe Fiasco and Mos Def bring Islamic symbols into mainstream American music. Their contribution to mainstream American music is their Islamic ethics and spirituality, which influence their conduct in the entertainment industry and their perception of music. Young Muslims will flock to their concerts in greater numbers, and it is not a rare sight to see a fully covered Muslim woman bobbing her head to the beat of her favorite Muslim rap artists. The Muslims in the rap industry probably attract the largest non-Muslim followings so their music does not cater only to a “conservative” Muslim taste.

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid.
Another up-and-coming singer in the Muslim American community is Kareem Salama, an Oklahoman of Egyptian decent. Salama is the first rising Muslim country music singer. Salama highlights universal themes about love, home, and family values. His songs are spiritual without being religious. One song, inspired by the writings of an eighth-century Islamic scholar, Imam Muhammad Al-Shafi‘ee, endorses the tolerance and the avoidance of violence; again contributing to the call Muslims have taken seriously after 9/11. In “Generous Peace,” he sings, “Gentleman, I’m like incense, the more you burn me, the more I’m fragrant.”12 After listening to one of his concerts, one convert to Islam told the New York Times, “We hope to establish an American Muslim identity, and what is more American than country music?”13

Comedy

Across the country, Muslim comedians are hitting their stride. Like their African American predecessors, they are espousing ethnic wit, not just to draw laughs, but to

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13 Ibid.
encourage the acceptance of Muslims into mainstream American society. By entertaining, they say, they aim to shatter stereotypes and make Muslims aware of their own, occasionally self-defeating, traits.

Azhar Usman, a lawyer turned comedian, has made a career out of just doing that. His “Allah made me funny” tour has captivated audiences at mainstream comic clubs throughout the country.\(^\text{14}\) Without the increased security and scrutiny of the Muslim community after 9/11, many of these comedians would not have much material to work with. Ahmed Ahmed and Maz Jobrani both perform on The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour. Jobrani jokes about his heightened anxiety as he passes through security. "If anything beeps in the metal detector, I think, 'Dammit, I'm a terrorist! I knew it!"\(^\text{15}\) But underneath the one-liners, the treatment really hurts. Ahmed, 35, now avoids flying on the day of a show for fear of being barred from his flight, “The stress reached a level that the whiskers in his beard started to


fall out," he says. Ahmed was handcuffed in the Las Vegas airport in November 2004, and, he said, a young black police officer leaned over and said, "Yo man, now you know what it was like to be a black man in the 60s."\textsuperscript{16} Again, as revealed in the comedy of American Muslims, the immigrant has a stronger bond with African American Muslims. The comedy has resonated with all Muslims, conservative, liberal, and cultural because the US government treats all of these groups in the same way. Thus, a person named Mohammed or Ahmed is still likely to be on a "No Fly List" regardless of his religious practice, and will identify with those themes presented in much Muslim comedy after 9/11.

Another young Muslim American comedian is Aman Ali, born and raised in Columbus, Ohio. In an interview I had with Ali, he said that he draws much of his material from "living in a household with four older brothers...and only two controllers on the family Nintendo".\textsuperscript{17} His humor crosses age, cultural and religious barriers. When I talked with

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.

him about his career, he said that he did not see himself as trying to make a statement, but as trying to make a difference. His message is “That it’s time we start celebrating people. We spend so much time tearing people down, that who is there to build us up?”

TV & Film

Many talented young American Muslims have delved into television and film. I interviewed three filmmakers about their career experiences. This medium is one that causes quite an impact and resonates in people’s heart. In a popular culture like ours, creators of popular expression are not only creating entertainment but also are creating realities by which their consumers are informed and make decisions. An example of its impressionable influence is with the African American experience, it was the impact that television sitcoms had on the perceptions of the country was quite evident. With such shows like The Cosby Show and The Jefferson’s, Caucasian Americans were able to see African American families in a different light. These shows depicted everyday African American families, thus no longer perpetuating the stereotype of uneducated, low-
income family. African Americans became a part of the mainstream and were no longer dehumanized and vilified as they had been in the past.

In October 2007, LinkTV started a contest called “One Nation, Many Voices Muslims in America, Stories not Stereotypes” in order to hear the voice of the developing Muslim American Identity and educate people about the American Muslim Experience. The contest found film submissions from all across the spectrum representing the voice of the American Muslim community from individuals all over the country. The winning film, produced by UCLA film graduate, Lena Khan, was called “A Land Called Paradise” which depicted what Muslim Americans would like to tell the world. The responses included “I love Jesus,” “Islam inhibits my suicidal thoughts,” “I want to live Green,” and “I shop at Victoria’s Secret, too.” The messages revealed that Muslim Americans have deep roots in this country, but also have produced their own unique flavor in the Muslim world.

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19 Ibid.
I asked Khan what motivated her to get involved in the arts. She began her undergraduate studies with an interest in becoming a professor. She claimed that just before finishing her bachelor’s degree in history and political science however, she realized that many Americans receive most of their information about the world and societal issues from film.\(^{20}\)

Khan had already known and had regularly bemoaned the portrayal of Muslims in cinema, whether it was in "The Siege" where a man is obviously shown making wudu` (ritual ablution) before hijacking a plane, or in Blackhawk Down where militants and "enemies" are shown while the call to prayer rings in the background.\(^{21}\) So with all these things sparking in my mind, I figured instead of complaining about it I would just be the one to make the movies myself and reeducate the public through films that entertain but have a message.\(^{22}\)


\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
With that she decided to enter film to shed light on social issues that needed to be publicized. I asked her if she had met any resistance from conservative elements in the community. She answered, “After my video, ‘A Land Called Paradise,’ Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, a prominent Islamic scholar in the United States, called me to congratulate me on the video and the prize, and other prominent shaykhs and scholars have done the same.” The reaction has been supportive. There are enough people who understand and value the power of filmmaking and music and who want alternatives to the celebrity-obsessed world of popular culture. Khan believes it is not the art they have a problem with; it is the excess of popular culture that goes along with it. Even people who do not like a particular work of art for religious reasons have not completely abandoned the medium.

