

The Religious Imagination of the Early Muslim Immigrants in America

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Abstract

The formation of the Muslim community in America was unique. For the early immigrant Muslims, America was certainly not their future land because of the theological complexity and the view that the West was full of uncertainty and had nothing to offer to improve their faith. However, the fact that the Muslim community could exist with their religious identity and could stay in the land ruled by a non-Muslim government epitomized a change in the religious understanding of identity and the evolution of view about the New World. Living in the land ruled by a non-Muslim government, where community and religious infrastructures were not yet established, the early immigrant Muslims created a set of consciousness, symbols, and practices that guided their acts and minds. At this point, the power of imagination that derived from religious teaching played an important role that would later determine Muslim's definition of the nature of life and human destiny. This article will explore the religious imagination of the early Muslim immigrants and explain how their imagination developed in accordance with the major change in American society, namely cultural pluralism.

Introduction

It is commonly assumed that, unlike the early English settlers of New England who came with a strong religious vision after failing to achieve a legitimate place in the Church of England, the early Muslim immigrants came to America without any means to make religion the focus of their journey. While the English Puritans came to America carrying a charter for land and ready to establish a community and a church in 1620, the Muslim immigrants who came 250 years later embarked without a strong commitment to building a community. With a modest economic vision, Muslims indeed scattered individually as unskilled labor in the New Land and continuously hoped to return.¹

While in the eyes of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company, England was "the sinful land," and therefore the Puritans should stay and build the New World, the Muslim immigrants did not share the same feeling toward their homeland.² For the early Muslim immigrants, as Nyang and Ahmad aptly said, America was certainly not their future land due to the theological complexity that existed among Muslims and the sense of superiority held by those who considered the West as uncertain and as having nothing that could teach them to improve their faith.³ Scholars of the Muslim presence in the West argued that the portrayal of the New World as dangerous, uncertain, and had

nothing for Muslims correlates with the medieval concept of *dar al-Islam* (the abode of Islam) and the *dar al-Harb* (the abode of war). The argument followed that had the condition of the Ottoman Empire not been daunting, or in the case of some Russian Muslims, had there not been economic suffering under the Czar, Muslims would not have risked themselves to immigrate to America.

The act of immigration often produces uncertainty. It is an act of taking a risk, struggling between the need for continuity of identity, the fear of losing identity, or the integration of identity. Whatever it involved, it means a journey from one religious atmosphere, cultural and social world to another. Either as an individual decision and or a mass movement, immigration shakes the main foundation of continuity in a community.⁴ That is the common experience faced by many immigrants including Muslims when they came to the new world.

The case of early Muslim immigrants in America is worth studying as Muslims had a great concern about their identity and religious vision. However, the fact that the Muslim community could exist with their religious identity and could stay in the land ruled by a non-Muslim government epitomized a change in a religious understanding of identity and an evolution of view about the New World. To identify this phenomenon, one may assume that when the early immigrant Muslims left their home country, they were not only bringing a hope to be rich, but also bringing their Islamic consciousness and imagination to at least remain Muslims. Living in the land ruled by a non-Muslim government, where community and religious infrastructures had not yet been established, the early immigrant Muslims created a set of consciousness, symbols, and practices that guided their acts and minds. Hence, the power of imagination that derived from religious teaching played an important role that

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would later determine Muslim's definition of the nature of life and human destiny. It was not solely economic reasons or political visions that helped Muslims to survive and establish community, but rather, the imagination to remain Muslims helped them to do so. Imagination as a set of 'thinking in pictures' could become a productive power to construct a new religious experience that might have been unrealized before. One can say that religious imagination also could play an important role in reinforcing identity or reshaping the theological paradigm that existed in Muslim minds.

There are two main factors that corresponded to the development of the religious imagination of the early Muslim immigrants and provided certain ways for Muslims to reconstruct a worldview and establish religious communities in America. The first factor is the new interpretation of Islamic theology in the land where Muslims do not experience spiritual unity with the Muslim world. The second is the gradual acceptance of American society of diversity of faith and culture that stemmed from the ideology of cultural pluralism.

We shall explore the religious imagination of the early Muslim immigrants and explain how their imagination developed in accordance with the two factors previously mentioned. We will answer what was in the minds of Muslims when they first arrived in America and how their imagination gradually changed following the new interpretation of their theology.

The early Muslim immigrants and how they are defined

The early immigrants who are the subject of this essay refer to a significant number of Muslims who emigrated from the area known today as Lebanon and Syria about 1875.⁵ Although speculation about early contact between Muslims and the New World during the pre-Columbus era found evidence and is accepted by some scholars,⁶ and sources about the individual survivors during the slavery period exist,⁷ the number of Muslims in these periods was very small. It goes without saying that there was a discontinuity between Muslims before Columbus and during the slavery period in America and those who emigrated in the nineteenth century, partly because of the memory of the Crusades and the enmity between Muslims and European churches or between Western European colonials (French, England, and Spain) and the Ottoman Empire.

Even after the signing of the "Treaty of Friendship" between the King of Morocco, Muhammad III, who granted free passage of Gibraltar to all American ships in 1777, there was no report of the coming of Muslims en masse to America. When the Suez Canal was opened, some Yemenis did come in 1869; the number, however, remains insignificant. That is to say, prior to 1875, the immigration of Muslims to the New World was merely of individual adventures. This individual adventure, as Orfaea noted, finally came to an end after the story of Hadji Ali or Hi Jolly who were unsuccessful as a camel trainer for Jefferson Davis' project of developing camel trail in the South. Despite the failure of the project, Hadji Ali finally became legendary as a scout for the U.S.

