MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to discuss Muslims in America. Why, then, do Americans insist on labeling Muslims as terrorists simply because of the actions of a few individuals? Because Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States, it seems that Americans and Muslims will have to learn how to respect one another’s beliefs if they desire to live peacefully in America. Therefore, those who remain largely uninformed about Islam, yet still wish to degrade the religion, have an obligation to educate themselves regarding the beliefs, traditions, rituals, and culture of Muslims in America. The authors provide a penetrating analysis along with providing a refreshing point of view in look at Muslims in the United States of America.
Introduction

In today’s tumultuous times and because of the United States changing demographics, knowledge of a people’s culture and religion are imperative or transcendental if harmony is to exist. More and more minorities from different ethnic backgrounds and religions are moving into areas or regions that were previously Anglo or African American. This rapid influx has caused problems or conflicts. The different groups are competing with not only Anglos, but with Latinos, Asians, Arabs and others for jobs.

Crawford (2004) stated that businesses such as meat packing, poultry, fishing and farming have brought demands for cheap labor. Many Latinos and Asians such as the Hmong and Vietnamese have moved into states such as Nebraska, Arkansas, Tennessee and Alabama in the past ten years. According to Crawford, Henry Ford in the early twentieth century brought in many Arabs to work in his plant in the Detroit, Michigan area. Most of these immigrants were Muslim.

Today’s Muslims in the United States

Today’s Muslims and mosques can be found in many parts of the United States. According to Hajar (2003) Islam is the world’s fastest growing religion. He also states that there are more than 1.1 billion followers in the world. Watanabe (2001) stated that there were about 5-8 million Muslims or followers in the United States in the year 2000.

Muslims are a very diverse group. There are Sunni Muslims, Shi’ite Muslims and Black Muslims. Muslims also come from many ethnic and racial groups. There are Black Muslims, Arab Muslims, Anglo Muslims, etc. Their beliefs and ideologies run the gamut from fundamentalists, moderates and extremists or radical. There are certain beliefs and practices that most Muslims follow that will be discussed later.

Eck (2003) states that only about 15 percent of Muslims are Shi’ites worldwide. They believe “that the Prophet Muhammad designated his son-in-law Ali and his descendents to be leaders of the community after his death” (cited in Banks&Banks, p.A-9). Eck also states that the Sunni make up about 85 percent of the Muslims and they “place the authority in the consensus of religious scholars to interpret the Qur’an and the Sunnah (custom) of the Prophets” (cited in Banks & Banks, p.A-9). Other Muslim groups also evolved over time, especially within the African American community. According to Eck, the first Black Muslims were slaves brought from Africa where that religion was practiced. In the early part of the twentieth century Timothy Drew changed his name to Noble Drew Ali and established the Moorish Science Temple here in the United States. The Holy Koran of the Moorish Temple “is not the Qur’an revealed to Muhammad, but rather an eclectic composite of Christian, Muslim, and Eastern religious traditions” (cited in Banks & Banks, p. A-12).

According to Pipes and Stillman (2002), Islam has dominated public life in the United States on two occasions, the first during the Iranian hostage crisis between 1979
and 1981 and, more recently, following the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon. Each time Americans responded with outrage and bewilderment at the sight of such violent and unprovoked attacks against their fellow citizens. Although these incidents were sponsored by Islamic extremists, namely Ayatollah Khomeini and Osama bin Laden, many Americans, because of their lack of knowledge regarding Islam, responded with great anger and false generalizations about Muslim’s and their beliefs. Many began to equate Islam with terrorism and, in some instances, retaliated against Muslim’s with further violence. Because Islam is currently the fastest growing religion in the United States, with estimated numbers reaching approximately six million nationwide (Banks & Banks, 2003), it is important that Americans understand Islam in its entirety, rather than basing judgments on the actions of a few extremists who distort Islam for political gain. This paper will attempt to provide clarification about Islam and its adherents, and seeks to deflate false generalizations that have given Islam a negative status in the United States.

