

Journey into America

THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAM

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ONE

Muslim Odyssey



I HAD WALKED into an ambush. An aggressive sniper was positioned directly in front of me, with two equally effective sharpshooters to my left and the obvious leader of the group facing me from the back row. Having been in charge of some of the most battle-hardened tribes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, I knew something about war tactics. One lesson I had learned was to keep cool under fire.

Showdown in a Mosque

Where does one begin a search for American identity and its Muslim component? The answer seemed obvious: in the nation's heartland. But what could be learned about America's founding principles of freedom of speech and religious tolerance in a nondescript, almost shabby mosque in Omaha, Nebraska, where I now was? Especially in the midst of a verbal ambush by an African American man wearing a typical Arab red-and-white checkered headdress, or *kufiya*, who looked as if he had come straight out of an orthodox mosque in Saudi Arabia.

Hearing my call for interfaith dialogue with Jews and Christians, the man stood up in a startling breach of mosque—not to mention Muslim—etiquette to challenge my interpretation of Islam. “Good Muslims” could not talk to nonbelievers, he almost shouted. The salvos continued, despite my well-founded explanation: Muhammad, the holy Prophet of Islam, had himself paved the way for such dialogue. He had urged Muslims persecuted in Mecca to migrate to Abyssinia, a Christian country, because he

anticipated they would be well received there once the natives of that land had met them and learned about Islam. But, the man in Arab headdress snapped back, the Prophet had really intended those Muslims to convert the Abyssinians by force.

To me, that seemed an unlikely scenario. This was a small group of destitute refugees, I explained, about a dozen men including their wives, seeking refuge in a large country. And why would the Prophet have sent his own daughter, Rokaya, to join such a group, essentially a war party in this man's interpretation? And why, on the death of Abyssinia's king, did the Prophet lead the funeral services if not out of respect? My remarks fell on deaf ears. By now highly agitated, the man turned his back on me and strode out of the room, only to return within minutes to undertake his prostrations in prayer even while I was still talking. On rising, he approached a bookshelf on my left and noisily browsed among the volumes, keeping his back to me.

I ignored him and continued talking to the congregants seated in front of me. They were a microcosm of Muslim society in America—African American Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians, with one or two white converts. Their conversation also faithfully reflected the range of Muslim thinking in America: some wished to live in contemporary times, and some would have nothing to do with modernity.

My host, a Pakistani lawyer from Karachi and acting president of the Islamic center running the mosque, did not remain with me at the pulpit once the harsh words began to fly. He had felt intimidated by those eager to challenge me and had quietly left. He had invited me with my team of research assistants to participate in the *iftaar*, the opening of the fast, in September 2008, as it was the month of Ramadan, but did not feel compelled to defend his guests. Meanwhile, the challengers, now numbering four, pressed on, disputing my claim that *ilm*, or knowledge—a central feature of God's message in the Quran—encompasses all knowledge, even if it comes from Western sources. For them, the only knowledge relevant to a Muslim arises from *shariah*, or Islamic law—never mind that in his famous sayings, or *hadith*, the Prophet had exhorted Muslims to acquire knowledge even if it meant going to China, which for a Muslim in the seventh century was a distant and forbidding non-Muslim land. It did not take long to grasp the “defensive” subtext of the debaters' argument: Islam must be defended at all costs, even to the point of martyrdom.

I replied with one of my favorite hadiths: “The ink of the scholar is more sacred than the blood of the martyr.” The truth of this hadith, I added, was abundantly apparent throughout the Muslim world, which during all my



At the main mosque in Omaha, the Pakistani host prepares to leave while another man stands up to protest as Akbar Ahmed continues his talk.

travels there exhibited a primarily open-minded and compassionate Islam, even under trying circumstances.

The older, more portly challenger in the back row, wearing a colorful shawl and a black velvet cap, shot back accusingly: “How could you take two white kids with you to the Muslim world and hope to explain Islam?” He was referring to my former students Frankie Martin and Hailey Woltdt, who were present and had helped me gather data for *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization*.¹ But he had overlooked my main research assistant for that project—a Muslim. Particularly unsettling was his reference to the color of my students’ skin. Islam prides itself on being emphatically color-blind in this regard.

The rebuke I had received was rooted in antipathy not only to other religions and the idea of knowledge as I saw it, but also to other races. On this and subsequent stops on my new journey, this time through America, I found that color continues to be a defining factor for Americans, affecting status and authority and echoing tensions of past eras. It was clearly a subject that needed to be explored further as we continued our fieldwork on a project that would take us across the length and breadth of the United States studying Muslims in the context of American society.

To my team's chagrin, our interviews had begun on shaky ground. We were being met with suspicion, paranoia, and fear fostered by the news media, particularly by reports of infiltrators—of secret agents pretending to be Muslim converts. When Frankie, always sensitive to mosque culture, tried to politely distribute our questionnaires to the men in Omaha's mosque, one congregant balked: "Believe me, you don't want to hear what I have to say." Hearing everyone's views was essential to our investigation, replied Frankie, but he quickly backed off upon receiving a "chilling look" that made his hair "stand on end." Some of the men gruffly asked whether we were working for the FBI. Their rudeness and open hostility surprised both Frankie and Hailey, who had not experienced "anything like this in the Muslim world," a remark they would utter several times on our new journey.

Celestine Johnson, another former American University student accompanying us in Omaha, was crestfallen. Her excitement at the prospect of visiting a mosque for the first time was squashed when she tried to take some pictures of us with the congregants. They angrily waved her back behind a sheet erected to segregate the women from the men. For Celestine, a young, white, middle-class American girl, the experience unleashed a fear lurking in the minds of many white Americans—a fear of Islam and aggressive non-white males. Some would call this America's nightmare.

The next day the team interviewed people about Omaha's Islamic center and community. The four who had challenged me, they learned, had posted a *fatwa* (pronouncement) in the mosque before 9/11 calling for the killing of Jews and Christians and praising the deeds of Osama bin Laden. All four were converts to what is known as Salafi Islam in the United States, a fundamentalist version of the faith influenced by Saudi Arabia (see chapter 5). It purports to be an unadulterated and "pure" form of Islam that is incompatible with any modern Western ideas. The Salafis believe Islam is under attack throughout the world and consider themselves champions of the faith. While most lead peaceful, isolated, and austere lives, some are prepared to take aggressive action in standing up for their beliefs. According to many informants in Omaha and elsewhere, Salafi Islam attracts the young by inspiring them with a sense of identity and of pride. It was estimated that roughly 50 percent of the Muslims in Omaha were Salafi or those inclined toward a more fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, a figure that cropped up again and again on our journey.

Salafi teachings are a far cry from those of Muslims such as Imam W. D. Mohammed, who has had a monumental impact on Islam in America, especially among African Americans (see chapter 4). He advocated acceptance of others and interfaith dialogue.

Just before our visit, the Salafi members of this congregation had sent waves of fear through Omaha's Muslim community when they brutally attacked some of their Muslim opponents in the parking lot of the mosque. Understandably, many congregants were vague about the incident but did hint that the Saudi government was filtering money into such groups through umbrella and student organizations.

Resurfacing after the talk, my host, the Pakistani lawyer, drew me aside to commend me for standing up to this group. Others, men and women alike, also came up to me and in hushed tones voiced their approval of my words. They could do little else in the face of the aggressive measures being taken to impose Salafi views on their congregation. Such a group can have an enormous impact on a small mosque. In this instance, its Salafi members had successfully blocked the appointment of any imam who was not of their thinking, leaving the Islamic center without an imam for six months. According to the community's mainstream Muslims, the previous imam had been fired because the Salafis claimed that he was not conservative enough.

Two days later, I delivered a public lecture on Islam at Omaha's Creighton University, and who should be sitting in the audience but the African American who had heckled me in the mosque from the back row, again strikingly attired. This time, however, he kept his peace, even when I again called on Muslims to participate in interfaith activity. Here, information gleaned during Frankie's conversation with the man's wife cast a different light on this individual. Apparently the state had removed their grandchildren from their home at the behest of government lawyers arguing they were a bad influence on the children because they were Muslims. The experience had left the family angry, distressed, and defensive.

Yet another scene presented itself three days later at an interfaith breakfast hosted by the inspiring figure of Rabbi Aryeh Azriel at Temple Israel. About sixty of the leading Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders of Omaha were present, including the Pakistani lawyer from the Islamic center. More vocal in this forum, he spoke of the Muslim community's struggles to become established. As first-generation Americans, they needed time, he explained plaintively, sounding a little lost and unsure.

Some Jewish leaders were not buying this argument, even in the temple's welcoming atmosphere, preferring to think that the Quran teaches violence and that Muslims have failed to integrate into mainstream U.S. culture. One said Americans "mistrusted their Muslim neighbors" for not speaking out against Muslim terrorists: "If I knew a Jew who would want to harm America, I would report him. I wonder if a Muslim would do so. Most Americans believe that Muslims are out to do us harm as Jews and Americans."

