



## Writing Histories of Western Muslims

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**T**he historical study of Muslim-minority communities in regions commonly associated with “the West” is a field in its infancy.<sup>1</sup> It was not until the 1980s that the enormously diverse groups who adhere to Islam in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada came to be categorized primarily by their religion rather than by their varying races, ethnicities, nationalities, class, or status as immigrants or colonials. This new categorization resulted largely from the recognition of a religious resurgence in public life that was punctuated by the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the “Rushdie Affair.” It was also informed by histories of modernity and experiences of European imperialism that pitted a “modern West” against a “Muslim Orient.” Consequently, as Yasemin Soysal (2001: 165) and many others have noted, “at issue” in the study of Western Muslims has been “the compatibility of Islam—its organizational culture and practice—with European categories of democratic participation and citizenship.” Not even the study of African American Muslims escaped this binary opposition between Islamic identity and democratic citizenship; early studies of the rise of Islam among African Americans generally explained the separatist tendencies of African American Muslim nationalist organizations, such as the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam, in terms of their appropriation of an Islamic identity.<sup>2</sup> Whether writing about immigrant or indigenous Muslims, scholars have been preoccupied with determining whether Muslims pose an anti-democratic, anti-modern threat to Western societies or if they are yet

another addition to the religious, cultural, and political diversity of Western nation-states.

The underlying assumption of both these positions—that Islam and the West are inherently opposed to one another—has obfuscated the historical experiences of Western Muslims by framing their lives in terms of an Islamic past situated in Arabia and classical Islamo-Arabic texts (Asad 1997:190-191) and by defining the West in terms of the Enlightenment and a modern present.<sup>3</sup> As Jacques Waardenburg (2004: 27) rightly observed, “Islam in the West” has become integral to an internal discourse about Western society, politics and security—a discourse that overlooks what Western Muslims have done and thought over several generations by “projecting one’s own ideas—including wishful thinking and nightmares—onto a largely unknown entity indicated by the term ‘Islam.’” It is thus not surprising that when in the 2000s a handful of scholars began to examine Western Muslims’ lives in their historical contexts, they also began to challenge their framing within the politicized dichotomy of “Islam and the West” as being ahistorical.<sup>4</sup>

### **Theoretical and Methodological Potential**

Western Muslims’ histories call into question the juxtaposition of Islam and the West by recalling the relations Muslims have formed through their religious practices, community building efforts, and interpretations of Islam in order to act on their historical context. The theoretical and methodological contributions this field stands to make, however, transcend the politics of our times. This is a field yet to be mined, and it is to this task of identifying its hidden riches that I wish to turn in this essay.

Western Muslims’ histories provide an opportunity for rethinking many of the analytical categories with which we have come to conceptualize modernity and the relationship between Muslim majority and Western societies in the modern world. The history of Western Muslims, by centering the lives and actions of those who have been at the peripheries of not only European empires but also of narratives of modernity and modern Western nation-states, demonstrates that many of the categories used to explain the modern world—secularism, fundamentalism, nationalism, globalization, human rights, Western civilization, Islamic civilization, and so on—are not ontological categories but rather products of historical attempts to control and manage the enormous diversity of the modern world (Malik 2004). More specifically, they were categories developed to manage and make sense of diversity through binaries distinguishing a self from an other—the civilized from the backward, the national from the colonial, the citizen from the alien, the secular from the religious, the modern from the traditional, the Occident from the

Orient. Western Muslims' histories, being both Islamic and Western, occupy a conceptual space in modern discourses between these binary categories. As such, Western Muslims' lives challenge both notions of European indigeneity and Islamic authenticity. They also complicate the notion of diaspora because many of them are converts at home in their own lands, and others are third- and fourth-generation Western Muslims, who self-identify with no land other than where they were born and now live.

