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## Islam in America: Breaking Down the Binaries Between “Islam and the West”

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# Islam in America: Breaking Down the Binaries Between “Islam and the West”

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you professor Al-Huraibi for being such a wonderful and inspirational professor who helped us understand and appreciate the complexities of Muslim minority experiences both in the U.S. and Europe.

## Introduction

Even though most Americans only became aware of the presence of Muslims in the U.S. after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Muslims have played a major role in helping to define, shape, and transform the American national identity since colonial times. Many of the slaves who came over from West Africa were from Muslim majority countries. During the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans used this Islamic heritage to invigorate the black community with a sense of pride and belonging. The current discourse on Islam in the U.S. however separates Islam from American history and creates a binary between two entities that are in fact very much intertwined. When one forgets the history of Islam in America it is easy to create conceptual dichotomies and draw clear distinctions between Islam as one category and “the West” as another, and argue that they are incompatible.

As GhaneaBassiri argues, by assuming that “the West” and Islam are essentially different, “the bulk of scholarship on Islam in America, whether immigrant or indigenous...has focused on how Muslims are faring in the United States rather than how they have actively participated in American history” (GhaneaBassiri, 4). Instead of breaking down the categories of “Islam and the West,” “Islam and modernity,” or “Islam and democracy,” scholars have attempted to show how the beliefs, values, and practices of Islam are complementary to western liberal values such as freedom, democracy, and tolerance. They have attempted to make Islam palatable for non-Muslim readers instead of questioning the very foundation for the claims that Islam and democracy or modernity are two juxtaposing categories in the first place. By trying to demonstrate how Islam fits in with modernity and “the West,” scholars have ended up producing and evoking the very binaries that they have sought to break down. American Muslims are in a unique position precisely because of Islam’s deep historical roots in the U.S. and the diverse practices of Islam that are represented in the U.S. According to GhaneaBassiri, “American Muslims stand at the intersection between American religious history and modern Islamic history...and their lived historical experiences give the lie to the notion that Islamic culture is intrinsically distinct from American culture” (GhaneaBassiri, 4). American Muslims’ experience in America demonstrate that Islam and the “the West” are not mutually exclusive, static, and immutable categories but rather lived traditions that are dynamic, relational, and can be re-thought and re-configured according to different historical contexts.

The history of Islam in America is, according to GhaneaBassiri, a history of the encounters and interactions between Muslims and non-Muslim through institutions, social movements, inter-faith coalitions, and day-to-day interactions. Rather than a move from invisibility to visibility, Muslims have always been “visible” in the U.S. The nature and degree of this visibility has shifted and transformed because of critical historical events such as the end of the Cold War and the ensuing struggle to define America’s national identity, the U.S. alliance with Israel, the Iranian Revolution, the Gulf War, and 9/11. Despite the history of shared experiences and positive interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims, the media’s negative portrayal of Islam as a violent ideology and the U.S.’s foreign policy towards Muslim-majority countries estranged Muslims from the day-to-day lives in and the national history of the US.

After the Gulf War, the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, and 9/11, non-Muslim Americans’ growing distrust of Islam “did not mesh with the historical experiences that shaped Islamic institutions and Muslims’ communal lives in the United States in the aftermath of the Cold War,” a time characterized by increased integration of American Muslims into the political and public sphere, and thus increased interactions between Muslims and non-Muslims

(GhaneaBassiri 367). These negative images have persisted because the discourse that surrounds Islam in the U.S., even those voices that want to demystify Islam and demonstrate its compatibility with the West, make their arguments within the construct of “Islam and the West.” In order to deconstruct this binary, organizations and institutions need to be created in civil society to provide a platform for Muslim stories and Muslim voices which would demonstrate the plurality of experiences and interpretations within Islam and make it exceedingly difficult to oversimplify a rich religion that has enhanced rather than posed a threat to Western culture and values.