**What is Islam?**

Islam is the faith and way of life of more than a billion people around the world (Knight, 1995). The word *Islam* means “submission” to God and those who practice Islam are called *Muslims*. Though Islam differs in many ways from Christianity, the two religions do share some similarities. Like Christian’s, Muslim’s believe in only one god, whom they refer to as *Allah*. Muslims believe that *Allah* knows all things, can do all things, and has always existed. Furthermore, everything exists because *Allah* wants it to exist. Because Islam is monotheistic, the worshiping of idols is strictly forbidden.

Muslim’s also trace the roots of Islam to Adam, the first man. Adam is believed by Muslims to be the first prophet sent by *Allah* to teach mankind the ways in which they should behave toward others if they expect to enter the kingdom of heaven. Muslim’s believe very strongly in the role of prophets, who are believed to be messengers sent by *Allah* to provide guidance and to deliver messages to humans from books that were pre-written from eternity. The final prophet, Muhammad, is believed to be the one to whom *Allah* revealed the holy *Qur’ān*, or the Islamic holy book. Of all prophets, Muhammad is the most revered by Muslims.

For Muslims who practice Islam it is not simply a set of beliefs but a way of life. Muslims incorporate *Shari’a*, or Islamic law into every aspect of their day-to-day routines. Muslims strictly adhere *Shari’a*, which is clearly set out in the *Qur’ān*. Muslims believe that the holy book provides information about a vast array of topics including the origins of the universe, how to practice their religion in their daily lives, and how to gain entry into Heaven. Furthermore, the *Qur’ān* provides information on topics such as faith, religious practices, business transactions, food, clothing, marriage, and behavior (Gard, 1997). Additionally, views on human embryonic development, the seas and rivers, mountains, clouds, the cerebrum, and other scientific miracles are discussed (Ibrahim, 1997).
Basic to every Muslim’s faith are five foundations of belief. These are the belief in the oneness of God, belief in angels (Gabriel and Shaitan are the most prominent), belief in prophets or messengers of God, belief in the sacredness of the Qur’an, and belief in the “Day of Judgment,” the time when each person will be judged according to his or her actions on earth (Gard, 1997). Emerick (2002) states Islam is a religion that teaches people to have faith in God and to lead a virtuous life. Furthermore, it is a message of salvation and offers Muslims the knowledge they need in order to get into heaven. Emerick (2002) goes on to state that Islam is 99% about saving the soul from hell, and 1% about politics, the Jihad, and other things.

The Five Pillars

Among the cornerstones of Islam are five main duties, known as pillars, which must be practiced faithfully by all Muslims. The first of the five pillars is to recite the confession of faith, known as the Shahada, which simply states, “There is no god except Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah.” In order to become a Muslim all that one must do is make this confession with conviction of heart and commit to living a life of obedience to Allah, as outlined in the Qur’an.

The second pillar involves ritual prayer, or salat. From the time of puberty on, every Muslim man and woman is obligated to offer five daily prayers that take place at dawn, in the middle of the day, in the afternoon, after sunset, and before bed. Furthermore, on Friday at noon men must meet at the mosque for common prayer and a sermon (Jomier, 1991). Not only is ritual prayer important, but praying correctly is also vital. Because prayer is performed in a state of purity, Muslims must remove all traces of dirt, sweat, or other impurities from the feet, forearms, hands, face, head, mouth, nose and so forth. Muslims are required to stand on clean ground, either without shoes or with clean shoes, before they begin to pray. Additionally, during prayer, Muslims must face the direction Mecca, the holy city that is considered the birthplace of Islam. Banks and Banks (2003) state that Muslims turn toward Mecca, not because it is a sacred place or because God is especially present there, but because it is the place where Abraham and Muhammad worshipped, and because it is where Muhammad received the revelation of the Qur’an. Moreover, Mecca is the place where the Kaaba, or House of God, was built by Abraham and Isaac. Today the Kaaba remains within the walls of the great mosque of Mecca and is considered the most holy building on earth. All mosques throughout the world are aligned so that worshipers face the Kaaba, and its direction is marked in every mosque by an arch called the mihrib (Banks & Banks, 2003).