While many of the bifurcating categories developed to make sense of diversity in terms of a *self* and an *other* focus on conceptual borders and their maintenance, the writing of Western Muslim histories involves the study of the relations that form through the porous membranes of boundaries.<sup>5</sup> It entails examining the means and mechanisms by which Western Muslims relate 'Islam and the West' in their individual and collective lives. These relations are greater than the sum of their Western and Islamic parts; they are themselves productive of historical change.<sup>6</sup> The writing of Western Muslims' histories is thus significant, not so much because it outlines Muslim contributions to "the West" or recalls a past forgotten in the age of "clash of civilizations" or "war on terror," but because it calls for new methodologies and paradigms for understanding the modern world. Leila Ahmed, for example, writes that her study of the history of Western Muslim women's activism completely reversed her understandings and expectations of feminism and Islamism: "This then is the conclusion I find myself arriving at in light of the evidence surveyed... that it is, after all, Islamists and the children of Islamists and not secular or privately religious Muslims who are most fully and actively integrating into this core and definingly American tradition of social and political activism.... It is they...who are now in the forefront of the struggle in relation to gender issues in Islam" (2011: 296-297).

### **Relationality**

Since Western Muslims are situated in an in-between space, the relations they create between a self and an other differ significantly depending on the varying contexts in which they participate socially, politically, culturally, and religiously. Therefore, their histories need to develop methods and an analytical vocabulary that could capture and make sense of the relationality of their lived experiences.<sup>7</sup> As an emerging subfield, there is currently no methodological trajectory or consensus in the historical study of Western Muslims. The utility of analytical concepts often employed to discuss "cultural mixing"—hybridity, symbiosis, syncretism, hegemony, resistance—have yet to be fully explored in regard to the history of Western Muslims. Their usefulness thus remains to be seen, but they appear limited insofar as they presume a

distinct self and an other interacting in history rather than focusing on the liminal or relational spaces between the self and the other as themselves fertile ground for historical change and identity formation. These liminal or relational spaces consist of mediums, concepts, institutions, and practices through which Western Muslims maintain relations among varying religious, ethnic, racial, gender, and national identities.<sup>8</sup> By way of example, in the early modern era, monotheism emerged in Europe as a conceptual means of identifying a consensus among Jews, Christians, and Muslims through which the diverse religious encounters of the modern world could be negotiated. More recently, the notion of “Abrahamic religions” has come to the fore as a means of shaping interfaith relations between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, particularly in the United States. While the pattern here is obvious, the relations these terms sought to negotiate through a consensual concept have not been historically contextualized in regard to Western Muslims’ lives. What historical factors contributed to the popularity of one and the waning of the other over time? What lessons did purveyors of the notion of “Abrahamic religions” learn from the earlier use of “monotheism” and what sort of communal and inter-religious consensus did they wish to enact through their choices? What were the historical effects of these concepts on Western Muslims’ self-understandings and relations with non-Muslims?<sup>9</sup>

### **Polyvalence and Polysemy**

If the study of the histories of Western Muslims calls for methodologies suitable for understanding relationality, polyvalence and polysemy could perhaps serve as a basis for the analytical vocabulary needed to express this relationality.<sup>10</sup> The diversity found among Western Muslims coupled with their situated in-between-ness have often engendered institutions, concepts, and practices that are open to multiple meanings and thus could pragmatically mediate relations between diverse understandings of religious duty, cultural practices, and political belonging. African slaves in antebellum America, for example, lived in a world where the same religious beliefs and practices were subject to widely varied meanings. Their polyvalence helped bridge individual differences in ethnicity, race, and religion, without eliminating these markers of difference. Enslaved literate Muslims in the United States, for example, often treated the Lord’s Prayer and *al-Fātiḥa* (the first chapter of the Qur’an) as interchangeable daily prayers.<sup>11</sup> When ʿAbdul Rahman (a Mandingo Muslim who after decades of slaving gained his freedom and travelled the North to raise money for the manumission of his family) was asked in 1828 to write the Lord’s Prayer in Arabic, he actually wrote *al-Fātiḥa*.<sup>12</sup> This act could be seen as a subtle form of resistance (Diouf 1998), ironically issued from a man who married an African

American Christian woman whom he reportedly accompanied to church (Austin 1984; 168, 187), but it is more likely that in the poly-religious context of antebellum America, *al-Fātiḥa* was functionally polysemous for ʿAbdul Rahman. In other words, ʿAbdul Rahman wrote the Lord’s Prayer that he knew and in the process ascribed new spheres of meaning to both *al-Fātiḥa* and the Lord’s Prayer (GhaneaBassiri 2010: 85).