### **Islam in America: The Era of “Identity Politics” (1960s and 1970s)**

The civil rights and immigration laws that congress passed in the mid-1960s radically altered the ethnic and racial makeup of American society, chipped away at the national image of America as an essentially white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant country, and reflected an attempt by the government to match U.S. policies with democratic ideals. The white, Protestant cultural and political hegemony receded as the traditional ideal of the melting pot was replaced by “a more pluralistic vision of America in which cultural and ethnic differences were not only recognized but increasingly valued for their distinct contributions to American society” (GhaneaBassiri, 272). As Randolph S. Bourne argued in the early 1900s, immigrants and minority groups did not want to disappear into a fabricated “melting-pot,” especially when this still did not bring about social equality or protection from socially significant categories such as race, ethnicity and religion (Bourne, 878). To correct the racist and sexist policies of the past that put a large portion of the population at an extreme disadvantage in terms of employment, housing, and other basic human rights, the government adopted “affirmative action” policies to put minority groups on equal footing with their white, male countrymen. It was recognized that simply outlawing discrimination was not enough and that those discriminated against were in need of assistance. These affirmative action or “equal opportunity” policies, along with the more inclusive legislation of the 1960s such as the Civil Rights Act of 1957 and 1960 and *Brown v. Board of Education*, demonstrated a move towards governmental action that supported, recognized, and promoted equal opportunities for people of all different races, ethnicities, religions, and genders. While these new laws did not instantly eradicate racism and discrimination (they still persist today), by providing legal protection to minorities in terms of access to education, housing, and jobs, it became more economically and socially costly to blatantly discriminate against certain groups of people.

The immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 represented a break from the immigration policies of the past, including the national origins quota system of the 1920s which curtailed immigration from all countries specifically targeting Southern Europeans, Eastern Europeans, Africa, East Asia, India, and the Middle East. This policy change led to an increase in Muslim immigration from Asia and Africa and a diversification of the Muslim community demonstrating a plurality of interpretations of the Quran and cultural practices within Islam. These Muslim immigrants, thanks to the advances made by the Civil Rights Movement, did not feel like they had to hide their identity or dissimulate their religion. The social and legislative changes of the 1960s created an atmosphere that “encouraged immigrant Muslims to define their Islamic identity as they saw fit” and thus “most immigrant Muslims in this period did not feel racialized in the United States” (GhaneaBassiri 275). These immigrants developed institutions,

organizations, and social networks that reflected their diversity within the U.S. at both a local and national level.

With limited legal restrictions on religious expression, Muslims from around the globe realized the potential to pursue their own understandings of Islam and develop their own places of worship, enjoying new found freedoms often suppressed by authoritarian regimes favoring one interpretation of the Sharia (Khan, 188-189). There was, however, social pressure to conform and “assimilate” into American mainstream. Key historical events such as the oil embargo of the 1970s, the Iranian hostage crisis, and media reports of “Arab/Palestinian terrorism” perpetuated widely held stereotypes and prejudices against Islam. However, these prejudices and popular ideas of Islam did not determine public policy, threaten the equal citizenship rights of Muslims, or result in exclusionary laws the way they had in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century or after 9/11.

### **A Search for Identity after the End of the Cold War: The “Otherizing” of Muslims**

The end of the Cold War marked a defining moment for the U.S. which assumed the position of the world’s only superpower. Thus the U.S. had to decide what kind of role it would play, how it would define itself, what its relationship with other nations would be, and “what kind of world is it that we are walking into at this stage in our history” (Moore 29). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Americans sought to create a new national identity that unified the population under a certain set of beliefs, values, and ideals that transcended multi-religious, ethnic, and cultural belonging. During the Cold War, this unifying category was based on a liberal, democratic ideology that upheld individual human rights and rule of law. Now that Democracy had “won,” culture and religion took on a more central role in forming “America’s national identity as a liberal democracy, which is fundamentally a product of Western European thought and Christianity” (GhaneaBassiri 368).