Army.⁸

Because the history of the immigration of Muslims prior to 1875 was viewed more as an individual adventure, or in the case of Muslim slaves was an unwilling journey rather than a mass migration, it is insignificant to place the term beginning earlier than 1875. However, by referring to the people from Syria or the mostly known 'Turkey in Asia,' the term does not exclude the later immigrants who came from Palestine, Yemen and South Asia, as well as from Eastern European countries. Given that the existing materials about the early immigrant Muslims provide little data about the immigrants from various countries other than the Greater Syria, it is doubly hard to provide a detailed experience for each cultural and geographic background. Nevertheless, in terms of period, as each era of immigration has its reasons and causes, the term 'early Muslim immigrants' in this article will not be earlier than 1875 and will not surpass the period of World War II.⁹

It is also necessary to divide the early immigrants from the early converts and the African-American Muslims who were indigenous to the New World. The first known white convert to Islam, Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb, had given a speech in the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago as early as 1893.¹⁰ Webb was known for his dedication to promoting Islam in America until the end of his life. Likewise, the African-American Muslims have developed communities since the first quarter of the twentieth century in Detroit¹¹ and Pittsburgh.¹² However, the historical elements that shaped all these communities differed greatly and therefore created different sets of mentality and experiences. While the sense of living in the diaspora was strong in the minds of the immigrants, the sense of belonging to the land was embedded in the mind of African-American Muslims and converts. Therefore, the early immigrants should be understood differently within their own context and cultural dimensions.

Although the segregation between Shi'ites and Sunni, as well as between Sunni, Druze and Ahmadiyyah existed as it did in the old countries and continued since the time Muslims stepped into America, we will not discuss the conflicts that might have happened among Muslims. In some cases, the early Muslims themselves ignored the differences between the groups, for example during community gatherings or the celebration of Islamic Holy Days. However, some differences regarding the fundamental history of Islam and theology could not be reconciled and continued to become a social barrier between them. Without ignoring this fact, we also will not discuss the theological debates among Muslims.

Another issue that should be clearly stated to avoid unnecessary generalization is the difference between 'Muslims religious' and 'Muslims cultural'. Muslims religious refers to a group of Muslims who practice Islamic values and rituals such as praying five times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and performing hajj. However, not all Muslims practice all the rituals mentioned. There are many Muslims who do not practice rituals, although still respecting the tradition of Muslims of their country of origin. These groups of Muslims best identify as Muslims cultural. The Muslims cultural are Muslims in term of using the culture of Islam and

Muslim communities throughout the Middle East such as the Arabic language, family gathering, and kinship. The recent categorization of 'unmosqued Muslims' or invisible Muslims popularized by Karen I. Leonard (2003) does not explain the early Muslim immigrants because in fact, all Muslims in the beginning of the twentieth century were unmosqued, and their small number made them invisible.¹³ What becomes the focus of our discussion is the Muslim immigrants who followed the Islamic religious tradition as commonly practiced among Muslims.

The image of America through the Eyes of the early Muslim immigrants

The research materials from the beginning of the twentieth century contact between Muslims and the new world are relatively limited compared to the materials on Jewish experience in America. Some materials available, such as the works of Philip K Hitti, portrayed the general view and relationship between Arab immigrants and the new world without emphasizing the particular experience of Muslim and Christian immigrants. Since the majority of Arab immigrants were Christians, it may be fair to say that research about the early contact between the Arab immigrants and America represents the Christians' experience rather than that of their Muslim brothers. This is exactly how it has been described in one of Hitti's book *The Syrians in America* (1924). Hitti estimated that in the early wave of Syrian immigration to America, Muslims constituted only 4% of the total 199,000 Syrian immigrants.

The Maronite and the Greek Orthodox represented the largest group with 45% and 43% of the total numbers of immigrants from the old country. The remaining were Greek Catholic, Protestant, and Druze which represented 5%, 2.5%, and 0.5%.¹⁴ Although the dream of being prosperous was widely acknowledged among Muslims, they were hesitant to cross the Atlantic for fear they would be unable to maintain their religion, and in reality, they usually did not have enough money to pay for the trip. In contrast, the Arab Christians were already motivated to come to America to be rich as well as to escape from military service under the Turks, and consequently, did not have the same hesitation. The Arab Christians, be they Maronites, Greek Orthodox, Melkites or Protestants, because of their common religious heritage with the majority of American Protestants, were relatively more easily integrated into the new environment. Despite the copious records of the peculiarity of culture between Arabs and Americans, in addition to many records of racial denial by the White against Arabs, the Christian immigrants produced a more positive experience living in America and were more absorbed into American society than Arab Muslims.¹⁵

The Muslim immigrants shared the same view of America as their fellow Christians. The new world is a land where they could reach a good life at least economically. Perhaps foreign missions were the agent who spread the idea that better economic prospects existed overseas.¹⁶ The immigrant Muslims who were the minority in the early waves of Arab

immigration to America were not only buying the idea of their fellow Christians but were also inspired by them. In his account of history of Muslims in America, Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi who emigrated from Palestine wrote, "for two hundred years the image America in the minds of Muslims was one of heaven where the persecuted could lead lives of religious freedom and piety and where they could earn God's bounty to feed and clothe themselves and their families."¹⁷

Following their Christian comrades, many Muslims started their live in America as peddlers or farmers, especially after being motivated by the Homestead Act to take free land to be farmed. Some others, as Orfalea observed, were attracted to the great booming midwestern factories of steel, tin, automobiles, and trains in cities like Pittsburgh, New Castle (Pennsylvania), Detroit, and Michigan City (Indiana).¹⁸ Most of the early unskilled Muslim immigrants, however, were peddlers. No other immigrant group, as Naff points out, with the exception of the German Jews, so completely identified with peddling.¹⁹ Although peddling was not a guarantee of a good wage, it was chosen because of its independence and was easier than to cope with the oppressive discipline of factory labor or the isolation of the farm.

