

Islam in the USA

If anyone had said at the turn of the twentieth century that Islam would become one of the four major religions in America by the millennium, people would have thought it a joke. Here we are, however, at the edge of the twenty-first century with Islam as a real presence in America. The reasons for this are many, but it is estimated that there are about six million Muslims in America, making Islam, after Christianity, the second largest religion in this country. I say "about" because nobody knows for sure since this is a secular culture and it is against the Constitution to ask someone, "What is your religious preference?" Measuring by mosque attendance is not reliable because many offer the five times a day daily prayer in their homes and many more do not offer it at all but still consider themselves Muslims.

The word "islam" means "surrender" (to God's Will) and therefore refers to those who are committed to the faith struggle on a daily basis of trying to determine what is God's Will as opposed to their own will. This is considered to be the greatest struggle (jihad), while struggling externally in God's cause is the lesser one. As this greater struggle takes place internally, it is hard to measure externally, and almost impossible for a social scientist to know what to ask in order to get a reliable answer. Whereas ethnic origin may be known and questioned, this does not get to the heart of Islam which is a multicultural, multiracial, and multisocial phenomenon.

Speaking from the Muslim (one who has surrendered to God's Will) perspective, the greatest challenge for American Muslims today is to be able to maintain their Islamic identity in a secular environment which promotes the separation of Church and state. This is a most crucial challenge and one which Muslims believe challenges the very preservation of their faith. It is, however, a defensive position and one which is continuously being brought forward by the—more often than not—unfair news coverage of Islam in American news circles. All practicing Muslims are united in this defense. Just as the Jewish people follow different interpretations of religious law, Muslims may be followers of one of the five major schools of Islamic law: Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Shafii or Jafari. And just as Christians follow a spiritual way, Muslims may be followers of one of forty traditional schools of mysticism or Sufism.

American Muslims, while always prepared to verbally defend their faith, are beginning to take the offensive, a stance which often works

out to be a position of integration. This can be best understood by viewing a faith group in its various manifestations. As with any faith group in the United States, there is a continuum of views ranging from the liberal to the conservative.

Liberal Muslims, as defined by a believer (one who practices Islam), are people who may have had parents or even grandparents who were Muslim, have a Muslim name but do not perform the practices on a regular basis. They pick and choose what practices are convenient for them. Their Islam is therefore defined as “supermarket” or “American” Islam. When asked to describe themselves, they would say, “I am first Lebanese (or Syrian or Iranian or Pakistani) and secondly Muslim.” They do not follow any particular religious law and may not even know that there are various schools of Islamic law.

On the far right are the conservative Muslims. These are the ones who practice the letter of the law to the extreme in all areas including views on women, holding that a woman’s place is only in the home; she has no choice. Even in the home she lives in a segregated space. Muslims do not believe that there is a meaning behind a form and, therefore, they end up worshipping the form itself instead of God because they have dissociated with their inner being. They follow the letter of the law to such an extent that they offer the five daily prescribed prayers exactly on time, five times a day, seven days a week for years and years from the age of fifteen until their death, and will even boast about this to others in an attempt to compete for piety. But in their compulsion to follow the exact letter of the law in regard to, say, prescribed prayer, they overlook so many other aspects of the Quran and the Prophet’s emphasis upon inner healing. It is this group which most often produces wife and husband beaters, rebellious teenage children who turn away from their faith, or teenagers who keep their rage within and then marry and end up beating their own children.

The best example of this group is in Saudi Arabia where there is one law for the ruler—who can steal from the people, practice prostitution and homosexuality, and drink alcohol (all forbidden according to the five schools of Islamic law) yet follow the letter of the law with a person who steals a chicken because he is hungry and who gets his finger cut off because of it. The Saudis have been pouring money into the United States to fund mosques and Islamic centers since the 1960s in an attempt to try to control the American Muslim community through economic support, much to the opposition of today’s American Muslims who want to be independent of foreign influence and control.

The Saudis are historically tied to the Wahhabi movement in the nineteenth-century in Arabia which has some ties with the Hanbali school of law. While they call themselves “Salafis,” that is, “followers of the way of Prophet Muhammad,” peace be upon him, they become

obsessed with one aspect of the Prophet's sayings and deeds to the exclusion of a holistic approach, the true Salafi approach, and, therefore, theirs is rightly called "Saudi" Islam.

In the middle of the continuum are those who call themselves followers of "mainstream" Islam. This is the fastest growing Muslim group in America and the most interesting to follow because it is attempting to equate being a Muslim with being a good American citizen. This group accepts people from all races, ethnic groups, and schools of law. If another word had to be used to define them, it would be to say that they practice "traditional" Islam. Traditional or mainstream Islam is defined in the following way: Mainstream Islam consists of all schools of Islamic law which follow the Straight Path. This means following the Quran and sunna (reliably recorded practices and sayings of the Prophet) and being, therefore, respectful of the Prophet, his Family and Companions. It also includes the Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki, Shafii, and Jafair schools of law (Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *Encyclopedia of Islamic Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 2). Under the direction of the Supreme Islamic Council of North America, this group is challenging "Saudi" and foreign dominated and foreign supported Islam in the United States.

Mainstream Islam consists of Muslims who emphasize spiritual healing as well as and alongside religious practice. In a sense one might say that they are followers of the way of Jesus while not forgetting the law of Moses, both exemplified in the prophethood of Muhammad, peace and the mercy of God be upon them all. They are Muslims who are striving and struggling to be good American citizens as well and to prove by example that this is possible.

Perhaps the best example that can be given to explain a position of mainstream Muslims is to consider their view of women. At the same time that a woman believer who follows one of the five schools of law and the Quran would wear the modest dress, mainstream Islam quickly points out a Quranic verse, "There is no compulsion in religion." Women must have an education, which will more likely produce children who place emphasis on education. According to Islamic law, it is preferable if a woman can go to a woman doctor or dentist or have a woman teacher. All this means that women must be educated to fill these positions. While "marriage is half of faith" according to a saying of Prophet Muhammad, a woman who freely chooses to get married knows that she is not religiously responsible to look after her children nor to clean her home nor cook. If she chooses to do so, the husband must be grateful to her. Her only religious obligation in regard to marriage is to satisfy her husband sexually within what the divine law allows. Marriage is not always a possibility, and so having an education will insure the person, man or woman, the possibility of leading a pro-

ductive life. Everything a woman earns, either through work or inheritance, is hers and hers alone, which she may choose to share with her family or not. Whatever she has or owns, the husband is religiously responsible to support her financially. She is equal to any male in terms of the political process as well as spiritual rewards and punishment for the way that she freely chooses to live her life.

With just these few examples, it will be interesting to watch the signs of the times and the unfolding of Islam in America. Will it go the way of the liberals, conservatives or mainstream Islam, or will it continue along the same continuum?

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It is easier
To gaze into the sun
Than into the face of the mystery of God.

Such is the beauty and its radiance.

God says:

I am the supreme fire;
Not deadly but rather,
Enkindling every spark of life.

—St. Hildegard of Bingen

Gabriele Uhlein, O.S.F., *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen*
(Santa Fe: Bear and Co., 1983) 25.