The Oslo Peace agreements and the end of the Cold War led to a period of optimism concerning the Middle East in 1990s. Underlying these “peaceful negotiations” was a foreign policy of interventionism that was linked with the rise of neo-conservatism in the U.S. Domestically, this neo-conservative ideology is characterized by a re-emergence of certain conservative, Christian values and an economic policy that reduces budgetary spending on social service and promotes widespread capitalism. These values seeped into U.S. foreign policy as politicians promoted a unilateral framework of interventionism so as to transplant American ideals abroad. America transitioned to a hard power and used military and political intervention, especially in the Middle East, to ensure that its interest and values were upheld abroad.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was in part a reaction to the excessive influence that America had over the Iranian government and its position in the Middle East. This revolution challenged the status quo of American interventionism in the Middle East and led to increased negative perceptions of Muslims in the U.S. The rising trend of Islamism (political Islam) in the Middle East as demonstrated by the Iranian Revolution, the rise of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the Gulf, the Iraq Wars, and Al Qaeda terrorism “was configured in seemingly more aggressive and anti-civil ways” (Alexander, 541).

Despite a growing multicultural and multi-religious population in American society, politically motivated discourse framed Islam and “the East” as a dangerous “other” against which the U.S. formed its own identity. This “clash of civilizations” theory coined by Samuel

Huntington and Bernard Lewis posited that after 1992 the world entered into a new period of history where it is divided into five civilizations but only two are in conflict: (1) the Western world defined by Christianity, Judaism, the Enlightenment, secularism, liberalization, and individualism and (2) the Arab world defined by authoritarianism, non-secular, non-enlightenment, and collectivism. Although Clinton did not necessarily accept the construction of a “clash of civilizations,” the divisive discourse on “Islam and the West” was the framework through which the U.S. and Islamists organizations sought to define their relationship in the absence of the Soviet Union. As GhaneaBassiri argues, “When Islam (a religion) and the West (a political territory) are juxtaposed; they signify conceptual categories that have no clear referent in the real world or in people’s actual experience. Most Americans simply reproduced this dichotomy without critical thought,” while others reproduced it purposefully for political ends (367). Unintentionally perhaps, this “clash of civilizations” though without any foundation in reality, became a self-fulfilling prophecy as Muslims and Islam became the “other” against which the U.S. constructed its identity.

### **Who’s Islam? With Increased Participation and “Visibility” in the Public Sphere, Who Gets to Define “True Islam”?**

The 1990s and early 2000s marked a turning point in the way Islam was portrayed in the media and understood by the mainstream– as a violent, tyrannical, and oppressive religion– that did not reflect American Muslim’s experiences or understandings of Islam. These perceptions of Islam were formed by certain key events which determined the context of American Muslim lives in the U.S. and ultimately led to their increased participation within the political and social sphere so as to counter the widespread misrepresentations of Islam.

The Persian Gulf War in 1990 was the first event that most drastically altered the history of Islam in America. The media coverage of the Gulf War created a binary between an “external Islam” and an “external America” that had little to do with people’s real experiences (GhaneaBassiri, 336). A freedom-loving, pro-democracy America was pitted against a violent, extremist Muslim tyrant. This was an unfair juxtaposition that shielded a much more complicated situation. Firstly, while the Muslim American community did not necessarily support Saddam Hussein, they were also against U.S. military presence in the “birthplace of Islam” as this sparked memories of colonialism and was a dangerous precedent to set. Secondly, the image of America as unilaterally opposed to Islamism and Middle Eastern dictators was also oversimplified as the U.S. government had no clear foreign policy position regarding these developments. In fact, during the Cold War the U.S. supported Islamism and the Afghan Jihad as a front against the Soviet Union. Furthermore, U.S. clients in the Middle East consisted of politically repressive regimes such as Saudi Arabia and Israel. After the Gulf War, the media started to portray Islam as a violent, extremist religion, a depiction very far from the truth.

After the World Trade Center Bombing of 1993, the U.S. tried not to malign Islam or Islamist political movements, dissociating Islam as a religion from the terrorists acts committed by a few in the name of Islam. The Clinton Administration rejected Samuel Huntington’s theory of the “clash of civilizations” between Islam and the West in affirming that there was no contradiction between the traditional values of Islam and American ideals. The Clintons in fact made a concerted effort to include Muslims in the political and social sphere, including Mosques as American centers of worship along with churches and synagogues and housing the first celebration of *‘Id al-fitr* at the White House. Despite these efforts, the Gulf War and the 1993

