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# "We are Moderate Muslims!": An Investigation into the Valorization of this Phrase in Post-9/11 America

Sher Afgan Tareen
*Macalester College*

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# "I am a Moderate Muslim!": An Investigation into the Valorization of this Phrase in Post 9/11 America

Sher Afgan Tareen

### I. Introduction

The events of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing national attention on Islam have forced American Muslims to re-imagine and re-evaluate the ways in which their religious identity relates to their role as American citizens. While Muslim responses to these new challenges have been diverse, many Muslims have started to valorize their identity as "moderate Muslims." To identify as a "moderate Muslim" is an attempt by many Muslim Americans to articulate a non-threatening, peaceful, and generally "moderate" vision of Islam that might offset the impact of the negative stereotypes propagated about Islam in the media and other avenues of public discourse in America.

From the clergy to the commoner, Muslims are proclaiming, "I am a moderate Muslim" in an attempt to answer the following question: How can Muslims stay loyal to the venture of Islam while also embracing the promise of American values? Are these two ideals compatible or must they involve a necessary process of cultural negotiation on the part of Muslim Americans?

In approaching the contours of the debate within the Muslim-American community on how to live as a pious Muslim and simultaneously adhere to American values, I will focus on the interaction between Muslims who immigrated to United States and second-generation, American-born Muslims. Specifically, I will analyze a character by the name of Rehan in Geneive Abdo's book, *Mecca and the Main Street*. Rehan's struggle to incorporate Islam into her daily lifestyle, her trans-

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formation from a guilty schoolgirl to a *hijabi* in light of September 11, is a microcosmic representation of Muslim Americans across the country. The struggle faced by Muslim Americans like Rehan has been based on questions of praxis. For instance, should Muslims marry members of different ethnic groups or those with different religious identities? Should Muslim teenagers attend prom? Questions such as these have haunted the experiences of immigrant families in America.

From Italian Catholics who landed at Coney Islands in the early 20th century to Serbian immigrants who worked at meat factories in Chicago, immigrant communities have always found it difficult to stay honest about their existing religious identity while also finding meaning in their newly found American identity. The immediate context of 9/11, however, and the subsequent reaction to the phrase "War on Terror" have cast a particular sense of urgency to these questions in the case of American Muslims.

The debates surrounding these questions have often produced opposing effects. Within the circle of American-born Muslims, many have united across barriers of nationality, race, and gender. The debate between the immigrant generation and American-born Muslims, on the other hand, has produced internal tensions. While the parental generation often seeks to follow the traditional upbringing of their native land, the younger generation seeks to build a purist model of Islam.

In the purist model of Islam, many American Muslims do not only depart from the cultural background of their parents. In addition, they distance themselves from popular American culture; thus, they are unwilling to relate their religious identity to their national identity as Americans. By identifying as moderate Muslims, many American Muslims unite on lines of religious solidarity that reflect an outward expression of religiosity. They do so in order to resist the negative light shed on Islam by the mass media since 9/11. However, this solidarity is devoid of any cultural context. Consequently, Muslims come across as a homogenous group. In a country known for its diversity, Islam is imagined as a monolithic religious tradition.

As an alternative to being described as "moderate Muslims" or claiming the identity of "moderate Islam," I argue that American Muslims ought to rethink their religious identity in order to incorporate their religiosity within the cultural setting of America. This process of rethinking will require American Muslims to display their diverse origins rather than to reduce themselves into a group of moderates.

## II. Methodology

I will use the story of Rehan as a symbol of how millions of other American Muslims valorize the identity of moderate Islam. I will depict how she struggles to understand her Muslim identity in America. After that, I will comment on how the image of moderate Islam affirms the discourse in some American intellectual circles that view Islam as a stagnant, homogenous tradition with a history marked by the struggle between backwardness and modernism.

As an alternative to this current model of moderate Islam, I will argue that Muslims ought to revisit the multifarious ways Islam has been understood by Muslims in the past. In particular, I will exemplify the diversity of responses that Muslim scholars historically have postulated on the question of Islam's compatibility with democracy. By doing so, I challenge the commonly held view that Islamic values and Muslims in general will always clash with American values, such as democracy. Moreover, by emphasizing the diversity of Muslims who come from all regions of the world to live in the United States, I challenge the view that regards American Muslims as a relatively stagnant, monolithic group, bereft of intellectual fermentation or internal diversity. If Muslim Americans embrace this internal diversity, they will be able to adopt the civic values of America in their religious journey and consequently negotiate their identities as Americans and Muslims.

