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American Muslims: How the “American Creed” Fosters Assimilation and Pluralism

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Keywords

: Islam, American Muslims, democracy, pluralism, assimilation, diversity

American Muslims: How the “American Creed” Fosters Assimilation and Pluralism

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1. Introduction

The United States of America—the world’s first modern nation spawned by massive immigration—was founded, not on “blood ties or soil,” but on the democratic ideals of liberty, individualism, property rights, equality before the law, justice, secularism, popular sovereignty, civic participation, Judeo-Christian principles (which had a significant impact on the development of American law and democracy), and limited government (Dye, 2011; Myrdal, 1944; Schlesinger, 1998). Gunnar Myrdal (1944), in his classic analysis of race relations *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*, termed these core political values “the American Creed.” The Creed would serve as the solution to the fundamental American dilemma in history: The hypocritical gap between our ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and our actual treatment of non-Anglo minority groups (Marger, 2015). The American Creed held that American citizenship is open to anyone because America’s national identity is rooted in a moral vision of a common humanity in which all individuals are naturally entitled to democracy, liberty, due

process, and equality before the law (Huntington, 2004; Myrdal, 1944; Schlesinger 1998).

Furthermore, the American Creed would serve as a cultural and political beacon to the world's immigrants: An opportunity to escape oppression, poverty, authoritarian regimes, and entrenched social class systems that acted as a major barrier to upward mobility in most countries (Huntington, 2004). Indeed, between 1840 and 2012, the United States admitted 66 million immigrants from Europe, Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East (Marger, 2015). The 47 million immigrants currently living in the United States is almost four times the number living in Germany, the world's second largest immigration destination (Connor & López, 2016). Thus, the stain of racism, religious bigotry, and *de jure* discrimination faced by many immigrants—spawned by entrenched notions of the biological and cultural inferiority of non-white minority groups and non-Christians—is the ultimate betrayal of the Creed and the political cancer in American democracy (Marger, 2015; Schlesinger, 1998).

Thus, many non-WASP (white Anglo-Saxon Christians) groups, such as African Americans, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Latinos, Native Americans, and others have experienced varying degrees of prejudice and discrimination spawned by the symbiotic relationships among racism, nationalism, economic competition, and religious bigotry (Marger, 2015). Of course, many of these groups have encountered significant discrimination because of the confluence of specific racial characteristics, nationality, social class, and religious identity. For example, American Muslims can be of any race, social class, and immigrate from over 54 Muslim-majority countries, as well as Muslim-minority countries, such as India. Overlapping multiple identities exacerbates intergroup relations and can weaken assimilation, which is especially true in a highly diverse America characterized by a long history of racial and religious bigotry (Huntington, 2004; Schlesinger, 1998)

Therefore, even non-Anglo white ethnics, such as Jews, Italians, and the Irish suffered significant discrimination in housing, education, employment, and social services based on religion, national origins, and the fact they were not considered white Anglo-Saxon elites (Joshi, 2006; Marger, 2015). Granted, the discrimination faced by these groups pales in comparison to the horrors of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, cultural annihilation, and the ubiquitous racism that characterized the experiences of Native Americans and African Americans, two groups that were involuntarily incorporated into American society (Marger, 2015). Moreover, both of these groups exhibited profound physical and cultural differences from the dominant WASP culture that exacerbated their treatment in American history.

However, despite the fact that racism was ingrained in the national character, non-white minority groups in conjunction with white supporters advocating for full civil rights and equality for all groups, relentlessly prodded white America to live up to its alleged principles, regardless of how often these principles were violated in reality (Huntington, 2004; Marger, 2015; Schlesinger, 1998). Oppressed minority groups, demonstrating the power of ideas and the human capacity for moral improvement, embraced the American Creed and understood its power to haunt the collective conscience of white America and through moral persuasion transform the United States into a pluralistic democracy where our stated ideals and actual behaviors are synonymous (Huntington, 2004; Schlesinger, 1998).

Thus, through a horrible Civil War (1861-1865) that claimed almost 600,000 American lives as well as the protests, lobbying, civil disobedience, violent riots, mass demonstrations, and anti-racist education that have characterized the civil rights movement for 60 years, the United States, albeit very slowly, began to dismantle its pervasive structure of *de jure* segregation and discrimination based on the dangerous and false notion of white superiority (Schweikart & Allen, 2004). The extraordinary transformation of a country that practiced multiple forms of discrimination against African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, Muslims, and other ethnic/racial groups as well as women, into a highly pluralistic and multicultural democracy is a remarkable event in human history.

Much of America's success politically, economically, and socially can be attributed to the desire of immigrants to assimilate into America's mainstream culture and, simultaneously, preserving important aspects, such as religious and cultural traditions, from their native country. This idea, reflected in the national motto of *e pluribus unum*—out of many, one—has allowed the United States to take in immigrants from all over the world and create a unique American national identity rooted in democratic principles (Dye, 2011; Marger, 2015; Schlesinger, 1998). This process was often painful, slow, violent, and crucially, it provided a decisive test of the American character. But, ultimately, so many minority groups, such as African Americans, Jews, Latinos, and the Irish, that suffered enormous oppression were assimilated, to varying degrees, and accepted as full citizens entitled to exactly the same rights, freedoms, opportunities, and responsibilities as Anglo Americans (Schlesinger, 1998).