By contrast, Rabbi Azriel, a Sephardic Jew, understands and even sympathizes with Muslim culture. As the leader of the Tri-Faith Initiative, a project to create a temple, church, and mosque on the same site, he is dedicated to promoting true interfaith understanding. Despite his energetic efforts, some members of his congregation remain opposed to the project, and like many Americans they consider the Muslim community an impenetrable and alien entity.

These and other encounters at the outset of our own project laid bare the social patterns, problems, and dilemmas of Muslims living in America today. I also realized that the three models of Muslim society I developed following my previous travels to the Muslim world—the mystics who believe in universal humanism, the modernists who attempt to balance modernity and religion, and the literalists who adhere strictly to tradition—were not easily applicable to the American Muslim community, and new ways of studying it were needed. Take the Omaha group. For one thing, this tiny midwestern mosque has had to deal with external problems common throughout the country: non-Muslim neighbors objecting to plans for expansion and overflow parking on the street or young white men intimidating Muslim women. Within the mosque itself, the community's narratives of American identity differed widely, with some overlapping and others in conflict. An intense ideological struggle was under way in the mosque concerning the nature of Islam and the directions it would take in the United States. To complicate matters, the mosque's leadership was in crisis, and scholarship was being marginalized. In addition, ethnic differences were creating conflict between the major Muslim groups in America—African Americans and immigrants. Islamic *adab*, or traditional etiquette, was disappearing. These heartland Muslims needed to reach out to other faiths to become better integrated into American society yet were uneasy about doing so. As we soon came to recognize, all of these factors were among the multiple strands of culture and history that have shaped American Muslim identity.

The Challenge of Islam

Muslims are for Americans what the Russians were for Churchill: “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.”² Yet it is urgent for America to comprehend Islam, not only for the sake of its ideals (which include religious tolerance) but also for its geopolitical needs and strategy. American troops are in several Muslim nations, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Somalia; five of the nine states that analysts consider “pivotal”

for American foreign policy are Muslim; 6 million to 7 million Muslims live in the United States (our field estimates weigh in on the higher side); with about 1.5 billion Muslims worldwide, one out of every four people on the planet is a Muslim. Furthermore, Muslims are beginning to make an impact on all levels of American society—even as members of Congress. Another reason to learn about Islam is the long list of its followers who want to harm the United States—from Osama bin Laden to the new phenomenon of the “homegrown terrorists” (see chapter 9).

America’s attempts to grapple with Islam reflect some rather misguided views of the faith’s tenets and its followers. These have led some, including so-called experts, to ridicule Islam’s holy book, mock its Prophet, and reject its teachings. Some also believe that the teachings in Muslim holy texts promote violence and terrorism, that these ideas exceed the boundaries of religious tolerance, and that Christianity and Islam are on a collision course.³ Needless to say, American Muslim identity has been greatly affected by the aggressive hyperpatriotism following 9/11, which pointed to Islam as the antithesis of all that was good and worthy in America and led many to ask whether Muslims could be good Americans.

Media and even government figures compounded the hostility: TV commentator Bill O’Reilly has compared the Quran to Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, and Representative Tom Tancredo of Colorado has advocated the nuking of Mecca. Comedians, whose traditional role has been to make fun of everyone regardless of race or religion in order to underline their common humanity, now also single out Muslims. In a 2006 Comedy Central special, *Carlos Mencia: No Strings Attached*, for example, the Mexican American comedian demonstrates his American patriotism by attacking Muslims more crudely and viciously than anyone else. Demeaning portrayals are also common in films like *Witless Protection* (2008), in which Larry the Cable Guy insults a Muslim motel keeper in a pointless sequence, or *Observe and Report* (2009), in which a “Mideast-looking” character called “Saddamn” functions as a punching bag for the main character.

These and other treatments suggesting Muslims are crude, inherently violent, and not to be trusted have now pervaded society, painting them as un-American. In the wake of growing American suspicion, fueled by terms bandied about in the media such as “jihad,” “fatwa,” “female circumcision,” and “honor killings,” the gap between mainstream Americans and the U.S. Muslim community has grown ever wider since 9/11.

Muslim actions have not helped. Every new case of violence involving a Muslim like that of Major Malik Nadal Hasan’s killing spree at Fort Hood, Texas, pours salt on the still-raw wounds of 9/11. Commentators

in the media and on blogs have been angrily warning of the dangers of homegrown terrorists. Such demonization robs Muslims of their dignity and humanity.

Cognizant of this problem, America's top military field officers—such as General David Petraeus, General Stanley McChrystal, and Colonel David Kilcullen—have emphasized winning the hearts and minds of Muslims.⁴ In September 2009 General McChrystal warned Americans against being “arrogant” in the ongoing war in Afghanistan and called for the protection of Muslim civilians, asking that they be treated with “respect.”⁵ Otherwise, he feared, Americans would have greater difficulty maintaining security at home and safeguarding the troops abroad. He repeated this theme when launching the largest military operation against the Taliban in February 2010.

Who, then, is right—those who advocate the bashing of Islam or the field commanders who urge that it be treated with dignity and respect? The fact of the matter is that many Americans on both sides, as well as others throughout the country, have an incomplete knowledge of Islam. Many are also unaware of Islam's role in U.S. history. The first nation to recognize the newly formed United States was Muslim Morocco, and the first recorded man to visit the North American continent with a Muslim background was a North African Berber who arrived almost a century before the landing of the *Mayflower* in 1620.⁶ Scholars speculate that 15 to 30 percent of the male slaves and 15 percent of the female slaves brought from Africa were Muslim, although Muslims believe the figures could be higher (see chapter 4).⁷ Thomas Jefferson owned a copy of the *Quran*, with which he taught himself Arabic, and hosted the first presidential iftaar. The Founding Fathers acknowledged Islam with cordiality.

Our journey revealed some interesting cultural contributions of Islam to American identity.⁸ In Houston, Texas, Father Donald Nesti was describing the special features of the beautiful church on the campus of the University of St. Thomas when the bells began to ring. Were they the equivalent of the Muslim call to prayer? I asked. “That's right,” he replied.⁹ “Saint Francis of Assisi started the bell after his visit to the caliph, the sultan; he came back and figured we have to have some kind of call for prayer, so he took the bell.” Considered a mystic figure close to God, Saint Francis was widely respected in the Muslim world, even by the Fatimid sultan. Islamic principles echo in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the father of American Transcendentalism, and of Walt Whitman, to name but two literary figures influenced by the *Quran* and by the great Muslim mystic poets, including Ibn Arabi and Jalaluddin Rumi, whom Whitman echoes in his well-known poem “Salut au Monde!”:

I hear the Arab muezzin calling from the top of the mosque,
I hear the Christian priests at the altars of their churches, . . .
I hear the Hebrew reading his records and psalms, . . .
I hear the Hindoo teaching his favorite pupil. . . .

Even that most quintessential American icon, the Statue of Liberty, France's gift to commemorate the centennial of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, has an Islamic connection. The inspiration for this colossal representation of republican virtue came from sculptor Frédéric Bartholdi's plans for a giant lighthouse to be patterned after the Roman Goddess Libertas, veiled in Arab fashion, with light beaming from a headband and a torch held upward at the entrance of the Suez Canal.¹⁰ The United States even has its Muslim "superstars" in Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X; and Rumi is America's best-selling poet. In other words, there are sufficient reasons for Americans to know and appreciate Islam.

The negative "normative" definition of Muslims imposed from outside their circles clearly burdens Muslim community leaders with a monumental task: they must cope not only with intrinsic forces arising from the diverse nature of the Muslim community but also with extrinsic ones arising from a culture vastly different from that of their countries of origin. Both sides—the American Muslim community and mainstream Americans—need to recognize the nature of these forces and their implications for the future.

An Anthropological Approach to America

"Foreigners can't write about America," pronounced a colleague when I outlined plans for a study of contemporary American society with a focus on the Muslim community. Before I could respond, he had added a postscript: "especially a Muslim." It was the fall of 2007, and we were living in post-9/11 America. This was not the best of times for a Muslim to be out in the country asking about American identity and distributing questionnaires enquiring about threat and security.

Moreover, I was not a scholar of America, although I had read diverse works about the country, historical and otherwise, and had traveled to many of its parts. But my trips had been brief, to give a lecture or to visit with relatives. Still, I was amused at the rich irony of my American colleague's comment because his job at a leading think tank was to study and travel to the Muslim world. It was ironic also that he was questioning someone who has grown up inspired by the traditions of the earliest and greatest travelers and ethnographers, such as Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Battuta, and Al-Beruni.

Together, these Muslim scholars laid the foundations for what centuries later would be called the science of anthropology. Besides, I thought, if a Frenchman such as Alexis de Tocqueville could do it, I saw no reason why a Pakistani could not.