Finally, I asked Lena Khan how imperative she felt it was for Muslims to become more involved in the arts in order to establish an indigenous Muslim American identity.

\[23 \text{ Ibid.}\]
\[24 \text{ Ibid.}\]
\[25 \text{ Ibid.}\]
September 11 created a gaping chasm between Muslims and the rest of the country, and I believe it is crucially important for film and media to bridge that gap. After September 11, Muslims became one monolithic mass—a homogeneous mass of sword or bomb wielding Arabs bent on destroying our "way of life." The truth is completely the opposite. Muslims are some of the most diverse people in the world and the majority hardly espouses the evil ideas of Osama bin Laden. But saying that isn't enough. To believe it, people need to see it. They need to see Muslims portrayed as simple, normal Americans (which they really are) on television, they need to play more realistic and human characters in films, and they need their stories to be told. This is part of why I made my film, "A Land Called Paradise." It tells the stories of real people who lost people in September 11, who want you to know that terrorists hijacked their religion, who cry for the families they have lost because of the tragic wars that came as a consequence of 9/11's misunderstandings.

Like nearly all professions where they lack a voice, it's extremely important for Muslims to get into film. Young Muslims more than any other group are those with the chips on their shoulders—the ones who see the mistreatment and lack of understanding that Muslims receive and are bitter about it. Instead of merely just complaining, the best way to channel this frustration is to tell our story through film and media. Film is one of the most powerful means of telling a story—of telling, our stories...one of the most powerful ways of conveying a point of view that others would otherwise either not listen to or not understand. Film tells what is real, and more than anything Muslims just need to find the most effective way to tell what is simply the truth.

So I think it is absolutely imperative for Muslims to get involved in the arts. Muslims need to get involved in any art in which the Muslim expression is not being heard. If they do not do this, where there is a hole, it will be filled with something—and that something won't necessarily be truthful, nor
good. Muslims also have so much to express, to tell, and to share, and art is one of the most beautiful and effective ways to do this. It is a way for those of different faiths and cultures to see the humanity in one another, and that is a tremendous need for this society, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.26

Finally, I asked her about her experience as a practicing Muslim trying to make it in the filmmaking industry and how she felt this affected her. She stated as follows:

In an industry which values extreme, such seemingly appreciable limits render one an outsider. I, for one, at first hardly minded abstaining from nightly jags of drug abuse and beer, but as I realized how vital networking and close relationships were to independent filmmaking, I could not help wishing to sometimes be included. The piece of cloth around my head invited the first barrier. Filmmakers associate religion with being artistically fettered, and unfortunately, I must admit the limitation barred me from some of the industry's most important dynamics. While film students naturally gravitate toward the licentious and outrageous, I could not in good conscience work on such sets, and thus I was unable to curry the favors upon which even the lowest levels of the industry operate. Even asking for a script before working on a set was a faux pas. Ever since having done this, the schools most avant-garde film student—the stereotypical artist who creates films "too deep" for even the professors—has not deigned to associate with me. The implication was clear: can Muslim filmmakers pay their dues whenever feature film contains a bedroom scene?

26 Ibid.
Some years later, I have somehow finagled strategies to counter these obstacles. My reputation as one who keeps her word cultivates valuable loyalty in a city of false promises, and my desire to avoid seclusion with male colleagues is equally successful. By now, not only does my cinematographer accept my roommate who casually accompanies us as we drive across California in search of filming locations...I think he now shares her taste in food. A more difficult situation, however, presented itself last year to a director to whom I owed a large favor. She asked me to assistant direct her film about a burka-clad woman's romance with another woman and I remorsefully could not repay my debt. But as is often the case with the wonders of ethnic food, several free kabob dinners have since given me her high regard.

Acceptability, it seems, is indeed a possibility for the young Muslim filmmaker. As I recall the last night of production for my film school thesis, I cannot help but smile at the outrageous gift so eagerly presented to me by Cheri and seven other grinning colleagues: three ounces of heroin with a shoestring bow. Hey, at least it was a start.

Where career and Islam so grossly conflict, the coveted prize—a piece of control over mass culture's most favored medium—must surely be worth the struggle. Few fail to recognize the impact of movies such as "The Siege," a film featuring a Muslim performing ritual ablution before hijacking a plane, on public perception. And as demonstrated by recent Oscar winners, movies ranging from "Crash" to "Hotel Rwanda" and even "Brokeback Mountain," films are one of the most effective modes of bringing light to virtually any issue or cause. I credit this cause alone for the blessings I have been given amidst the struggles. For no other reason than hope that film is part of the panacea for curing Islam's bad image, my casting director and I gathered
over forty cast members and twenty crew within a week to shoot my most recent project, a music video--"A Land Called Paradise"--for LinkTV's "One Nation, Many Voices" film contest meant to spread awareness on the Muslim experience. Thus far my fundraising, the Achilles heel of most filmmakers, is made easy for the same reason. Colleagues to this day still implore me to teach them how to gather crew and funds with such ease. Each time I wonder, "Should I jokingly tell them to become Muslim?"

Money and support prove little help, however, in the most pronounced struggle of America's first generation of filmmakers: content and identity. Less than one hundred Muslims seriously pursue the field in America, and of this number, a large group either foolishly hopes to use cinema to proselytize the public, or more foolishly finds no anathema in making terrorist movies to attain success. This unfortunate reality leaves few capable Muslim filmmakers in a field requiring dozens if not hundreds to churn out one quality project, but it also forces them to define their own identity and personal limitations. For years, I had wanted to make a film based on what I called the "cult and cattle" mentality of Muslim youth. It was a project that finally reverberated with my passions. It was the product of my quest to nurture my self-expression. It was compelling and real. But it also aired out the dirty laundry of my community, and so I have never made it.