bombings increased prejudice and violence against American Muslims. This led to increased political organization, participation, and activism on the part of American Muslims who sought to counter this heightened level of discrimination by playing a more influential role in determining American foreign and domestic policy. Muslim activists accepted the government's inclusive gestures and in turn made a "concerted effort to define cooperation rather than confrontation as their goal" (GhaneaBassiri, 341). In 1993, several Muslim national organizations held a conference called "Islam and the West: Cooperation not Confrontation." One of the main messages of this conference was that American Muslims could either keep a low profile and ignore the discourses and political decisions about Islam and Muslims that did not match the reality of their experiences, or they could play a more central role in American politics so as to challenge widely held perceptions of Islam.

However, this basic dichotomy between Islam and the West was not questioned by the government or national Muslim organizations which resulted in its perpetuation. GhaneaBassiri argues, "The depiction of an encounter between 'Islam' and 'the West,'... [was made] without any interrogation of the referents of these constructed categories or their relation to any local context (Whose Islam? Whose West?)" (GhaneaBassiri, 342). Several U.S. politicians and writers such as Steve Emerson and Daniel Pipes sought to paint organizations like the MSA and ISNA as proponents of a militant Islam despite the fact that they had never carried out or supported military actions. In response, national Muslim organizations emerged in the mid-1990s to combat these inflammatory perceptions of Muslims and educate the American public about Islam. The most prominent of these was CAIR which sought to re-empower and give American Muslims the agency to challenge alarmists' depictions of Muslims, lobby for issues that were important for Muslim activists, and protect American Muslims' civil liberties. CAIR developed local branches to protect and provide services such as monitoring local news media and government officials for the different Muslim communities in the U.S. Throughout the 1990s, the building of local Muslim institutions including Mosques and Islamic centers and political activism increased. This allowed for a plurality of Muslim voices in the public sphere. Understandably, national Muslim organizations sought to unite all these local organizations so as to harness political leverage. However, as demonstrated by the 2000 presidential elections where 42% of Muslims voted for George W. Bush and 31% for John Kerry, the diversity of the American Muslim community made it difficult to unite them all around one political platform or one understanding of Islam (GhaneaBassiri, 348). Thus, while national Muslim organizations were responsive for the local needs of Muslims, they could not reflect all the diverse elements of the Muslim community in the U.S. and unify this constituency under one banner, one set of beliefs, or one political candidate. While this may seem like a weakness, it is actually this diversity and this complex symphony of voices within Islam that fly in the face of simplistic constructions of "Islam and the West." Ironically, it was not until after 9/11 that these voices started to come to the forefront and that the "diversity of the American Muslim population came to be a bit more widely reflected in these national organizations and in the American public square" (GhaneaBassiri, 359).

### **9/11 and the Changing Nature of "Visibility"- from National to Local**

In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslims sought to increase their visibility in the political and public sphere in all of its diversity so as to counter the widely held stereotype of a monolithic Islam that supported violence. Muslims from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds and cultures

including an important constituency of women sought to make their voices heard in the mainstream. Even the U.S. government started to recognize the plurality of Muslims within its country as demonstrated by the U.S. Institute of Peace report entitled “The diversity of Muslims in the United States” (2006) (GhaneaBassiri, 359). According to GhaneaBassiri, “The State Department recognized this diversity mainly because it helped weave the story of American Muslims within the larger narrative of America as a nation of diverse immigrants” (GhaneaBassiri, 360). Thus, attempts were made at a national level to show that all Muslims do not adhere to one singular interpretation of Islam and that the terrorist acts carried out by a minority of individuals does not indicate that Islam is a violent religion. National Muslim organizations such as ISNA also started to expand their reach and cater to a more diverse population of Muslims so as to promote pluralism and “counter extremism among the Muslims within their own organizations” (GhaneaBassiri, 361).