This transformation, albeit far from perfect or complete and agonizingly slow for minority populations, demonstrated the power of the American Creed to sway the majority of Americans—viewed by civil rights advocates as rational beings capable of moral conversion when confronted with the reality of racism—that change was possible in an evolving democracy. This, of course, was at the heart of the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s successful strategy that contributed to the passing of the 1964 Civil Right Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act that expanded the ideals of the American Creed to all Americans regardless of race, ethnicity, national origins, or religion (Huntington, 2004; Schlesinger, 1998).

However, as Myrdal stated in 1944, “America is continuously struggling for its soul” (Schlesinger, 1998, p. 11) and the forces of bigotry, xenophobia, racism, and discrimination are powerful in human history and, despite enormous progress in the past century, have not been eradicated in the United States or any other human society. The reduction in racial, ethnic, and religious bigotry is a timeless struggle that requires continuing eternal vigilance, education, tolerance, and a commitment to cultural diversity and democracy. Racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts within and among countries are not intractable problems; the progress in the United States and other multicultural countries (Canada and Australia) serve as a powerful example that these conflicts are amenable to equitable resolutions based on a commitment to pluralism and democracy (Marger, 2015).

2. Islam in the United States: Controversies, Fears, and the Unknown:

Currently, the American public is torn regarding Islam and Muslims and their compatibility with American democracy, laws, and social norms. Public opinion polls consistently show many non-Muslim Americans hold unfavorable views about Islam and harbor some prejudice against Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2010). In addition, the racialization of Muslims—they are often viewed as a non-white and non-Christian “Other” that exacerbates racial and religious tensions in the United States—contributes to negative stereotyping about Muslim Americans (Joshi, 2006). Stunningly, a Gallup World Poll revealed that less than half of non-Muslim Americans believe “that U.S. Muslims are loyal to the United States,” 32 percent of Americans see nothing to admire about the Muslim world, and 57 percent say they know nothing or very little about Islam and Muslim countries (Esposito & Mogahed, 2007; p. 155). Many non-Muslim Americans harbor suspicions regarding Muslims and their willingness and ability—some scholars assert that Islam is not compatible with American democracy (Bukay, 2008; Fregosi, 1998; Huntington, 1996; Lewis, 2003)—to assimilate into the American mainstream culture.

Simultaneously, there is growing concern in the United States about rising Islamic terrorism and extremism at home and abroad (Pew Research Center 2014). Sixty-two percent of Americans are very concerned with the global rise of Islamic extremism and 53 percent are very concerned about increasing Islamic extremism in the United States; the latter figure ties a record high (Pew Research Center, 2014). ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) is using social media—Twitter and Facebook are being used to post violent videos, threaten its enemies, and spread propaganda—to recruit young people in the United States, especially disaffected immigrant Muslims and others experiencing economic problems and cultural confusion (Siegel, 2014). For example, ISIS is attempting to recruit Somalis who have migrated to Minnesota—initially, the federal government assigns legal refugees a location and this state offers expansive social services—and are sympathetic to radicalization against the West. Some of these people have gone to fight for ISIS in Syria and Iraq (Yuccas, 2014).

ISIS is a Sunni militant group at war with the Shi’a Muslim Iraqi government and Shi’a militias; its ideology is rooted in the teachings and traditions of 7th century Islam (Wood, 2015). ISIS, like some other Sunni sects, regards Shi’ites as apostates; thus ISIS has marked Muslims and non-Muslims for death based on their extreme ideology. Citizens must understand that the current conflagration in Iraq and Syria is spawned, in part, by bitter sectarian differences that are not amenable to compromise (Wood, 2015). It is important for all Americans to understand that there is a bitter struggle among various Muslim factions—secularists and reformers (they support separation of church and state, women’s equality, democracy, and modernity), fundamentalists (they wish to see a revival of traditional Islam to combat rampant materialism, colonialism, and behaviors, such as homosexuality and abortion, deemed un-Islamic), violent Islamists (moderate Muslims assert that the extremists have perverted Islam for their political goals and have misinterpreted the Qu’rān)—to define Islam (Curiel, 2015; Lewis & Churchill, 2009; Phares, 2007).

This is a troubling situation given the fact that Islam is a fast-growing religion and Muslims continue to migrate to the United States. In fact, the United States has admitted 29,000 Muslim refugees—46 percent of all refugees— so far in 2016, and the

continuing political turmoil in many Muslim countries suggests these trends will continue into the foreseeable future (Connor, 2016.) Islam, perhaps more than any other religion, currently inspires more discussions, debates, concerns, and bitter disagreements regarding theology, law, Islam's association with terrorism (unjustified or not), the relationship between politics and religion, and controversies surrounding teaching about Islam in American public schools. In fact, Islam, with an estimated 1.6 billion followers in 2016 and increasing due to high fertility rates (Pew Research Center, 2012), plays a central role in international relations, American foreign policies, and is commanding more attention in the United States owing to a growing domestic Muslim population seeking political power and a passion to extricate Islam from violence and terrorism (Barrett, 2007; Bilici, 2012; Curiel, 2015; Nimer, 2002).