For some early insights, I turned to de Tocqueville and was immediately struck by his remarks about American hypersensitivity to perceived criticism:

There is nothing more annoying in the habits of life than this irritable patriotism of the Americans. A foreigner would indeed consent to praise much in their country; but he would want to be permitted to blame something, and this he is absolutely refused. America is therefore a country of freedom where, in order not to wound anyone, the foreigner must not speak freely either of particular persons, or of the state, or of the governed, or of those who govern, or of public undertakings, or of private undertakings; or, finally, of anything one encounters except perhaps the climate and the soil; and still, one finds Americans ready to defend both as if they had helped to form them.¹¹

And there I was, about to deal with the most sensitive of subjects for Americans: race, religion, and politics. Any remarks touching on these subjects, especially before television cameras, have the potential to be blown out of proportion or to destroy a career under the gaze of the entire American public. Hence I knew I had to tread carefully yet believed in the importance of my proposed study, not least because it was long overdue. I could not back away from it, even if my name was Ahmed.

How then, I asked myself, would Americans react to a Muslim perspective on American society? More to the point, how should the Muslim go about eliciting their answers? My training as an anthropologist showed me the way: to get the full story, it would be necessary to look at the psychological, economic, and religious dimensions of American society in the context of its history. Anthropologists believe that society consists of interacting parts, and that anthropology is therefore the only discipline attempting to study society as a whole. The history of the group, social organization, leadership, and rites of passage are of particular interest. Anthropologists interview individuals, spend time with their families, and follow them as they go about their daily business. Their principal tools include face-to-face interviews and questionnaires, diaries, and notes. They are thus immersed in society through “participant observation.”

I vowed to faithfully record what I saw and heard as objectively as possible. I hoped the study would conform to scientific principles as far as possible, and that by engaging a tried and tested team in the endeavor, I would balance any tendency to error and present a fairly accurate picture

of the society in question. To ensure that our methods established trust and allowed for counterchecking, we also sought to maintain objectivity throughout the interviews. The team had been trained to remain neutral, respectful, and nonargumentative during interviews. They were not on this journey to change people's opinions but to give them a chance to talk and share their views. This is the only way to achieve the anthropological objective: namely, to hold a mirror up to society fairly and steadily.

Any doubts I may have had about the sheer size of the project or about a foreigner trying to comment on America were quickly dispelled by the enthusiasm of my team (which, incidentally, was composed mainly of Americans) and the people we met on the journey. We encountered so many good and decent people who prayed for our success and academics who were enthralled by our project that I was sure we were on the right track.

A central message of this book, then, is that scant information and knowledge are to blame for the stereotypes and prejudices that Muslims and non-Muslim Americans have of each other. For those critics of applied anthropology who may believe I am suggesting the use of knowledge to better assist in invading Muslim societies or torturing individual Muslims my answer is no, not at all. On the contrary, by presenting Muslims in the context of larger society, I aim to humanize both and therefore make it more difficult for either to inflict cruelty and pain.

In a 2007 Department of Homeland Security (DHS) video in which I participated, I explained why a Muslim woman arriving at an American airport may be nervous and disconcerted if a male official has spoken to her loudly and aggressively, has looked directly in her eyes, or come too close to her. He would be violating the rules of modesty for this woman. She would be nervous not because she was hiding a bomb, but because her culture tells her that men must respect women and maintain boundaries between them. The video was distributed to thousands of DHS agents, and I was told it helped them to receive visitors at airports with more courtesy and understanding.

For Muslims and non-Muslims alike whose professional interest is to look at or comment on Muslim society in America, the sociological reality is that they cannot do so without also looking at the context of larger American society. It is the interaction of the two that shapes Muslim society. That is why a study of the Muslim community needs to be placed within the frame of American identity.

Why Societies Maintain Boundaries

Identity, a subject of long interest to social scientists, is clearly taken seriously in American society. Although I use simple labels to categorize

complex identities for purposes of discussion in this book, they are nothing more than a sociological device and should not be taken to suggest that I accept the stereotypes and prejudices that are implied in normative attitudes. Rather, I am merely trying to explain the boundaries that ethnic groups establish to ensure their “purity” and to confer certain rights, privileges, and obligations on their members. Boundaries also establish a pool for leadership, which is required to look after the interests of the group and to perpetuate its values, attitudes, and beliefs. The stakes are high in the creation of boundaries because they provide access to political, economic, and social power.

Anthropologists, in particular, have been preoccupied with the way in which communities define themselves, maintain their uniqueness, and are defined by others.¹² A group sets itself apart through its language, genealogical charter, historical traditions, cultural patterns, special rites of passage, or a combination of these factors. An individual is thus born into a web with some or all of these features, which define his or her identity. This identity confers security and stability. That is why those living in societies with a strong sense of identity have few problems in defining themselves. By contrast, those living in societies with less sense of identity, perhaps because traditions have been disrupted by high urbanization, rapid change, or migration, are more unsure of their identity and even troubled by its murkiness.

Yet social boundaries are never as rigid as they may seem. They are made permeable by different strategies adopted by a society’s less privileged groups. Intermarriage is one such strategy, education another. The dominant group may also broaden its definition of who can be part of the group. In time, the differences between ethnic and religious backgrounds fade as the minority or weaker groups are accepted and they are allowed to maintain their particular identity without compromising it. Many Americans have told me that they are a mixture of ethnicities, their ancestors coming from different European countries. An American could be a descendant of Polish, Scottish, Hungarian, and French ancestors, and also have some Native American blood.

The Question of the Muslim Minority

Americans tend to have mixed views about how to approach minority cultures. For decades they considered the country a “melting pot” in which all immigrant cultures eventually became blended into the larger American culture. Now they see it as more of a “salad bowl” in which immigrant

communities maintain a sense of their own identity within the context of the larger American culture. This raises important questions for studies such as ours: how, then, is one to define a minority community, and how does such a community maintain its particular identity in the face of a powerful centralizing culture?

An Iraqi may consider himself or herself a Shia or Sunni, and a Pakistani a Punjabi or Pathan. In other words, identity for Muslims living in the Muslim world is based on sect or ethnicity, each of which is associated with a distinct code of behavior. Underlying sectarian and ethnic differences is a common bond arising from worship of the same God, reverence for the same holy book (the Quran) and the same Prophet Muhammad, and adherence to the Five Pillars (core beliefs) of Islam.

To add to this complexity, the American Muslim community is not a monolith but is roughly divided about one-third each between African Americans, Muslims from the Middle East, and those from South Asia. There are also a small but growing number of white and Latino converts. These groups in turn differ markedly in historical background, lifestyle, attitudes, and values. Muslim life is also affected by location. New York's Muslims remain traumatized by 9/11 and the changed attitudes toward them as a result. By contrast, West Coast Muslims are much more confident, relaxed, and only occasionally reminded of 9/11 through the media. Communities having a strong religious leader such as Imam Hassan Qazwini in Dearborn, Michigan, or Muzammil Siddiqi in Los Angeles, California, appear to be more cohesive, with rituals and festivals, rites of passage, and social activities focused on an Islamic center and its leadership. On the other hand, some of the newly formed Islamic centers in medium-size towns are having leadership problems owing to the community's ethnic or sectarian divisions, as in Omaha, yet do not have a large enough population to support more than one center.

Amid the many contradictions witnessed by our team—vitality and confidence here, disunity and despair there—some interesting patterns emerged. For one thing, Muslims promoting interfaith activity tended to be at odds with the more orthodox members of their communities; we saw such clashes in centers and mosques ranging from Honolulu to New York, and Dearborn to Omaha. Those in favor of literalist interpretations of Islam emanating from Saudi Arabia are the most vocal and aggressive in rejecting or ignoring “corrosive and corrupting” American culture. They believe Muslim energy and commitment should be focused on reeducating Muslims or converting Americans to “true Islam.” Some of their barbs are also directed at female leaders and those who practice Sufi Islam. Complaints

of another sort surfaced among African American Muslims who balk at immigrants' displeasure with American culture and their air of superiority, particularly before 9/11. Muslim rapper Quadir "Q-Boogie" Habeeb of Buffalo, New York, explained that immigrants were not as effective as blacks in the white media because "they say 'Allah Subhanatallah,' while we say 'God'—they are seen as un-American."

The immigrants had reasons to celebrate their Americanness. Many proudly said that America was the "best place to be a Muslim" (see chapter 5). Arriving from Pakistan destitute, Munir Chaudry in Chicago and Hamid Malik in Los Angeles became prominent and successful citizens who are now gratefully living the "American dream"; a century ago, the Lebanese grandfather of activist Najah Bazzy came to work in a Ford factory in Dearborn and established a family of achievers; out of loyalty to his new land, Imam Qazwini, originally from Iraq, publicly supported the U.S. invasion of Iraq and faced the wrath of his own community. Perhaps the most poignant sentiment from individuals across the land was summed up by the woman from Cairo who, abandoned by her Egyptian husband, took the opportunity to educate herself and now lives a successful life in Paterson, New Jersey: "America saved my life."