In the American public sphere, civic values such as equality, liberty, and justice have long contributed to what one might call a meta-religion: an inclusive ideology that embraces a wide spectrum of religious identities without valorizing any one over the other. Throughout American history, immigrant communities have negotiated the demands of their particular religious identity with the meta-religion of American civic values. The narrative of Islam in America is yet another episode in the continuing story of immigrant adaptation and accommodation to the imperatives of civic life in America.

### A. Immigrant life in Dearborn

Early Muslim immigrants who came to the United States after the ease of immigration rules under the Johnson administration struggled to embrace their newly acquired American identity. Some felt that once they were able to earn a sufficient amount of money, they would return to their homeland. In her book *Mecca and Main Street*, Geneive Abdo

reveals the urge among early immigrant families to return home in her narrative of a family that finds itself in Dearborn, Michigan. She writes, "But during the last twenty years of the twentieth century, more and more Muslim immigrants to the Dearborn area hailed from the 'peasant class.' Those who settled in the Detroit area from Iraq and Yemen sought jobs in the auto and shipping industries, planning to earn money and then return home."[1] Many Muslims did indeed go back home. However, many of them stayed in the United States once they started to build their families. When the United States became their new home, many of these early immigrants started to realize that the cultural backdrop of their new locality drastically differed from that of their native land. Consequently, they struggled to relate their religion to this new environment.

**B. Islam Back Home**

The parental generation understood Islam according to the cultural setting of their country of origin. Most of the immigrants to America were not used to a distinction between their culture and their religious practices because a large part of religious practices were meant to display the cultural norms. In other words, separating religion from culture would have been problematic in their native land. Remarking on the deep interweaving of cultural norms and religious identity among the earlier immigrant generation, Abdo writes, "Their parents practiced a faith heavy with ritual, tradition, and folklore."[2] However, when early immigrants felt foreign to the American culture, they also started to wonder about the fate of their religious identity. Early immigrants felt threatened that in America their religion would erode. The driving factor behind such concern, however, was the different cultural landscape of their new locality. A problem that had more to do with cultural foreignness was instead expressed with concern for the vitality of their religion.

**C. Raising Muslim Children in America**

This concern about the consequences of their Muslim identity in the United States became very evident in the way they immigrants brought up their children. With the constant fear that their children would become "Americanized" and consequently weaken their Muslim identity, most of the immigrant families forcefully ingrained Islam in the

consciousness of their children. The parents of the character Rehan, for instance, enforced the practice of Islam during her early childhood. Conscious of her parents' desire for her to fulfill her duty as a Muslim, Rehan realized that the environment outside her home hindered her ability to live as a pious Muslim. Abdo writes:

> Before she became a practicing Muslim, Rehan thought she led a depraved life. Her Egyptian parents from Cairo wanted their daughter to lead a strictly religious life, even though there were temptations all around. Her family lived in Islip, Long Island, and Rehan's public school friends indulged in drinking, drugs, and premarital sex. At different times as a teenager, she drifted further from Islam than her parents would have liked.[3]

Rehan struggles to understand how her Muslim and American identities are supposed to co-exist. Her life in a public school raises tensions between her American and Muslim identities. On one hand, Rehan is told to live a "strictly religious life," but on the other hand, she also witnesses that her friends in school "indulged in drinking, drugs, and premarital sex." Due to these two contrasting lives—one of school and the other of household—Rehan could not understand how living the way her parents urged her to live would also allow her to socialize with her school friends. Due to her identity crisis as a teenager, Rehan "drifted further from Islam than her parents would have liked." Once Rehan enters college however, she changes her mindset toward her Muslim identity.

## D. Return to Islam

As Rehan departs from her parents' household and grows from a teenage schoolgirl to a young adult college student, she continues to be dumb founded by the demands of her parents. That said, she also develops a religious zeal that never existed before. Abdo writes:

> By the time Rehan entered Stony Brook University on Long Island, a forty-five minute drive from her house, she was torn between her deep devotion to Islam and her desire to acquire some of the freedom her parents denied her in high school. She protested her parents' decision forcing her to live at home, rather than in a campus dormitory, but it did little to change their minds. Underneath all her defeat and frustration, she was changing.[4]

Rehan's tension with her parents, who forced her to always remain a devout Muslim, persists. However, even though she remained frustrated by the demands of her parents, she did not lose concern for her Muslim identity. While reminiscing about her teenage life, Rehan remarks, "I still had love for Islam in my heart."[5] Rehan's "deep devotion to Islam" and desire to gain "the freedom her parents denied her in high school" reveals that as she is distancing herself from her parents, she is also reintroducing herself to Islam. But while her parents used Islam as a means to acculturate her into their own cultural setting, Rehan has no desire to sustain the cultural heritage of her parents.