Indeed, several scholars assert that the majority of American Muslims reject terrorists acts perpetuated in the name of Islam (Curiel, 2015; Kabir, 2014; Pew Research Center, 2009a) and have assimilated, to varying degrees, into American society and have made significant contributions in numerous professional fields (Barrett, 2007; Bilici, 2012; Findley, 2001; Hasan, 2000; Kabir, 2014; Khan, 2002; Manji, 2003; Nimer, 2002; Pew Research Center, 2009a; Pipes, 2003). American Muslims have been able to assimilate and maintain their Islamic faith; they view Islam as being compatible with American democracy based on America's commitment to pluralism and freedom of religion, Islam's long history of religious tolerance and the fact that Islam is characterized by pluralism and diversity of thought (Aslan, 2008). Of course, not all scholars agree with this view; some see Islam as incompatible with democracy because Islam is a theocracy (Bukay, 2008; Fregosi, 1998; Huntington, 1996; Kupelian, 2008). This is why presenting multiple perspectives is vital to the national debate surrounding Islam and Muslims in the United States.

However, this task is exacerbated by the controversies regarding Islam that breed suspicion, fear, and attempts to censor opinions and facts that may offend some people. This is, of course, anathema to America's historic commitment to freedom of expression—designed to protect unpopular, controversial, or radical thoughts—and the scholarly goal of seeking truth (Haynes *et al.*, 2003). Freedom of expression is a controversial topic in contemporary America—many universities and public schools have passed “speech codes” that prevent individuals from making offensive, radical, and controversial statements—and it is vital that all ideas and opinions are open for discussion (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, 2013; Marshall & Shea, 2011; Powers, 2015; Ravitch, 2003). Censorship can be fatal to the pursuit of truth and diversity of opinion; therefore, this article will present empirical data and offer a multitude of competing ideas and narratives in order to create a holistic and intellectually balanced presentation of Islam and American Muslims.

This article will focus on four important aspects of Islam as it relates to the United States and democracy. First, there will be an overview on the growth of Islam in the United States, including a discussion on the hotly debated topic of the number of Muslims in the country. Second, there will be analysis of how Islam and its core beliefs and obligations unite American Muslims, many of whom have migrated to the United States from dozens of countries. Third, empirical evidence will demonstrate that American Muslims, far from being a stereotypical monolithic group, are very diverse in terms of race, language, historical experiences, political values, religious views, and national origins. This is important because so many non-Muslim Americans possess

very little knowledge about Islam and Muslims and are vulnerable to harmful stereotypes that can result in discrimination. Finally, the article will analyze the status of American Muslims in terms of education, socioeconomic status, political power, and the degree of assimilation and contentment in the United States.

This is of critical importance because the successful assimilation of American Muslims in the United States could demonstrate to the world that Islam (excluding the radical versions that categorically reject modernity, democracy, and pluralism) and democracy are compatible. Indeed, it appears that American Muslims, like almost all preceding immigrant and minority groups, have assimilated into the American mainstream while maintaining crucial aspects of their Islamic identity. This is in stark contrast to Europe, where mass Muslim immigration from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia has spawned enormous hostility, violence, xenophobia, ethnocentrism, and a climate of mistrust and fear (Bukay, 2008; Elver, 2012; Landman, 2010; Huntington, 2004). Historically, Muslims have not been well-assimilated into non-Muslim countries; the United States seems to be an exception because America's national identity is rooted in the American Creed.

3. American Muslims and the Role of Islam in the United States:

The September 11, 2001 terrorists' attacks in New York and Washington, DC, perpetuated by 19 radical Muslim extremists dramatically increased interest in Islam, the relationship between radical Islam and terrorism, and American Muslims. Muslims faced increased scrutiny from citizens and law enforcement agencies, as well as from the media and academics. Generally, the responses to the 9-11 attacks were two-fold: On one hand, many Americans responded with increased suspicion, hostility, and discrimination towards Islam and Muslims, as evidenced by some violence and widespread perceptions that Islam is a violent and intolerant religion that promotes hatred and theocracy (Curiel, 2015; Elver, 2012; Levin & McDevitt, 2002; Mir, 2014). On the other hand, many Americans expressed support for American Muslims and stressed that a very small group of violent extremists hijacked Islam for their own perverted political goals should not be allowed to define the vast majority of Muslims (Curiel, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2007).