In his book *The Arab Moslems in the United States* (1966), Abdo Elkholy revealed a story of a Muslim who came to America in 1902. His main reasons to leave his country were politics and economic. His country, Syria, at the time suffered and bore heavy burdens under the political and economic control of the Ottoman Empire. As Elkholy states, "Everything was heavily taxed, even one's own garment; no more than one member at a time of the large family could go outside or walk in the street, for the garment had to be sealed to indicate the tax payment."²⁰ This economic situation, according to Elkholy, urged the young man to leave his country. He was 25 years of age and had saved a few liras to buy a ticket to join his friends sailing to America. After he arrived at Ellis Island, he did not know where to go. Without a sufficient skill in English, he affiliated himself with some Syrian Christians in New York City and followed their occupation as peddlers, walking from one state to another. By the end of the year, he found himself in another Syrian Christian community in Detroit and stayed there. Although he had saved enough money, he did not want to establish a permanent life in the United States, and yet he was still unable to go back home. Even after many years living in the United States, he was still unable to improve his English. He continued his dream to collect enough money and believed that he would go back to the old country some day.²¹

The story of Mohammed Isa Abu-Howah who emigrated around 1900 reflects a similar view of America as a country full of opportunities. Arriving at the age of 17, Abu-Howah started life as a peddler selling women's clothes, and later he could earn \$ 30,000 - 40,000 annually after opening a store in Washington, D.C.²²

Brought by the immigrants who returned home, the successful stories of Muslim immigrants in the early twentieth century was widely circulated in the old countries and attracted more immigrants to cross the water. In the old country, America was in everybody's mouth and in daily conver-

sations. Not only was the magic land the topic in the markets or in the streets, it was also the issue among women in the houses. The letters of the immigrants, as well as the promotions of the steamship companies and their agents, in addition, were convincing to the youth to take the risk of crossing the water for the same economic fortune they hoped to gain. Sometimes, the letters contained an exaggerated view of America as the land of enormous wages, the land where all houses were furnished, and mistakenly portrayed as the place where all people eat meat everyday. Like for many other immigrants, America was also a “distant magnet” for the immigrant Muslims who want to gain a better life.²³

However, the successful dream economically in the land that is ruled by a non-Muslim government put the Muslims in the position of living at odds with their religious identity. Before he embarked to America, Mohammed Isa Abu-Howah was already aware of the problem of identity he would face when people he met on the boat asked him to change his name:

My true name is Mohammed Isa Abu-Howah. But people I met on the boat told me I'd better change my name. They said it labeled me as a Muslim, and no immigration officer would allow a Muslim to enter the United States. I had two cousins who'd become American citizens. One had taken the name of Abraham and the other Joseph. So I took both those name, and since the British had pronounced Howah as if it were Howar, I made my American name A. Joseph Howar. That's how I was naturalized in 1908.²⁴

Abu-Howah or Joseph Howar was not the only immigrant who faced this problem. Hundreds or thousands of others had to Anglicize their name to enter America and to continue their economic fortune in America.

A similar story is told by Abdo Elkholy when a Muslim whose name was Sam Othman coming to America in 1912. Following his friends, the young man who was only 13, made a journey to the new world. His father, who had made three trips to America before his birth, gave him his image of America. Sam was the only Muslim in his group. After he arrived, the immigration officer did not allow him to land, and he finally had to go back on the same boat and landed in England. Sam had a countryman in Cincinnati whose name was Hidar. Motivated to help his friend, Hidar wanted Sam to work for him and sent money to Sam. Hidar suggested that Sam return to America under another name. He wrote to Sam to tell the immigration officer that he was going to his brother, Kamil Hidar, to study in America. Sam finally arrived in Philadelphia under the name of Joseph Hidar and was admitted.²⁵

That “Muhammad became Mike, Ya' kub was changed to Jack, Nasreen to Nancy”²⁶ had become the popular pattern of adjustment of names among the early generation of Muslims in America. The early Muslims were not hesitant to change and blur their identity because they never thought they would stay permanently. The myth of return motivated the immigrant Muslims to earn money, and erased the whole matter of

identity. The early immigrants thought of themselves as sojourners in America, not settlers. For the sojourners, cultural and religious identities were a matter of personal dimension, and not of social dimension. The absence of inquiries to face the problem of identity at an institutional level caused Muslims to be invisible in America. This invisibility was heightened because they did not see any reason to stay permanently in the United States.

The invisibility of the early Muslim immigrants and their desire to return is theologically rooted in the classical formulation that existed in Muslims' minds at that time; *dar al-Islam* (abode of Islam) and *dar al-harb* (abode of war). The abode of Islam, according to the old assumption that was formed in the Medieval Era, must be the property of Muslims where the Islamic legal system is applied. In the abode of Islam, Muslims were assumed to be not only in a position of safety, but also to be free to practice their religion.

Although there was no single document saying that America is the land of war or *dar al-harb*, the new world generally fell into this category because the Muslims were not so sure whether or not they were in a position of safety, or whether or not they could practice their religion freely. The religious scholars only defined *dar al-harb*, or *dar al-kufr* (the abode of non acceptance of Islam) as a land where the legal system as well as the government are non Muslim. Given that the number of the Muslim immigrants was small, their unfamiliarity with the laws, and their desire to return homes, many Muslims concluded that America was not the place where they could permanently stay.