### E. Valorization of *Hijab*

Rehan's understanding of Islam is a restricted vision of normative Islam embodied by popular Muslim symbols such as the *hijab*. On the nature of these divergent conceptions of Islam between American-born Muslims and their parents, Abdo comments:

> While their parents were content to follow an Islam dictated by ethnic tradition rather than religious doctrine, the children make a clear distinction between the two. The younger generation, unlike their parents, is interested in the symbols of belonging to an Islamic community, the *hijab* being perhaps the most powerful expression of this identity.[6]

Rehan belongs to this younger generation of Muslims. When she enters school, Rehan distances herself from Muslims who she does not consider to be good Muslims. In Rehan's own words, "My closest friends were four Muslim girls that weren't necessarily practicing. I wasn't too comfortable with them because of the guilt I felt from straying from my religion."[7] Those who do not subscribe to Muslim symbols have no place in Rehan's social life. Since she feels guilty of "straying from [her] religion" when she used to be a teenager, Rehan seeks to intensify her Islamic identity to make amends for her past. She consequently pushes toward only identifying with those who emphasize common Muslim symbols, such as wearing the *hijab*. On Rehan's acceptance of the *hijab*, Abdo writes:

> Rehan's older sister decided to start wearing the *hijab* shortly after September 11, as an expression of Muslim solidarity in the face of the widespread criticism of Islam in the United States. Suddenly, Rehan realized that she was a minority in America, a feeling she had not experienced

before. Her sister tried to draw Rehan into her new world. "She told me, 'Your clothes are too tight.' I said, 'I don't want to hear it.'" But the message did have an effect, and Rehan became more conflicted. She began attending mosque prayers on Fridays and lectures at the nearby Islamic centers at night. In February 2003, when a close college friend put on a headscarf, Rehan decided she should do the same.[8]

The events of September 11 led American media to portray Islam in a negative way. In reaction, American Muslims, such as Rehan, heighten and overtly express their Muslim identity as they unite with other Muslims who similarly wear the *hijab* or the headscarf. The expression of Muslim symbols, such as the *hijab*, does not come naturally for Rehan. For instance, Rehan's first response to her sister was actually marked by annoyance. She tells her sister, "I don't want to hear it." However, after witnessing her "close college friend put on a headscarf…she decided to do the same." Why does Rehan wear the *hijab*?

If wearing the *hijab* were a reflection of how her parents had brought her up, then it would have showed that Rehan is following her parents rather than distancing herself from them. However Rehan intends to gain more freedom from her parents. Therefore her parents probably played no role in forcing her to wear the *hijab*. Her acceptance of the *hijab* also does not reflect the broader culture of her locality as most Americans do not wear the *hijab*. Rehan instead wears the *hijab* once her sister starts to wear it after September 11 and she starts to think of herself as a minority.

### F. Defenders of Islam

When Rehan wore the *hijab*, she did not do so to express her upbringing or parental influence. Unlike the parents who expressed their Islam as a means of reflecting their cultural background, the younger generation's articulation of Muslim identity is more of an outward expression of religious identity, rather than just a part of everyday life. Muslim symbols probably played no role in her life in the past. She wore the *hijab* in order to unite with her fellow Muslims because she feels like a member of a minority religious group who is threatened by the mass media. Consequently, the framework of Islam among American-born Muslims as "interested in the symbols of belonging to an Islamic community," also distances from the cultural backdrop of the country of origin of their parents' generation.