Furthermore, the attacks produced an ongoing and intense debate surrounding the true nature of Islam—propensity for peace, war, violence, and tolerance; the treatment of women; and its compatibility with American law, democracy, and culture—as well as the increased violence and discrimination faced by Muslim Americans (Curiel, 2015; Elver, 2012; Harris, 2007; Imani, 2008; Kupelian, 2008; Kushner, 2004; Majid, 2012; Mir, 2014; Levin and McDevitt, 2002; Pipes, 2003; Phares, 2007). In fact, people who “looked like” Muslims, such as Sikhs and Hindus, were victims of hate crimes and discrimination by people who did not know, or care about, the differences among these cultural groups (Curiel, 2015; Elver, 2012; Harris, 2007; Kupelian, 2008; Kushner, 2004; Majid, 2012; Mir, 2014; Levitt & McDevitt, 2002; Pipes, 2003; Phares, 2007). These debates surrounding Islam and Muslims are intense and reflect an American citizenry deeply divided. Thus, the demographic trends concerning Muslim immigration and the number of Muslims in the United States, in addition to their political views, are currently hotly debated topics.

Although there is a broad consensus among demographers that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States, no one can provide the empirical data to ascertain just how many American Muslims reside in the country (Barrett, 2007; Kabir, 2014; Nimer, 2002). Estimates range from 2-9 million Muslims (Curiel, 2015, p. xvi), and there are political reasons to inflate or deflate the actual numbers. The Census Bureau is allowed to collect data on race, ethnicity, nationality, and immigration trends, but it is prohibited by law from collecting data regarding religious affiliation, and private surveys conducted by Muslims and non-Muslims provide widely incongruent figures (Barrett, 2007; Curiel, 2015). Furthermore, surveys by Muslim organizations, such as CAIR (Council on American-Islamic Relations), may inflate the actual number of American Muslims in order to augment the political power of their community—after all, in a representative democracy numbers matter in electoral politics—and exert more control over public institutions and policies (Barrett, 2007; Curiel, 2015; Pipes, 2003). Conversely, surveys conducted by non-Muslim organizations have produced significantly lower numbers, prompting angry responses from Muslim leaders claiming that these surveys ignored immigrants and poor African-American Muslims (Barrett, 2007).

Therefore, any estimates of the number of American Muslims must be approached with caution and the knowledge that it is not simply a technical matter of counting people; politics, definitions, and complex demographic techniques all play a role that cannot be ignored. Nevertheless, it is possible to make educated estimates based on the available data. In October 2009, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life published a comprehensive study, entitled “*Mapping the Global Muslim Population*,” which estimated the American Muslim population to be 2.4 million (Pew Research Center, 2009b). And, though some estimates reach as high as 9 million (Curiel, 2015), it appears reasonable, based on the comprehensive nature of a 2016 Pew Research Center study, to accept the estimate of 3.3 million American Muslims in 2016 (Mohamed, 2016). The American Muslim population represents 1 percent of the American population and 0.2 percent of the worldwide Muslim population (Mohamed, 2016). By 2050, the American Muslim population is projected by the Pew study to be 8 million, or roughly 2.1% of the American population.

It is important to note that the American Muslim population, like the global community of Muslims, is not a monolithic group. Indeed, one of the most interesting and crucial characteristics of the increasing American Muslim population is its diversity in terms of national origins, languages, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and thought. The presence of Muslims in America is not a recent phenomenon; in fact, African Muslims arrived as slaves as early as the 17th century (Bentley & Zielger, 2000; Diouf, 2013). Some scholars assert that between 10 and 20 percent of the 500,000 slaves brought to North America from the 17th to the 19th centuries were Muslims, many of whom converted to Christianity or pretended to convert in order to placate their Christian owners (Diouf, 2013; Hasan, 2000; Hermansen, 2003; McCloud, 1995;). However, the Islam brought to the American colonies did not survive (Diouf, 2013); American Islam today is the product of voluntary Muslim immigrants who came to America beginning in the late 19th century and continuing today. The 1965 Hart-Cellar Act—which abolished the racist quotas that favored European immigrants—allowed, for the first time in American history, large numbers of immigrants from Asia, Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa (Marger, 2015). This included Muslims from 12

Arab countries whose motivation for migrating is historically familiar: Economic opportunities, religious liberty, family unification, and freedom.

Today, the United States continues to admit large numbers of Muslim immigrants, the majority coming from South Asia (India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh), Southeastern Asia (Indonesia, the world's largest Muslim country, and Malaysia, and the Middle East (Connor & Lopez, 2016; Hermansen, 2003; Lipka, 2016; Marger, 2015; Nimer, 2002). Empirical evidence suggests that Muslim immigrants are assimilating into the American mainstream; however, there are some barriers, such as non-Muslim American hostility, fear, or ignorance of Islam, and the increasing racialization of Muslims as the "other." Moreover, violent terrorist acts in the United States or anywhere in the world adversely impacts Americans Muslims and assimilation trends because these acts exacerbate prejudice and discrimination against American Muslims (Marger, 2015). These issues continue to present challenges that require knowledge, tolerance, compromise, and communication among all interested parties.

