Abstract

This paper traces the trajectory of the African American Muslim community in the US by analyzing the various strands of the community’s make-up and exploring the dialectic of immigrant-indigenous Islam. It raises questions regarding, for instance, the failure of the community to create a group of qualified scholars in three decades. Such scholars, it is argued, are the instrument through which new forms of religious expressions can emerge and new and different voices can be heard as more conceptual and even gender spaces open up. Finally, the paper discusses the challenges facing the Ummah/Muslim community from within—the cultural, racial and class-based divides—and from without—the impact of 9/11 against which a beleaguered community must now, to some extent, define its faith.

Introduction

This paper will examine the development of Islam within the African American community to highlight some of the most recent trends, challenges and prospects for the future. The intention is to delineate the paths that American Islam is navigating, especially in the post-Malcolm X (d. 1965) and Elijah Muhammad (d. 1975) eras. Collective identities are being negotiated and choices being made between Islam as an inherited identity (the immigrant experience) and Islam as an expression of empowerment (the African American experience). African American Muslims have engaged historical Islam to articulate religious positions as they reflect on the needs of their communities. Their choices are in part informed by the black experience and in part shaped by the immigrant tradition of Islamic scholarship and connections to Islamic heartlands. This has brought forth different expectations as immigrant Muslims (like most immigrants to the US) gravitate
toward assimilation and the good life of wealth and success, whereas many of the African American converts seek, among other things, closer encounters with Islamic “authenticity” (by taking on Muslims names, dress code, etc.). This has led some to part company with aspects of mainstream American culture. It is within these broad contours that this paper posits its analysis of issues.

The Genesis of Islam in the Americas

Islam’s origin in the Americas goes back to the period of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade especially in the 17th–18th centuries when a number of Muslims from West Africa were sold into slavery in America.¹ We know about some of these Muslim slaves, including those from the ruling classes (for instance, Ibrahima Jallo [d. 1828] from Guinea) who was sent back to Africa only to die upon arrival.² Prior to this the first recorded Muslim presence was in 1527 when Estevan (d. 1539), a black Moroccan guide and interpreter, arrived in Florida from Spain.³ He came with the Panfilo de Narvaez (d. 1528) expedition and for over a decade explored the areas of the southwest before venturing into present-day New Mexico and Arizona in 1539.⁴ It was apparently there that he died at the hands of the Zuni Indians. Further south in South America the Muslim presence was strongly felt in the 19th century in Bahia, Brazil when Hausa Muslims took part in slave revolts.⁵

For obvious reasons it was difficult for these Muslim slaves in the regions of the African diaspora to maintain their faith and pass it on to the next

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¹ The Trans-Atlantic slave trade, begun by the Portuguese and stemming out of their voyages of exploration of the Atlantic coast and islands in the 15th century, soon, thanks to Western nations’ international dimensions, the British came to dominate this trade focused on the sale and exploitation of African slave labour for markets in the Americas. The Atlantic slave trade lasted from 15th century to the 19th century, reaching its peak in the 18th century.


³ Daniel Panger, *Black Ulysses* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1982), 3. The irony though is that while he may be claimed as a Muslim he was also part of the Spanish conquistador class.


generation. Nevertheless, new infusions of Islam on American soil took place later but did not much affect African Americans. In other words, a slow trickle of immigrant Muslims from Ottoman areas began to arrive in the country in the late 19th century although their number then was not significant. In the meantime, within the African American community, Islamic presence faded though it is possible that memories of Islam may have remained, even if just as faint echoes of the past. Through the self-improvement associations (expressions of Black nationalism) such as that of the Marcus Garvey [d. 1940] movement of the 1920s, proto-Islam would eventually find a medium within which to express, if not to reinvent itself. This was the era of the “Black Religion” phenomenon among various groups of African Americans irrespective of religious affiliation.\(^7\)