American Muslim institutions such as local mosques, Islamic centers, and national organizations were crucial in the aftermath of 9/11 for helping American Muslims weather the storm of violence, hate crimes, and discrimination that peaked during this time. While many of these local Mosques and Islamic centers had remained insular before 9/11, servicing the needs of small Muslim communities, after the attacks these institutions “came to see themselves as ambassadors of Islam to the larger non-Muslim community” (GhaneaBassiri, 362). They sought to integrate themselves more fully with the local community by holding “open houses” where non-Muslims could come to the mosque and learn about Islam, joining interfaith coalitions and civil rights organizations, and creating stronger relationships with law enforcement and the media. This increased level of community involvement and visibility led to strong friendships and important allies among other faiths, civil rights activists, and law enforcement that cushioned the blow of 9/11 in the Muslim community. Through increased involvement in their local communities, American Muslims were able to start breaking down the polarizing constructs of “Islam” and “the West,” by demonstrating that in their own lives these categories were not mutually exclusive.

### **Competing Voices: Islamophobia and Taking on the Voice of “The Other”**

Since 9/11 Muslims in the U.S. have faced increased levels of discrimination, racial-profiling, and hate crimes which have fostered an environment of fear, violence, and misunderstanding. Muslim Americans were a marginalized community before the 9/11 attacks, but this event resulted in a paradigm-shift within the American and Western mainstream. Islam is portrayed in the media and by high-profile public officials as a violent, oppressive, and dangerous religion. This results in the homogenization of a community consisting of 1.5 billion people. Islamophobes, such as American comedian Bill Maher who has been increasingly critical of Islam since the rise of ISIS and Geert Wilders, de-contextualize and extract Islam from culturally important categories, mistaking a particular (and extremist) interpretation of the Quran as the one “true Islam.” Muslims and Islam have been “otherized” in Western society through Islamophobic discourse which serves only to degrade and de-moralize communities rather than enhance them.

Writing in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois explores what it means to be an “other” in society, to be identified as a “social problem,” and to have no voice in a nation that espouses the ideals of liberty, freedom, equality, and democracy. What kind of self-consciousness and what kind of society does this kind of marginalization create when a large portion of Americans feel as if they



are on the outside looking in, knowing that they do not have equal access to the same opportunities as their white peers or that their contributions to society are deemed insignificant? What happens when one is made to feel ashamed of their cultural heritage, when the actions or comments of others do not match one's self-conception, and when one's culture and values are completely devalued? While Du Bois is exploring the plight of black people in America, his analysis can be applied to other groups such as American Muslims or Muslims in Europe whose voices are overshadowed by the stereotypes, fears, and prejudices that pervade society about Islam, transforming their religion into a "thing" or a set of beliefs that is so far removed from Muslims' actual experience with Islam. Du Bois started to recognize his "otherness" when he was a child at school and a fellow classmate, refused to accept his holiday card that all the children had bought for each other. It was at this moment, Du Bois recalls, this small act of discrimination, that he started to feel as if he was different from white students and shut out of their privileged world "by a vast veil" (Du Bois, 255). According to Du Bois, one is made to feel different from others through small, and sometimes not so small, daily acts of prejudice and discrimination that reinforce the feeling that he or she is on the outside, a spectator watching a game that he or she cannot play.

Though the African-American experience as well as the Muslim American experience or the Japanese American experience, is unique and carries with it its own set of struggles that cannot be subsumed under one "minority experience," Du Bois beautifully articulates how it feels to be a "problem" in society and how it feels to be excluded from the "core group" of a nation (Alexander).

"The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with a second-sight in this American world— a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American and a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; to warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois, 255).

Du Bois asserts that the history of the African American is a history of the struggle to achieve a self-consciousness that merges these two selves into a "better and truer self" without compromising one or the other (Du Bois, 255). He simply wishes for a world in which one can be both black and American "without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows" or without being denied the opportunities that America promises for all people (Du Bois 255). Many scholars on the American-Muslim experience express a similar desire for American Muslims to create a space for themselves within American society where they are accepted as both American and Muslim (Al-Alwani). American Muslims refuse to remain on the periphery of society and want to be integrated into civil sphere without having to give up their "qualities" as human beings (Alexander).