However successful the lives of these immigrants, a fundamental question that propelled our investigation remains: whether Americans, on the one hand, could overcome their fear (commonly appearing in the guise of patriotism) and reach out to Muslims, and whether Muslims, on the other hand, could correct the distortions and misunderstandings about Islam enough to demonstrate that they, too, are fully "American." The first logical step of our project—and one expected to ultimately foster mutual understanding—was to uncover concerns common to *both* communities and to see how each perceives the other.

Everywhere we traveled we saw that the problem of accommodating Muslims in American society poses a challenge to American identity itself. With their different appearance, different religion, and different values, Muslims create a complexity for mainstream Americans. Their presence and treatment by Americans test the limits of pluralism. Indeed, torture in secret prisons, wiretapping, and policies in Guantánamo Bay have seriously damaged the nation's core values. The enormity of the challenge lies in its dual effect: first, on American self-perception in the future, and, second, on the relationship with the Muslim world, which will also determine the political trajectory of the United States as a global power. Therefore any attempt to analyze America's predicament needs to begin with a discussion of its identity.



Dr. Sadiq Mohyuddin, center, greets Ahmed and members of the team, Frankie Martin on the right and Madeeba Hameed and Jonathan Hayden on the left, on their first stop at the airport in St. Louis. Throughout their journey team members traveled to unique and the most representative communities in the country using many modes of transport, including cars, SUVs, planes, trains, and even boats.

Fieldwork Methodology

Our greatest methodological challenge lay in the geographic boundaries of the community under study, which is spread across a vast nation. Some might be inclined to forgo traveling across its breadth and to draw conclusions from the works of others, brief discussions with elites, or mass polls. None of these approaches could yield the mine of information from face-to-face encounters in places of worship, homes, and recreation centers, which we endeavored to reach by all possible means of transportation.

As in my previous study of the Muslim world, the project was a social science experiment encompassing history, religion, and political science. In preparation for these encounters, my team and I dug into works of American history, society, and culture written from a wide range of perspectives.

Fortunately, there are excellent books on American history, many of them written recently, for example, by Joseph Ellis, David Hackett Fischer, Jon Meacham, Walter Russell Meade, and Sarah Vowell.¹³ There are also insightful books on contemporary American society by Morris Berman, Diana Eck, Chris Hedges, and Samuel Huntington.¹⁴ In addition, I read the works of scholars like Howard Zinn and Noam Chomsky for whom American history is soaked in blood and tears, as well as of those whose

America is forever drenched in sunshine like Larry Schweikart and Michael Allen.¹⁵ For the former, white people are unrelenting villains providing little worth or value; for the latter, they are the triumphant embodiment of God's vision on earth. I do not find either view entirely convincing.

Our constant and most reliable companion was de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*.¹⁶ We were invariably surprised at the detailed nature of the analysis and its contemporary relevance for a book written almost two centuries ago. De Tocqueville takes in the entire range of American society. He found American democracy a "superabundant force" that can "bring forth marvels" but was not impressed by the general level of political understanding in America. Because "the majority draws a formidable circle around thought," he did "not know any country where, in general, less independence of mind and genuine freedom of discussion reign than in America."¹⁷ He was "struck by the vulgar aspect of this great assembly [House of Representatives]," members of which "do not always know how to write correctly" and warned of the "effects of the omnipotence of the majority on the arbitrariness of American officials."¹⁸ As for the health of the nation, he found that due to the ever-weakening federal government, "the sovereignty of the Union alone is in peril."¹⁹ He admired Thomas Jefferson, "the most powerful apostle that democracy has ever had," but disliked Andrew Jackson, "a man of violent character and middling capacity," whose actions forced de Tocqueville to contemplate "evils that would be impossible for me to recount."²⁰ De Tocqueville was not hopeful of the fortunes of the slaves and the Indians: "The servility of the one delivers him to slavery, and the pride of the other to death."²¹

In addition, we consulted various works on Islam in America and interviewed both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of the subject. In spite of the obvious need, there is a surprising dearth of reliable and good books on American Muslims. We read and met respected Muslim figures like Sheikh Hamza Yusuf and Imam Hassan Qazwini, those well-meaning but controversial Muslims who would be adventurous with Islam in America like Irshad Manji and Asra Nomani, and the authoritative non-Muslim scholars of Islam like John Voll, John Esposito, Tamara Sonn, and Lawrence Rosen. We also read the work of those authors, like Steve Emerson and Daniel Pipes, whose combined corpus conveys the impression that Islam is inherently a violent religion.

Of the excellent books that are available, those by Jane I. Smith and Karen Isaksen Leonard provide scholarly and useful overviews, but neither is based on fieldwork.²² Many others are limited in scope: Paul Barrett's

book is based entirely on interviews with seven Muslims; the Hafiz family's popular book is based on data gathered from 150 questionnaires sent to high school students; Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Jane I. Smith, and Kathleen M. Moore and Jamillah Karim have studied Muslim women; Evelyn Shakir's book is about Arab women; Abdo Elkholy writes of Arab Muslims in Toledo, Ohio, and Detroit, Michigan; Alia Malek and John Tehranian of immigrant Muslims; and Robert Dannin and Sherman Jackson about African American Muslims.²³ Aminah McCloud has written two books on African American and immigrant Muslims.²⁴ Several books by Muslims are of an autobiographical nature, notably by Imam Qazwini and Asma Gull Hasan.²⁵ Some works on Islam in America are marred by the ideological stance of the author who wishes to project Islam in a specific way, as in the books by Steve Emerson and Robert Spencer.²⁶

Our team spent a year on the background work for the project and starting in September 2008 about nine months in the field. We visited over 75 cities and over 100 of the estimated 1,200 mosques, some of which are little more than a room or two. Following the anthropological techniques just mentioned, we endeavored to engage in participant observation to the extent possible. This meant that we often stayed with Muslims to see how ordinary Muslims live their lives. We spent time with their families, opened the fast with them, observed them at prayer. Our strategy of having males speak to the men in the mosques and females to the women was very effective. Working within the culture of the respondents in this manner, the team gained unique access to the community and obtained important data. With a trained and motivated team, it was possible to maintain a frenetic pace and ferret out significant facts and figures on Islam in America over nine months. We approached the fieldwork with humility, bent on learning and listening. Thus we were able to collect the wide range of opinions and ideas needed to paint an accurate picture of the American moment that we wished to study.

The typical procedure on arriving in a city would be for me to address a large congregation on the first day in its main mosque, followed by an interfaith gathering, if possible, or reception. This would swiftly open the doors of the community, enabling the team to follow up leads. In addition, we would also research a city beforehand to determine what community members would be important sources of information. In Atlanta, for instance, we were welcomed at a dinner on our arrival by some thirty of the city's leading Muslim figures, consisting of Bosnians, Turks, Arabs, Pakistanis, Indians, and Ethiopians, representing Sunnis, Shias, and Ismailis. Through contacts made at the dinner and research on the city, we were able

to successfully arrange interviews and meetings. This was anthropology on speed—but still anthropology.

Our work has had several outcomes besides this book. By filming our interviews and anything that caught our interest in the context of the project, we collected valuable film material. With the help of my son, Babar Ahmed, a professional filmmaker, we produced the documentary *Journey into America* in time for the Islamic Film Festival organized by the Islamic Society of North America in Washington, D.C., on July 4, 2009.²⁷ Since then, the film has been shown in France, Australia, Pakistan, and other countries and in the United States at venues including the National Cathedral. We also maintained a popular blog, www.journeyintoamerica.wordpress.com. For more information on the project, see the Berkley Center's Knowledge Resources page "Understanding Islam in America and Around the World" at <http://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/>.

Questionnaires

Altogether, we gathered about 2,000 questionnaires from people of all ages, races, religions, and classes across the country. The questionnaires were designed with two objectives in mind: to capture the views and social circumstances of a particular individual at a particular time in his or her life, and to penetrate that subject's personality. We presented open-ended questions and included ample space for the interviewee's responses. Many people complained about the time it took to answer the questions and the level of difficulty it posed, but this approach produced considerable insight into and details about the community that no multiple-choice question could provide.

Our first question asked about the interviewee's role models. Through many years of fieldwork, I have found this to be an effective way to get people talking, even though the question by implication asks about their identity or beliefs and thus makes some people uncomfortable. This was followed by questions about American identity, the books that respondents read, the media that informed their opinions, and what they saw as the greatest threat to America. Some of the answers to the last question were particularly surprising. Expecting to be told "terrorism"—which for the majority of Americans is implicitly associated with Muslims—we found lack of education, ignorance, and the compromising of civil liberties most frequently cited as the greatest threat. At times, respondents misunderstood the question or were offended by it. The answer to "What does it mean to be American?" seemed obvious to many and offensive to others.