In addition, many American-born Muslims also distance themselves from mainstream American culture. The act of "belonging to an Islamic community" in effect prevents many American Muslims from belonging to the larger American community. Imam Qazwini, in his book *American Crescent*, comments, "Many born-and-raised Americans assume the disloyalty of Muslim immigrants to this country."[9] The parental generation struggled to understand their place in America because the cultural ethos of America seemed too foreign for their liking. However, American Muslims also "assume the disloyalty of Muslim immigrants to this country" even though unlike the immigrant generation, they are born Americans. Many American Muslims I have witnessed post-9/11 feel as if they are a minority in America, up against the rest of Americans who reserve negative opinions of Islam. Therefore, they unite with other young American Muslims who similarly feel the urge to heighten their religious identity in an attempt to defend Islam. As the application of *hijab* by Rehan reveals, this unity among young American Muslims has no past cultural context. Instead, it only represents a desperate need to unite with other Muslims. Even though they come from diverse backgrounds, they ignore their diversity and come across to other Americans as one homogenous group of *hijabis*. "Moderate Muslims" neither culturally acquaint with the immigrant generation nor fully embrace the American lifestyle. Since the aim of creating solidarity comes through expressing common Islamic symbols, "moderate Muslims" lack any inner diversity. This purist model of Islam does injustice to Islam's dynamic history and severs the role of Muslim participation in the American public square.

## G. The Need to Adapt

I argue that the role of Muslims in 21st-century America is to first realize and then be able to articulate the following sentiments of adaptation expressed by Imam Hassan Qazwini. He writes, "Islam has by no means remained static; successive cultures that embraced Islam incorporated it into their cultural framework, each one's brilliant scholars adding texture and depth to our religious understanding."[10] The narrative of Islam in America should be the next chapter in the long history of Islamic civilization, in which Muslims have succeeded in shaping their religious identity through the spectrum of their cultural settings. I fear that in the struggle to make sense out of their national and religious identities, many Muslim Americans end up not only rejecting the

cultural norms of their parents, but also the cultural norms of America. On this tendency among Muslim Americans to distance themselves from American mainstream culture, Abdo writes:

> Their Islam would be free of national and ethnic identification. They wouldn't consider themselves Palestinian Muslims, but simply Muslims. These sentiments are so common that the Zaytuna sheikhs call these young Muslims the rejectionist generation.[11]

Becoming "Simply Muslims" consists of making a deliberate cultural break with the dominant values of the country in which they are citizens by law. While I agree that these young Muslims have no need to identify as Pakistani or Palestinian Muslims, they should be concerned about coming across as a "rejectionist generation." Instead of rejecting the cultural landscape of their home in the United States, they should accommodate it. This need for accommodation is well articulated by educator Yahiya Emerick. Emerick wrote a colorful article in Michael Wolfe's edited volume, *Taking Back Islam*, entitled "The Fight for the Soul of Islam in America." On the role of Islam in 21st-century America, she argues:

> We all know that Islam must adapt to this environment to survive. No, I don't mean that the teachings or beliefs of Islam must change. Islam must stay intact for it to be acceptable to Allah. Islam 'adapted' to Malaysia, Pakistan, Morocco, Turkey, Bosnia, and Gambia. No one complains about that. So if Islam needs to do the same here, then instead of complaining that our kids love pizza and hate kabobs or can't identify our home country on a map, we must work to see how we can implement the Islamic lifestyle in America.[12]

I agree. The role of Muslim Americans should be one of accommodation towards the end goal of creating individual American-Muslim identities, rather than one simplistic group of "moderate Muslims." As it stands today, Islam in America has a homogenous outlook. Due to the current homogeneity, moderate Muslims reaffirm a particular discourse about Islam, which goes as follows: Islam has had a long history of extremism and backwardness, and in order compensate for this lengthy history, Muslims need to reform. A proponent of such an understanding of Islamic civilization is Francis Fukuyama.

### III. Neo-Conservative Image of Islam

Francis Fukuyama, a neo-conservative philosopher, once argued that Islam is a destructive force on a path to harm the United States, and it is comparable to fascism or communism.[13] Interestingly, he also argues that radical Muslims use certain techniques that in effect are products of modernity.[14] From this proposition, he concludes that while Islam is and has historically been destructive, it does have the potential to be a modernizing force that would strip away the traditional constraints on Muslims. For that to occur, he argues Muslims would have to reform.

#### A. Reformed Islam and Moderate Muslims

By conceptualizing radical Islam as one brand of Islam and then paralleling it with fascism and communism, Fukuyama expresses a simplistic discourse that distinguishes Muslims by those who fit under the "radical" category and those who have the potential to become "reformed." Those who call themselves "Moderate Muslims" exemplify a reformed image. When Muslim girls like Rehan and her sister decide to wear a headscarf or a *hijab* to express solidarity with other Muslims, the rest of the society starts thinking that every Muslim girl necessarily would wear a *hijab*. If the majority of them view the *hijab* as a sign of oppression, then they would also conclude that Islam is an oppressive religion. To offset such reactions, Muslim Americans have started to define themselves as moderate Muslims. They are proud of their religious identity but in no sense do they adhere to the fundamental ideals of figures such as Bin Laden. They distance themselves from such figures by arguing that the brand of Islam practiced by Bin Laden and his ilk is not real Islam. They emphasize the term "moderate" for their Muslim identity in order to come across as non-threatening to the rest of Americans.

