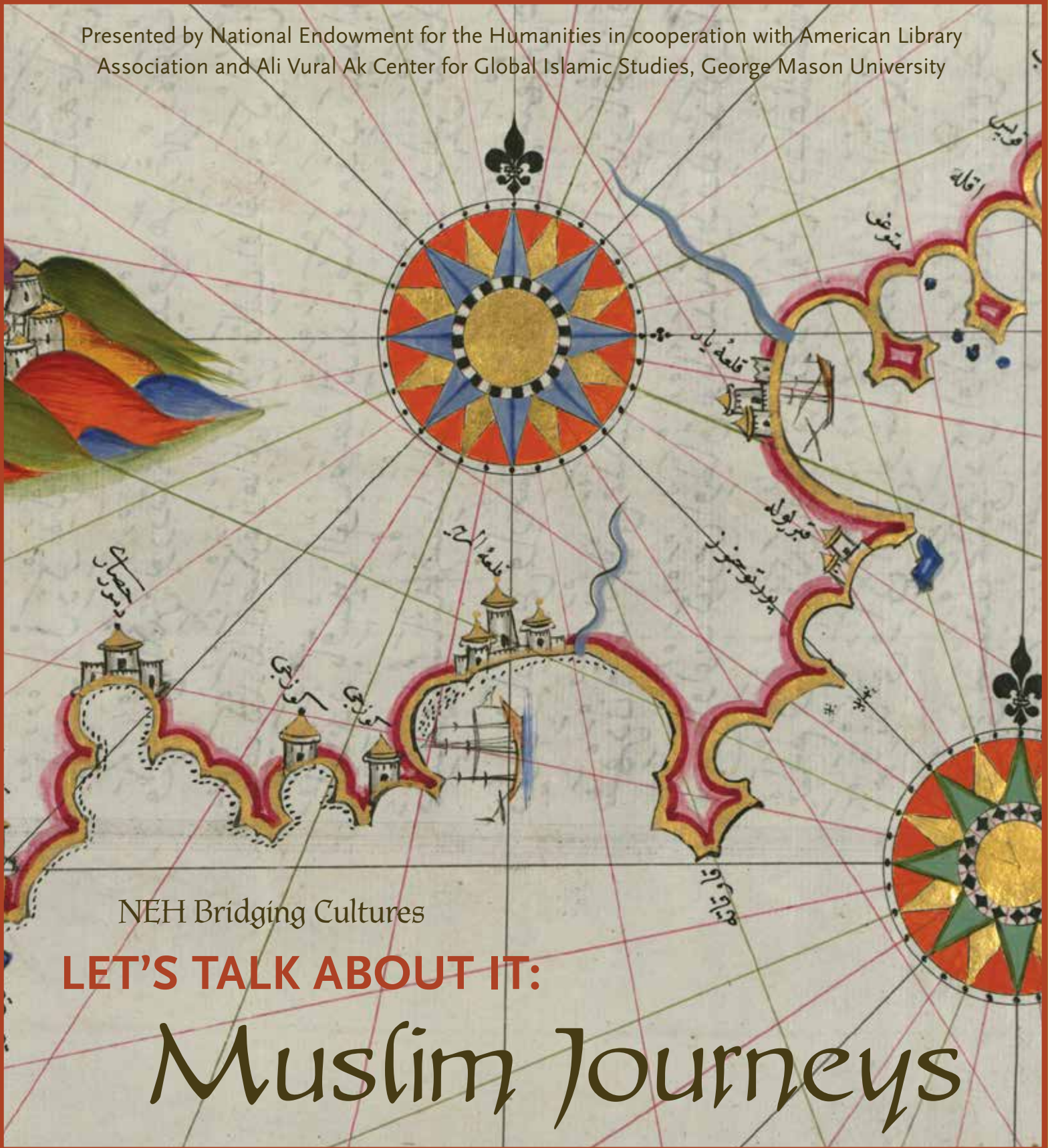


Presented by National Endowment for the Humanities in cooperation with American Library Association and Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies, George Mason University



NEH Bridging Cultures

**LET'S TALK ABOUT IT:**

# Muslim Journeys



American Stories

Kambiz GhaneaBassiri · Reed College

# American Stories

by Kambiz GhaneaBassiri



A children's class at the Moslem Temple of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, circa 1945. Their cupped hands and bowed heads suggest that they are reciting a prayer, most likely the first chapter of the Qur'an, *al-Fatiha*.