### **Pluralism**

Since the relationality of Western Muslim histories is negotiated differently by different actors in varying historical circumstances, its study begins with the assumption that diversity is the norm and thus calls for the pluralization of our terms of analysis. There is no modernity, but negotiated modernities. No monolithic Muslim community but Muslim communities with varying visions of Islam that stand pluralistically in relation to one another as well as to non-Muslim communities. While anthropological and sociological studies have explored ethnic, gender, class, generational, and sectarian tensions among Western Muslims, much less attention has been paid to how these tensions evolved to shape new Western Muslim identities, institutions, and practices over time. One of the ways in which Muslims have dealt with intra-religious tensions has been to interpret “the West” as a terra incognita upon which an idealized Islam could be realized, divorced from cultural practices and problems of the “old world.” This separation of religion and culture is a common trope in the history of Islam in the United States, dating back at least to the early 1920s when the Ahmadi missionary, Muhammad Sadiq, proselytized Islam as a race-blind religion that could solve America’s “color problem.” Since then it has been variously employed by such diverse groups as the Nation of Islam, immigrant Muslim activists, and African American Sunnis to define their diverse religious beliefs and practices as authentically Islamic. However, it has not been adequately historicized nor systematically studied because scholars have generally viewed it as a mechanism of adaptation rather than an enduring pattern of Western Muslim history.

### **Transnationalism**

The relationality of Western Muslims’ lives requires not only that we use a pluralistic language to write their histories but that scholars also situate them transnationally. Western Muslims, throughout their history, have been seen as liminal figures, who could serve as conduits and translators between “Western” and “Muslim” peoples. France founded the Great Mosque of Paris at the heart of its empire to signal a new relation with its colonial subjects who fought in World War I. In the United States, President Dwight Eisenhower helped

inaugurate the Islamic Center of Washington, D.C. in 1957 to mark the United States' new relation with client states in the Middle East after World War II. After Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Saudi and Kuwaiti officials, who for years financially contributed to national Muslim organizations in the United States and Canada, called on these groups to help gain support for a US-led war against Iraq. One could cite many more such examples of the transnationalism of Western Muslims. "Today, the Muslim diaspora is the most prominent interlocutor between the two sides [Islam and the West]," Iftikhar Malik (2004, 181) writes. "The diaspora can offer a fresh view of the Islamic heritage and a better understanding of the Muslim predicament."

Throughout their history, Western Muslims have personified transnationalism. Similar to the trope of the separation of religion and culture, transnationalism has been a part of Western Muslim history for many years, dating back at least to the early-eighteenth century, when the Royal African Company employed Job Ben Solomon (a Fulbe Muslim of notable ancestry who was sold into slavery in Maryland in the early 1730s before gaining manumission at the hand of British aristocrats) to expand English trade inland in Africa (Bluett 1734, Moore 1738, and Grant 1968). Today, in the midst of revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa, Western Muslims are once again intermediaries, explaining to "the West" their co-religionists' emotions and calming anxieties about the future relations between "the West" and the Middle East and North African by personifying a cosmopolitan transnationalism.

The transnational space in which Western Muslim histories unfold is not a de-territorialized, globalized space as some like Olivier Roy (2004) have suggested. Transnationalism has been both imagined and institutionalized in Western Muslims' everyday lives and cultural memories. Its manifestations over time, however, have not been comprehensively studied for what they reveal about how diversity has socially, culturally, and politically been negotiated in the modern era.<sup>13</sup> When Western Muslims act as translators or are employed as cultural ambassadors, they are generally casted as negotiating national and international relations anew, irrespective of their long history of transnationalism.<sup>14</sup> John Bowen (2010:6), for example, writes, "Muslims who are engaged in deliberating about Islam in France must navigate between two spatially distinct realms of justification: a transnational one, based on the norms and traditions of Islam, and a national one, based on the civic values of France." The history of French Muslims, however, suggests that there is a third space between these two realms bequeathed by efforts of prior Muslims in France to negotiate this same distinction socially, religiously, politically, and institutionally.