Even in the office environment, the struggle is similar. At my past two production companies, my job focused on selecting and shaping scripts and story ideas that would be the most successful; alignment with my principles was not part of the job description. Should I approve a script that is a sure blockbuster, but that promotes Muslim stereotypes? Should I green-light the next low-brow cult favorite even though it contributes to society's deterioration? And how
should I have judged the script I read last week, about two Israelis paralyzed by a suicide attack?

Today's vanguard of Muslim filmmakers must face the decision on how they will represent Muslims and define their own Islamic identity. How will we represent Muslims? What intensity of flaws will we portray? Domestic violence? Racism? Anti-Semitism even? And even more difficult, how liberal will we allow our artistic expression to be? Will the benefits of showing the graphicness of a rape scene outweigh potential inappropriateness and hampering of artistic voice? Will we allow a couple to kiss on screen? Even in small issues, I struggle with my opinions on such issues. Can I film a scene, I wonder, in which a man and woman must touch—a doctor and patient, or perhaps a brother and sister? Will I ever have a scene at a beach, with a screen littered with scantily-clad women? If I one day decide to stop listening to music, will Sami Yusuf record my soundtrack?

Noble intentions and adherence to Islamic principles alone, however, hardly produce cinematic masterpieces. Competing with directors whose pained lives or arcane experiences fuel brilliant self-expression, many Muslims enter the field for no reason other than the cause. The result is a massive stumbling block; film itself is an art, an end itself and not merely a means to one. And so in my second year, in an area of campus where my work would only be shown to eight others, I decided to forget for a moment that I was Muslim and remember that I was a filmmaker. I wrote a dark comedy about self-mutilation for no other reason than I felt like it. I wrote a horror film I would never dream of spending a penny on. And with that, the slight nuance between being a Muslim outsider or a filmmaker who happens to be Muslim, I began to win more awards than anyone in the program.
Unlike others, I have never been able to rely on a love scene or a film glorifying immorality in order to succeed. Instead, I have had to dig deeper. In making a film about a homeless veteran, I failed for weeks to relate to the character. I was a suburbanite. He was the product of a devastating journey. But in the end, I realized it was a feeling many of us have understood—a lack of control, a helplessness in one's affairs and life—that would allow me to at all relate to the gut-wrenching heart of homelessness and connect with my film. The movie went on to compete in several film festivals, and I can only say I am a more capable filmmaker and person after the struggle.

Having dedicated myself to a career I hope to use to help change society, I attempt to continuously learn more about it. Even now, its power never fails to awe me. As Orson Welles once said, "Life imitates art," and it is a sentiment we see daily on screen. To the public, American soldiers have families and those of Iraqis do not exist—for no other reason than because only the former is shown in today's visual media. I remember asking my brother if I could put my nephew on YouTube and later realizing: does everything around us channel our lives toward some sort of final reality on a screen? I remember watching the home videos of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two young men who committed the 1999 Columbine massacre, and thinking the same. The two wondered whether "Tarantino...Spielberg" would be "fighting over this story," and my reaction was sullen: for Harris and Klebold, they could only imagine their "story" becoming reality when it became a film in its own right. Whether through historical dramas like "Amistad" or "Schindler's List," which implicitly infer documentary status for themselves, or by using cinema's magic to create increasingly realistic depictions of disasters or wars, the question to myself grows ever stronger:
what version of reality do I wish to present to the public?

My most recent project, "A Land Called Paradise," combined all of the accouterments that come with being a Muslim filmmaker. Were it not for the struggle in how to represent Muslims, I would have never come up with the premise: ask thousands of Muslims what they would most like to say to the rest of the world, and visually display the results. The outcome was an enormous success. Aside from winning the Grand Prize and being featured in major newspapers, it attracted a colossal following amongst blogs and YouTube viewers, and I have received letters of appreciation and confessions of tears from hundreds. But even with a video based on realities, there was still struggles for self-definition and opportunities for expression gladly taken. I made the decision to support a head-scarf wearing woman holding a sign declaring, "I, too, shop at Victoria's Secret." I sought out the music of country singer Kareem Salama because the beautiful twang in his voice simply felt right. I told my casting director that the man who stated, "I am not ashamed of my virginity," should be handsome. I insisted that the girl who said, "I wear the headscarf even though my parents don't want me to" put on her hijab on camera, for no other reason than because I felt I wanted to express that image. Through one visual collection, people were moved in ways the statements themselves may not have ever accomplished. Perhaps it is a circumstance less than perfect, but it is the reason I chose this field. People cry for fictional characters, not real people."27

Recently, I was able to speak with the Director of Development for Unity Productions Foundation, Jawaad Abdul

27 Ibid.
Rahman. During the interview, I asked him as a Muslim, how he viewed his involvement in the arts. He said that he believed the arts could bring people together, lower the temperature on the fears and help people overcome prejudices. He told me that he remembered going to an interfaith concert at a church to benefit Habitat for Humanity. The Jewish and Christian performers received polite applause. The Muslim performers faced skepticism but once they completed their set, they received a standing ovation. They were probably the best performers there. Not only that, but the Muslim community in attendance became bigger supporters of Habitat for Humanity and has continued to support it to this day. I’ve seen the arts have that type of power. They can also be a medium to carry a message.

Unity Productions Foundation was created in the belief that the media is the strongest force in shaping public

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
opinion and stimulates national dialogue. Unity Productions recognize that film and television is the primary agent for spreading information and formulating the images by which people come to know and understand the world. Unity Productions Foundation (UPF) is a non-profit educational foundation. The foundation works through the media to produce films and documentaries that promote peace and understanding. “UPF produces high-quality films intended to excite and entertain large national audiences and become the centerpieces for well-designed educational outreach programs in classrooms, museums, community organizations, and public institutions.”