Photo courtesy of Imam Taha Tawil of the Mother Mosque of America in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

**N**arratives of the modern age often divide the world into a “modern West” and a “traditional Orient,” or between Islam and the West, with the suggestion that the two are incompatible. However, this narrative is countered by the actual history of Muslims in America, the story of people who are both Muslim *and* American.

Consider the story of Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima, a young man who was captured in an ambush in his West African homeland and transported to the Americas as a commodity in the transatlantic slave trade. In 1788 he found himself enslaved on a plantation in Mississippi. But Abd al-Rahman's reduced position in America could not hide the fact that he was a literate and educated man, a onetime military leader who was also of noble blood. Thomas Foster, the planter who was the young West African's slave master, valued his leadership skills and his knowledge about agriculture. Assigned to oversee Foster's

holdings of cotton and tobacco, Abd al-Rahman helped the planter become a wealthy man. But Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima's greatest accomplishment was applying the full force of his wisdom and strength of character to regaining freedom—not only for himself, but for his wife and children.

Then there is the story of Mary Juma. Like so many others who homesteaded the American West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, her family had recently crossed the ocean looking for freedom and economic opportunity. But they came not from England, Norway, or Bohemia, but from Syria. Joining other Syrian immigrants in North Dakota, they and their compatriots formed their own Muslim community—praying together on Fridays, observing Ramadan, building a mosque, and establishing a Muslim cemetery. Despite the harsh climate and hardscrabble life on the northern plains of the United States, Mary Juma told interviewers from the Works Progress Administration,



“This country has everything, and we have freedom. When we pay taxes, we get schools, roads, and an efficiency in the government.”

Spanning centuries of American history, the stories of American Muslims show how people of varying religious, cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds have interacted with each other, not only shaping and reshaping their individual lives, but changing the contours of American society as well. These stories are windows onto the formation of Muslim and American identities in the modern world.

The books in the American Stories section of Muslim Journeys do not aim to provide a comprehensive representation of American Muslims. The American Muslim population is too diverse for that. Not only are Muslims from every corner of the globe present in the United States, there are also movements established in the name of Islam that originated in this country. No single set of books could embrace the full breadth of this rich experience. Nonetheless, the five books listed here provide a framework for approaching the stories of American Muslims with an eye toward their diversity and their involvement in the larger story of America itself.

## Prince Among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South

By Terry Alford

Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima (1762–1829), whose life story Terry Alford masterfully relates in *Prince Among Slaves*, was one of tens of thousands of West African Muslims who lived in slavery in antebellum America. The stories of most of these people are lost to us because those who traded and owned slaves took little interest in the native religions of their human property. The few West African Muslim

slaves—such as Abd al-Rahman—whose stories survived mainly came from elite backgrounds or possessed the rare ability to read and write in Arabic. For this reason, they were generally regarded as extraordinary individuals, and their life stories were read in isolation from larger historical trends.

With the publication of *Prince Among Slaves* in 1977, Alford countered such readings by placing Abd al-Rahman’s life within a larger historical context. Alford’s account shows how the transatlantic slave trade not only shaped the economy of the American South but contributed to the formation of reformist Muslim states in West Africa in the eighteenth century. These states sought to expand their rule by purifying the region of religious practices that were seen as mixing Islamic and indigenous religious practices. The slave trade was a major source of wealth on the West African coast, and, once in power, new Muslim leaders also came to rely on it as a source of revenue. Although the exact identity of Abd al-Rahman’s captors is unclear, from the 1760s to the 1780s non-Muslim groups led major campaigns against Islamic states in which he and numerous other Muslims were taken prisoner, many of them ending up being sold into the transatlantic slave trade.