Consequently, in Fukuyama's discourse, "Moderate Muslims" would come under the reformed category of Muslims. However, once they seek to come across as reformed, they also legitimize the view that the rest of Islam's followers are marked by backwardness. Fukuyama's discourse of "reformed" Islam and the valorization of "Moderate Islam" by many Muslim Americans both affirm the view that Islam is inherently backward and encourage Muslims to distance themselves from the history of Islam. I argue that instead of rejecting the past and claiming to be moderates, Muslim Americans must reflect upon

the history of Islamic civilization to negotiate their dual identities as Americans and Muslims.

## B. Rejecting Fukuyama and Adapting to the American Civic Value of Democracy

In order to find an effective pathway for Muslims to participate in the civic life of United States, Muslims must dig into their religion's history as a source of guidance. Once they do so, they would be better equipped to relate their Muslim identity with American civic values. If Islam is viewed as inherently backward, then Muslim Americans will constantly struggle to negotiate the American civic value of democracy and stay loyal to their Muslim identity. However the issue of how Muslims could participate in a democratic society has been critically debated for ages. Muhammad Qasim Zaman, in his talk entitled, "Islam, Democracy and Religious Authority"[15] at Yale University, reveals that Islam and democracy are not at odds with each other. Zamman cites Muslim theologians and thinkers such as Ubaidulah Sindhi and Madani in South Asia, Yousul Al-Qaradawi in Egypt, and current scholars like Abdul Aziz and Khalid Abdul Falad in the United States, who have articulated their thoughts about Islam and democracy. When I heard his talk, I realized that these scholars expressed divergent arguments. Granted, none of them agree with each other on the role of Islam in a democratic nation. However, they did share their hopes, concerns, and numerous scenarios in which Islam and democracy could co-exist. If Islam had a backward history, then the notion of democracy would have been completely foreign to Muslim thinkers.

Fukuyama is consequently incorrect to argue that Islam has had a backward history. According to Fukuyama, if "Reformed" Islam means Muslims who are compatible with democracy, then the historical debates with the Islamic tradition should reveal that Muslims have thought about the issue of democracy long before any reformed or moderate Islamic identity was proclaimed by Muslim Americans. Therefore the question is not whether Islam is compatible with democracy. Instead, the question is whether American Muslims will acquaint themselves with the historical debates that have already taken place on this issue as a guiding source for their own particular journey of living as a Muslim in the United States.

## IV. Muslim Symbols and American Civic Values

In order to reconcile American civic values, such as democracy, with their religious identity, Muslim Americans will need to realize that Islamic symbols do not have a fixed role at all times. Islamic symbols evolve and one can be flexible about expressing them. As Professor Bruce Lawrence from Duke University writes in his book *Shattering the Myth*, "The current debate over whether Islam is compatible with democracy turns in large part on whether Islamic values and symbols are seen as evolving and flexible or as definitive and unyielding."[16] As it stands today, the former part of Lawrence's statement would be true. Muslim Americans view themselves as one homogenous group. In my opinion, many American Muslims, such as Rehan, assert solidarity with their fellow Muslims not due to some genuine similarity with their peers but as an expression of resistance and heightened religious zeal. Most of them wear the *hijab* or express other Muslim symbols without thinking about the varying roles these symbols perform in different time periods and in different locations. Instead, they do so only to proudly claim their Muslim identity and view themselves as defenders of Islam. As an alternative to this current model, I argue that every individual Muslim in America ought to interpret Islamic symbols, practices, and scholarly writings of the past and present to make sense of his or her particular experience of living in America as a Muslim. That will hopefully reveal that *hijab* is a flexible symbol of Islam. In some societies, women wear it, but in others, they do not. Most importantly, Muslims across the world do not wear particular dress to show off their Muslim identity to others, but instead they do so because such dress reflects their tradition. If in some sectors of America the *hijab* is viewed as the symbol of a society where women are oppressed by undemocratic rulers, then perhaps Muslim Americans should rethink their decision to wear the *hijab*. Furthermore, these symbols mostly reflect Muslims who come from Arabic societies. Consequently, when moderate Muslims attempt to unite as one homogenous group, they mostly relate with symbols and traditions of the Arab world.