The mission statement states:

Today one in five people on earth are Muslim, and yet much of what is known about Islam comes mainly from the headlines. What is the history of this faith? Why does it continue to exert an influence over one-fifth of the world's population? How does Islam fit within a wider societal context?

The foundation believes that comprehending the way in which Islamic values have been expressed in the past and


\[33\] Ibid.

\[34\] Ibid.
today is of central importance to the cause of peace and understanding. The production company has produced popular documentaries that have been featured on television channels such as PBS. Michael Wolfe, of Unity Productions, said that it’s crucial for Muslims to become involved in the arts in order to establish an indigenous American identity. Wolfe believes that this country is a free-for-all and if people from minority groups don’t get involved in telling their own story, someone else will tell it for them. Even if they’re meaning well, they very well may not get your story right. The only real solution is to help tell the story yourself.35

The first of Unity Productions Foundation’s films was Muhammad: Legacy of the Prophet. It travels in the path of the prophet to the Arabian Desert and the holy city of Mecca where much of Muhammad’s narrative unfolded. But the film does not just stay in the past. The story is told by contemporary American Muslims, “including a fireman at the World Trade Center on September 11, a second generation Arab-American family building a community based on Islamic

principles, a Congressional Chief of Staff working for justice, and a refugee fleeing religious persecution, whose experiences in some way echo Muhammad’s life.\textsuperscript{36} The film was given a lot of airtime, Unity Productions website indicates:

...first aired on PBS on December 18, 2003. This primetime, weeknight broadcast covered 97\% of the United States. The two-hour program played without commercial interruption on 340 stations nationwide and was viewed simultaneously in Canada.

Prior to broadcast, PBS designated our show a ‘Pick of the Month’ program and featured it on their community outreach website.

Press coverage was extensive, with articles appearing in 40 newspapers nationwide. The program was discussed nationally on MS-NBC and received a great deal of radio coverage, too. In many cases, print, TV, and radio coverage outlined the story of Muhammad (PBUH) as part of their review, so that the actual exposure to Muhammad’s story far exceeded the PBS audience. MS-NBC ran clips of the show nationally, one day prior to the broadcast.

An above average audience of several million viewers watched the program. Viewers responded enthusiastically. In the last two weeks of December, the film’s PBS-supported website received a total of 630,000 page views by approximately 373,000 users—extremely heavy traffic for a PBS program website.

In addition, PBS’s central offices in Washington, D.C. received 5,000 messages in the first two days of broadcasting (See Viewers Views). On average, these responses ran 40 to 1 positive. The program’s associated websites received thousands more messages.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
Through the winter of 2003, the video and DVD versions of Muhammad: Legacy of a Prophet were the two top-selling items for PBS.\footnote{Ibid.}

Unity Productions has also produced *Prince Among Slaves*. Winner of the Best Documentary at the 2007 American Black Film Festival, *Prince Among Slaves* tells the compelling story of Abdul Rahman, an African Muslim prince, through feature-film styled re-enactments directed by Andrea Kalin and Emmy-Award-winner Bill Duke; contemporary artworks, archival letters and diaries; and on-camera interviews with distinguished scholars and experts...\footnote{PBS website. http://www.pbs.org/previews/princeamongslaves/, (Accessed on January 1, 2009)}

Musa Syeed’s film, *A Son’s Sacrifice*, was chosen Best Documentary Short at the Tribeca Film Festival and Best Documentary Short at the International Documentary Association (IDA) Awards. The film was broadcast in 2008 on PBS' Independent Lens series. When asked why he became involved in the arts, he said that it “is just in my essence.”\footnote{Syeed, Musa. 2008. Interview by author. Washington, DC. September 6.} Syeed believes in the transformative nature of art. “Both artist and audience have the ability to be
transformed in some way by the work, and this works best when there’s some positive intentionality behind it.”\textsuperscript{40}

Syeed grew up in a spiritual and activist household; his parents were able to show him that his art could serve a higher purpose. I asked him what aspect of film inspired his pursue of a career in this art. Syeed felt that as far as artistic mediums go, cinema seems to be one of the most universal, maybe not in its content but in its unique visual language.\textsuperscript{41} Though its form may have cultural specificities throughout the world, this language breaks through the usual language and cultural barriers.\textsuperscript{42} At the very least, cinematic language is intelligible, if not fully comprehendible, across vastly different cultures.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, film’s ability to reach and inspire drew him to filmmaking. The need to tell stories was already there. “I just had to choose a medium.”\textsuperscript{44}

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.
I asked Syeed in what way he felt his faith and affected his art. Syeed believed that “search for God’s Truth and the search for higher forms of creative expression are the same.” Syeed has come to understand the creative process as the exploration of perspectives. “Artists like to present people with different ways of seeing the world, primarily by breaking down the barriers of perception.” Thereby, audiences must examine the way in which they relate to the world and then their relationship to God. “This spiritual dimension is what all artists I think strive for, whether they know it or not.”

The difficulty, Syeed believes, is in understanding how religion affects art. Most people are open to “discussing spirituality, but not religion.” Religion is seen as a brake on the creative process. The word “dogma” shuts down the discussion. Syeed counters this attitude by trying to “find a more holistic perspective of religion,

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
with regard to art."\(^{51}\) Because there are so few Muslims in the arts, and because there is so much scrutiny of what Muslims are doing, American Muslim artists have been “given the burden of representing Muslims in a post 9/11, War on Terror-stricken world, even if our work has nothing to do with that”.\(^{52}\) Syeed intends to make films that “give a face and voice to underrepresented communities, to restore their dignity, validate their stories, and challenge ‘mainstream’ understandings of the world.”\(^{53}\) Beyond that, he says, “I do intend to make films that inspire justice, unity, and positivity. And the highest goal is to make films that make people reconsider their relationship with God.”\(^{54}\)

Furthermore, Syeed values that the most important statement that can be made now is the development of an Islamic aesthetic cinema. There is no single model of an American Muslim cinema. The films cannot merely revolve around mosques or religious practices.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid.  
\(^{53}\) Ibid.  
\(^{54}\) Ibid.
He contends that, “The answer lies in how an Islamic worldview is translated in cinematic language. If that is done the content itself won’t necessarily look Muslim, but it will feel and be Muslim. It may be a subtle, almost imperceptible statement, but it is the most important, since we’re in the business of creating realities.” And with that development hopefully, a Muslim aesthetic would bring us to a positive, true reality.