For Abd al-Rahman and other enslaved Muslims, however, the politics and economy of their homeland became forever a part of the past. They were left with the challenge of surviving slavery and making sense of their new circumstances. From what we can gather from the scant evidence available to us, Islam continued to be important to these captive people, but its role was not recognized by their white contemporaries, who read their own interests and desires into the enslaved Muslims’ lives. Antebellum stories about West African Muslim slaves often depicted them as figures occupying a space between civilized white Christians and savage black pagans. Descriptions of their physical and ethnic attributes reveal antebellum attitudes toward race, religion, and human progress. Abd al-Rahman was described as a “Moor,” whose hair, “[w]hen he arrived in this country . . . hung in flowing ringlets far below his shoulders . . . since that time . . . [it] has become

coarse, and in some degree curly. His skin, also, by long service in the sun and the privations of bondage, has been materially changed.” A similar example is provided by Omar ibn Sayyid, also a Muslim from West Africa, who was described as an Arabian prince whose “hair was straight” and who was “a fine looking man, copper colored, though an African.”

As extraordinary individuals who were not quite black and who were, in the eye of those who kept them in bondage, semicivilized, enslaved Muslims were seen as potential arbiters of Anglo-American national, commercial, and religious interests in West Africa. The primary reason Abd al-Rahman’s life story is known today is because he was brought to the attention of Henry Clay, who was serving at the time as President John Quincy Adams’s secretary of state. Clay thought that Abd al-Rahman’s repatriation to Africa would make “favorable impressions on behalf of the United States” with Muslim states on the Barbary Coast with which the United States had been negotiating access to Mediterranean ports. The American Colonization Society, which sought to repatriate blacks to Africa and helped Abd al-Rahman in his effort to buy his family’s freedom, also expressed hope that, once in Africa, he would not only divert trade to American commercial interests but also help extend Christianity to the continent.

Enslaved African Muslims seem to have understood what was expected of them by the society they had been thrust into. They were described as “obliging,” and they often even accepted baptism. However, they also had their own distinct understandings of their circumstances. For instance, when Abd al-Rahman was asked in 1828 to write the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic, he wrote down the opening chapter of the Qur’an—*al-Fatiha*. This is the chapter Muslims recite in their daily prayers. It is the closest equivalent to the Lord’s Prayer available in Islam. In writing *al-Fatiha* when asked to write the Lord’s Prayer, Abd al-Rahman seems to have placed the request in the context of his own religious vernacular and written down the prayer he knew.

Omar ibn Sayyid drew a similar parallel between *al-Fatiha* and the Lord’s Prayer, when he wrote in his autobiography that as a Muslim he had recited *al-Fatiha* but now said the Lord’s Prayer. (An excerpt from Omar’s autobiography, in English translation, appears on pages 5–9 of *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States*.) While this statement seems to suggest that Omar had converted to Christianity, this is by no means clear because he begins his autobiography by quoting the sixty-seventh chapter of the Qur’an, *al-Mulk*, which emphasizes God’s dominion over all things, thus undermining the moral foundation of slavery. The equivalencies Abd al-Rahman and Omar drew between these prayers specifically and between Christianity and Islam more broadly raise the general question of how these two men understood or practiced their religion. Were their appeals to Islam acts of defiance, or subtle forms of resistance to slavery and white supremacy? Did they see multiple levels of meaning in religious acts and scriptures that allowed them to establish a common ground between Islam and Christianity?

## The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States

Compiled by Edward E. Curtis IV

Selections:

- Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, excerpt from *Islam in America*, pp. 9–18
- Works Progress Administration interviews with Mary Juma and Mike Abdallah, pp. 29–39
- Pir Inayat Khan, “America: 1910–1912,” pp. 46–53
- Articles from *Moslem Sunrise*, pp. 53–58
- Noble Drew Ali, *The Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple*, pp. 59–64
- Elijah Muhammad, “What the Muslims Want” and “What the Muslims Believe,” pp. 92–96



- Malcolm X, interview with *Al-Muslimoon*, pp. 96–104
- W. D. Mohammad, “Historic Atlanta Address,” pp. 116–120

Under slavery, African Muslims were not able to form communities through which they could transmit their religion to their descendants. The passing of the last slave generation marked the end of an era in the history of Islam in America. This selection of readings from *The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States* describes the next wave of Muslims newcomers (estimated to number 60,000), who arrived voluntarily between the 1880s and 1910s from Eastern Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East; the readings also describe the turn to Islam among some African Americans in the twentieth century.