**Evolving Religious Landscapes: The Nation of Islam**

During the early part of the 20th century the first group to emerge was the Moorish Science Temple movement of Noble Drew Ali (d. 1929) that taught pride of race and claimed that African Americans were descendants of an “Asiatic race” known as the Moors. By 1930 Wallace Fard Muhammad was preaching the Nation of Islam (NOI) message of hope to the blackmen of America and soon attracted Elijah Muhammad as his spokesperson or messenger. He later became the leader of the movement from 1933 onwards when Wallace Fard supposedly “disappeared” in that year. The NOI was clearly influenced by the Marcus Garvey movement’s teachings on self-improvement and black pride, and Booker T. Washington’s (d. 1915) ideas of education for social reform.\(^8\) Other influences were seen in the adoption of the drill method to instil discipline; dietary rules that banned eating pork, smoking, or drinking alcohol. They opened restaurants and other business ventures to promote self-reliance and to encourage black businesses and the spirit of industriousness and thriftiness. The NOI also sought to promote a new identity born out of the peculiar painful experience of living in America as a black person, under conditions of racism, segregation, and inferiority


status in society.\(^9\) In this scheme of things Islam provided the idiom (and an alternative one to that of what was seen as white man’s Christianity). Moreover, it also provided a convenient umbrella label to distinguish the new movement, its distinctly African American religious experience, with a belief system that represented a cocktail mixture of proto-Islam, Christianity and even pseudo-scientism. This last is evident from the Nation of Islam’s mythical doctrine of the alleged design of the mad scientist, Yacoob, who created the devilish white race.\(^10\) It is significant to point out that what attracted followers to NOI was often not so much this racialized theology but the discipline, the self-respect, the positive reinforcement of self-affirming values for a suffering humanity placed at the bottom of America’s racially constructed social hierarchy.\(^11\) Not surprisingly, therefore, many of those who joined the movement were the poorest of the poor, many recruited while in prison, including inner city dwellers of a number of American major metropolitan cities. The group also attracted some black militant activists (arising from the black consciousness movement) who had later become disenchanted with the pacifist strategy of the civil rights movement. Malcolm Little, later known as Malcolm X (d. 1965) for one, the son of a civil rights worker who later became a pimp, drug dealer and a convicted criminal, emerged as one of the country’s most vocal advocates of black nationalism and militancy after joining NOI in the early 1950s.

**Religious Transformation: From NOI to Mainstream Islam**

The Islam of the immigrants from the Middle East and the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent continued to grow after 1965 reaching its peak in the closing decades of the 20th century. By then the immigrant Muslims had come to outnumber the indigenous American-born Muslims, who were mostly African-Americans including some white converts who make up a quarter to one-third of the Muslim population. Together, the two streams of Islam today make up an estimated 5–8 million Muslims, with the immigrants far wealthier and with more resources to channel into their Islamic centres, mosques and national organizations such as ISNA (Islamic Society of North America),


ICNA (Islamic Circle of North America) and others than their African American counterparts.

By the mid-1970s the NOI metamorphosized after the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975 when his son Wallace (or Warith Deen) Muhammad, like Malcolm X, had begun to question the theology of the NOI and to steer the movement in the direction of mainstream Islam. It is significant to mention here that the immigrant and the indigenous streams of Islam could not be kept apart permanently and soon had to mingle at some level. In fact, as Wallace Muhammad recalls, when his father was alive he had seen visitors to their house from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. The call of international or Sunni-oriented Islam became louder and clearer when leading American figures such as Malcolm X visited Saudi Arabia to perform hajj, an experience that reinforced their transitions to this much larger and inclusive Islam.

When the NOI shed its racialized mythologies and adopted the teachings of mainstream Islam under the leadership of Wallace Muhammad, it was too much for some of the old guards within the NOI movement. A fission took place in which Minister Louis Farrakhan left Wallace Muhammad’s American Muslim Community to re-establish the NOI under his own leadership. Within both groups, however, there was an abiding commitment (despite their doctrinal differences) to continue to affirm and to build on the black experience. However, given Louis Farrakhan’s ideological orientation, this was more explicit.