Moreover, Muslims have even found themselves the subject of a sitcom. The sitcom, Little Mosque on the Prairie has already completed two seasons and is one of the highest rated shows in Canada. Plans for the series to come to the United States are already underway. The sitcom is about a young community of Muslims living in a rural area of Canada and how their presence in the small town has created such hysteria. The antics of characters that range from staunchly conservative, liberal feminist, and “I converted only for marriage” bring to life the spectrum of Muslims at any mosque in America. To look at the impact

55 Ibid.
that such a sitcom would have on the Muslim experience in North America and to the perception of Muslims in America one need only look to what *The Cosby Show* did for Black Americans. In the United States, the CW network has produced a show called *Aliens in America* depicting a Pakistani Muslim boy as a foreign exchange student in a typical American household. Still wearing his ethnic dress and speaking in a thick accent, this practicing Muslim delights the audience with his upstanding morals and irresistible charm. Although his character often plays into stereotypes about Muslim clothing and manners, the character slowly shares his religion and culture with his American host family, while learning American customs in the process.

**Clothing**

The American Muslim identity has even led to entrepreneurial efforts markets the American Muslim identity in the form of clothing. In 2000, a clothing line started for Muslims that wished to wear quality clothing that met the Islamic standards of modesty. The website for this clothing line, Shukr, states, “Whilst habits of dress are only one aspect of this growing and developing
collective self-identity, it is an important aspect, because how one looks on the outside often reflects a lot about how one feels on the inside.” Dawood Yasin, a former model who embraced Islam after working in Paris, London, New York, Milan, and finally South Africa, started the clothing line. He studied Islam and Arabic in Damascus for five years and returned to the United States to be an Imam and start the clothing company. Thus, one will now see denim version of the black gowns worn in Saudi Arabia, or the long hooded robes that men wear in Morocco converted into a hooded shirt that is culturally friendly to a western audience. Not all Muslims “wear their religion on their sleeve.” Some Muslims may understand their dress obligations quite differently. Regardless of whether or not one chooses to adopt a “Muslim dress,” many Muslims in the West continue to do so.

There are other designers that go for a different look than the Shukr clothing line. Although it’s still modest, these designers have chosen a more mainstream and modest look. One such example is Rabia Z. Dubai Fashion Week’s


dubbed Rabia Z as the “Emerging Talent Winner.” What makes her unique is that she is designing for the modern Muslim woman and she is taking traditional Muslim fashion and making it fun, fabulous, and “hip.” Rabia’s goal is to make modesty “look beautiful,” and aspires to someday be featured in department stores worldwide.

The latest revolution that has hit the market is in women’s swimwear- the burqini. It is a type of swimsuit designed by Lebanese Australian designer Aheda Zanetti under the company name Ahiida. The suit covers the whole body apart from the face, hands and feet in accordance with Muslim views on modesty. It resembles a full-length wetsuit together with a built-in hood, other than that it is somewhat looser and made of swimsuit material. It is being described as the perfect Muslim/Islamic swimwear solution for Muslim women who want to swim and participate in sports but have reservations about "revealing" bathing suits.


60 Ibid.

Muslim American Monuments and Sports Icons

Washington, D.C. has memorialized the great figures of American history. Our founding fathers are remembered everyday by those who come from around the world to these historical monuments. Every year Americans visit the monuments to Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, and Franklin D. Roosevelt. They honor those who deserve acknowledgment and this has led to increased solidarity of Americans by deepening our appreciation for the sacrifices of those who came before us.

Approximately forty miles from Philadelphia, “among the rolling hills and tall trees of Chester County, is the Mazar (mausoleum), the resting place of Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen, the Sufi saint, and founder of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, who passed away in 1986.”62 This scenic Mazar, the first in the United States, was envisaged, designed, and built by the members of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship, and dedicated in 1987.63

Mazar of Bawa Muhayideen has become a significant destination for pilgrims from all over the world who desire

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63 Ibid.
to pay their respects to this notable Sufi teacher.⁶⁴ There is only a minute amount of information known regarding his early life. “Records began in the early 1900s when religious pilgrims traveling through the jungles of Sri Lanka first caught glimpses of a holy man. The depth of divine knowledge that he imparted overwhelmed them. Sometime later a pilgrim invited him to a nearby village, and he began his public life as a teacher of wisdom.”⁶⁵ Mazars exist throughout the Muslim world, marking the resting place of great teachers of Islam. Muslims have traditionally visited these places to remember those commendable individuals and pray for them. Important mosques and places of worship would be built near them, and thus a culture would develop. These places have also been examples of great Islamic architecture. Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen is the only person in the United States to have such a resting place. A Sufi mystic, he is best

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⁶⁴ Ibid.

remembered for his efforts to bring unity through understanding to the faithful of all religions.\textsuperscript{66}

Islam in America has produced its own sports icons. One such person is two-time NBA champion Hakeem Olajuwon of the Houston Rockets. The city of Houston wished to honor him with a statue, but because of restrictions in Islamic Law, he declined and requested that he be honored in another form.\textsuperscript{67} Muhammad Ali has been given a star on Hollywood’s Walk of Fame. His star, interestingly enough, is the only star that was placed on a wall, reflecting his request that his name Muhammad, the name of the Prophet of Islam, not be in a place where it could be stepped on. These sports stars are a source of pride for all Americans, but because they are Muslim, they have contributed widely to identifying Islam as an American religion worthy of respect and admiration.