Two major organizations, with vast budgets and large staffs, have conducted surveys on American Muslims in the past several years. The Pew

Research Center Poll, “Muslim Americans: Middle Class and Mostly Mainstream,” released in 2007, polled 1,050 people, while Gallup’s “Muslim Americans: A National Portrait” released in 2009 sampled 946. Our sample of 2,000, of which about half were Muslim, was not only larger but also provided a more in-depth survey. Unlike the multiple-choice questions common in other surveys or a telephone call, our open-ended questions conducted in face-to-face sessions gave us better access to people’s emotions and passions. It is impossible to learn “what Muslim women really want” without getting to know them in their living rooms and kitchens and chatting with them for hours, or shopping with them, or meeting their families. Similarly, one cannot determine “who are the extremists” without meeting them face-to-face in their isolated mosques. In short, no study of Islam in America can be complete without the use of the anthropological method.

The Team

A great deal of our success in rapidly getting to the heart of a community was due to our team. As Frankie pointed out in an interview with Al Jazeera on the *Riz Khan Show*, “I think people realize that we travel as a family ourselves. Professor Ahmed is like a father to us. We have known each other for four or five years, so we are traveling as a unit. When we traveled in the Muslim world and among Muslims here in America, we were welcomed as a family by Muslim families. It builds relationships that we need for the study.”

Inasmuch as this book is about American identity, it is correct to disclose the background of my team. Four are white and Christian. Jonathan Hayden, from Alabama, is a Protestant of mainly Anglo-Saxon descent, and one of his ancestors was a general with George Washington. Frankie Martin comes from a Catholic background, part Italian and part Irish, but was raised Episcopalian. Hailey Woldt, a Texan, is partly descended from travelers on the *Mayflower*, was a Protestant, and is now a Catholic. Craig Considine is an Irish-Italian Catholic from Boston. While studying at the College of William and Mary, Madeeha Hameed, who is of Pakistani background and a Muslim, joined us for three months. Two of the team are therefore descended from America’s earliest white settlers.

Although they all had video and still cameras, I designated Craig the film director and Hailey the photographer, in addition to their other tasks. Celestine Johnson, a good friend of Hailey’s, also joined us intermittently. Various friends and relatives contributed to our fieldwork as well. My wife, Zeenat, joined us on the northern leg of our journey, and Amineh Hoti, my daughter and fellow anthropologist, with her two children, Mina (thirteen) and

Ibrahim (ten), came in on the southern leg. Amineh was pregnant with Anah, but this did not deter her from participating in fieldwork with the rest of us.

Each member had a different talent that in combination made for a cohesive, fast-moving, perceptive, and dedicated team, whatever the circumstances. At times we had to sleep on the floor in the house of a friend or drive six hours in pouring rain or the dark of early morning to keep an appointment. While we occasionally enjoyed the luxury of a Hilton Hotel, we usually checked in at more modest accommodations. The Hampton Inn became our second home. The women on the team slept in one room and the men shared another.

Although the road travel was long, it permitted us to compare experiences and discuss theoretical issues. Cramped in a van, we found these peripatetic seminars exhilarating, with ideas flowing freely and being dissected vigorously. The drive from Las Vegas to a Hopi reservation in Arizona and back, when we spent fourteen hours in the van, then had to rush to board a plane to San Francisco, is an example of our long road journeys.

Pressures were constant and often arose from unexpected quarters. In Honolulu, Frankie and Celestine were taken to a police station and threatened with arrest (see chapter 3). Craig sustained so many injuries and accidents that we jokingly compiled a "Craig's list," which included an allergic reaction to peanuts in Los Angeles that sent him to the emergency room, a sleepwalking accident in Miami warranting another hospital visit, and the theft of his driver's license by a taxi driver in Washington, D.C., the day before we left for Florida. But even technical difficulties with his camera failed to dim his enthusiasm. At one point in Chicago, a computer glitch threatened to keep him from producing the DVD I needed for the next morning's meeting. Pulling an all-nighter, with no thought to his health, he had the DVD in hand at 7 a.m., the problem solved.

In Atlanta and Dallas our rental car was broken into, and in New Orleans and Boston the car was towed away. In Atlanta, Hailey's expensive camera, with shots of some significant moments of the journey, was stolen. When I fell ill in freezing Nashville in winter, the team bundled me up and we climbed into the minivan early in the morning for our next stop in Memphis. Miraculously, we somehow kept to our busy schedule. Over these long grueling months away from home, the team never complained.

American Journey

To learn what America means to Americans, why they are so passionately attached to the land, and how they express this affection, visit Monticello

and see it through the eyes of its owner, Thomas Jefferson. Monticello sits atop a small mountain reaching 850 feet, and in the distance one can see the Blue Ridge Mountains, which in Jefferson's youth marked the furthest extent of the new nation, beyond which lay the unknown.

Spread over 5,000 acres, Monticello is surrounded by undulating green fields with dense thickets of trees. Scenic views extend across miles of valleys, giving the landscape a secure and serene look, far from the grasping reach of monarchs or the prying eyes of government officials. It speaks of an America of endless possibilities, with even greater ones lying beyond the mountains. Jefferson's America is what many still see today—a land of hope and optimism, of boundless opportunity, and the promise of a bright tomorrow. As de Tocqueville remarked, "In the United States they rightly think that love of one's native country is a kind of worship to which men are attached by its observances."²⁸

What America meant to Jefferson—architect, philosopher, founder of a university, ambassador in a foreign land, author of a document that would trigger a revolution, founder of a new country, president of the nation—was a host of fine and noble things that still stir the imagination. Even so, Monticello is also a reminder of the canker at the heart of American society: slavery, which Jefferson himself called America's "original sin."²⁹ But this did not deter him from keeping and using slaves, behavior that has raised charges of hypocrisy, especially in the case of his relationship with Sally Hemings. Although Sally was related to his dead wife, mostly of English descent, and alleged to have given birth to several of his children, Jefferson did not free her. Jefferson had promised to free Sally's children, and she was paid wages when she accompanied him to Europe, but the reality was that slaves did help maintain his estate. Yet their graveyard is but a small patch of rough land without markers, cordoned off by a rickety wood fence. Those caring for the estate at present have been sensitive to notions of political correctness, and signs now point to the "African American graveyard" without mentioning the word "slave." Stripped of their ancestral identities and without the courtesy of markers, they seem never to have even existed.

Having grown up in the foothills of the Himalayas, the most majestic mountain range in the world, I know something of the beauty and grandeur of nature. Yet America's landscapes never fail to take my breath away. Who does not marvel at the splendor of New England in the autumn, with leaves aflame in crimson, red, and gold, or the awesome spectacle of the Grand Canyon, the thundering roar of Niagara Falls, or the sun slipping over the Pacific horizon in Honolulu? Landmarks that we visited were equally

evocative: the Statue of Liberty in New York, Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts, Jackson Square and the French Quarter in New Orleans, the Alamo in Texas, the arch in St. Louis, and Pearl Harbor in Hawai'i. At various stops, we participated in some of the country's key cultural events: a Sunday service in Houston at the largest church in the United States, a parade during Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and prayers at the Mormon holy sites in Palmyra, New York, and Salt Lake City, Utah. And at Chicago's Wrigley Field, I went to my first baseball game and saw the Cubs in action.

Our travels also brought home the astonishing affluence of America and its highly visible position as the engine of what is known as globalization. Coming from Pakistan, I could not imagine such a high standard of living was possible for so many people. The endless shopping malls were bursting with colorful products and throngs of people. Hotels offered cheap meals, and people were invited to eat as much as they wanted. There was excess everywhere, and in its midst, shocking pockets of poverty. Almost everywhere we went the comfort zone of a suburb or town awaited us, often of a generic type now dotting the landscape of modern America. On one long road trip from Houston to Dallas, we saw a former desert and scrubland covered with unending urban sprawl, with all the familiar logos visible from the road. I thought of the resources required to maintain the affluence and was reminded that America's population alone, not even 5 percent of the global total, was using up about one-fourth of the planet's energy.³⁰ How long could this disproportionate consumption last?