The Works Progress Administration interviews in North Dakota with Mary Juma and Mike Abdallah provide an account of the lives of pioneering Muslims who immigrated to the United States from the Levant (the region bordering the far eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea) in the first decade of the twentieth century. Mary Juma’s interview is particularly noteworthy because very few Muslim women immigrated to the United States at that time. Most early Muslim immigrants were young men who came in search of economic opportunities. They worked as factory laborers, farmers, and peddlers, and only gradually came to own their own stores and land. Many returned home. Others stayed, and were joined by their families. Some formed new families in the United States, and they founded mosques and funerary associations in order to bury their dead with the appropriate Islamic rites. By the time the Muslim community in Ross, North Dakota, built its mosque in 1929, there were already mosques in Brooklyn, New York; Detroit, Michigan; and Michigan City, Indiana. The only mosque to survive from this period, however, was established in 1934 in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and is affectionately known today as the Mother Mosque of America.

Although their experiences were similar to those of millions of other immigrants from Eastern

and Southern Europe, Muslims also faced some of the additional challenges Asian immigrants had to confront. Under the Naturalization Acts of 1790, the only “aliens” who could be granted citizenship were “free white persons.” Congress amended this law in the 1870s to open citizenship “to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.” Ambiguities surrounding the racial status of Turks, Arabs, and Indians resulted in challenges to their eligibility for citizenship. Levantine Arab immigrants, who were predominantly Christian, argued that they should be considered white, and eventually gained citizenship rights in 1915 in a ruling by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. Dark-skinned immigrants, who also happened to be non-Christians, however, were denied citizenship. In 1923, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously denied citizenship to Bhagat Singh Thind, a World War I veteran from Punjab, India, and as late as 1942, a Michigan district court denied citizenship to Ahmed Hassan, who was from Yemen.

Immigration regulations in the early 1900s also discriminated against Asians and Africans, restricting Muslims’ ability to travel to the United States. When the Immigration Acts of 1924 established quotas in favor of immigration from Northern and Western Europe, Muslim immigration to the United States was reduced to a trickle. Meanwhile, South Asian immigrants on the West Coast suffered from a variety of local forms of discrimination that limited their ability to work or own land.

But immigration was not the only means by which Islam took root in the United States before World War II. Muslims also came to do mission work, finding fertile soil for their teachings among two groups—spiritual seekers and African Americans. The readings by Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (1846–1916) and Pir Inayat Khan (1882–1927) illustrate the efforts of Muslim missionaries who sought converts among spiritual seekers who had become disillusioned by institutional religions and were looking eastward for spiritual inspiration. Most turned to Buddhism, but a few found meaning in mystical Sufi teaching in Islam. Both Webb and Khan defined Islam as a

---

universal teaching that speaks to humankind's innate spirituality. Khan went so far as to divorce Sufism from Islam in order to couch his teachings squarely within universal spirituality.

The spread of Islam among African Americans resulted from a confluence of historical factors. As early as the 1910s Sudanese Muslim, Satti Majid (1883–1963), acted as a religious leader for Muslim communities in the Midwest and the Northeast and proselytized among black Americans. In 1920, a missionary from the Ahmadiyya Movement, Muhammad Sadiq, came to the United States and, by his own account, converted nearly a thousand Americans from various ethnic and racial backgrounds to Islam. The Ahmadiyya Movement had been founded in the late nineteenth century in India by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad (1835–1908), a controversial figure who claimed to be a prophet who had received divine revelation to renew Islam for the modern age. Although most Muslims rejected Ahmad's assertions, soon after his death his followers set out to spread Islam throughout the world. In the United States, they founded a journal called *Moslem Sunrise* to help with their mission, and as the articles from this publication cited in *The Columbia Sourcebook* show, the Ahmadiyya Movement found some of its most enthusiastic supporters among African Americans by portraying Islam as a religion of universal brotherhood that could provide black Americans with a positive national identity.