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.

Civic Engagement

American Muslim scholars like Sheick Hamza Yusuf and Imam Zaid Shakir have not only called to an inward rectification of the soul, but also for the spiritual change to translate into constructive involvement and civic engagement. This call for civic engagement recognizes the dichotomous nature of the Muslim community and is an integral part of the unique Muslim experience and identity in America. The Muslim dichotomy of indigenous and immigrant is one of color and socioeconomic status, rendering largely minority converts and recent immigrants living in inner cities, while more affluent and established immigrants reside in suburbs. The two scholars say that this dichotomy creates a setting in which the Muslims of the inner cities have a remarkable social capital, or the capability to draw on internal and communal support systems and network with churches, schools, neighborhood associations, local politicians, and small interest groups.\footnote{Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir, Agenda to Change Our Condition, Zaytuna Institute, 2007, pg. 51.} In contrast, Muslims living in the suburbs have intellectual and financial capital. The call today for American Muslims is to bring these two reservoirs of

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68 Hamza Yusuf and Zaid Shakir, Agenda to Change Our Condition, Zaytuna Institute, 2007, pg. 51.
capital together and develop a model that could revolutionize American civic participation.\textsuperscript{69} Imam Zaid Shakir issued a challenge to the wealthy American Muslim community in Houston, “Where are the Muslim Doctors without Borders? Spend Six months here, six months in the Congo. Form it!”\textsuperscript{70}

Such efforts have already begun in many Muslim communities throughout the United States and have been a source of great pride for Muslim Americans. Organizations such as Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) in Chicago combine the material and intellectual resources of suburban Muslims with the organizational expertise and networking potential of inner-city Muslims to create a dynamic synthesis that is having an ever greater impact on the life of both Muslims and non-Muslim communities. “The Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) is a community-based nonprofit that works for social justice, delivers a range of social services, and cultivates the arts in urban communities.”\textsuperscript{71}

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\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{71} The Inner-City Muslim Action Network Website. http://www.imancentral.org/about.html (Accessed on December 1, 2008).
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The members of this community are white, black, Arab and Asian, PhD students and high school dropouts, hip hop artists and physicians, all working towards the Muslim objective of being compassionate towards humanity and having true genuineness.\textsuperscript{72}

In Los Angeles, the Umma Community Clinic provides free healthcare to over 10,000 residents of South Central Los Angeles. Similar projects exist in the Washington, D.C., Dallas, Texas, and Oakland. This civic engagement by Muslims allows them to be identified as “whole” citizens connected to the larger American community.

**Muslim American Education**

Ernest Gellner states that the minimal requirement for full citizenship and effective moral membership of a modern community is literacy.\textsuperscript{73} Dr. Sherman Jackson has also made the call for Islamic literacy among Muslims in America.\textsuperscript{74} Gellner states, “Only a nation-size educational system can


\textsuperscript{73} Ernest Gellner, *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (City: Publisher, 1994), 55.

produce full citizens”. Several American Muslim institutions have taken this advice to heart in an effort to train and produce indigenous American Muslim leadership and scholarship. While Muslims in the past thirty years have struggled to develop effective Sunday Schools and full-time Islamic grade schools, the Zaytuna Institute is now trying to develop an American Muslim seminary. With the development of this seminary Yusuf and Shakir hope to establish a setting, “...where they hope to train a new generation of imams and scholars who can reconcile Islam and American culture.”

The full time Islamic Studies program is designed to educate and train Muslim students, thereby equipping them to be among the future scholars, leaders, thinkers and influential voices of American society. Other smaller institutions, like Sunnipath.com and Al-Maghrib Institute offer online classes and weekend seminars in religion. People who were born and raised in the United States but who have studied in Muslim countries often give

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The quest for reliable Islamic knowledge is vital to a western student has provided an avenue for those Muslims who want to go beyond a Sunday school understanding of their religion and a profitable endeavor for those that run them.

However, the Zaytuna Institute has the loftiest goals: the formation of an accredited Islamic seminary, already moving its campus close to the University of California, Berkeley in hopes of acquiring recognition or partnership with the University. The founder and director of the institution, Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, is one of the leading scholars and Muslim voices in America. The Wall Street Journal has called him a “rock star” amongst Muslim youth in America. Part of his attraction comes from his mastery of not only the Arabic language and the Islamic sciences, but his profound understanding of the Western canon, western philosophy and his birth and upbringing in the United States. Gellner states that, “If every man is a clerk, it is a great help if the language in which he is

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literate is identical with, or at least fairly close to, the vernacular in which he was reared in the family context”.

The Muslim scholars who have come from overseas do not have the language skills or cultural literacy to bring the religion to its next phase. In fact, it took Muslim converts from the west to conquer the Islamic tradition and make it accessible to a western audience. Hamza Yusuf told the New York Times that the problem with Islam today is that its followers lack “religious knowledge.” Islam, like Judaism, is based in scripture and law that has been interpreted, reinterpreted, and debated for centuries by scholars who inspired four schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Yusuf laments that many of the seminaries that once flourished in the Muslim world are now either gone or intellectually dead. The reality, he noted, is that the sharpest Muslim students go into technical fields like engineering, not religion.