Overriding all the negatives, however, was the basic goodness of the American people, reaffirmed again and again in our travels. Rabbi Susan Talve blessed us as we began our journey in St. Louis at a breakfast hosted by our friend Susan Zuckerman, the mother of my former student Lauren. Geitner Simmons, an editor at the *Omaha World-Herald*, went out of his way to welcome us. Leona Kalima of Hawai'i arranged a week of visits to homes of native Hawaiians and treated us like one of her own. Herb Goodman and Bapsi Sidhwa of Houston took time off from their busy schedules to make sure we met a cross section of their friends. Our Pakistani American hosts, both husbands and wives, were especially hospitable: Sadiq Mohyuddin in St. Louis, Kamran Khan and Munir Chaudry in Chicago, Hamid Malik in Los Angeles, Shaukat Fareed in New York, and Faizan Haq in Buffalo. Relatives of the team—the parents of Craig and of Hailey, the brother and sister-in-law of Jonathan—also opened their homes to us and treated us like family. Many spiritual leaders prayed in support of our journey and efforts, including Senior Rabbi Bruce Lustig of Washington, D.C., Rabbi Hillel Levine of Boston, former Archbishop

Joseph Fiorenza and Father Donald Nesti of Houston, Reverend Bob Norris of Palm Beach, Florida, Jeffrey Clark, the president of the Mormon community in Palmyra, and too many imams to name. Muslim rappers spent time with us in Buffalo, observing that although we were “not an all-Muslim team,” we were an “all-righteous” one. Archbishop Fiorenza said we were “doing God’s work.”

We also interviewed prominent Americans like U.S. Representatives Keith Ellison and André Carson, Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, Imam Qazwini, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, comedian Maz Jobrani, Judea Pearl, Maya Soetoro-Ng, former governor Bob Holden of Missouri, Joanne Herring, Sheriff Lee Baca of Los Angeles County, former secretary of the Department of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff, and Noam Chomsky.

Another of America’s astonishing features, we discovered, is the infinite variety of its population and the cultural paradoxes it engenders. Sometimes the juxtapositions were jarring for us as we traveled from place to place and event to event: destitute lives in Detroit next to the affluent gated community of nearby Grosse Pointe; puritan ways of Salt Lake City next to the bright lights of “Sin City,” Las Vegas; the Hopi settlement in Arizona, where there is no electricity, next to high-tech Silicon Valley, with its young dot-com entrepreneurs and scientists talking of settlements on Mars; hope and faith of the rap music of African American Muslims in Buffalo next to the anger and despair of Mexican gang members in a jail in Los Angeles; the universal love of the Sufis in New York alongside the abuse hurled at the Muslim Day parade on Madison Avenue.

We interviewed the heads or representatives of major Muslim organizations, such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), and Muslim Students Association (MSA) (see chapter 5). We met Muslims with different ethnic and sectarian backgrounds. Our impression of America’s rich cultural variety was further heightened by our visits to its Muslim communities and their mosques. We went to the largest mosque in New York, to the oldest mosque in the United States in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, the westernmost mosque in Honolulu, the only mosque in Vermont, and perhaps the most magnificent mosque in the United States in Dearborn. We found mosques even in unlikely places. An amiable TV chat show host in Memphis, Tennessee, was surprised to learn that a Muslim like me would be interested in seeing Elvis Presley’s Graceland, and that Memphis has six mosques, which we planned to visit. On our trip to Hawai’i, a *Honolulu Weekly* reporter chuckled when he heard of our visit’s purpose.³¹ Did Hawai’i even have

Muslims? Indeed, it has at least 4,000 Muslims and a flourishing central mosque where we said our Friday prayers. In Houston, we were surprised to learn that this sprawling city has some 120 mosques.

Even the tiny Muslim community of Gadsden, a small town in Alabama, had its mosque. There were no signs of its identity outside, but we found a small buoyant group waiting to welcome us with a traditional Pakistani lunch. The wife of the Pakistani president of the mosque committee told me shyly how much she enjoyed seeing *Jinnah*, the movie I had made with Christopher Lee. One of the congregants, an Arab man who had been in the region for decades and had married a local woman who remained a Christian, summed up his American identity in a notably southern accent as “Muslim by birth, Southern by the grace of God.”

The optimism and hospitality of our hosts made this a memorable visit. Then I heard the call to prayer. I stopped and joined the few worshippers. At the end of the prayer, the man leading us said a special prayer for the success of our project. Moments like this reconnected me to the purpose that had prompted me to launch this project in the first place.

Survival of the Fittest in America

In *Democracy in America*, de Tocqueville states: “Peoples always feel [the effects of] their origins.”³² These are the “deep structures” that anthropologists believe shape a society’s character and values. America’s deep structures go back to the seventeenth-century settlements at Jamestown and Plymouth (see chapter 2), when a white population arrived from England and over the years consolidated its hold on America. Some clues to American identity rest there and in that population’s demonstration of Charles Darwin’s famous thesis espoused in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.³³ My interest here is not the relevance of these theories to the creation of the world or to humanity’s random or predictable evolution, but their influence on the organization of societies, specifically American society. Darwin argued that it was not the strongest of the species that survived, nor even the most intelligent, but those most adaptable to change. This principle he called “natural selection,” also known as “the survival of the fittest.” The idea of favored races and the struggle for life came to imply a belief in evolution or a movement toward “progress.”

Those who succeed in the competition to survive are said to be the “favored races.” Along with their genes they will pass on memes, the cultural equivalent of genes, which are the ideas, behavior, style, or usage

imitated by succeeding generations. If the favored races are defined by a certain religion, language, and culture, these will be imitated, preserved, and passed on. Because in America the English—and later by extension the white race—emerged on top in the competition, their characteristics have become the standard, as explained in chapter 2. In time, all others—African Americans, Mexicans, Native Americans, and Asians—were forced to imitate the dominant ethos if they wished to succeed. Barack Obama is a good example. He has dark skin and a Muslim father from Africa, but as president, he sounds, dresses, and behaves like other politicians from the dominant white race.

For Darwin, the world was not created in six days, and all races were related by blood. Therefore being white or black was no indication of any special status. On the contrary, Darwin found the whole business of slavery abhorrent and hoped his work would help terminate it. Darwin's ideas undermined two pillars of American society: literal belief in the Bible and the notion that the white race was innately superior to all other races and therefore destined for greatness. Although the theories of Darwin have resonated throughout American history, they have generated more heat than light. Even today they evoke intense passion in the United States, either in their defense or opposition.

Darwin versus Jesus

A debilitating tension between Darwin and Jesus lies at the heart of American identity. It is not so much about *how* society originated and evolved but *what* defines and motivates it. The core principles of the Darwinian thesis and Christianity are diametrically opposed and cannot coexist simultaneously in one society without causing severe friction. Darwin represents adaptability and survival, Jesus compassion and universal love. Darwin acknowledges that those who cannot adapt will not—indeed must not—survive; for Jesus it is precisely the least privileged members in society who are deserving of support. For Darwin, the concepts of “morality,” “compassion,” “humility,” “austerity,” “poverty,” “shame,” or “honor” are irrelevant in the struggle for survival; for Jesus, these are what define a good Christian.

Darwinian principles rest in notions of a struggle to survive. In this struggle, the ruthless will to succeed, strength, speed, stamina, and force determine success. In turn, success generates pride and arrogance, the chauvinism of being on top, and a belief in the superiority of the dominant group. The Abrahamic faiths, on the other hand, advocate austerity and

humility in a greater cause. They encourage selfless love, care, and concern for the dispossessed and the needy. They advocate proper moral behavior, even at the cost of suffering.

For me as a Muslim, Jesus is the embodiment of compassion, humility, and love for all humanity. For Muslims, there is no figure quite like Jesus in the Quran. His birth was miraculous. He can breathe life into clay figures. He is an inspiration to the Prophet of Islam himself. To Christians, Jesus is *the* figure of love. Even in the face of aggression, they will emphasize Jesus' sayings about turning the other cheek. But in what Darwin described as a "struggle for existence," the weakest are eliminated. Only the fit survive. The survivors will pass on their characteristics to the next generations, and in time a new species will form. It is a depressing thought that existence is reduced to a meaningless struggle for survival, that there is no larger cause to live for than self-preservation, no inspiration on earth or in the heavens except self-interest. Because it is unpalatable in its implications for human society, Darwinism is often cloaked, disguised, and confused with terminology borrowed from religion.

As a direct consequence of the dominance of Darwinian thinking, Americans remain in a state of anxious competitiveness that creates insecurity and engenders fear and anger. In the context of the number of guns available to Americans and their inclination to use them, it is well to keep in mind the frequent episodes of violence reported in the media. The anger combined with fear is a ready-made formula for tense individuals to commit acts of violence.

I have always found American fear and anger surprising. Why should the most powerful people on earth be fearful? And why should the richest people be angry? If there was more true Christianity and less Darwinian thinking, I am convinced, there would be far more calmness in American social life.

American Christianity should thus be viewed through a prism inspired by French sociologist Emile Durkheim, who argued that a society's notions of God reflect its predominant ideas and ethos. Kurt Vonnegut's observation in *A Man without a Country* encapsulates the struggle between these two diametric forces in the Christian tradition: "I haven't heard one of them (vocal Christians) demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. 'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!"³⁴

From the seventeenth century on, Christian preachers used the Bible to justify slavery (see chapter 4): Ham, the ancestor of the black race and son of Noah, they taught, was cursed by his father and along with his

descendants doomed to servility. Blacks, as Saint Paul had admonished the slaves, therefore needed to accept their subordinate position and obey their masters, the colonists argued, conveniently ignoring the teaching of the Gospels that “ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” As good Christians, white colonists felt obliged to care for slaves, though “lesser” beings, as they would their property. Using religious scripture, the favored races ensured their own preeminent position by denying blacks any rights to education, ownership of property, or even citizenship. Slaves existed only as an extension of their owner. Miraculously, in spite of several centuries of brutal subjugation, the black population itself devised means to preserve learning and humanity. When one reads the works of African Americans like Frederick Douglass or W. E. B. Du Bois, one is moved by the clarity and moral power with which they convey the nightmare of legalized slavery. These works stand as a challenge to the idea of the favored races.