Historical studies have shown that the two theological frames were not static in the history of Muslims. Nevertheless, the early Muslim immigrants tended to think in a binary pattern. Living in a secular America in which the government had nothing to do with religious institutions was not well understood by Muslims. For the early Muslim immigrants, religion is the responsibility of the Islamic government. In the old countries, religious institutions, education, as well as laws, were maintained and supported by the government and community, including the assistance provided by the government. When the ideal services were not available in secular America, Muslims came to think that the new world was not a suitable place to live permanently. The early Muslim immigrants neither hated America, nor refused to stay and look for goods, but they had difficulty imagining America as a space where they could practice their religion in the same manner as in the old country.

Before leaving their villages, the early immigrant Muslims already knew that America was not the same environment as that in their own country. When they decided to embark, they were already aware that they would not find a religious atmosphere where they could practice their faith with the same awareness and community control as they had experienced in their villages. A popular story told by an elderly Muslim lady in Detroit who said that her father, in 1885, planned to accompany some Christian friends to come to America. He bought a ticket and boarded the boat. Shortly before sailing, he asked the captain whether America had mosques. Told that it had none, and fearing that America

was *bilad kufr* (a land of unbelief), he immediately got off the boat.²⁷ This story reflects the fact that by the end of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, Muslims were already conscious that America was not the abode of Islam. This fact, on the other hand, was coincidentally asserted by an anonymous author in the journal *American Presbyterian and Theological Review*. He wrote:

This is a Christian Republic, our Christianity being of the Protestant type. People who are not Christians, and people called Christians, but who are not Protestants dwell among us, but they did not build this house. We have never shut our doors against them, but if they come, they must take up with such accommodations as we have. . . . If anyone, coming among us finds that this arrangement is uncomfortable, perhaps he will do well to try some other country. The world is wide, there is more land to be possessed; let him go and make a beginning for himself as our father did for us; as for this land, we have taken possession of it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; and if he will give us grace to do it, we mean to hold it for him till he comes.²⁸

Although there was no record saying that Muslims had known this statement, the fact of the absence of Muslim communities and their religious institutions such as mosques as stated by the immigrants who returned home had sufficiently described how the life was in America. Muslims who decided to sail to America must have known the risk of being a new comer in a society which has its own standard of values, religions, and legal systems.

Besides the theological position that is commonly understood by the immigrant Muslims, some stories about racial prejudice against Arabs, although experienced by both Muslims and Christians respectively, also added a less positive image of America. The story of Kalil A. Bishara, a Syrian who was refused his American citizenship because of his race, more or less described Islam and America as incompatible. In his effort to convince the court that he was fit for naturalization, Bishara contended that Syrians were Arabs and Arabs were the purest type of Semitic race. In support of his view, he wrote:

I most emphatically declare that our (American) national character needs the Semitic element in it. That "pliability combined with iron fixity of purpose," which has developed a Moses, an Elijah, a Hannibal, an Amos, a Paul, a John, not to begin to enumerate that large host of Fathers, Prophets and Apostles.²⁹

Referring to the 1870 Naturalization Statute, Bishara argued that Syrians were white people and therefore he was convinced that he was fit for American citizenship. As Suleiman speculated, it is possible that Bishara intentionally omitted the name of one major prophet, namely Muhammad, from the list because he was apprehensive about the American sen-

timent against Muslims.³⁰ Bishara was well aware that a single evidence or similarity of his identity with Islam, since he was an Arab, might negate his right to citizenship. Islam, for Bishara, was considered incompatible with America, and he felt it was necessary to distance his Arab background from Islam.

All these records reflect that the early Muslim immigrants felt an ambiguity toward America. America was considered as an economic paradise, but theologically it was not a place for Muslims to stay permanently. Although America through the eyes of Muslims had never been a forbidden place to visit, the early Muslim immigrants thought that the Christian land of America was not a place where they could build their faith as they did in their old countries. The common assumption saying that the early Muslim immigrants came to America for economic reasons finds its evidence. However, as I shall explain in the next paragraph, economic motives were not the only motivation for Muslims to bear the wilderness of America during their temporary stay. In their temporary life in America, Muslims could still imagine a religious community, an ummah in diaspora that would become a significant starting point for the later generation of Muslim communities in America.

The imagination of Ummah in diaspora

The early Muslim immigrants experienced constant divergence between the reality of living in America and what they perceived as ideal Islamic society. Religious guidance and public service to accommodate their daily rituals that had usually been provided by the government in the old country was not available from the secular government of America. Religious institutions like the mosque, school (*madrakah*), or any social event that had supposedly been part of the living community were something unattainable in the Christian society of America. Living in this different environment and in this unusual religious landscape, the Muslim immigrants were forced to live in constraint, and this gradually created minority consciousness among them. The efforts by the Muslims to adopt Western or Christian names, to seek proof that Arabs were Semitic and therefore equal to White people, or even to hide anything of Islamic identity are implicit examples of that minority consciousness. To seek equality and attachment to the majority group was the wise way for Muslims to survive in the new environment. On the one hand, the acknowledgment of the majority's identity can be interpreted as a degradation of ideal values and a confession that the ideal Islam is somewhat insignificant for the life of the immigrants as sojourners in America. However, on the other hand, one must not forget that, as in many cases of immigration studies, the immigrant Muslims had a strong memory of their origin. Anna Sofie Roald, in her study of Muslims in Europe rightly pointed out that "migration does not always involve a total break with the land of origin."³¹ Therefore, it is natural that the commitment of the Muslims to maintain relationship with the homeland and their continuous hope to return would someday gradually create a consciousness of

living in diaspora. Living in diaspora, or what Jane Smith called “living in an alien context,”³² is a living in extraordinary conditions where the ideal life under the Islamic government is inaccessible, and therefore, the ideal Islamic rituals such as praying in the mosque or dietary restrictions, could be reduced to a lower level. In an area where Muslims could not find a mosque, for example, they were not obligated to conduct the Friday service. However, we must note that living in diaspora also implied creating a distinct identity from the rest of American society. By living in diaspora the immigrant Muslims were forced to maintain their connections to their homeland and its cultural traditions.

