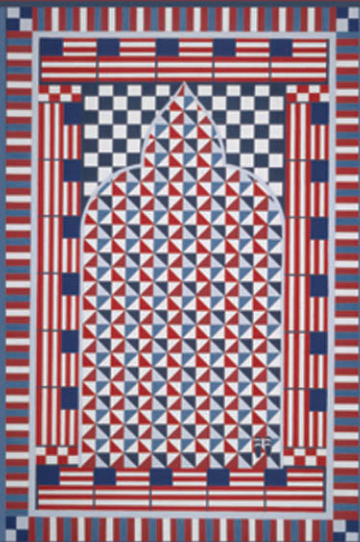


MUSLIMS IN AMERICA



A SHORT HISTORY



EDWARD E. CURTIS IV

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Frontispiece: Maryam Khan, a Pakistani American engineer, outside
the Rabia-e-Balkhi Women's Hospital in Kabul, Afghanistan, 2005.

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Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

For my son, Zayd

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PREFACE

*O people! We created you from the same male
and female, and made you distinct peoples and
tribes so that you may know one another. The
noblest among you in the sight of God is the most
righteous.*

—*Qur'an 49:13*

In 2007, one of my neighbors organized public protests against the inclusion of foot baths at the new terminal of the Indianapolis International Airport. These foot baths had been proposed on behalf of the hundred-plus African Muslim cabbies who regularly washed their feet before performing their daily prayers. Airport planning officials explained that it was a matter of public health. Without the foot baths, these cabdrivers would wash their feet in the hand sinks or use empty soda bottles to wash them outdoors in the cold. The cost of installing the two stainless steel basins would be less than \$2,000, a token amount given that the new airport terminal budget was over \$1 billion. The money would come from airline-generated revenues, not taxes.

My neighbor, a Baptist preacher, declared that such accommodation of the Muslim cabdrivers was “fraternization with the

enemy” during a time of war, as he told a reporter from the *Indianapolis Star*. The minister had tragically lost a son in the Iraq war, although he insisted that his son’s death was not the reason for his opposition to Muslims. Instead, he told a conservative website, he opposed the addition of the sinks on the basis that this was a first step toward “Islam’s desired goal, which is to thrust the entire world under one single Islamic caliphate under sharia law.”

When my neighbor staged a “citizens’ rally” against the foot baths, the local media covered the affair. The Rev. Dr. Henry Gerner, a local leader of Christians for Peace and Justice in the Middle East, staged a counterprotest. He held a sign in his hand and stood outside the preacher’s church. One churchgoer attempted to force the sign out of Gerner’s hand, but Gerner, whose long white beard and kindly voice invited constant comparisons to Santa Claus, would not yield the sign. As the hand-to-hand struggle ensued, Gerner eventually fell to the ground—and an Indianapolis television station caught it all on tape.

Weeks later, my neighbor, the Baptist preacher who opposed the foot baths, appeared at my doorstep with his wife. It was Christmas time, and he handed us a festive tin of fudge and cookies along with a greeting card. My wife and I thanked them and, trying to be polite, invited them in. They declined.

If they had come into the house, they would have been surprised, probably shocked. We had just finished our Saturday lunch of stuffed grape leaves, chick pea dip, and tabbouli, and had moved to the basement to drink tea. Our lunch guests that day were all Muslims, a family of five. The dad was a Syrian, the mother a Moroccan, and the three young kids were Americans. I wonder what this pastor might have said—or felt—if he had met these really cute kids and their friendly parents. The sad truth is that even if he had met our guests, his deep prejudices

might have prevented him from really seeing them, much less really knowing them.

But I hope that I am wrong. Indeed, I have written this book so that non-Muslim Americans may come to understand Muslim Americans just a little bit better. That purpose is captured by the epigraph of this preface, which I have taken from chapter 49, verse 13 of the Qur'an, a verse that is well-known among Muslims. In it, God speaks directly to human beings, proclaiming that humankind was created from a single pair of male and female and made into different peoples and ethnicities so that they might come to know each other.

There is a second meaning that I wish to communicate in quoting this verse of the Qur'an. Because Muslim America, like the rest of the country, is often divided along lines of race, class, and ethnicity, and because Muslim Americans have had such different life experiences, they often know very little about one another. Recently, I was speaking with a prominent Muslim philanthropist who is a first-generation immigrant from the Middle East. Although very well informed about a variety of topics, this man had no idea that there were practicing African American Muslims in his city before the 1960s. And what he did have to say about black Muslims in his town was not very complimentary.

This lack of knowledge about Muslim American history among Muslim Americans themselves is explained partly by the fact that many Muslim American leaders are first-generation immigrants without a collective memory of Islam in the United States. Many of these first-generation Muslim immigrants also lack deep and meaningful social ties to African American Muslims, among whom Islam first developed as a religious "denomination" that was national in scope. The incredible influx of Muslim immigrants after 1965 coincided with increasing

patterns of racial segregation in the United States, and this racial segregation profoundly shaped contemporary Muslim American communities.

Since 1970, neighborhoods and schools have become more racially segregated in the United States. Most post-1965 Muslim immigrants, both richer and better educated than the average American, joined whites in taking flight from the inner city to the suburbs. Although Muslim Americans condemn racial discrimination and prejudice, they live, like most Americans, in a nation that is divided by race. These racial divisions and other social fissures mean that Muslim Americans, like most Americans, do not necessarily have close friendships, go to school, work, or pray with Muslims of a different race.