4. American Muslims: How Islam Unites Diverse Populations:

Despite the enormous linguistic, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity of the American Muslim population, their common Islamic faith provides an enormously powerful centripetal force in balancing their commitment to Islam and participating in a secular and highly pluralistic democracy. In fact, a 2007 study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found that 82 percent of Muslims are absolutely certain that God exists and 72 percent of Muslims say that religion is very important in their lives. Furthermore, the majority of Muslims (71percent) pray daily and 60 percent assert that there is more than one correct way to interpret the teachings of Islam. Simultaneously, the Muslim minority who dissent from these views and practices are protected by the First Amendment, as well as America's openness and tolerance for diverse thought, beliefs, and attitudes (Barrett, 2007; Khan, 2002; Majid, 2012).

Even with some significant differences between various Islamic sects and theological schools of law—Sunnī and Shī'ite Muslims disagree over the proper succession to Muhammad and several other issues; often these differences are more political than purely theological—all Muslims share similar core beliefs about Islam (Pew Research Center, 2012). For example, Islam can be translated as "submission to the will of God" and this means that a Muslim makes a "deliberate, conscious, and rational act" to submit his limited human will to the "absolute and omnipotent will of God" (Cornell, 1999, 67). In addition, all Muslims are expected to follow the moral teachings expressed in the Qur'ān, the Islamic holy book that Muslims believe is the word of Allah (God) as related to the Prophet (Muhammad) beginning in 610 CE, and the Hadīth, or the sayings and actions of Muhammad (Brown, 2009).

The "five pillars" of Islam constitute the most important obligations of every devout Muslim (Brown, 2009). These five pillars are: (1). All Muslims are expected to recite daily the *Shahāda*, the declaration that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his Prophet. This declaration affirms a Muslim's commitment to monotheism and the notion that God is One, a clear rejection of the Christian concept of the Trinity. (2). Every Muslim must engage in *salāt*, the ritual prayers performed five times daily at prescribed times and in prescribed manners. These prayers are critically important and demonstrate a Muslim's devotion to, and total dependence on, Allah. (3). All Muslims

are expected to engage in almsgiving or *zakāt*, a poor-tax to help those in poverty or material need. Generally, a Muslim will pay 2.5 percent of his income to the state. This tax reflects the Qur'ān's emphasis on compassion, equality, and social justice (4). During Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar Muslim calendar, all Muslims are expected to fast from dawn to sunset. This fast, known as the *siyām*, prohibits eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse. This pillar reflects the Muslim's commitment to self-discipline, devotion to Allah, and compassion. (5). Finally, all healthy and financially stable Muslims are expected to make a religious journey to Mecca, Islam's holiest city and home to its most important shrine, at least once in their lifetime. This journey, popularly known as the Hajj, involves a series of specific rituals and symbolizes entry into the earthly House of God which Muslims believe is a cosmic replication of the House of God in the Seventh Heaven (Brown, 2009; Cornell, 1999; Esposito & Mogahed, 2007).

Diverse Muslim populations are also united by following the teachings in the Qur'ān that prohibit the consumption of pork and alcohol, gambling, usury (paying or charging interest on loans), adultery, and murder. Furthermore, all Muslims are expected to demonstrate the virtues of humility, self-discipline, personal responsibility, courage, honesty, hard work, and modesty, a love of knowledge, and restraining sexual desires and behaviors (Brown, 2009; Haneef, 1996; Lewis & Churchill, 2009). Many of these virtues, which are stressed in several religious and philosophical traditions, are compatible with mainstream American culture, especially the emphasis on hard work (which could be described as "striving" in Islam), self-discipline, honesty, and personal responsibility. Thus, Muslims who have inculcated these virtues have found educational and economic success in the United States; simultaneously, Muslims have been accepted into the mainstream American culture because their virtuous behaviors that have contributed to American prosperity.

Of course, there are, for some American Muslims, conflicts between their religion and some of the laws, cultural norms, practices and behaviors of mainstream America; current popular culture with its ubiquitous themes of illicit sex and drug use, crude language, and materialism are affront to many Muslims and non-Muslims alike. In addition, many Muslims, including Democrats, Republicans, and moderates, are unhappy with domestic discrimination and America's foreign policies regarding the Middle East and the U.S. fight with radical and violent extremist Muslims (Barrett, 2007; Curiel, 2015). In this regard, Muslims are truly integrated into American politics and the "cultural wars" (intense debates over the size and scope of government, as well as sharp divisions on moral issues and foreign policy). Many religious, racial, ethnic, and ideological groups express their displeasure with the government, offensive cultural behaviors, or socioeconomic conditions and they exercise their right to dissent via protests, voting, and lobbying for their goals.

Thus, American Muslims, like other religious, ethnic, or racial groups in the United States, are speaking out on moral, socioeconomic, and political issues: A common theme throughout American history as all cultural groups attempt to assert their rights in a democracy. And, though American Muslims are far from a monolithic group, their common Islamic faith serves as a foundation upon which to build political power and create institutions that provide a sense of identity and protection as this increasing population continues to assimilate, to varying degrees, into the American mainstream (Barrett, 2007; Curiel, 2015; Khan, 2002).