Also competing for survival in colonial America were people of other faiths. Notions of universal compassion or kindness did not enter into early American theological thinking. Battles with the Native Americans were therefore fierce and conducted in a spirit of a fight to the finish, wiping out some 60 to 80 percent of the native peoples of New England within half a century of the first white arrivals.³⁵ Other Christian sects like the Catholics and Mormons were treated with prejudice (see chapters 2 and 8), as were members of the Jewish community (chapter 7). From this fundamental tension emerged a white majority that considered itself superior to minority peoples, who in turn devised special monikers for those they viewed as soulless aggressors. Mexicans, for example, called white Americans *gringos* because of the color of the uniforms worn by the soldiers who came to kill and capture territory, or *gueros*, possibly from *guerra*, the Spanish word for war. To Hawaiians, they were *haole*, or those without a breath or spirit, while to Native Americans, they were *eankke* (cowards) or *yankwako* (snakes). The African slaves called them *buckre*, or someone who cannot be trusted. The Nation of Islam would hold up a mirror to white people and reverse the prejudice, calling them white devils (chapter 4).

The consequences of the uneasy fusion of Darwinism and Christianity are not limited to America. The excesses inspired by Adolf Hitler are a stark, if extreme, example. Hitler melded Darwinism and Christianity in the concept of the “Aryan Christ.” His “feeling as a Christian” led him, like Christ, his “Lord and Savior,” to recognize “these Jews for what they were”: a “poison,” a “brood of vipers and adders,” to be driven from the land. That is why, Hitler claimed, Christ “had to shed His blood upon the cross.” Jesus, he said, was “greatest not as a sufferer but as a fighter.”³⁶

Perhaps the answer to racial hatred is the very same Jesus so misunderstood by Hitler. We need to heed the commandment of Jesus to love one another. Or to look at the example of the Prophet of Islam, who in his last address at Arafat categorically rejected the division of society on the basis of race, “Arab and non-Arab,” or color, “black and white.” Dividing societies into superior and inferior members on the basis of race is not only morally wrong but also makes little sociological sense. Morally, the Abrahamic faiths espoused by most Americans reject divisions based on color and would say that in the eyes of God humans are to be judged by their actions and beliefs. Biologically, the DNA of the vast majority of the world’s population is nearly identical. Moreover, history shows that the rise and fall of different cultures and civilizations have nothing to do with race.

Cherchez la Couleur

Stephen Colbert, the popular television satirist, is fond of telling guests, especially those who are non-white, that he “does not see color.” In the guise of a conservative who means precisely the opposite of what he says, Colbert is implying not only that he sees color, or race, but also that it is everywhere. He is right. While many Americans doggedly do not want to see race, they cannot ignore it. Many feel threatened by what they see as potential challenges to the ethnic composition and normative ideas of American society.

My journey confirmed that color functions as an important factor separating social groups in America, just as tribal identity does in Muslim societies and caste in Indian society.³⁷ The lobbies and dining rooms of many hotels we stayed in invariably had an overwhelmingly white clientele. They were mostly husbands and wives, sometimes with families, touring America and enjoying its sights. A few visitors might be black, but almost none were visibly Latino. In some cases, reception staff were black, while those who cleaned the rooms and tended to the grass and garden were Latinos who spoke little English.

America’s ethnic hierarchy is apparent not only from direct observations. Even more telling are its social symbols. The color white, for example, is associated with goodness, nobility, virtue, and purity, whereas black conjures up negative or bad images. Think of expressions that are widespread both in America and other Western cultures, such as the “white knight” or “pure as snow,” on the one hand, and the “dark side,” “black mark,” or black magic,” on the other. Villains in film and drama dress in black to depict their black hearts, while heroines wear white to symbolize purity.

Color discrimination and segregation have marked American identity with a legacy of tears, bloodshed, and violence.

Color-created boundaries gave the WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) a dominant social position over the “red” (Native Americans), the black (African Americans), and the yellow (Chinese and Japanese) groups. This tradition persists. On our journey, some referred to Muslims as “sand niggers.”

One could easily argue, however, that the category “white” is quite diverse in itself, with its different languages, customs, religions, and regional and historical characteristics. White populations, quite different from the English settlers, also came to America’s shores bringing with them diverse religious and social traditions, all now lumped in the category “white.” America’s “black” category is just as diverse in its linguistic and cultural origins, which range from light-skinned communities of North Africa to dark-skinned tribes along the equator and to the south. This rich diversity has also been compressed into that all-too-simple label, “black.” And, of course, before the “white man” arrived on its shores, America, north and south, had a native population of some 112 million people, 18 million of whom lived in what is now the United States.

What does all this mean when it comes to defining Muslims? The Muslim community represents the entire spectrum of the world, because it, too, is not defined through any one racial or ethnic group. But, accustomed to categorizing people by race, Americans are befuddled by the great variety of Muslim ethnic backgrounds and skin color. When the first Muslims from the Middle East arrived in the late nineteenth century, there were too few and their backgrounds too varied to warrant a label. They also posed a “color problem.” Being brown, with a range of skin color within the communities, they were neither quite white enough for the white category nor dark enough for the black category, nor would their features qualify them for the Asian category, as it is understood in America. In time, those from the Middle East and Iran would be called Arab and those from South Asia, Indian.

The importance of color in defining American identity was recognized over a century ago by Du Bois. His observation that the “problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” still holds true, except that today “Muslim” could substitute for “Negro.” Du Bois argued that African Americans are separated from the mainstream white culture not by a wall but a “veil”—a metaphor that also has great resonance for Muslim Americans.

Du Bois was right to sound the alarm. By the time America achieved its independence, the structure of white male power was already in place.

For the next two centuries, the men who ran the country—the president, vice president, the head of the armed forces, the Supreme Court judges—would be white and male. The legislative arm of government would be dominated by whites. If a black man was arrested, he would invariably have been apprehended by a white sheriff, then would have faced a white judge and white jury, and in jail white officials. The leading business tycoons, entertainment figures, and scholars would also have been white except in sports and entertainment, where blacks began to emerge in the twentieth century. Where it mattered in terms of making the law, interpreting it, and executing it, America was a white country for most of its history. And its philosophy toward race, formulated early in its history, was summed up in the motto “zero tolerance.”

The American “Club”

From the seventeenth century onward, then, being American was like belonging to a club with membership based on the criteria of race and color. The leadership, organization, values, and attitudes of the club formed the basis of what came to be loosely and widely referred to as “the system.” Its definition remains amorphous and intangible, but people who refer to it do so as if the system is as concrete as the U.S. Constitution. Furthermore, the English had appointed themselves the guardians of the club. Even white immigrants from places like Ireland or Italy who had become legal citizens were not automatically accepted as full-fledged members. As others arrived, their faith, if not Protestant, would keep them from becoming full members.

Jewish immigrants posed an interesting new challenge. Although Eastern European, Irish, and Italian Catholics were outside the Protestant pale, they were still white and Christian. It would take the Jewish immigrants a century or two to become fully accepted. Non-white communities like African Americans and Mexicans were only permitted to provide “services” to the club, the former as slaves and the latter as hired help. Meanwhile, Native Americans, many of whom had been forced into separate communities far from urban areas, had no association with the club whatsoever and were reduced to an anthropological curiosity.

After 9/11 immigrant Muslims also posed a problem. Although they arrived throughout the twentieth century, especially from Egypt and Lebanon, the largest number appeared from the 1960s onward, many coming as students, others to take on a professional life. Many moved into professional jobs and assumed they were part of the club. On 9/11, however, they

found themselves out in the cold. In an address to South Asian leaders in Chicago after 9/11, Jesse Jackson reputedly admonished them for ignoring African Americans and noted, “Before 9/11 you thought you were white but now you realize you’re black.”³⁸ Lawrence Rosen of Princeton University explained the problem of “placing” Muslims in America: “It is not so much that Muslims in America are out of category, but that they were never clearly in a category, and now, people aren’t sure which category to put them into.” Rosen, too, recognizes the defining force of color: “Race in America is literally skin deep. When somebody passes for white, it’s not really an issue. When somebody is visibly different, then Americans historically have not known what to make of that person. They are out of their category.”