And yet, indigenous and immigrant Muslims have still influenced one another across the racial and other social lines that have divided them. They have shared ideas, disagreed with each other, and exchanged food, clothes, and other goods. Unearthing the history of Muslims in the United States means showing how Middle Eastern, South Asian, European, African, black, white, Hispanic, and other Muslim Americans have come in contact and sometimes in conflict with one another.

Telling the story of Muslim America also means tracing the connections of Muslim Americans to Muslims abroad. American Islam is a drama that has unfolded on a global stage marked by international crossings. Few know about the Muslim American slave Job Ben Solomon, who traveled from his native West Africa to North America, then from America to England, and finally back to his African home—all decades before the American Revolution. His global trek illustrates an important theme in the history of Muslim Americans.

Islam in America has been international and cross-cultural from its very beginning. Like most Americans in the New

World, Muslim Americans have never known a world that was not affected by contact, exchange, and confrontation across racial, ethnic, social, and geographic boundaries. The history of Muslims in the United States is at least in part a story about what happens when the lives of Muslims from various places collide with one another in a new, multicultural nation.

This book also explains how larger events in U.S. history have had an important impact on Muslim American life. It illustrates how the transatlantic slave trade resulted in the first major (and forced) migration of Muslims to the Americas, and how internal migrations of African Americans from the South to the North set the stage for African American conversion to Islam. This volume reveals how the National Origins Act of 1924 and the 1965 law that repealed it changed Muslim American life. It also explores how U.S. foreign policy affected Muslim American consciousness during the Cold War, and how the revival of Islam in the 1970s around the globe influenced the Islamic awakening in the United States. Finally, it surveys the impact of 9/11 on Muslim Americans.

In offering a religious history of Muslim America, this book rather blatantly avoids any extended analysis of terrorism. With only a very few exceptions, Muslim Americans are not and never have been terrorists. Focusing on the supposed Muslim “enemy” inside America may stir fear and sell books, but it does not accurately or fairly portray the mundane realities of Muslim American life. Islamophobia, or the irrational fear of Muslims, is a form of prejudice akin to racism and anti-Semitism that should be resisted. Avoiding Islamophobia, however, does not mean ducking difficult issues, and this book offers a sober and well-rounded portrait of socially conservative and politically active Muslim Americans—the people who are sometimes mistaken for violent radicals. The book also explores the lives

PREFACE

of Muslim Americans who want nothing to do with politics and choose to focus instead on spiritual enlightenment or their family's financial success.

On the whole, this book illustrates how the saga of Muslim America is an inextricable part of the American story. In a time when some people see a contradiction between being Muslim and being American, the lives of the human beings narrated here cry out for recognition. Their simultaneously Muslim and American voices demand our respect, whether we are Muslim or not.

March 2009
Indianapolis, Indiana

Across the Black Atlantic: The First Muslims in North America

In 1730 or 1731, Ayuba Suleiman Diallo was enslaved near the Gambia River in Bundu, in the eastern part of what is now the West African nation of Senegal. A slave ship carried this father and husband across the Atlantic Ocean to Annapolis, Maryland, where he was sold to a tobacco farmer. In America, Ayuba, who was named after the biblical figure and qur'anic prophet Job, became known by a translation of his name, Job Ben Solomon, or Job, the son of Solomon. He toiled in the tobacco fields, but soon fell ill and complained that he was not suited for such work. His owner allowed him to tend the cattle instead. These lighter duties allowed Job, who was a practicing Muslim, to maintain his daily prayer schedule, and he would often walk into the woods to pray. Job's peaceful devotions were soon disturbed, however, by a young white boy who mocked him and even threw dirt on him—and did so more than once. Perhaps for this reason, Job decided in 1731 to escape his bondage and head west. When a local jailer caught him, Job tried to explain why he had run away but he

was unable to communicate in English. Eventually, an African translator was found, and when Job was returned to the plantation, his owner set aside a place where Job could pray without disturbance.

But Job had a plan to escape his enslavement in America, and he wrote a letter in Arabic to his father, a prominent person, probably a religious scholar, in Bundu, hoping that his father might ransom him. Like other educated Muslims of the Fulbe or Fulani ethnic group, Job spoke Fula in daily life, but he could also read and write Arabic, a common West African language of learning, statecraft, and commerce in the eighteenth century. As a Muslim child, Job had memorized the Qur'an and studied numerous religious texts and traditions in Arabic.

Such knowledge impressed many of the white people whom Job met in his global travels. One of them was James Oglethorpe, the founder of Georgia and a member of the British parliament. Though Job's father never received the Arabic letter, Oglethorpe eventually came into possession of it and asked scholars at Oxford University to translate the letter into English. Oglethorpe, impressed by the slave's literacy and sympathetic to his story, then purchased his "bond." With Oglethorpe's assistance, Job crossed the Atlantic again, just two years or so after he had arrived in Annapolis. This time, he traveled to England. During this 1733 sea voyage, his biographer, the Rev. Thomas Bluett, noted that Job often prayed; butchered his own meat according to the rules outlined in the *shari'a*, or Islamic law and ethics; and avoided all pork.

During his stay in England, Job was said to have written in his own hand three complete copies of the Qur'an—from memory. Some of his sponsors had hoped to convert him to Christianity, and they gave him a copy of the New Testament in Arabic translation. But Job was already familiar with the story