79 Ernest Gellner, Nationalism, eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (City: Publisher, 1994), 55.
Zaytuna Institute in America hopes to produce the future intellectuals and scholars of Islam. Hamza Yusuf himself has translated a number of books from Arabic to English realizing that if the religion is to survive and for a community memory to exist, scholarship must develop in the language of the country in which its people are living. Just as the Muslims in Persia and Pakistan made Persian and Urdu languages of the Islamic tradition, English has a chance to become such a language.
CHAPTER V
GOALS FOR DEVELOPING A SUCCESSFUL MUSLIM AMERICAN CULTURE

As Dr. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah points out, to build a successful indigenous Muslim culture, the process cannot be left to a haphazard and an unconscious direction. The process requires deep knowledge of Islam, history, the humanities, and social sciences and must be based on cognizance of how viable cultural traditions are formed.¹

Constructing a sound Muslim American culture requires taking into account what is already established, primarily the community’s flourishing initiatives. The future generations of American Muslims have to examine where they come from and ask themselves what the first generation’s struggles were. They should learn from their ancestors’ mistakes and accomplishments while strengthening their own goals with new ideas and direction.

Moreover, Muslim Americans, essentially, need to be producers of culture, not inactive consumers of it.² Muslims cannot allow backlash from a minute number of conservative elements in their communities to allow them to be

² Ibid.
distrustful or be fearful of work in the arts. Although Muslims have become media-conscious, their engagement needs to move beyond the scope of a reactive position. Today, we have filmmakers Musa Syeed and Jaffar Mahmood, both of whom both have made films that capture the complexities of Muslim life in America. While these are admirable goals, the reason for engaging in the creative arts cannot solely be concerns for self-image. Such a narrow vision does not allow for an organic expression of the self that projects outwards and informs rather than dispels. We need to produce cinematic thrillers and adventures that are creative and that project a fully developed and assimilated American Muslim identity.

A successful Muslim American culture should provide psychological space for all of its constituents.³ Culturally speaking, what is correct for the suburbs may not be for the inner city.⁴ “Its imperative has to embrace all and foster a true sense of continuity and community amongst each other.”⁵ The culture must focus on Islam’s inspiring and collective values while creating “a broad national

³ Ibid.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
matrix that fits all like a master key, despite ethnic, class, and social differences."\textsuperscript{6} This cultural outline must ration openhanded sub-group room for every individual unit to encourage its particular character and distinctive cultural idiom. It must assist vigorous internal multiplicity, while endorsing communal understanding amid "groups, cross cultural communication, and interfaith cooperation with the larger American society."\textsuperscript{7} Umar Abdullah states, that while cultivating sophisticated knowledge of the Arabic tongue, we must embrace our indigenous tongue, the English language, and make it the primary vehicle of our culture. We must continue to develop humor and various literary and musical forms but also cultivate film, theater, and art.\textsuperscript{8}

Dr. Umar is convinced that religion takes on the shape of the mainstream culture in which it finds itself. He compares Islam to a crystal clear river that takes on the color of its bedrock. If the bedrock is dirty, the religion will look dirty, and if the bedrock is clean the religion

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 10.
will reflect it. This captures the force that culture plays in shaping the practice and life of religion. If Islam is going to flourish in America, it has to express and take on the uniqueness of American culture. Islam is flowing over the bedrock of American culture, and if the community does not see it as so, therein rests many of the problems Muslims grapple with that have to be addressed.\(^9\)

A practicable Muslim American culture must generate wholly integrated patterns of reflection and behavior. Such a culture must generate integrated patterns of thought and behavior that allow a cohesive enriching character, capable of discussing modernity and tradition unreservedly and progress for practical purposes between the complexities of today's society.\(^{10}\) By allowing Muslims to evolve further than day-to-day troubles and subjects of individuality, a viable Muslim American culture would produce openhanded psychological room, freeing Muslims to hub on the majority of principal trepidation of being and urbane maturity.\(^{11}\) Culture enables Muslims to be contented

\(^9\) Ibid.
\(^{10}\) Ibid.
\(^{11}\) Ibid.
with who, where, and what they are.\textsuperscript{12} Muslim Americans who are at ease with themselves have taken the first step in becoming role models for their children and others and radiate a sense of direction and credibility, especially because the most powerful leadership is following by example.\textsuperscript{13} These Muslims will not be remorseful for their identity; but instead will exert more efforts to producing mutual understanding. They will be more apt to socialize and build relationships with colleagues, neighbors, and peers. Identities that are entrenched in profound cultural inconsistency are with no trouble thrown into positions of perplexity and skepticism. Genuine religiosity and deep spirituality oblige inner reliability and solidity, which are only achievable “within a sound cultural nexus.”\textsuperscript{14}

Beyond identity development, a thriving Muslim American culture may operate as a center of community improvement and public self-determination.\textsuperscript{15} “This requires not only taking interpretive control of our religion,
ourselves, and our community but developing a healthy social-psychology that provides authority without authoritarianism, continuity and tradition without blind conformity.”16

A thriving Muslim American collective American requires that a “social-psychology must be at the center of our culture just as it is at the core of the most successful social classes around us. Our social-psychology must allow for the full and dynamic participation of both genders on an equal footing.”17 It must be legitimately apparent, detecting problems candidly, smooth the progress of dialogue, and in quest of genuine solutions on the foundation of reciprocal esteem, support, and cooperative assessments, “healthily rooted in the past with an intelligent vision of the future.”18

Cultural phobia is unsustainable in the luminosity of classical Islamic jurisprudence and is adversative to a countless number of successful indigenous Islamic cultures and global civilization. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, asserts the

16 Ibid., 11.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.
need for a deeper understanding of Islam for personal and community growth. This paper is a continuation of the *Islam and The Cultural Imperative*, which was referred to in the abovementioned chapters. In this paper Dr. Abd-Allah focuses on “five operational principles”: trusting reason, respecting dissent, stressing societal obligation, setting priorities, and embracing maxims. These principles are based on Quran and Sunnah and supported by traditional Islamic scholarship. Dr. Abd-Allah contends that these principles emphasize the core values and principals that bridge Islam and the ideals and values of other cultures and religions. This provides Muslims with the opportunity to understand and speak about their faith, and to make themselves relevant in diverse cultural surroundings. This lays the foundations of a vibrant indigenous Muslim presence wherever they may be. These operational principles do not constitute everything a Muslim needs to know about and is not a substitute for the study of Islamic theology law, or spirituality. These are general rules to