Diversity of Islamic Experience and Islamic Organizations

The paper does not argue that these were the only significant organizations within the indigenous American Muslim communities. There was, for

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14 See, Video interview of Imam W.D. Muhammad (“Mainstream Islam”) by Nazir Khan of the Islamic Information Service (IIS), Altadena, California [1985].
15 The expressions Sunnism or Sunni-oriented, in the context of African American religious experience, refers to mainstream Islam. The term “Sunnī” stresses its distinctness from what the author terms as “proto-Islam” rather than from the usual alternative, the Shi‘i-oriented Islam. Ed.
instance, the Dar-ul-Islam movement of Imam Yahya Abdul Karim, a student of Sheikh Dawood Ahmed Faisal (d. 1981) that grew out of the State Street Masjid in New York City. This mosque was built in the mid-1950s while the Dar-ul-Islam movement sprang up by the early 1960s and continued to function as a revivalist movement. Yahya Abdul Karim was its most recognizable leader during this volatile period, until the late 1970s. By then Dar-ul-Islam had entered into a new phase with the arrival in 1978 of the charismatic Pakistani Shaikh Mubarak Ali Jilani/Gilani. He attracted some African American Muslims from the poorer areas of the city who came to the mosque to participate in Zikr (Dhikr) ceremonies. Soon followers began to pledge allegiance to him. It did not take long for Jilani’s newly established Jamaat al-Fuqra (a Sufi mystical organization that was active by 1980) to eclipse Darul Islam at Masjid Yasin. In fact, so successful was al-Fuqra that even Dar-ul Islam leaders such as Yahya Abdul Karim and Rijab Mahmud followed Jilani. Subsequently Darul Islam splintered into two smaller mosques within the New York city area.

These were not the only organizations that were active in the 1970s or 1980s. There was also, for instance, a smaller, organization, a splinter group from the NOI, that was established in 1968 in New York. This was the Hanafi movement of Hamas Abdul Khaalis that by the 1970s had relocated its Hanafi Madhhab Center to Washington DC. There were also Sufi organizations or orders whose presence goes back to the early part of the 20th century. These Sufi groups (introduced by Muslim immigrants) have made their presence known for much of the 20th century,

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17 We also need to mention here that there were some Americans who came to Islam via the music (jazz) path. Even Imam Isa Abdullah (who has changed his name several times) the leader of the Ansar Allah community was himself a musician. He is presently serving a long prison sentence on child molestation/statutory rape charges. His organization (informed by notions of Black nationalism) has taken on myriad expressions (I believe it is now called Holy Tabernacle Ministries) as have splinter groups from the NOI such as the Five Percenters who have produced some rappers.


21 Khaalis is currently serving a long prison sentence following a mass hostage taking incident in 1977 to avenge the murders of Khaalis’ family members by the NOI.
and range from universalist to New Age ones. With the exception of al-Fuqra, Sufi groups have had a far more enduring appeal among white converts than African American ones, since the former are relatively more educated and more likely to come to the fold of Islam via the Sufi route, after having read the works of Muslim thinkers such as Imām Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), Muḥyī l-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Alī Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Rūmī (d. 672/1273) and others. There is definitely a class factor in the conversion process to Islam among white and non-white Americans. In other words, African Americans are more likely to be attracted to an Islam that is connected to their experience as a marginalized group and articulates issues of social justice, equality, and empowerment or identity formation.

Islamic “Authenticity”?; Transnational Tablīghī Jamā‘at and Salafī Networks

The African American search for authenticity with “normative” Islam led some to join the Tablīghī Jamā‘at movement with its ritualistic expression of faith and emphasis on South Asian dress, food, culture, etc., while others joined the Salafī movement with its austere expression of Islam, to a large extent as it is practised by the Salafis in the Arab countries of the Gulf.