The third pillar of Islam is the observance of Ramadan, the month during which all Muslims fast from dawn until sundown, abstaining from food, drink, and sexual relations (Ibrahim, 1997). Additionally, Muslims read the entire Qur’an and recite special prayers at night during the month of Ramadan. Salaam (1998) states that those who are ill or women who are menstruating are required to feed a hungry person once each day, or feed 30 people at the end of the fast. At the end of Ramadan Muslims
celebrate Eid-Ul-Fitr in which they pray, give charity, feast and exchange gifts. Though fasting can be physically difficult, it is regarded by Muslims to be a form of self-purification by which he or she is able to gain true sympathy for those who go hungry every day. Young children are not required to fast.

Zakat, or the giving of charity to the poor, is the fourth pillar of Islam. Muslims believe that all things belong to God and that earthly treasures are only held by humans in trust. The Qur’an teaches that giving generously to the poor is a duty and that the poor have a legal right to part of the property of the rich (Jomier, 1991). The giving of zakat is praised frequently in the Qur’an and is mentioned often alongside prayer as having been taught by all of the prophets. Though Muslims may give any amount they wish as an act of charity, it is the standard to give two and a half percent of what remains after personal and business expenses are paid in full (Knight, 1995). Additionally, special categories exist that allow for specific percentages to be given from the revenue of fields watered by rain (10%), fields watered by artificial irrigation (5%), as well as for the sale of animal herds (Jomier, 1991). Today the zakat is practiced only in very traditional countries like Saudia Arabia, as many Muslims feel that state taxation, which directs a large majority of funds toward social programs, has replaced it.

The fifth and final pillar of Islam is known as the Hajj, or “great journey” to the city of Mecca. Every Muslim must try to make the Hajj at least once in their lifetime, provided they are physically and financially able to do so (Chalfonte, 1996). Ibrahim (1997) states that nearly two million people from all over the world travel to Mecca every year during the month of Dhu al-Hijja. Over a period of four to six days Muslim’s participate in a series of rites performed in and around the holy city of Mecca that are meant to reenact events in the lives of the prophets Abraham, Isaac and Muhammad (Knight, 1995). Dressing in a white garment, known as the ihram, symbolizes a pilgrims search for purity and the abandonment of all worldly thoughts. Muslims wear the ihram throughout their journey. During the Hajj pilgrims travel between the cities of Mecca, Mina, Arafat, and Muzdalifa, reciting prayers and participating in sacred rituals along the way. The fifth pillar of Islam is an attempt by all Muslims to secure remission from all former sins and to truly experience the meaning of Islam.

**Major Divisions of Islam**

Approximately 30 years after the death of Muhammad, great political divisions took place in the Islamic world regarding who would be at the head of the Muslim community. Specific qualifications of the caliph, or head of the Muslim population, became the source of great strife during this period (Jomier, 1991). Those who believed the caliph should be a direct descendant of the tribe of Quraysh, that of Muhammad, became known as the Sunnites or Sunnis. Others believed that only a direct descendent of Muhammad himself should be in direct command. These believers became known as the Shiites. The final division were known as Kharijites and believed that the worthiest Muslim, regardless of his origins, should become head of the community. Jomier (1991)
further states that about 90% of all Muslims today are Sunnis, approximately 10% are Shiites, and even a smaller majority are Kharijites. Although they differ in terms of political leadership, these groups do not differ at all regarding the dogma of Islam. To Muslims doctrine is very simple, and all are agreed on it.

History of Islam in the United States

According to Banks and Banks (2003), the first major influx of Muslims in the United States came during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when approximately 10 million Africans were brought to America as slaves. Later, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, significant numbers of Arab Muslims immigrated to the United States and settled in large industrial cities where they could obtain jobs. Some time thereafter, hundreds of thousands of Eastern European Muslims immigrated to America, along with large numbers of immigrants from such countries as Palestine, Lebanon and Pakistan. Many of these immigrants found living conditions in their homeland inhospitable and hoped to find better situations in the United States. This became a time when many Muslim communities began to form in America. Mosques were being built in cities such as Detroit, Ann Arbor, Cedar Rapids and Sacramento. Moreover, students, missionaries, and scholars from the Middle East began to visit the United States in greater numbers and, as a result, Islam slowly began to gain followers among Americans. Today, the Muslim population in the United States is predominantly made up of three major groups. African Americans are said to represent the largest number of Muslims, followed by South Asian Muslims and, finally, by Muslims of Arab descent (Ali, 1996).