In the beginning of the twentieth century, imagining an intellectual product that critically examined the binary concept of *dar al-Islam* (abode of peace) and *dar al-harb* (abode of war) was too luxurious. In fact, the prominent intellectual figures in the Muslim world such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, or Rashid Ridla, still used the binary concept in their campaign to build a mass consciousness of anti-colonialism. In the context where the Ottoman Empire was in the state of decline after the strong penetration of British and French military power in the Muslim world, the mode of thought that strengthens the old binary position was inevitable, although Islamic jurisprudence does not always confirm these strict binary positions.

The Muslim immigrants in America were the group of Muslims who experienced the difference between the abode of Islam and the abode of war. As I said in the previous pages, although there was no explicit declaration of war against Islam, Muslims tended to think that America was the abode of war. America was considered as the abode of war because the Muslim immigrants were not quite sure whether they were in a position of safety or not, or whether they could practice their religion freely or not. The constant rejection by some American people of certain races at the beginning of the twentieth century and the statements of religious leaders emphasizing that America was a Protestant land, forced the Muslims to conclude that America was not the land of peace. Unlike the experience of the immigrants who came after the period of 1950's and considered America as peaceful land, the early immigrants could not exactly define whether or not America was their future home. The later immigrants could come to a conclusion that America was a safe and pluralist country because American society in general already engaged in the issue of pluralism, partly marked by the liberalization of immigration policy to open the door of immigration to all non European people, the human rights movements in the 1960's, and the emergence of intellectual discourse that promoted a new idea of American pluralism.

Muslim immigrants living the early twentieth century lived in the environment where the idea of American pluralism was a luxurious thought. In the period of time where the economics were unstable, in addition to political turbulence in the light of World War I, people in America hardly engaged in the issue of pluralism. Muslim immigrants, therefore, experienced ‘otherness’ not only in term of racial preference, but also in term of spiritual life: Islam was considered a foreign religion and could not become part of the American

religious landscape.

Muslims, however, had already decided to come. Without theological certainty whether they would be allowed to live and stay in America, Muslim immigrants began to utilize Islam as a public religion, similar to what modern sociologist like Jose Casanova stated about Christianity in the last quarter of the twentieth century.³³ If Muslims in the old countries had to accept or to chose any product of jurisprudence that regulated social relationships, theology, law, and economic systems, the early immigrant Muslims in America were challenged to find their own legitimate religious basis of living in a new society of America. It is precisely when the old product of jurisprudence could not provide any justifiable answer to the situation of the immigrant, whether they lived in peace or not, that the immigrant Muslims were psychologically forced to utilize their imagination to connect between the ideal Islam and their new environment of living in America. Living in diaspora, the early immigrant Muslims started to think of how to build social infrastructures that could help them maintain their distinct identity, at least individually. It was in this context that the emergence of the early Muslim communities in America was founded: the Khairat al-Umma in Chicago (1906),³⁴ or the American Mohammedan Society in New York City (1907).³⁵ Outside New York City and Chicago, the idea of imagining ummah had been realized with the building of physical mosques like that in Ross, North Dakota in the 1900s, followed by another building in Michigan City, Indiana in 1914, Dearborn, Michigan in 1919, Cedar Rapids, Iowa in 1920, and around 1930s in New York City.³⁶

The founding of institutions in this period of time was an articulation of the imagination of a religious community among the sojourners. Many recent commentators of Islam in America have said that the founding of institutions was addressed to provide an Islamic atmosphere for the second or the third generations of the immigrants. This argument might be true, but it reflects the recent phenomena among Muslims who are already aware of the function of religious education for their young generations. On the contrary, for the early Muslim immigrants, providing education was not their priority because they still hoped to go home and reattach to the wider Muslim community someday.

One must bear in mind that the Muslims who came to America prior to World War II were mainly worker class and less educated. According to Abdo Elkholy, 97% of the early immigrants claimed that English was their main problem.³⁷ In term of religious education, it was commonly understood in the old country that, because of economic hardship, they could only gain traditional religious education from their family without having opportunity to study at formal institutions. There are significant differences between the immigrant Muslims who came in the next wave of immigration: after the creation of Pakistan, the war between Israel and Palestine, or after the rise of conflict between the nationalist government and the Muslim brotherhood of Egypt, as well as the conflict between the Tunisian government and the *nahdah* movement in Tunisia, and the early immigrant Muslims who came since the end of the nineteenth century. While the

early Muslim immigrants were driven mainly by economics and were mostly less educated, the later Muslim immigrants were pushed out of their country by political problems, and some of them were highly educated.

These early Muslim immigrants who lacked education and religious training eventually needed foreign assistance in their effort to maintain religion and to build a religious community in diaspora. Under the auspices of foreign assistance in the form of either financial support or religious leadership, the Muslims could build early Muslim communities in America. However, foreign assistance was limited. In the area where Muslim populations were high, like in Dearborn, Toledo, New York City, or Pittsburg, Muslims could still enjoy the services and religious guidance of the foreign imams. The case is completely different in the area where Muslims were not highly populated. In the area where Muslims were still rare, they barely received foreign assistance, and therefore they could only realize their imagination of ummah with their inadequate religious knowledge and limited financial capacity. This is one of the reasons why the idea of building ummah in diaspora or creating Islamic space among the sojourners was not fully articulated in the early period of Muslims living in America.