According to Du Bois, out of the systematic humiliation, discrimination, and slavery that persisted for hundreds of years in the U.S. came a clearer perception of the black-self, his or her social responsibilities, and the "feeling that, to attain his place in the world, he must be himself and not another. For the first time he sought to analyze the burden he bore upon his back, that dead-weight of social degradation" (Du Bois 257). "Progress" and modernity did not necessarily go hand in hand with the actual implementation of equal rights, social justice, and freedom despite the fact that these ideals were purported to be the very foundation on which the

“promised land” was built. This contradiction between American ideals and reality which lie at the heart of Du Bois’ writing persists today. The political system and values of the U.S. and western Europe call for equal treatment and inclusion of all citizens, cultural recognition, freedom of expression, and freedom of religion are undermined by prejudices and stereotypes that lie underneath the surface of civil society, excluding Muslims from the institutions and services that would allow for their full participation and acceptance into the public sphere (Khan, 188). The paradox within American society - the contradiction between the ideals of democracy, freedom, and human rights, and the actual policies and attitudes – widens the distance between “what exists...and what should be.” This makes it more difficult for people to be both Muslim and American, both Black and American, or both Mexican and American (Roald, 174). As Du Bois argues:

“We still seek, the freedom of life and limb, the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture, liberty– all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together, each growing and aiding each, all striving toward that vaster ideal the swims before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in larger conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack” (Du Bois 258).

### **A Warning to the U.S.**

When individuals’ voices, their unique complexities or subtleties, their religions, understanding of genders, or their forms of empowerment are ignored, it becomes exceedingly easy to either speak for disempowered groups or oversimplify their self-understandings and their religion so that it becomes detached from their actual experiences. Lelha Ahmed, in an interview about her new book *A Quiet Revolution*, expresses her desire at the outset of her research to assume that her “subjects” were *not* like her. She was forced to actually listen to their words to guide her research. In *A Quiet Revolution*, Ahmed examines the history of veiling in America and asks how the veil assumed such a powerful role in Western perceptions of Islam. She does not investigate whether veiling is found in the Quran or whether Muslim women should be veiled. Rather she asks how an article of clothing came to represent Muslim women so entirely as to obscure their actual voices. According to Ahmed, Islam has been reduced to an article of clothing. With this simplification, the complexities of a whole diverse religious tradition are ignored. It is assumed Islam is an oppressive, violent, patriarchal religion. This reduction prevents the understanding of the role of Islam in Muslim activism in America and the sense of empowerment for Muslim women. Ahmed grew up in Egypt at a time when women for the most part did not veil and understands that her views on veiling are different than her “subjects” due to her background and the society in which she grew up. She listens to these women with the goal of understanding their positions, but this does not necessarily mean that she agrees with their conclusions. Just because one understands another’s viewpoint and the influence of social-historical contexts on actions does not mean that all will always agree. As GhaneaBassiri states in the Muslim Journey’s lecture, “we can have much more fruitful discussions and hear each other better if we focus on the common problems we face rather than assuming that we are all the same or assume that we will all address the problems in the same way.”

When one ignores the fact that opinions and beliefs are complex because human beings are complex and shaped by the society and historical contexts in which they find themselves, one runs the risk of making assumptions about an entire group of people or a religion that are prejudiced, incomplete, simplistic, and potentially dangerous. In *Eclipse of Reason*, Max Horkheimer looks back at Nazi's and the Holocaust in order to understand how as a society these types of atrocity were able to happen. Horkheimer warns the U.S. of the potential for Nazism lying underneath the surface. He focuses his concern on the American academy. Horkheimer warns American students to be careful with their arrogance for once they turn people into a "thing," it is extraordinarily easy to step on that "thing." When people do not fit into mainstream enlightenment consciousness, they are characterized as "other," and it becomes easy to form prejudices against and target this "other." While academics and scholars have a great potential to demystify Islam and create spaces for open dialogue, Weber argues they must not confuse fact with value. They must not assert that their positions are value-free and objective when there may be dangerous assumptions that are never examined below the surface of their arguments. For example, when certain writers or politicians claim expertise on the Quran because they have read a couple passages that may contain ambiguous messages about a husband's right to abuse his wife, they decontextualize and oversimplify messages that are still being debated and constantly re-interpreted by Islamic theologians. When policy-makers and scholars reduce a group of people to a set of "facts" and "statistics" which are often incorrect and define specific minority groups in purely political, economic, or demographic terms, they remove emotions from politics and become mechanical when confronting people's problems (Weber). This creates a state that is run by clever technocrats, "specialists without a spirit...essentialists without a heart," who are insulated from political discussion and thus ignore the demands and voices of minority communities when making policy decisions.