We do not know exactly how Ahmadiyya teachings may have influenced the founding of the Moorish Science Temple of America by Noble Drew Ali (1886–1929), or the establishment of the Nation of Islam by Wallace Fard Muhammad (ca. 1877–ca. 1934), but both groups claimed Islam as the original religion of blacks. Ali and Muhammad taught their followers that their respective unique understandings of Islam empowered African Americans not only by assuring their salvation in the hereafter but also by providing them with a black national identity through which they could advance socially and economically in the here and now.

Neither the Moorish Science Temple nor the Nation of Islam adopted Islamic teachings from

the Old World wholesale. Rather, they established their own teachings in the name of Islam, and in this effort they were influenced by Masonic organizations such as the Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (Shriners), who playfully adopted Islamic symbols and teachings in their own secretive rites and mythologies. (An excerpt from *The Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine* can be found in *The Columbia Sourcebook*, pp. 22–29.)

Malcolm X's conversion to Islam and affiliation with the Nation of Islam, which he recounted to Alex Haley in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, was perhaps the single most important event in the propagation of the Muslim faith among African Americans. With his charismatic personality and fiery speeches against white America, Malcolm X (1925–1965) helped bring national notoriety to the Nation of Islam. He touted Islam as the solution to black struggles for self-determination and equality in the 1950s and 1960s. His popularization of the Nation of Islam's teachings attracted many black men and women not only to the Nation of Islam but to mainstream Islam.

Muslims who came to the United States in the 1950s and 1960s challenged the legitimacy of earlier Muslim practices and called American Muslims to what they considered to be "true Islam." They not only denounced the Nation of Islam and its racist cosmology, but also criticized the practices and institutions of earlier Muslim immigrants for having become too Americanized. Most of the immigrants who arrived in the fifties and sixties were students who came to acquire knowledge in the technological and hard sciences at American universities with the aim of returning home to help build their countries, which had recently gained independence from colonial rule. Some of them had become politicized by the anticolonial struggles in their native lands. They continued their activism in the United States by organizing both locally and nationally, founding the Muslim Students Association in 1963, for example. Many remained in the United States and went on to form various Muslim professional associations as well as other umbrella organizations, such as the Islamic Society of North America



(founded in 1981), in order to meet the growing needs of the American Muslim population.

As the United States came to play a greater role in the domestic affairs of oil-rich nations in the Middle East, American Muslims came to be seen as conduits of public diplomacy between the United States and the Middle East. The Islamic Center of Washington, D.C., inaugurated in 1957, architecturally marks the beginning of this relationship on Embassy Row in our nation's capital. American Muslim organizations and fourteen Muslim-majority nation-states worked together to realize its construction, and President Dwight Eisenhower spoke at its inauguration. "From these many personal contacts, here and abroad," Eisenhower told the audience at the mosque, "I firmly believe there will come a broader understanding and a deeper respect for the worth of all men. . . . Americans would fight with all their strength for your right to have your own church and worship according to your own conscience. Without this, we would be something else than what we are."

In 1975 W. D. Mohammed (1933–2008) succeeded his father, Elijah Muhammad, as the leader of the Nation of Islam, and began to disband its centralized hierarchy, demythologize its antiwhite teachings, and instruct his followers in traditional Islamic beliefs and practices. Breaking somewhat with past practice of the Nation of Islam, which had regularly condemned America for slavery, Jim Crow, and other forms of institutionalized racial discrimination, Mohammed gave a historic address in Atlanta in 1978 calling on his followers to be patriotic and to hold an annual "Patriotism Day Parade."

The changes W. D. Mohammed introduced to members of the Nation of Islam were in large part the consequence of the passage of civil rights legislation in the 1950s and 1960s. Until that time, racial and ethnic minorities had been unable to appeal to the state to protect their citizenship rights. However, Mohammed saw the enactment of these laws as marking the onset a new era in American history that was inviting blacks into "the mainstream of American life," and he called on his followers to

accept the invitation. Most did. The effect of the events put in motion by Mohammed was to put an end to the Nation of Islam.

A few of W. D. Mohammed's erstwhile followers, who felt that he had betrayed the original teachings of the Nation of Islam, reconstituted it under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan in 1978.

## Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation

By Eboo Patel

The American Muslim population radically changed after the Immigration Act of 1965 abolished national quotas, allowing millions of Africans and Asians to immigrate to the United States alongside Latinos. From 1960 to 1990, the foreign-born population of the United States from Muslim-majority countries increased from around 150,000 to about 900,000. In addition, many native-born Americans, particularly black Americans, converted to Islam.

Of the hundreds of thousands of Muslim immigrants who came to the United States in this period, only a handful were activists who started Muslim organizations and places of worship. The overwhelming majority practiced Islam privately. Eboo Patel's memoir tells the story of a child born in the Chicago area to one such family, immigrants from India who were Ismaili Shi'i, a minority sect within Islam.

As Patel notes of his father, these late-twentieth-century immigrants identified deeply with Muslim struggles abroad but did not actively engage in them, and their children were formed more by American society and politics than by events affecting their coreligionists overseas. More specifically, this younger generation was shaped by encounters with people of diverse religious, ethnic, and racial backgrounds as well as the culture wars and identity politics that consumed American society in the final quarter of the twentieth century.

---

In *Acts of Faith*, Patel discerningly renders his journey through these changing times. He talks about how out of touch the leaders of the various religious establishments seemed to him when they took joy in gathering Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, or Jews around the same table with Christians, contrasting this supposed achievement with the richer diversity he experienced every day around the tables in his high school cafeteria. He explains his struggles with his identity and how, like many members of minority groups at that time, he was angry about the social injustices inflicted on people of color and how his “tribal identity” seemed to trump all other concerns as he argued for his piece of the American pie. He recalls how narratives of African-American alienation helped him interpret his own experiences as an American of Indian Muslim heritage. He also discusses how his attitude changed over time as he came to think of America as an ongoing project to which he could make a contribution based on his own experiences, both good and bad, as an Indian American Muslim. Armed with this sense of optimism, Patel turned his attention to social work and to building an interfaith “core” to help young people find positive ways of expressing their identities through mutual understanding and service to others.

The turning point in Patel’s personal narrative is remarkably similar to W. D. Mohammed’s, and resonates with the changing attitudes expressed by many Muslim activists in the United States in the early 1990s. Two reading selections in *The Columbia Sourcebook* express these new attitudes: Shamin A. Saddiqui’s “Islamic Movement in America—Why?” (pp. 315–322) and Khaled Abou El Fadl’s “Islam and the Challenge of Democracy” (pp. 306–314). In years past, Muslim activists generally had frowned upon Muslim participation in American politics and civic life because they feared that such activities would lead to assimilation. By the late 1980s, however, with the influx of Muslims having gone on for more than two decades, activists acknowledged that American society was sufficiently diverse to accommodate Islam. They began to encourage American Muslims to become civically and politically engaged in order

to apply their understanding of Islamic values to efforts to improve American society. Some activists with a conservative missionary bent, such as Saddiqui, saw Muslim social and civic engagement as a means of calling people to Islam in America. More liberal activists, such as El Fadl, saw no major divergences between Islamic principles and American democratic values. While the differences between these two interpretations of Islam are obvious, careful readers will note the ways in which they *both* seek to adapt Islam to life in America and the values through which their respective authors identify with America. To see these similarities, one has to pay as much attention to the structure of the arguments of Saddiqui and El Fadl as to their content. American democratic values loom large in both texts. The two authors’ discussions of Islam in light of these values are distinctly American efforts to apply Islamic teachings to the quintessentially American project of achieving an ideal society.

## A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, From the Middle East to America

By Leila Ahmed

The Muslim practice of veiling, or covering one’s head, is primarily based on Qur’anic injunctions to “believing men and women” to guard their modesty and, in particular, to “believing women” to “draw their veils over their bosoms, and not to reveal their adornment” to males outside their immediate family (Qur’an 24:31). Muslims’ application of these Qur’anic admonitions has varied widely depending on local customs and cultural norms. Today in the United States, many Muslim women do not cover their hair but refrain from wearing clothes that show any part of their body other than their head, hands, and feet. Some cover their hair. A few others also wear a facial covering called a *niqab*, which leaves only the eyes visible. American Muslim women not only veil differently, but do so for varying reasons.