Perhaps the elderly Muslim we talked to in Al-Mahdi Foundation Mosque in “Little Pakistan” in Brooklyn, New York, captured the dilemma best (see chapter 3). White colleagues in his office repeatedly shoved him against the wall and tried to choke him—or as he put it, “to kill him”—because they thought he was a potential terrorist. But he was also a target of the black community, which saw him as a “Jew or a Christian,” meaning a white man. “I am in much trouble,” he ruminated dolefully.

Obama’s election in 2008 and inauguration in January 2009 unleashed euphoria in the United States among those who wished to see America moving beyond race—or becoming a club open to all. The *New Yorker* had Obama dressed up as George Washington, white wig and all, on its cover. *Newsweek’s* cover showed a reflective Obama with the title “Obama’s America: Who We Are Now.” The *Atlantic* cover with the new president asked, “The End of White America?” While these magazines reflected an exuberance felt by millions of Americans, they failed to appreciate that there were limits to what had actually changed and what could be changed. Demographic changes are seriously challenging the white population’s hold and alarming many of its members. The Latino population has topped 50 million, and in a few short decades whites will actually be in the minority for the first time. Samuel Huntington, who borrowed the idea of the Clash of Civilizations from Bernard Lewis and popularized it, thus shifted his focus from Muslims to Latinos, who, he argued, were threatening the white Protestant way of life.³⁹ In short, issues of identity trumped even those of terrorism and security.

Many white Americans, already feeling threatened, believe that the natural order has been further disturbed by Obama’s presidency. Extreme hysteria built on absurd arguments marked the first counterpunch in the media following the Obama inauguration. In the forefront of the onslaught were

media heavyweights such as Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, Bill O'Reilly, and Glenn Beck. Obama was compared to Hitler and called a Muslim Marxist. Beck questioned Obama's "Americanness" and called him a "racist" who "hates white people" and "white culture." Crudely and explicitly, the attacks on Obama suggested that he hated the very foundations of the country of which he was the president. Through innuendo, Islam, widely demonized in certain media outlets, was associated with Obama. Later in the year, Beck vented his fury on those Europeans who were responsible for awarding Obama the Nobel Peace Prize because, he warned, they were "dismantling America." It was a dangerous game because the passions generated by discussions of race have frequently triggered violence.

A Facebook poll asking if Obama "should be killed" was only removed after the Secret Service discovered it.⁴⁰ In late September 2009 columnist John L. Perry, a former top official in the Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter administrations, wrote in the online edition of *Newsmax* that a military coup may be necessary to "restore and defend the Constitution" and stop Obama from turning America into a "Marxist state."⁴¹ Some people even seemed to be calling for Obama's assassination or unconstitutional dismissal in a very public way and getting away with it. Matters reached such a point that two former presidents, having emerged as wise and respected international statesmen since their days in the White House, felt they needed to comment publicly on the tone of these assaults: Jimmy Carter said he detected racism, and Bill Clinton suspected a "vast right-wing conspiracy."

Racial ideas obviously continue to shape American identity. How do we make sense of its complex nature and the relationship its different parts have to each other? In order to probe further, it would be useful to go back to the Greeks—the source of Western culture.

Greek Philosophers, Viennese Psychiatrists, and Pakistani Anthropologists

What is more fundamental to Western thinking than the notion that the human mind can be divided into three parts, or the use of color as a metaphor for virtue and vice, or the importance of "shame" in defining character and controlling passion. It is said that Freud discovered the mind's tripartite division, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) invented color prejudice, and Japan's Samurai created the code of shame and honor. Yet all these ideas are reflected in Plato and Socrates.

The concept of the tripartite division was introduced in Plato's *Republic*, Book IV, in which the Greek philosopher explained the Socratic approach

to the human soul as being divided into three parts: *logos* (reason), which seeks truth and knowledge; *thumos* (spirit), which desires honor; and *alogon* (irrationality), which lusts after the objects of passion, including drink, food, sex, and especially money. The just man sets these three parts together as “chords in a harmony” and controls his passions in pursuit of balance, philosophy, and truth.

These three parts of the individual soul correspond to the components of an ideal society, says Socrates: at the top are the “guardians,” whose concern is philosophy and just governance, and not money or property; then come the “auxiliaries” such as the military, who keep the peace, protect the city, and implement the directions of the guardians; and the productive class, including various businessmen, craftsmen, and artists, who are concerned with money and the passions.

In another Platonic dialogue, the *Phaedrus*, Socrates compares the soul to a charioteer with two horses, one representing reason and the other passion, that he must steer and control through life:

The horse that is on the right, or nobler, side is upright in frame and well jointed, with a high neck and a regal nose; his coat is white, his eyes are black, and he is a lover of honor with modesty and self-control; companion to true glory, he needs no whip, and is guided by verbal commands alone. The other horse is a crooked great jumble of limbs with a short bull-neck, a pug nose, black skin, and bloodshot white eyes; companion to wild boasts and indecency, he is shaggy around the ears—deaf as a post—and just barely yields to horsewhip and goad combined.⁴²

Plato reveals that the notion of “shame” is enough to keep the white horse in check, but something much more violent is required to control the black horse. When the charioteer tries to restrain the black horse by whipping it and pulling on the reins, causing blood to gush from its mouth, the horse has the ability to taunt the charioteer with insults and accusations of cowardice and unmanliness. The black horse, writes Plato, is “without any shame at all.”

One can see, then, that Freud’s analysis dividing the human mind into three parts was not entirely original. Freud described the “psychic apparatus,” which is the function of every individual’s mind, as being divided into an ego, super-ego, and id. Ego means I, or myself. Ego is anchored in reason and common sense and aims to be organized and realistic. The super-ego is critical and moralizing, aiming for perfection. The id is uncoordinated and based in instinct.

In some ways, nations are like individuals. The character of both reflects a constant internal struggle between various forces that invariably pull in different directions. External forces also influence and shape them. Under such pressures, nations change over time, yet try to remain true to their character. The challenge for social analysts is to understand society and identify these pressures and their effect on its character. As an anthropologist, I approach the task through ethnicity and identity in pursuit of the principles that define and determine the behavior of a particularly diverse society: that of the United States.

Using an anthropological framework in the following chapters, I delineate the three basic identities that define American society: primordial, pluralist, and predator. These three American identities overlap and derive from the same source—namely, the first white settlers at Plymouth, and to an extent those at Jamestown. In terms of Plato's allegory, one might loosely equate the charioteer to primordial identity, the well-behaved horse to pluralist identity, and the wild horse to predator identity. Or following Freud's classification, one might equate ego to primordial identity, super-ego to pluralist identity, and id to predator identity. The story of America may be read as the story of these identities and their struggle to form the dominant narrative.

Structure of the Book

This book is about how people of different religions, cultures, and skin colors can live together at a time when their communities have become more jumbled and juxtaposed than ever before in history. This subject cannot be fully explored without discussing pluralism (the concept of accepting others not like us); integration, if not assimilation, of freshly arrived immigrants; and ways in which people have adjusted to and live with one another when events in other parts of the world disturb and disrupt life here. In short, the book is about some fundamental concerns to all societies and nations in this difficult and turbulent time.

The book is divided into three parts. The chapters of part one define American identity and present the ethnography to support that definition. Part two focuses on the ethnography of Islam in America—African American Muslims, immigrants, and converts. Part three compares Muslims to other minorities and suggests ways to improve understanding between them.

In chapter 2, I examine the different events, ethnic strands, and ideas that form American identity, as well as the sources of its dynamism and tension. I also explore the creation and development of distinct identities

that have emerged from the original American identity. While the boundaries by which American society maintains itself are defined by white Americans, several other well-defined ethnicities have been maintained by Native American, African American, and Latino communities, and I also refer to them.

The book will not retell American history. That has been done well and many times in the past. However, episodes from history illuminate the broader arguments in the book about American identity and its formation. Chapter 3 presents the findings of our field trip that corroborate the outlines of my interpretation of American identity, revealing its three components in the actions and words of the people we met on our journey. African American leadership in forging an American Muslim identity is discussed in chapter 4. Muslims who migrated from the Middle East, South Asia, and other regions of the world are the subject of chapter 5. The social and cultural factors behind the conversion to Islam of white and Latino Americans are explored in chapter 6, while chapter 7 turns to the history and role of the Jewish community in shaping American identity and its relations with Muslims. Chapter 8 compares Muslims and Mormons, both at times persecuted and controversial minorities in the United States. Chapter 9 draws on our fieldwork findings to suggest ways to help resolve the tensions within American society and improve relations between America and the Muslim world. It also throws light on the “homegrown terrorist,” a subject that had assumed urgency by the time we were ending our fieldwork.

Every society has a vision of the ideal community, which is challenged by the different pulls and strains within it. America’s ideal was formulated by its Founding Fathers. If this book succeeds in reminding the reader of that ideal, it would have served its purpose, particularly since questions of American identity and the meaning of America have never been of greater importance than today.