Institutions like mosques require an imam who has dual functions as a religious or spiritual leader and as a community leader. With the absence of such an imam, not only did the mosques lose its function, but the idea of building a community could not fully flourish. Asad Husain and Harold Vogelaar, in their observance of the early Muslim community in Chicago, noted, "Of those Muslim who came here in the first quarter of this first century, their children are almost 100% lost."³⁸ The lack of religious leadership, the ambiguity of the immigrant Muslims toward their lives in America, therefore, ruined the imagination of the Islamic community in America, what contemporary Muslim leaders in America bemoan as the betrayal of the continuity of maintaining Islamic identity for the next generation.

From the case of the diminishing of the institutions and losing of one generation of Muslims in the early period, it can be concluded that the concept of ummah in diapora is vulnerable because of the insufficiency of foreign assistance and the inability of the early Muslims to maintain their own Islam. The ummah in diaspora was weak because the source of religious authority or imams was not based on the environment of the Muslim communities they served, but was based on the experience of Muslims in their country of origin. As a result of referring to the way of life in the old country, many Muslims were outcasts in their American environment. Foreign imams, in this case, contributed to the detachment of the early Muslim immigrants from American society.

The early Muslims gradually realized that the ummah in diaspora could not answer the need to connect the ideal Islam to their new environment while living temporarily in America. Their dependency on foreign assistance was seen as a big dilemma which they encountered continuously. However, foreign assistance or the coming of imams from the Muslim world can also be seen as an acceptance of a religious authority for Muslims to live in America.

Then the question was gradually raised, if the Muslim immigrants could live and make a good life economically, why couldn't they live permanently in America? The question of whether to break with the past and build local Islam gained momentum following the malfunction of the concept of ummah in diaspora and the complexity of maintaining dependency on foreign assistance. The imagination to create local space steadily rose among Muslims who were aware of their inability to continue living under overseas' guidance. However, as I stated earlier in the previous pages, their imagination to create local Islam in America was not born in a vacuum. While the lack of foreign assistance can be seen as an internal factor, there is the external factor that corresponds to the real situation of the Muslim and American society in general.

Breaking with the Past and Building Local Islam

Muslim immigrants experienced hardship in their early days of living in America by practicing ethics and values dictated by foreign imams in an environment that was different than that in their home country. Since they first came en mass in about 1875, there has been gradual development of minority consciousness and the awareness of the Muslims to keep their identity and to build a community or ummah in diaspora during their temporary life in America. Historical evidence confirms that the early immigrant Muslims had in some ways affirmed the culture of the majority and tried very hard to adjust to the new environment. However, the sharp divergences between Muslim's faith and the majority of Protestants did not provide any room for the Muslims to be fully assimilated. The Muslim immigrants, in their endeavor to survive, decided to build distinct religious communities under various types of foreign assistance. We must note, however, that the early immigrant Muslims, in their imagination to build a distinct community, did not create a ghetto community that had no interaction with their fellow Americans. The ghetto community, in itself, cannot survive among Muslims because the Muslim immigrants consisted of multi ethnic communities rooted from many different countries of origin. That is to say, although the early Muslims had tried to build a community that was separated from the majority, there was still room for interaction with the American society. It is precisely when the imagination of the envisioned ummah in diaspora did not work out that the early Muslims could still revise their imagination of religious community by creating local Islam.

The early steps to create local Islam were born from the social process of the inability of foreign assistance to assist the Muslims in the American environment. It was born as a continuation of the efforts of the Muslim immigrants to re-read the revelations and the medieval doctrine of the ideal society in their continuous reality of living in the West.

In addition to that, the other factor that made imagining and creating local Islam possible was the openness to a wider discussion of the relationship between the majority and minority in American society. One should remem-

ber that the first quarter of the twentieth century is the time when minority groups in America like Catholics, Jews, and Asians started to seek acceptance in a wider American society in the form that is popularized by sociologists as “cultural pluralism.” The person who introduced this idea, according to William M Newman (1973), was a Harvard-educated philosopher Horace Kallen. Kallen began to popularize the idea through his book entitled *Culture and Democracy in the United States* (1924), but the seed to campaign the idea of cultural pluralism had started in his early writing that appeared in the magazine *The Nation* in 1915.³⁹

It is also important to review how the American religious community responded to the idea of cultural pluralism initiated by Kallen. Five years after Kallen published his book, H. Richard Niebuhr published a book entitled *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929). In this book, Niebuhr explained that the differences of social structures such as race, class, or ethnicity have produced a unique diverse array of American Protestant denominations. Niebuhr’s book is a sign that within the Protestant community, difference is inevitable and has become a social asset for American society. In the period of the Second World War, another scholar named Ruby Jo Reeves Kennedy, in her article published in 1944, argued that American pluralism is a triple melting pot, with assimilation or amalgamation occurring within the Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish groups, but with cultural pluralism remaining characteristic of the relationship between the three communities.⁴⁰ What has been explicitly said by Will Herberg in his book *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* published in 1955, therefore, is the continuation of the ideas promoted earlier by Kallen, Niebuhr, and Kennedy.⁴¹

Although the Muslim immigrants were beyond the boundary of the triple melting pot, their imagination to create local Islam was within the social flow of the American minority to seek a place in the American concept of pluralism. Like Jews and Catholics, the early Muslims thought that it was a challenge to find social foundations for their existence as a native community. This was a new experience for the Muslim immigrants, in which living in ‘the abode of the infidels’ was not considered an anomaly, because they still could become Muslims while ruled by the non-Muslim government. This was the period when the Muslim immigrants started to think seriously that it was possible to live permanently in America.