Some veil as an act of obedience to God. Some view the veil as an outward expression of their piety. Some seek to assert their religious identity in American public life through the veil. Some are simply conforming to family traditions and customs. The rise of the veil as a symbol of Islam in modern times, however, has obscured the diversity of reasons why Muslim women veil. Many non-Muslim Americans, and some Muslim Americans, see the veil as an antiquated practice that symbolizes the oppression of women. Those who veil retort that veiling elevates the social status of women in society beyond their sex appeal.

In *A Quiet Revolution*, Leila Ahmed traces the history of debates surrounding the veil back to efforts by European empires to justify the colonization of Muslim-majority societies and to unveiling movements led by Muslim reformers and feminists. Ahmed shows how veiling in the twentieth century has been caught up in the struggle to define the place of religion in public life.

Ahmed's inquiries into the practice of veiling are rooted in her own experiences as a Harvard academic, born in Egypt and trained at Cambridge University, who saw the veil nearly disappear from the streets of Cairo and Alexandria in the 1950s and 1960s but later resurge to a point that, today, not only does one rarely see unveiled women in public in those cities, but many Muslim women in Europe and North America also choose to veil despite the stigma associated with the practice in these parts of the world.

Ahmed carefully walks readers through her research to show how she arrived at the surprising conclusion that the rise of Islamism in the second half of the twentieth century, by promoting the pursuit of social justice as a religious duty, has given Muslim women a means of engaging in political and social activism. It is thus Islamists and the children of Islamists, and not secular or privately religious Muslims, "who are now in the forefront of the struggle in relation to gender issues in Islam, as well as with respect to other human rights issues of importance to Muslims in America today." Her

conclusion does not suggest that Islamism engenders Muslim feminism; but it does reveal that Muslim women who are working to reconcile Islam with Western traditions of gender justice have roots in Islamist communities.

It is an open question whether Ahmed's take on the resurgence of the veil is unduly optimistic. One way to test her conclusion would be by supplementing a reading of her book with a reading of the entries in "Women, Gender, and Sexuality in American Islam," section 4 of *The Columbia Sourcebook* (pp. 179–263). These readings capture the varying experiences and thoughts of a number of contemporary American Muslim women (some of whom Ahmed discusses in *A Quiet Revolution*) on issues of gender equality and justice. They provide insights into the complexity of debates among Muslims regarding the personal status and rights of women in Islam. Furthermore, they vividly demonstrate that the struggle for gender equality among American Muslim women cannot be reduced symbolically to the veil. Rather, as Ahmed states, Islam, like every other religion, is practiced in relation to changing social and political conditions, which throw open the gate to new possibilities of belief and practice.

## The Butterfly Mosque: A Young American Woman's Journey to Love and Islam

By G. Willow Wilson

*The Butterfly Mosque* is a memoir recounting the experiences of a young, white, middle-class American woman who becomes interested in Islam in college while struggling with her health. She eventually converts and moves temporarily to Cairo to teach English. There, she falls in love with an Egyptian Muslim and gets married. Much of her story is about the steep learning curve she faces as she enters a middle-class Egyptian family

---

in an age of the “clash of civilizations” and “war on terror.” Wilson narrates her story with an eye to how beauty, love, empathy, and compassion facilitate interpersonal connections that bridge cultures, but she is also astutely observant of how stereotypes and differences in customs and social and political structures hinder cross-cultural understanding.