### A. Arabization of Islam

The Arabization of Islam is pertinent in many squares of public life in the United States. In my personal experience, *halal* grocery stores all across America heavily advertize Middle Eastern food such as hum-

mus. It seems to be way more popular than foods like *dossa*, an Indian dish. For an American Muslim whose parents came from India, eating *dossa* would be more natural, but instead most Muslims go to *halal* stores to buy hummus, even though only Middle Easterners are acquainted with it. Muslim Americans sacrifice the traditional symbols of their native land and instead express their religiosity through a lens that is more tilted towards the Arab world. Such an outlook discourages Muslim Americans to value their diversity in America because it imagines Islam as primarily Arabic in essence. Many people use "Arab" and "Islam" interchangeably as if to say Islam is reducible to Arab. The book *Al'America: Travels through America's Arab and Islamic Roots*, by Jonathan Curiel, is an example of such an interchange.

Although written with the intent to reveal Islam's importance to the cultural history of the United States, and thus to present Islam in a positive light to the American pubic, Curiel fails to acknowledge the diversity among Muslims by equating Islam with Arab. The title of the book "Al'America" itself exposes his understanding of Islam as Arabic since the word "Al" is an article in the Arabic language. While describing Rumi's influence on the American literary public, he explicitly combines Arab and Islam as one term. He writes, "Rumi is only the most recent writer from the Arab/Muslim world who has gained a popular foothold in the United States centuries after his original heyday."[17] By writing "Arab/Muslim," Curiel is indirectly saying there is no difference between Arab and Muslim. (The slash between Arab and Muslim implies the two words have no difference.) My criticism of Curiel reveals that Islam consists of much more than Arab. Moreover, just as Islam in Pakistan is different from Islam in Indonesia, which is different from Islam in Egypt, we should be ready to imagine Islam in America.

## V. Counter-Thesis: Is America a Christian Nation?

While I express hope that Muslims would be able to incorporate American civic religious values of justice and liberty in their daily life as American citizens, there is a counter argument. What if the American civic religion is characterized in its Christian roots? What if no matter how much Muslims progress in the United States, Christians would end up having the upper hand over members of any other religious traditions, including Muslims? On the nature of America's Christian origin, in *Broken Covenant* Robert Bellah writes:

> For all the new European inhabitants of America the Christian and bibli-
> cal tradition provided images and symbols with which to interpret the
> enormous hopes and fears aroused in them by their new situation, as I
> have already suggested in the terms "paradise" and "wilderness." The
> English colonists, especially in New England, had a particular version of
> that interpretation, one that contained a dialectical relationship between
> wilderness and paradise.[18]

The early inhabitants of the colonies articulated the values that one
would find in paradise, such as justice and liberty, in a biblical lan-
guage rather than a product of pure secularism. For instance, one such
Puritan named John Winthrop reflects on the verses about "Salt and
Water" in the Gospel of Matthew. In it, Jesus is said to have proclaimed
to his supporters that, "A city upon a hill cannot be hidden."[19] Win-
throp used similar language as he wrote, "We will be as a city upon a
hill. The eyes of all people are upon us, so that if we deal falsely with
our God in this work we have undertaken and so cause Him to with-
draw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword
throughout the world."[20] Hundreds of years after these words were
said, President Ronald Reagan echoed Winthrop:

> I've spoken of the Shining City all my political life. … In my mind it was
> a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-
> blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and
> peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity.
> And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were
> open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That's how I saw
> it and see it still.[21]

These words by President Reagan are some of the most memorable in
presidential rhetoric. Whether Muslims belong in this "Shining City"
is yet to be seen. Whether America's Puritan roots created a sense of
America as a Christian nation is the major concern. If one argues that
the United States is essentially a Christian nation, then no matter how
much Muslim Americans proclaim their American identity, they will
always be viewed as secondary citizens.