5. American Muslims: A Profile in Diversity:

Considering the fact that American Muslims originate from dozens of Muslim countries or countries where Muslims are a minority, it is not surprising that they exhibit an enormous amount of cultural, linguistic, racial, and ethnic diversity, as well as diverse opinions regarding political, economic, moral, and cultural matters (Curiel, 2015; Kabir, 2014; Majid, 2012). For example, 38 percent of American Muslims identify themselves as white, 20 percent as African-Americans (the first Muslims were brought to the American colonies as slaves in the late 17th century, although today, the vast majority of African-American Muslims are converts), 20 percent as Asian, 4 percent Hispanics, and 16 percent as 'other or mixed race' (Curiel, 2015, p. 65). Moreover, many immigrant Muslims arrive in the United States speaking Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and a host of other languages. And, even though they are Muslims, they have lived in very diverse cultures that produced distinctive forms of Islam, which can lead to dissenting interpretations, values, and practices. This is especially true of the split between Sunnis and Shi'ites; disagreement over who should have succeeded Mohammad as caliph after his death in 632 led to a permanent political division (there are a few theological disagreements as well) and continuing violent strife in the Middle East (Brown, 2009).

In addition, Muslims hold divergent views on moral and political issues. For example, the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2009c) states that 48 percent of American Muslims believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases, but 48 percent of Muslims believe that it should be illegal in all or most cases. Twenty-seven percent of Muslim Americans regard homosexuality, which is a crime punishable by death in Iran, as something that should be accepted by American society. And, the fact that 61 percent of Muslims assert that homosexuality should be discouraged by society (Islam has historically condemned homosexuality), did not deter a significant minority from expressing a dissenting view.

A significant majority of Muslims (59 percent) argue that the government should do more to protect morality in society, such as prohibiting pornography and discouraging premarital sex and the consumption of alcohol (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2009b). These views regarding moral issues are generally aligned with those of conservatives, particularly religious conservatives, in the United States. Ironically, in spite of holding similar views on moral issues, Muslims feel that many fundamentalist Christians defame Islam and are immunized from criticism because of their importance to the Republican Party (Barrett, 2007).

However, an examination of Muslims' political and economic attitudes reveals a leaning towards liberalism, especially on economic issues. For example, 70 percent of Muslims considered themselves Democratic or leaning towards the Democratic Party; only 11 percent claimed to identify with the Republican Party. In addition, 70 percent of Muslims believed that we should have a larger government that provides more services to the American people (Lipka, 2016; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2009b). Of course, these profound disparities could be explained by several factors. First, after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, some Muslims were victims of reactionary (extreme right-wing fringe) discrimination and violence (Barrett, 2007; Curiel, 2015; Levin & McDevitt, 2002). Second, many Muslims—ironically, 80 percent of Muslims voted for George W. Bush in 2000—viewed the steps, such as the

Patriot Act, taken by the Republican administration of President Bush as anti-Muslim policies that perpetuated stereotypes about Muslims (Levin & McDevitt, 2002; Nimer, 2002).

In addition, conservative Republicans, particularly white evangelical Protestants, are more likely to assert that Islam encourages more violence than other religions (Lipka, 2015; Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2009b). In general, Republicans express more negative views about Islam and Muslims than Democrats; in fact, Republicans (82%) are much more likely than Democrats (51%) to express concern for Islamic extremism (Lipka, 2015). Thus, the strongly divergent views expressed by non-Muslim Americans reflect differences in political ideology, as well as other factors, such as age, sex, and religious affiliation (Lipka, 2015).

Conversely, it could be argued that the Democratic Party's emphasis on equality, social justice, shared responsibilities for improving life for the poor, and the power of government to provide services are aligned with Islamic values, such as almsgiving (all Muslims are expected to give 2.5 percent of their income to charity), compassion, and community obligations (Brown, 2009). Thus, it appears that on moral issues (abortion, homosexuality, and premarital sex) American Muslims are more conservative (similar to Evangelical Christians) and on socioeconomic issues, such as the role of government to help the poor and disenfranchised, stricter environmental policies, and laws, and hate crime statutes to protect religious minorities, Muslims tend to be more liberal (Lipka, 2015). These differences could be viewed as natural in an open and dynamic democracy characterized by individualism and freedom of thought, speech, and religion.

Moreover, America's pluralistic population and constitutional emphasis on individual rights and liberties serve as powerful shields to efforts to mandate conformity of thought or action by any religious, racial, ideological, or ethnic group. It is always dangerous to believe that any single group—racial, religious, ethnic, sex, or socioeconomic—is an ideological monolith; America stresses individual rights and liberties and individual persons can think for themselves, independent of their group membership. Indeed, American Muslims have significant political and religious differences and engage in serious debates over separation of church and state, the relationship between radical Islam and terrorism, the wearing of the hijab and burqa (there is a major division concerning these garments; some argue they are a symbol of oppression and should be banned, whereas others see them as protecting women's privacy and dignity), women and equality, the proper balance between assimilation and maintaining their Islamic faith (Ahmed, 2011; Curiel, 2015; Kabir, 2014).