Unfortunately, it is far more difficult to find historical evidence of how the early Muslim communities realized their imagination of building local Islam, than to find that evidence for other religious communities. Throughout the second quarter of the twentieth century, there was no concrete evidence of the building of local Islam in the American context, except the continuing of the trial and error project of building Muslim communities envisioned by foreign imams. That is to say, the idea of building local Islam in this period was not really articulated because the early Muslim immigrants did not precisely know how to present Islam in the new environment. Perhaps, the idea to build local Islam is a fine example of what Karl Mannheim has called a utopia. Mannheim’s doctrine of utopia assumed an establishment of

society that has not yet happened, breaking off from the old doctrine in what he called as ideology.⁴² However, for the Muslim immigrants in America, breaking with the past did not mean breaking with the revelation or the entire tradition of Islam. For the Muslim immigrants, it was the old ideology of *dar al-harb* or *dar al-kufr* that became the starting point for immigrant Muslims to create an ideal Muslim society in America.

Contemporary scholars of Muslims in America often argue that one of the earlier representations of creating local Islam was the trend of some early Muslim immigrants to be missionaries to promote Islam for a wider American society. Larry Poston, in his book *Islamic Da’wah in the West* (1992), captured this trend and argued that mission (*da’wah*) for Muslims was assumed to be the way out of feeling guilty after their emigration to the new land. According to Poston, this is the point when Muslims started thinking that their emigration to America was God’s call to become missionaries (*da’i*).⁴³ The contradiction between *dar al-harb* and *dar al-Islam*, therefore lost its significance because Muslims now have a chance to get reward from God for living in the ‘land of the infidels.’ Although Poston’s argument does not represent the entire situation of the immigrant Muslims, his study of Muslim missionaries is significant in describing a new Muslim view of American society.

Mission in America is a clear example of combining the new idea of nativism and Islamic vision. Muslim immigrants have admitted their fate of living outside their country of origin and considered it as an unprecedented challenge in the history of Muslims. Following their challenge to create local Islam, the Muslims also believed that they had something to contribute to American society in general. The Muslims saw that the ideal values of Islam regarding social justice, the obedience to God, and the Islamization of social and political structure were beneficial to American society. Mission in America, therefore, must be understood in the frame of Muslim’s intention to live under their religious values and their intention to contribute to the community where they lived.

Moreover, it is also clear that the need to create local Islam and to contribute to American society reflects a new Muslim imagination and worldview. If in the early period of immigration, the Muslims thought that America was the economic paradise, within less than a century, they gradually acknowledged that America was the land in which they could serve God. There was a growing assumption that living and being a Muslim in America was an act of worship. The Muslim immigrants finally found the religious significance of their lives, not only to live as a Muslim, but also to live as a better Muslim.

Conclusion

The early Muslim immigrants in America experienced a unique process in becoming part of American society. At first, Muslims of the greater Syria came to America provoked by their Christian friends to seek economic fortunes in the new land. Although sometimes Muslims disregarded the separation between economic interests and religious in-

terests, this article has shown clearly that at the beginning, religion was really not a significant factor of their immigration. It was because of religious matters that the early Muslim immigrants did not want to stay permanently in America. However, the long process of Muslims engagement with the American environment, from attempting to assimilate to creating a distinct identity of community under foreign assistance, resulted in their consideration of the religious significance of living in America. While in the early part of the twentieth century Muslims still lived under the shadow of the medieval binary vision of *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-harb*, the Muslims in the period of the second quarter of the twentieth century had already found religious significance while living under a non-Muslim government.

Since the first quarter of the twentieth century, Muslim immigrants tried to build religious communities in the new world using foreign assistance in the form of ummah in diaspora. However, the early Muslims gradually realized that the ummah in diaspora did not answer the need for connection between the ideal Islam and their new environment living temporarily in America. The ummah in diaspora did not work out because the source of religious authority was not based in the same environment as the Muslim communities they served. They were based on the experience of Muslims in their country of origin. The foreign imams, in this case, contributed to the detachment of the early Muslim immigrants from American society. As a result of referring to the way of life in the old country, many Muslims were outcast from their American environment.

Consistent with their effort to bridge the ideal Islam and their reality of living in the new environment, the Muslims then initiated the creation of local Islam and Muslim communities that no longer refer to the old country. This initiative was born as a continuation of the efforts of the Muslim immigrants to reread the revelations and the medieval doctrine of the ideal society into the reality of living in the West. This initiative became possible not only because the eagerness of the Muslim immigrants to create local communities, but also because of their openness to a wider discussion of the relationship between the majority and minority in American society. The Muslim immigrants were in the flow of the American minority groups who sought a place in the American concept of pluralism.

Some evidence show that the initiative to create local Islam and Muslim communities in America is best reflected in Muslim efforts of mission (*da'wah*). Although this argument does not represent the whole situation of immigrant Muslims, the initiative of mission was very significant as a moment that marked the irrelevance of the binary world view of *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-harb*. Whatever the reason behind the mission, it is important to note this phenomenon to mark the period when Muslims started to think that their immigration was God's call, not just an escape from economic trouble.