In an article published in *Aljazeera*, Japanese-American's serve as a reminder of what can happen when the U.S. ignores the diversity of an entire race and demonize a group of people based on the actions of others who though they may be of the same race they differ in social or cultural experiences or backgrounds which are much more important for determining an individual's actions. Commenting on the memorial that grandchildren of the survivors of the Japanese-American internment camps held last February 2014, U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia stated that "you are kidding yourself if you think the same thing will not happen again... In times of war, the laws fall silent" (Hayoun, 1). This statement is a reminder that when it comes to national security and a potential threat to the nation constitutionally guaranteed rights can be ignored. This seeming ambivalence to purported American ideals of democracy, freedom, social justice, and human rights is demonstrated by the NSA's mass surveillance of Muslim communities, the detention of alleged terrorist suspects, the majority of whom were Arab and Muslim men, and the horrific and extensive torture techniques used against terrorists in the aftermath of 9/11.

### **Conclusion: Matching the Ideal with the Reality**

At the Muslim Journeys Workshop in Denver, Colorado on August 2013, GhaneaBassiri ended his lecture on the diversity and dynamism of Islam in America stating that "American Muslims' stories are one of those rare places where we can begin to have public discussions about Islam because the American context for Muslims in America is familiar, but American Muslim stories and experiences are distinctive enough and surprising enough to create the

dissonance we need in our public discourse to have more nuanced and informed discussions about Islam.” The diverse practices of Islam do not occur in isolation but come in contact with each other in places like the U.S. where Muslims from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds are in contact with one another and non-Muslims. Islam is shaped by and shapes the varying contexts where it is practiced. Through listening to American Muslim stories and realizing the different experiences and relationships with Islam and America, it is possible to begin to break down the constructed binary between “Islam and the West” and see how these categories are intertwined and connected within U.S. history and individual lives.

Shortly after 9/11, Robert Wuthnow conducted a three-year national survey to measure American attitudes towards Muslims. It was clear from this study that there was widespread fear, mistrust, and suspicion surrounding Islam and Muslims after 9/11. Wuthnow found that “47% of the Americans thought Muslims were ‘fanatical,’ 40% thought Muslims ‘violent’ and 57% said Muslims are closed minded” (Wuthnow 213). Another survey conducted in 2004 found that “47% of Americans believed that ‘the Islamic religion is more likely than others to encourage violence among its believers...[and] 22% of Americans indicated that they believed that the primary reason why foreign Muslims were hostile to the United States was because there was a fundamental difference between Western and Muslim values and culture” (Wuthnow 213). Ultimately, these attitudes result from the fear created by the terrorists acts carried out by a small minority against the United States. However, what is interesting is that these fears were cultivated and perpetuated at a time when there was growing political activism and outreach projects on the part of American Muslims and thus increased interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. Wuthnow’s study also found that despite the mistrust and prejudices against Islam, 64% out of the 68% of Americans who said they had some to a fair amount of contact with Muslims reported that these interactions were “mostly pleasant” (Wuthnow 216). Thus, it is clearly not the actions of the majority of American Muslims themselves who are perpetuating and creating these myths and stereotypes surrounding Islam but rather the *idea* of Islam generated by the media and public officials and the externalization of “Islam” and “Muslims” from actual day-to-day experience. In order to counteract these stereotypes and create a more realistic portrayal of Islam and Muslims in America, it is necessary for non-Muslims to connect their own experiences and national history with theory and policy. The fact that Americans have a distrustful relationship with Islam yet have positive experiences with Muslims reflects the fact that one’s experiences are not reflected in the media or in public policy, both of which play a major role in shaping perceptions. As a society, it is necessary to take a step back and ask why there is a disconnect between what one sees and reads in the news or in books and the actual experiences and listen to people’s voices before forming opinions about them.

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