Dissent, discussion, compromise, and tolerance for diverse views are hallmarks of a healthy pluralistic democracy (Ahmed, 2011; Curiel, 2015; Kabir, 2014). Diversity must go beyond the traditional categories of race, ethnicity, religion, social class, and sex to include diversity of thought and opinion; individuals must be free to hold any views they choose independent of their membership in any specific cultural group. In this regard, American Muslims are quite diverse.

6. American Muslims: Successful, Content, and Assimilated:

One of the key issues regarding American Muslims centers on their degree of assimilation into mainstream American society, while maintaining their Islamic faith, and their current socioeconomic status. The evidence suggests that the vast majority of

American Muslims has assimilated, to varying degrees, into American society and is doing very well in terms of educational attainment and economic success. In 2007, the Pew Research Center published a study entitled *Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream*, with findings that American Muslims—65% of whom are immigrants from all over the world—are “largely assimilated, happy with their lives, and moderate with respect to many of the issues that have divided Muslims and Westerners around the world.” Many scholars contend that mainstream Islam—not the militant, political or radicalized forms of the religion that have perverted Islam—is compatible with democracy (Aslan, 2008; Barrett, 2007; Curiel, 2015; Esposito, 1999; Ezzati, 2002;; Feldman, 2003; Findley, 2001; Hasan, 2000; Kabir, 2014; Khan, 2002; Ramadan, 2004); the experience of American Muslims offers support for this thesis—American Muslims are participating in the democratic process and maintaining their Islamic identities, beliefs, and practices.

American Muslims support pluralism, separation of church and state, individual liberties, the rule of law, equality of opportunity, tolerance, and other characteristics of modern democracies (Bilici, 2012; Curiel, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2009a; Pew Research Center, 2007). Of course, some Muslims argue that American Muslims are apostates, an offense punishable by death, because they assimilated into a secular country and abandoned the teachings and practices mandated by Allah in the Qur’ān (Kabir, 2014). Of course, a large part of the controversy is related to the art of hermeneutics, the complex interpretation of holy texts (this helps explain why there are so many disagreements within and among the world’s religions), and the fact that not all Muslims agree on who is a Muslim.

Many immigrant populations face the challenges associated with assimilation and maintaining their cultural ties rooted in language, religion, custom, and ethnicity (Huntington, 2004). Thus, the American Muslim experience mirrors that of numerous other immigrant populations. In this respect, the results have been similar: Assimilation, increasing upward social mobility, and increased participation in the political processes (voting, jury duty, lobbying for their interests, paying taxes, and so forth). In addition, America’s constitutional guarantees of freedom of religion, assembly, and speech have allowed Muslims to build over 2,000 mosques, several hundred Islamic religious schools, and hundreds of Islamic centers throughout the country (Bilici, 2012; Curiel, 2015). These Islamic institutions are created to offer places of worship for Muslims, provide an Islamic education to Muslims, assist Muslims in integrating into society, and fight against the harmful stereotypes that plague Islam and American Muslims (Khan, 2002; Majid, 2012). The vast majority of American Muslims are maintaining their Islamic identities and simultaneously assimilating into mainstream American culture; this is a difficult process for all immigrant groups as they negotiate an acceptable balance between change and continuity.

Indeed, an examination of the data demonstrates that most Muslims are doing quite well in the United States. For example, contrary to the popular misconception that most Muslims are cab drivers or work as convenience store clerks, the majority of Muslims work as professionals, such as doctors and university professors, and in various fields such as technical and engineering, science, finance, computer science, and corporate management (Barrett, 2007; Findley, 2001; Marger, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2007). Muslims tend to be highly educated; one study found that 52 percent of adults possess a graduate degree (Pipes, 2003, p. 157), often in fields that pay very well.

In a 2004 study, researchers found that median family income among American Muslims was sixty thousand dollars a year; this was higher than the national median of fifty thousand (Barrett, 2007, p. 9). American Muslims, especially when compared to predominately Muslim countries, are doing remarkably well; they have the freedom to practice Islam, freedom of expression, the freedom to organize and engage in the political process to improve their lives, and are thriving educationally and economically. By comparison, European Muslims are poorer, less educated, and perhaps most critically, socially marginalized and segregated into poor communities ripe for radicalization (Barrett, 2007; Elver, 2012; Wiktorowicz, 2005).

The fact that American Muslims are well-educated, economically prosperous, and increasing their political participation throughout the country sends a powerful signal that they are successfully integrating into the larger society. Furthermore, their assimilation into society has been supported by the American government, military, numerous private corporations, and educational institutions making reasonable accommodations, as they have done for other religious traditions, to assist Muslims in fulfilling their religious obligations (Barrett, 2007; Curiel, 2015; Marger, 2015; Pipes, 2003). Since changes in immigration law in 1965, Americans have shown increasing tolerance for immigrants and a desire to offer equal opportunities to people willing to work hard; Muslims have benefited from this tolerance, as well as the notion that minority religious, racial, and ethnic groups should not experience discrimination.