In the late 1970s and 1980s there were some new Muslims who joined the Tablīghī Jamā‘at movement (a conservative spiritual revitalization movement with origins in mid-1920s in pre-partition India) that tends to emphasize the ritual expression of Islam, including the, in quite a few cases, wearing the Indo-Pakistani shalwar-qamīz, (a long shirt with loose pajama-like pants to go with it). They wear a long beard, share communal meals (eating, while seated on the floor, with hands from a single plate), and emphasize the use of siwāk/tooth stick. They particularly encourage going out on tours (khurūj) to summon fellow Muslims to come to the mosque to listen to their standardized talks on Islamic belief (Īmān). Those who join their mosque retreats are asked to sit in a circle and take turns reading from the book, Tablīghī Niṣāb by Mawlānā

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Muhammad Zakariyyā (d. 1403/1982). These practices (mythicized and infused with new or revitalized conceptual content) had great appeal, since they strengthened or reinforced the values of shared experience. To the critics of the Tablighi Jama’at, however, while the ritualistic practices of this faith-based movement may have created the sense of brotherhood in the confines of the mosque, did very little to broaden the new Muslims’ knowledge of Islam. The Tablighi Jama’at emphasized the reading of only one book (The Teachings of Islam) that contains pious stories of the Prophet (peace be on him), his Companions, Muslim sages and elders of later times. No Qur’ānic study (tafsīr or exegesis) is undertaken apart from reading the literal text of the Qur’ān in Arabic. More seriously, the Tablighi Jama’at does not address social problems or issues within the local communities.

As a result, by the late 1980s or early 1990s there were some Muslims who began to gravitate towards the Salafī movement (claiming to represent “true” Islam) that emphasizes a literal understanding of, and strict adherence to the text of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah/normative sayings/practices of the Prophet (peace be on him). The Salafīs, who describe themselves as those who follow the Islam of the Prophet (peace be on him) and his Companions, preach an austere Islam that is suspicious of any practices, including those derived from local cultures, that are not in keeping with authentic Islamic teachings. Thus they condemn Sufi as well as local Muslim religious practices.

that deviate from the practices in the time of the Prophet (peace be on him) and the Ṣaḥābah. These include, for instance, *mawlid*/celebration of the Prophet’s birthday as “deviated” innovations from the “pure” Islam of the Salafis. They are of the view, in keeping with the strict Ḥanbali juristic position, for instance, that women must not venture out in public without wearing a head cover and a face veil (*niqāb*). For their part, the men tend to grow thick beards and wear the long flowing gowns (Arab *thawb* as opposed to Indo-Pakistani loose pants and long shirt of the Tablighis) that reach somewhere close to the ankles. The aim of the Salafis is to reintroduce early Islam into modern life without reconfiguring or reinterpreting it. Hence theirs is a “conservationist” (not “reconstructionist”) project that considers all Islamic practices that do not conform to what they consider to be the Islamic norm, as they narrowly define it, as being deviated or not meeting the stringent standards of normative Islam.  

**Salafi Influence and Bases of Support**

Salafism is uncompromising in its negation of culture and assumes rather unrealistically that religious teachings or precepts can take roots in any society without harnessing some elements of local culture. Failure to accept this leads the Salafis to self-righteously label every behaviour or practice of fellow Muslims in terms of this binary opposition between the guided and the misguided/deviated, and between the *ummah* of faith and the community of *kufr*/*disbelief*. If fellow Muslims are judged harshly (forgetting that differences in interpretation are lauded in the Islamic tradition as a blessing) one can only imagine what their attitude would be to non-Muslims with whom interfaith dialogue makes no sense.  

In other words, the concept of pluralism (and even interfaith dialogues of the type that Imam Warith Deen Muhammad has been conducting with some Jewish communities) remain foreign or incomprehensible to Salafis.

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29 For instance, at one of the local mosques here in the US I have heard a *khatib* refer to inter-religious dialogue exactly in this way. This was not an isolated incident.

