

A “BROWNING” OF ISLAM IN AMERICA?

The New York Times of 6 September 2010 carries a report entitled: “American Muslims Ask, Will We Ever Belong?”

(http://www.nytimes.com/2010/09/06/us/06muslims.html?_r=1&hp). “For nine years after the attacks of Sept. 11,” it begins, “many American Muslims made concerted efforts to build relationships with non-Muslims, to make it clear they abhor terrorism, to educate people about Islam and to participate in interfaith service projects. They took satisfaction in the observations by many scholars that Muslims in America were more successful and assimilated than Muslims in Europe.... Now, many of those same Muslims say that all of those years of work are being rapidly undone by the fierce opposition to a Muslim cultural center near ground zero that has unleashed a torrent of anti-Muslim sentiments and a spate of vandalism.” It carries two pictures, one showing a Muslim family in Ohio; the father, Dr. Ferhan Asghar, is an orthopedic surgeon. The other picture shows a Muslim inter-faith activist in Chicago named Eboo Patel, author of a fine autobiography. The report goes on to present to us the views of several other Muslims: Abdullah T. Antepi; Ibrahim Hooper; Ingrid Mattson.

The same newspaper carried another report two weeks earlier, under the heading, “Islamic Center Exposes Mixed Feelings Locally.”

(<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/20/nyregion/20muslims.html?fta=y>) It informed us that the outcome of the intense controversy over the proposed center “could have its most lasting impact on the estimated 600,000 Muslim residents in New York and its suburbs.” It then reported “a welter of mixed feelings” the reporter discovered “on street corners, in stores and in mosques: Some said they felt embittered or hurt by criticism of the project, and of Islam in general, yet understood opponents’ misgivings. Others said Muslim-Americans should continue to push for the center’s construction as a means of asserting their full citizenship rights — but not too hard, lest they draw even more resentment. A few said they wished the project had never been proposed in the first place. While these few dozen conversations do not represent the views of all Muslim New Yorkers, they show that many are grappling deeply, through the current tension, with the lingering ambiguities of their place in American society nine years after 9/11.” The report carried pictures of New York Muslims, with names such as Laique Khan, Pervaz Akhtar, Malik Nadeem Abid, A. Chowdhry, Muntasir Sattar, Majeed Babar, Shamsi Ali, Moinul Haque, and Ahmed Habeeb.

Both reports are well-intentioned, and clearly sympathetic to the plight of Muslims in America at this time. What struck me as curious were the looks and names of their interlocutors. Unless I’m totally mistaken, in other contexts where hyphenated identities reign supreme, the above people would be identified in several different ways except one: African-American. A peculiar “Browning” of Islam seems to have taken place in the

minds of well-intentioned people and liberal media, despite the fact that the oldest, and also perhaps the largest, ethnic group practicing Islam in the United States is that of African-Americans. I find it disturbing that the *Times* made no effort to bring to the issue views of such people as Professors Aminah McCloud and Amina Wadud, and Congressman Keith Ellison, that it was the *New York Daily News* that gave space to Abdur-Rahman Muhammad, a dissenting Muslim from Cape Verde, and that no reporter from any paper thought it fit to visit the mosques connected to either the late Imam Warithuddeen Mohammed—his group’s the *Muslim Journal* ignores the issue—or the living and active Minister Louis Farrakhan, whose *The Final Call* is strongly supportive of the project.

What is happening in the liberal media, some kind of a “Browning” of Islam? And, if that is the case, what could be the reason? *

Is it because “the media is trying to reach the majority of its readers who happen to be of European background, and who are more likely to be sympathetic to a “Lighter-shaded-American” than a “Darker-shaded-American”? That was the response of my nephew, Aziz, who came to this country as a college freshman and is now a successful lawyer in New York. He then added, “This ‘elite’ group interacts with the ‘Immigrant-Muslim-Americans’ group more on a daily basis, than people of the ‘African-American’ background. Additionally, with President Obama sending mixed messages the media might be trying to steer the story away from becoming also an ‘African-American’ story.”

Good points. I should only add that my nephew’s “Immigrant-Muslim-Americans” group had its own elite class that had little or no social interaction with people of African-American ethnicity as the immigrant community began to expand in the Seventies. The two generations of South Asian Muslims, for example, who came with high professional qualifications in the Sixties and Seventies moved into hesitatingly integrating urban centers, and when they prospered they quickly moved to suburbs that were predominantly white. Not that they were readily accepted there or did not face any discrimination. Like all immigrants they went through those experiences, but given their professional qualifications they, as a minority group, soon also began to profit from the country’s “affirmative action” laws. The situation on the level of social interaction, however, changed for their children in public schools across the country; it continues to change more meaningfully for their grandchildren who are now in colleges and schools. It is the latter who, for example, are coming up here and there with organizations and projects that serve needy communities and people regardless of ethnic or religious identities. (An excellent example is the organization called the Inner-City Muslim Action Network—[IMAN](#)—in south Chicago.) These younger men and women, unlike their grandfathers,

* My acquaintance with the “liberal media” is limited to *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, occasional articles sent by friends from other newspapers, reports on the National Public Radio, and such TV shows as the “Countdown with Keith Olberman,” “Rachel Maddow Show,” and “Tavis Smiley Show.” The latter two TV programs and the NPR, I must emphasize, have done exemplary work on behalf of American Muslims.

are also more likely to have read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* for the right reasons, and as likely the writings of people like Professor Amina Wadud, the African-American Muslim woman who led a joint congregation of men and women in the Friday prayers in New York in 2005. She was considered “too radical” by all the Imams in New York, and now it seems that the *Times* too shares that view. I don’t know her views on the erstwhile “Cordoba Center,” but it would have been useful for the *Times* to ask her and others like her.

It is important to acknowledge publicly, not just now but always and not just for the media but for American Muslims too, that Islam has been in these United States for a long time, not just among the immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia but among the African-Americans, many of whose ancestors were Muslims sold into slavery by other Muslims and Christians, and in various guises too—Moorish Temple; The Nation of Islam; Ahmadis; and, of course, Sunnis belonging to this school or that. What surprises me less but saddens me most is to see that attacks on Islam and American Muslims are made—and also protested against—as if African-American Muslims have not been a part of the American scene for a long time, or have not shed their blood in every war of the last hundred years to protect the liberties all Americans enjoy. Why is it that African-American Muslims have been ignored or marginalized by those who demonize Islam and also by those who oppose the demonizers? How and why has Islam in America become almost exclusively “Arab” or “Pakistani”?

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