African-American Muslims in America

As previously stated, African Muslims were some of the first people of Islamic faith to be brought to the United States. As early as the eighteenth century, millions of Africans were shipped to America in order to work on the plantations of the South. However, because slave masters often disregarded the Africans’ culture and religious beliefs, enslavement often meant that their Islamic roots were lost. Some were even converted to Christianity. Fifty years after slavery was abolished however, Africans again became interested in Islam (Knight, 1995).

During the early 1900’s, more immigrants arrived in the United States in an attempt to gain economic stability for themselves and their families. Because many were illiterate and unskilled, they were forced to accept jobs in auto factories and shipyards. Then, in 1930, during a time of civil and political unrest, a man named Wallace “W.D.” Fard arrived in Detroit, Michigan. Fard was a self-proclaimed prophet of Allah and
stated that he had come from Mecca, having been sent to restore blacks to their Muslim heritage as members of the “Lost-Found Nation of Islam” (Banks & Banks, 2003). He told his followers that all African-Americans were from the lost Islamic tribe of Shabazz (Knight, 1995). In 1934, Fard turned over leadership of his movement to his most devout follower, Elijah Muhammad, and then mysteriously disappeared.

Elijah Muhammad was able to give many suffering, black Americans pride in themselves, and under his leadership they established schools, universities, and “temples of Islam.” This new group helped to start many black-owned businesses, encouraged women to train for jobs, and taught the value of being alcohol and drug free. Additionally, it taught black Americans to hate all white people. Because of heated racial turmoil in the United States at the time, Muhammad was easily able to sell his followers on his form of Islam, which included the idea that racism should be reacted to with further racism. His movement was entitled “Black Islam” and it thrived for quite some time until his sexual improprieties were exposed (Ali, 1996). Shortly thereafter, the man who had been the spokesperson for “Black Islam” turned against Muhammad’s teachings after completing the Hajj. Malcolm X, as he was known, later altered his beliefs concerning the evil nature of all white people and began to teach that Islam gives equality to all, black and white. Islamic extremists became suspicious of Malcolm X’s new message however, and assassinated him in 1965. Following Malcolm’s death, Elijah Muhammad’s son led most of his father’s ex-followers back into orthodox Islam. Those who remained became known as the “Nation of Islam” and were led by a man named Louis Farrakhan. Today, Louis Farrakhan remains the leader of the “Nation of Islam.”

Concluding Remarks

Before the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, Islam seemed to be viewed as little more than a political or social movement within the United States. Though the Iranian Hostage Crisis during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s left many Americans with a negative impression of Islam, it seemed the majority understood that the act was committed by a few Islam extremists acting independently of the majority of Muslims throughout the world. However, since September 11, 2001, the religion of Islam has appeared to be under attack. Many Americans have become suspicious of Muslims in general and have even started to label all Muslims as terrorists. It seems that there is currently no differentiation between Muslims and Islamic extremists in the minds of some Americans. This seems quite hypocritical since the world never called Christianity into question after Timothy McVeigh blew up the federal building in Oklahoma, even though he repeatedly recited scripture from the Bible. Likewise, the world did not condemn all Germans because of the actions of Hitler. Why, then, do Americans insist on labeling Muslims as terrorists simply because of the actions of a few individuals? Because Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States, it seems that Americans and Muslims will have to learn how to respect one another’s beliefs if they desire to live peacefully in America. Therefore,
those who remain largely uninformed about Islam, yet still wish to degrade the religion, have an obligation to educate themselves regarding the beliefs, traditions, rituals, and culture of Muslims in America.

References