Wilson’s memoir is a beautiful testament to the fact that comprehending another person’s culture requires not only love and compassion but also hard work and self-reflection. Living in the suburbs of Cairo, Wilson found that despite her efforts to assimilate Egyptian habits and customs, her race and nationality prevented her from being accepted as a fellow Egyptian. Yet she refused to be an American transplant in Egypt. Rather, she and her husband relied on Islam, “which was neither Egyptian nor American and often contradicted both,” to build their own culture. Making a hybrid culture was novel and harrowing for Wilson, but people in Egypt and most other Muslim-majority societies can look back on a long history of doing just that in order to cope with cultural mixing under European colonialism. For example, Wilson’s husband, Omar, studied in British private schools, knew more about English literature than classical Arabic poetry, and could easily converse about American music. Omar’s return to Islam and classical Arabic writings later in life raises the question whether creating common ground between peoples of varying cultures requires forgetting some aspect of either culture—or even both cultures. Wilson seems to suggest that this is inevitable only if we think about the world in terms of a divide between “us and them,” but not if we think of the world in more universal, humanistic terms. Ironically, her solution when applied to Islam engenders another Manichean divide: between particularists, whom she presents (perhaps somewhat too broadly) through Wahhabism and a “rabidly conservative mosque,” and universalists, whom she presents through Sufism and a quaint “butterfly mosque.”

Wilson’s memoir illustrates the anxieties and questions perplexing many Americans who have reached adulthood since September 11, 2001. The presumption of a “clash of civilizations” between “Islam and the West,” coupled with the deadly attacks by Al Qaeda and the wars and policies undertaken by the United States after 9/11 to fight “Islamic terrorism,” has come to shape a Muslim enemy in the American imagination.

American Muslim life today is keenly marked by the paradox of coming under suspicion by the state even while relying on the state for protection and representation. But as Wilson’s memoir and other American Muslim stories show, this paradox is not something new in American history, neither for Muslims nor for people of other faiths. This tension between feelings of belonging and alienation is one of the challenges facing Americans as we strive to realize our founding ideals of equality and pluralism.



**Kambiz GhaneaBassiri** is an associate professor of religion and humanities at Reed College. He received his bachelor's degree in Religious Studies from Claremont McKenna College and completed his master's and doctoral degrees in Islamic Studies at Harvard University. GhaneaBassiri's scholarship stands at the intersection of religious studies, Islamic social and intellectual history, and American religious history. His most recent book, *A History of Islam in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) traces the history of Muslim presence in the United States through colonial and antebellum America, through world wars and civil rights struggles, to the contemporary era. His work has been supported by fellowships from the Carnegie Scholars Program (2006–2008) and the Guggenheim Foundation (2012).

Created in 1965 as an independent federal agency, **National Endowment for the Humanities** supports learning in history, literature, philosophy and other areas of the humanities. NEH grants enrich classroom learning, create and preserve knowledge and bring ideas to life through public television, radio, new technologies, exhibitions and programs in libraries, museums and other community places. Additional information about the National Endowment for the Humanities and its grant programs is available at [www.neh.gov](http://www.neh.gov).

**Bridging Cultures** is an NEH special initiative to engage the power of the humanities to promote understanding and mutual respect for people with diverse histories, cultures, and perspectives within the United States and abroad.

Through its Public Programs Office, the **American Library Association** promotes cultural and community programming as an essential part of library service in all types and sizes of libraries. Successful library programming initiatives have included “Let’s Talk About It” reading and discussion series, traveling exhibitions, film discussion programs, the Great Stories CLUB, LIVE @ your library and more. Recently, the ALA Public Programs Office developed [www.ProgrammingLibrarian.org](http://www.ProgrammingLibrarian.org), an online resource center bringing librarians timely and valuable information to support them in the creation of high-quality cultural programs for their communities. For more information on the ALA Public Programs Office, visit [www.ala.org/publicprograms](http://www.ala.org/publicprograms).

**Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies** supports research, interdisciplinary academic programs, and community outreach to advance knowledge and understanding of Islam as a world religion, its role in world history, and current patterns of globalization in Muslim societies. The center aspires to be a hub of international excellence for research and learning, and to promote a sophisticated understanding of the complex dynamics that shape Muslim societies and communities worldwide.

*Let’s Talk About It: Muslim Journeys* is presented by National Endowment for the Humanities in cooperation with American Library Association and Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies.

Support for this program was provided by a grant from **Carnegie Corporation of New York**. Additional support for the arts and media components was provided by the **Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art**.

Cover: Fifteenth-century map by Piri Reis of the coastline of Andalusia and the city of Granada.  
Photo ©The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE  
**Humanities**

**ALA** American  
Library  
Association



Ali Vural Ak Center for  
Global Islamic Studies