## A. Response to Counter-Thesis

Irrespective of America's Christian origins, Muslim Americans must
integrate their individual identities as Muslims with their identities

as Americans. Currently, most Muslim Americans retaliate against how the common American "Joe and Jane" view Islam. If they are attacked in the American political arena or by the media, American Muslims attempt to defend themselves by identifying as moderates. Consequently, even though they participate in the American workforce, they often find themselves in the outskirts of American civic life. They struggle to become patriotic Americans and simultaneously remain pious Muslims. Even if the United States is a Christian nation, people of all religious traditions have found a home there. Muslims must also cherish their national identity as Americans and find their place not only in the workforce but also in the political arena, judicial arena, media, and every other public square.

## VI. Conclusion

To give a definitive answer as to the exact role of Islam in contemporary American public life is outside the scope of this essay. While studying the role of religion in America, it is nearly impossible to reach a definitive conclusion. Members of different religious traditions have found many ways to practice their religion in this secular nation. Christopher Bigsby, in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern American Culture*, humorously writes, "America is a country built on contradictions. Imperial in origin, it has remained ever since, yet seldom if ever confesses as much. It is a secular state suffused with religion, a puritan culture in love with pornography."[22] In a culture as complex as that of the United States, Muslim Americans should not expect similar experiences. Many Muslim Americans unite under the notion of being moderates, but by doing so they regard Islam as a monolithic tradition. Professor Bruce Lawrence argues that such an approach does not reflect Islam. He writes, "Islam is many things. Just as there is no single America or Europe or the West, seamless caption etching diverse groups and persons with the same values and meanings, so there is no single place or uniform culture called Islam. There is no monolithic Islam."[23] Therefore, I argue that Muslim Americans will need to stress their diversity instead of homogenize as one people with one belief system. The current model in which the majority of Muslims in America describe themselves as moderate is unhelpful because in its apologetic tone, it reaffirms the belief of those who think of Islamic history as marked by backwardness, extremism, and gender oppression. I challenge such stereotypes.

Throughout this essay, I try to emphasize Islam's rich scholarly tradition, its diverse followers, and its ever-evolving history. Muslims in America must embrace Islam's dynamic evolution and diversity because Muslims who live in America themselves have diverse origins. Therefore, I believe that for Muslims to prosper in the American public arena, each individual Muslim must find a way to relate to Muslim symbols and practices in a way that conforms to his or her identity as an American. In order to do so, Muslim Americans should grasp what scholars have historically and in present times remarked about particular questions of praxis. By examining what religious scholars have had to say on issues pertinent to their own concerns, Muslim Americans will be better able to understand their American and Muslim identities. Indeed, such a journey will not only be a personal journey for the individual Muslim. It will also have the potential to evolve Islam itself. But that is all right. To echo Yahiya Emerick, if Islam can find a home in Pakistan and Egypt, Islam most certainly can find a home in the United States of America.

As it stands today, most Muslims willingly participate in the American workforce but on the question of religion, they either remain silent or else distance themselves from popular American culture. Many fear that by becoming "Americanized," they will no longer remain true believers of their religion. We must depart from our present ways of thinking about Islam in the United States of America. It is time to move beyond the opinion that being a good Muslim requires one to reject popular American culture. Moreover, we must move beyond our fear of the presence of Islam in America. The crescent of Islam will rekindle this Shining City upon a Hill. A day will arrive when a Muslim in America will not be labeled by others as Un-American. A day will arrive when being a Muslim will not be a barrier to holding the highest office in the United States of America. That day will arrive.

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**Notes**

1. Geneive Abdo, *Mecca and Main Street: Muslim Life in America after 9/11* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 38.

2. Ibid., p. 22.

3. Ibid. p. 29.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., p. 22.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Imam Qazwini, *American Crescent: A Muslim Cleric on the Power of his Faith, the Struggle against Prejudice, and the Future of Islam and America* (New York: Random House, 2007), p. 80.

10. Ibid., p. x.

11. Abdo 2006, p. 29.

12. Michael Wolfe, ed., *Taking Back America: American Muslims Reclaim Their Faith* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), p. 200.

13. Online at www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct11/afghanistan.terrorism. Fukuyama's book, *The End of History and the Last Man,* makes the arguments that I elaborate. I am citing the Internet website I explored to do research on Fukuyama's views on Islam.

14. Online at http://www.geocities.com/martinkramerorg/Fukuyama.htm. "Modernizing Islam Commentary" by Martin Kramer.

15. Qasim Zamman, *Islam, Democracy, and Religious Authority* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Divinity School's Center for Faith and Culture, 2006).

16. Bruce Lawrence, *Shattering the Myth: Islam Beyond Violence* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. xv.

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