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20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.
aid in grasping and applying the broader tradition. Embracing maxims, the fifth of the operational principles, constitutes the bulk of Dr. Abd-Allah’s paper. The core maxims are that matters will be judged by their purposes, certainty will not be overturned by doubt, harm must be removed, hardship must be alleviated, and finally that custom has the weight of law.\textsuperscript{22} He focuses on these maxims because they are revered within the religion. In the eyes of traditional Muslim scholars these maxims are the epitome of Islam. The maxim “custom has the weight of law” affirms that Islam is not culturally predatory, and it teaches Muslims to look upon all cultural heritages with an open mind.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 23.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 31.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The crisis of September 11 has provided the Muslim world a great opportunity. As the rest of the world is discovering Islam, Muslims are hoping to discover the real Islam—a tolerant, enlightened, and dynamic faith suitable for the future. This vision is in stark contrast to the orthodox one created by reactionary traditionalists.\(^1\) All Muslims believe that the words of the Quran are eternal, but this is no excuse to freeze their interpretation. If the words are to provide guidance in an ever-changing world, they must speak in ever-changing ways.\(^2\)

Once again, the sacred texts must be regarded as the source of principles rather than a prescription for piety. A movement for true reform in Islamic thinking can be feasibly accomplished in the West, with its guaranteed freedoms and its provisions for space and ideas.\(^3\)


\(^2\) Ibid., 10.

\(^3\) Abdul Aziz Said and Meena Sharify-Funk, eds. Cultural Diversity and Islam (Lanham: University Press of America), 1.
The process must not injure the basic precepts of the faith.\textsuperscript{4} The movement must be thoughtful, so that it does not antagonize believing Muslims. It must be based on rigorous scholarship so that it carries weight. Finally, it must be daring so that it can inspire.\textsuperscript{5} The only way to reclaim the enlightened aspect of Islam is to pursue enlightenment aggressively.\textsuperscript{6}

Islam is not only a theological doctrine, but also a historical dynamic that involves today's Muslims. Every period and cultural milieu has fostered a different synthesis of Islamic command. As a civilizational force and religious tradition, it is an integral part of the Western tradition. Unfortunately, post 9/11, this idea is being marred by the concept that there is a clash between Islam and the West.\textsuperscript{7} Many people in the West are now repelled by headscarves, turbans, and other symbols of Islam, just as fundamentalist Muslims have seen blue jeans and other manifestations of Western culture as explicitly anti-

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{7} Ibid., 2.
Islamic. Belief systems are becoming simplified into images to be either rejected or absorbed in their entirety.

The West and Islam are caught in a cycle of arrogance that breeds contempt, fanaticism, and paranoia. Western cultural triumphalism is sustained through the use of mass media, educational systems, and control over the symbols of legitimacy and status. As John Esposito states in his introduction for the book titled *Muslims on the Americanization Path?*, "The American Media continue to view Islam through the prism of the Iranian Revolution, regarding it as a retrogressive religion given to extremism and terrorism." Greg Noakes, in "Muslims and the American Press," analyzes the quality of media coverage and the reasons for the tendency to misconstrue and alter the nature and function of Islam. Noakes maintains that the media's susceptibility for the "sensational," the explosive headline events; acts of violence, and religious extremism

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
encapsulate the headlines at the expense of the faith and practice of the vast majority of Muslims.\textsuperscript{13}

Development of a sound Muslim American cultural identity must be resolutely undertaken as a conscious pursuit. The community must make this goal the Muslim Americans community’s priority. It is not a problem that will sort out itself with time and cannot be left to develop on its own by default. Islam does not merely encourage but requires the creation of a successful indigenous Islamic culture in America. It provides for us all the necessary parameters and guidelines for its formation and growth.\textsuperscript{14}

In the absence of an integrated and dynamic Muslim American culture, to speak of ourselves as constituting a true community –despite our immense individual talent and large and growing numbers –or being able someday to play an effective role in civic life or politics is little more than rhetoric or wishful thinking.\textsuperscript{15} By setting the boundaries of the self and imparting a strong, unified

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 14.
sense of identity, a sound Muslim American culture would allow for dynamic engagement within themselves and the world around them.\textsuperscript{16} It would also cultivate the ability to cope with complex social realities and negotiate productively the roles which modern society require us to play, while maintaining a unified, dignified, self-assured sense of who we are and a consistent commitment to our values.\textsuperscript{17} “People can repent from broken rules but not from broken psyches.”\textsuperscript{18} The creation of a healthy Muslim American psyche is contingent on the creation of a successful, well-integrated indigenous culture. A well-integrated psyche and unified sense of identity make authentic Islamic religiosity, a true spirituality, and moral perfection a normative possibility within the American context.\textsuperscript{19}

Once Muslims have relearned the traditional Islamic science of the spirit, they can hope to produce, as great Muslim souls did in the past, enduring monuments of literature, art, and architecture which will proclaim to

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
their neighbors the quality of their souls, and their ability to enrich America. It is imperative that Muslims establish an artistic tradition in America, because to be an American Muslim is a creative process in itself. In this formative process of creating an identity, they must hear every part of their community’s story, so that they recognize the diversity, their strength, which they have been blessed with. Further, given that Muslims are in such a defensive position, they are forgetting their own dignity and humanity. Laying the foundation for an expressive culture will ensure that Muslims celebrate their humanity and affirm their dignity, and they will then be free from having to define themselves in opposition to something else. A positive self-definition is what Muslims need.

20 Ibid.
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