Of course, some Muslims have been victims of discrimination and violence based on religious bigotry; the same can still be said for Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and other groups. Some groups may have a vested interest in promoting the idea that Muslims are victims of widespread discrimination—currently, victim status in the United States can beget political and educational concessions and economic advantages—and in need of special treatment and protection. But the reality paints a different picture: In general, American Muslims are doing quite well economically, educationally, and socially. Moreover, they are making vital contributions to American society in terms of cultural diversity and in the workforce (Barrett, 2007; Curiel, 2015; Pipes, 2003). In fact, 66% of American Muslims say that life in the United States is better than in most Muslim countries, 90% say they are happy to be Americans, and 80% say that immigrant Muslims want to assimilate into the American mainstream (Marger, 2015, p. 357). Thus, it appears that American Muslims, two-thirds of whom are foreign-born, are committed to the ideals of individualism, democracy, religious liberty, a strong work ethic, and equality under the law. And as with all past immigrant populations, some cannot or will not assimilate and leave the United States, and some remain in the country but ardently reject assimilation. However, generally speaking, the American Creed continues to erode the forces of racial, ethnic, and religious bigotry and expand equality and opportunity for all Americans.

7. Conclusion:

One of the great strengths of contemporary American democracy is the capacity to absorb immigrants from across the globe and successfully integrate them into the American culture. This process, occasionally fraught with tensions common to highly pluralistic societies, allows immigrants to maintain key elements of their culture—religious beliefs and practices, rituals, and family relationships—and simultaneously

assimilate, to varying degrees, into the mainstream culture. It is a tribute to the core ideals of America, such as liberty, social justice, and individualism, equality of opportunity, the rule of law, separation of church and state, and the essential moral equality of all people, that a highly diverse country of over 320 million people is basically a stable and productive state characterized by positive intergroup relationships.

The fact that American Muslims are highly successful socially, economically, and educationally testifies to the viability of the American motto *e pluribus unum* (out of many, one) in forging a pluralistic democracy. Moreover, the capacity of America to evolve into a more just society, albeit slowly for many minority groups and their supporters among the dominant cultural group, demonstrates that democracies can make social and moral progress. This is possible in America because the moral validity of our political ideals, however broached in reality, compel all fair-minded Americans to continually push for more liberty, justice, and equality of opportunity.

Of course, no society is free from all conflicts, tensions, and violence spawned by ethnicity, race, nationality, and religion. This is inevitable because there will be conflicts among groups who hold diametrically opposed values that make compromise impossible or very difficult; certain religious or cultural practices and beliefs, such as polygamy, the legal subordination of women, and blasphemy laws, are incompatible with American laws. Thus, these conflicts, which are easier to decide in authoritarian societies unconcerned with democratic principles and a proclivity for oppression and violence, must be settled via the judicial and legislative institutions designed to foster decisions that conform with American constitutional law. And, even though there are conflicts between some Muslim practices and American laws and norms, the legitimacy of our institutions reduces the probability of violence. Moreover, the vast majority of Americans understand the importance of compromise, tolerance, dissent and working within the system to solve differences and complex problems.

Radicalized American Muslims are a very small minority that should not obfuscate the fact that the vast majority of Muslims reject terrorism and violence perpetuated in the name of Islam or any other religious or political tradition (Pew Research Center, 2009a). These radical Muslims, like all individuals who advocate violence or break American laws, should be monitored and receive equal treatment under the law. Thus, American Muslims demonstrate another similarity with every other cultural group in the country: The fact that some individuals engage in criminal activity should not taint the entire group. Shattering stereotypes about Muslims now is just as important as was shattering stereotypes about African Americans, Italians, and the Irish in the 19th and 20th centuries.

As the United States continues to evolve—defined as the effort to reduce the gap between our stated political and legal ideals and unjust discriminatory practices—immigrant and minority populations will likely experience greater tolerance and acceptance into the mainstream. History shows that a commitment to pluralism and democratic principles, which only enhances the necessity of a common political and legal culture, is a highly effective, albeit imperfect, approach to fostering positive intergroup relationships based on common humanity. The United States, because of its commitment to pluralism, secularism, and democracy, is able to absorb millions of immigrants and assimilate them into a free society characterized by diversity and unity. It is reasonable to assert that much of the discrimination faced by American Muslims

will dissipate over time as they assimilate and non-Muslim Americans acknowledge that Muslim Americans, like most immigrant and minority populations before them, are productive and law-abiding citizens contributing to America's economy and rich cultural diversity. The American Creed—with its emphasis on the moral and political values associated with a pluralistic democracy—continues to allow global immigrants to cross political, psychological, and cultural borders to become Americans and experience the promise of religious liberty, political freedom, and equality under the law.

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