Finding religious significance in living in the West might have been a new experience for Muslims. In the early twentieth century, it was almost impossible to imagine that Muslims could live permanently in America under a non-Muslim ruler. However, Muslims gradually realized, albeit through a

long process, that 'the infidel land' is a safe place for them. Muslim immigrants finally found that they still could maintain their religious identity and become better Muslims even though living in secular America.

Footnotes

¹Jane I. Smith (1999). *Islam in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 50-55. See also Abdo A. Elkholy (1966). *The Arab Moslems in the United States*. New Haven: College and University Press, 81, 121-22.

²John Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer (2002). *Religion in American Life: A Short History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 52.

³Sulayman S. Nyang & Ahmad, Mumtaz (1985). The Muslim Intellectual Émigré in the United States. *Islamic Culture* (July), 277-278.

⁴Joseph J. Barton (1977). Religion and Change in Czech Immigrant Community. In Randall M. Miler & Thomas D. Marzik (Eds.), *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 4.

⁵Yvonne Haddad (1983). Arab Muslims and Islamic Institution in America: Adaptation and Reform. In Sameer Y. Abraham & Nabeel Abraham (Eds.), *Arab in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*. Detroit: Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies, 61.

⁶Clyde-Ahmad Winter (1997). Islam in Early North and South America. *Al-Ittihad* (July-October), 57-61. See also Gregory Orfalea (1988). *Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 46.

⁷For detail information about the slavery see Allen D. Austin (1981). *Muslims in the New World: A Sourcebook for Cultural Historians*. New York: Garland.

⁸Orfalea (1988), 49-50.

⁹After the World War II, the huge number of immigrants came from India-Pakistan and Palestine following the creation of the state of Israel. The type of immigration that was driven by post colonial political reasons might not be well explained here and needs further research.

¹⁰For a complete story of Alexander Russell Webb, see Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb (1992). *The Spirit of Islam*. In Michael A. Koszegi & J. Gordon Melton (Eds.), *Islam in North America: A Source Book*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc.

¹¹Lawrence Mamiya (1992). From Black Muslim to Bilalian: The Evolution of A Movement. In Michael A. Koszegi & J. Gordon Melton (Eds.), *Islam in North America: A Source Book*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 164.

¹²Jameela A Hakim (1992). History of the first Muslim Mosque of Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. In Michael A. Koszegi & J. Gordon Melton (Eds.), *Islam in North America: A Source Book*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 153.

¹³Karen Isaksen Leonard (2003). *Muslims in the United States: The State of Research*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 43.

¹⁴Philip K. Hitti (1924) *The Syrian in America*. New York: Doran, 58, 104.

¹⁵See for example Alixa Naff (1983). Arab in America: A Historical View. In Sameer Y. Abraham & Nabeel Abraham (Eds.), *Arabs in The New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*. Detroit: Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies.

¹⁶See Najib E. Saliba (1983). Emigration from Syria. In Sameer Y. Abraham & Nabeel Abraham (Eds.), *Arabs in The New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*. Detroit: Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies, 36.

¹⁷The story of Isma'il Raji al-Faruqi is cited from Kathleen M. Moore. See Kathleen M. Moore (1995). *Al-Mughtaribūn: American Law and the Transformation of Muslim Life in the United States*. Albany, NY: State University of New York, 8.

¹⁸Orfalea (1988), 94.

¹⁹Naff (1983), 15.

²⁰Elkholy (1966), 121.

²¹Ibid., 121-22.

²²See Philip Harsham (1992). Arabs in America: One Arab's Immigration. In Michael A. Koszegi & J. Gordon Melton (Eds.), *Islam in North America: A Source Book*. New York: Garland Publishing Inc., 74-76.

²³The term of 'distant magnet' is borrowed from Philip Taylor. See Philip Taylor (1971). *The Distant Magnet*. New York: Harper and Row.

²⁴Harsham (1992), 75.

²⁵Elkholy (1966), 58-59.

²⁶Smith (1999), 55.

²⁷Beverly Turner Mehdy (1978). *The Arabs in America 1492-1977*. New York: Oceana Publications, 5.

²⁸*American Protestant Theological Review* 5 (July, 1867), 390-391.

²⁹As quoted in Moore (1995), 49. See also Michael Suleiman (1987). Early Arab-Americans: The Search for Identity. In Eric J. Hooglund (Ed.), *Crossing the Waters: Arab-Speaking Immigrants to the United States Before 1940*. London, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 4.

³⁰Suleiman (1987), 45.

³¹Anne Sofie Roald (2004). *New Muslims in the European Context*. Leiden: Brill, 2004, 4.

³²Smith (1999), 54.

³³Jose Casanova (1994) *Public Religion in the Modern World*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

³⁴For a detail account of the formation of the Khairat al-Umma community, see Asad Husain & Harold Vogelaar (1994). Activities of the Immigrant Muslim Communities in Chicago. In Yvone Y. Hadad & Jane I. Smith (Eds.), *Muslim Communities in North America*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

³⁵Marc Ferris (1994). "To Achieve the pleasure of Allah": Immigrant Muslim in New York City 1893-1990. In Yvone Y. Hadad & Jane I. Smith (Eds.), *Muslim Communities in North America*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 211.

³⁶Smith (1999), 56-59.

³⁷Elkholy (1966), 84.

³⁸Husain and Vogelaar (1994), 233.

³⁹See William M. Newman (1973). *American Pluralism: A Study of Minority Groups and Social Theory*. New York, Evanston, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1973, 67-68.

⁴⁰Ibid., 76.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Karl Mannheim (1970). *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* trans. Louis Wirth and Edward Shils. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970.

⁴³Larry Poston (1992). *Islamic Da'wah in the West*. New York-Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, 43.



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