## Conclusion

The histories of Western Muslims have only recently been critically examined, but they stand to make considerable theoretical and methodological contributions to our understandings of Islam and the modern world. While the diversity of the modern world has generally been examined through bifurcating categories that distinguish a self from an other, the histories of Western Muslims, situated in between “Islam and the West” calls for a rethinking of the modern world by viewing diversity—not as an intractable problem that needs to be explained or contained—but as the grounds on which modern experiences, identities, institutions, and concepts are formed. Western Muslim lives draw attention to how relations between different religions, cultures, societies, nations, races, ethnicities, and genders—varyingly negotiated depending on context and maintained through polyvalent media, concepts, institutions and practices—are not just products of history but themselves productive of history. ✎

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>The notion of "the West" as a unified cultural complex is a problematic notion that I have critiqued elsewhere, particularly when it is defined in contradistinction from Islam. See Kambiz GhaneaBassiri (2010: 4-8). In this essay, I use the West and its derivative forms, not as a cultural complex, but as a shorthand reference to Western European nations, the United States, and Canada.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Lincoln (1994) and Essien-Udom (1962). A similar critique of scholarship on African American Muslims could be found in Jackson (2005).

<sup>3</sup>Bernard Lewis's writings (*inter alia* 1993, 1994) on "Islam and the West" are the most influential examples of scholarship that interprets the modern presence of Muslims in Western Europe in terms of the ancient history and legal discourses of Muslims. For an influential discussion of the modern West as a product of Enlightenment thought, see Lilla (2007). Even

when scholars do not adhere to such essentialized understandings of “Islam and the West,” they often frame discussion of Western Muslims in terms of their commensurability or incommensurability by asking how Muslims are self-identifying in an inherently foreign society. See, for example, Haddad and Esposito (1998), Haddad (1987 and 2002), and Smith (2009).

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Ansari (2004), Arkoun (2006), Curtis (2009), GhaneaBassiri (2010), Gilliat-Ray (2010: 3-27), Malik (2004) and Matar (1998). The works of Gomez (2005) and Turner (2003) make a similar point in relation to the history of Islam in Black America.

<sup>5</sup>For a classic study of how conceptions of religion both establish boundaries and cut across them, see Chidester (1996: particularly 259-266).

<sup>6</sup>See, for example, the seminal study of Karen Leonard on California’s Punjabi Mexican Americans (1992).

<sup>7</sup>For a recent, exemplary study of relational history, see Makdisi (2008).

<sup>8</sup>For an example of how personal narratives are used to negotiate gender, religious, ethnic, and national identities, see Herbert and Rodger (2008).

<sup>9</sup>For an illuminating discussion of some of these questions, see Hicks (2010).

<sup>10</sup>Bruce Lawrence (2002) first introduced *polyvalence* and *kaleidoculture* as analytical concepts through which diversity and multiculturalism could be re-imagined in the modern era in terms of equivalency.

<sup>11</sup>In addition to the example of ‘Abdul Rahman, see the autobiographical manuscript of ‘Umar ibn Said (2011: 74-75), where he indicates that, before coming to a “Christian country, he recited *al-Fātiḥa* for prayer and now he recites the Lord’s Prayer.

<sup>12</sup>A photocopy of his manuscript can be seen in Austin (1984): 190.

<sup>13</sup>Some steps toward such analysis have been made by Curtis (2007), GhaneaBassiri (2010: 254-263), and Howell (2009).

<sup>14</sup>For examples of attempts to examine contemporary Western Muslims’ transnational roles with reference to their histories, see Aidi (2011), Hicks (2010), Silverstein (2004), or Werbner (2002).