In addition to their own efforts, the Salafis have also received assistance directly or indirectly through Saudi-funded programmes. We can mention here the important contribution made by the Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America (IIASA) in Fairfax, Virginia (founded in 1989 as a satellite campus of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University in Riyadh) and organizations such as the Muslim World League (MWL) founded in 1962 and based in Saudi Arabia, and also the World Assembly of Muslim Youth (WAMY) also founded in Saudi Arabia and quite active. These organizations channel funding destined for Muslim organizations or Islamic centres along with the distribution of the Qur’an (Saudi-approved English translation with a clear Salafi agenda—and other Islamic literature, not to mention the sponsoring of foreign imāms brought in under Saudi sponsorship.

There was the impact of transnational salafism through the returning American graduates of Saudi Universities (for instance, Abu Amina Bilal Philip, who is now based in the United Arab Emirates) as well as notable scholars present in the US and teaching at the institute in Fairfax, VA such as Ja’far Shaykh Idrīs (a Sudanese scholar affiliated to Imam Muhammad ibn Saud University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia) and Shaykh ‘Alī al-Timimī. Both facilitated this da’wah work in the US by holding study sessions for Muslims in Washington DC area. The capital region (including its suburbs) as well as East Orange, New Jersey, and Philadelphia were some of the most important magnets of Salafī activities within the US. Facilitating this da’wah was also the ubiquitous internet (with the vast network of Salafī websites on Islam/Qur’an/Hadith) that promoted the growth of the Salafī movement. Moreover, the distribution of the translated Saudi/Islamic literature, tapes (recorded lectures as well as Qur’ānic recitation by the Imams of the holy mosques in Makkah and Madinah) and a few magazines were making their rounds among Muslim converts. Salafī da’wah was also disseminated through conferences of IANA (Islamic Assembly of North America) and QSS (Qur’an and Sunnah Society of North America). Popular speakers at these Salafī

did not avoid the company of non-Muslims as ‘unbelievers but cooperated with them for what was for the common good of both groups. See, for instance, chapter ix, 95–110 where he discusses Muhammad’s life in Madinah. This is contrary to the attitude and position of today’s conservative Salafis who are influenced by Ḥanbali scholars such as Shaykh Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1207/1792). His teachings form the basis of the prevailing religious (at the same time legitimating) ideology of the ruling elite in Saudi Arabia. Unlike the conservative Salafis, Shaykh Muhammad ‘Abduh of Egypt (d. 1323/1905) was a modernist “Salafi” who sought to reinterpret Islamic teachings in the light of the modern experience.

31 College Park’s Dar-us-Salaam that runs a mosque and al-Huda School with several hundred students up to the 8th grade, its Imām Safi Khan is also a graduate of a Saudi Arabian University.
conferences included Dāwūd Adib, Abū Muslimah, Abū Usāmah and Muhammad Syed Adly who became household names in Salafī circles.\(^{32}\) The conference platform provided an important avenue for acquiring literature, networking (including getting on email lists), meeting like-minded people and deepening commitment to Salafī values. These conferences (far more noticeable in the 1990s) were a bit similar to the Tablīghī Jamā‘at’s annual meetings where the sense of bonding and spiritual connection were cultivated.

**Contrasting Salafism with Other Organizations: ISNA and ICNA**

The enthusiastic converts to the salafī understanding of Islam exhibited a strong sense of spiritual empowerment and validation of his/her chosen path at these gatherings where the euphoria of religious revival (common to many religions) was very much in the air. Contrast this highly charged religious atmosphere with the more sedate and sometimes even “academic” style arrangement or format especially at some of the plenary sessions of Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA) annual meetings. The ISNA/ICNA meetings attracted some academics in various fields who presented their findings on this or that issue as it has impacted Muslims.\(^{33}\) There is no doubt that the Salafīs attracted new converts to Islam (both African American and white), including former Tablighis, or those who had been part of Wallace Deen Muhammad’s movement but decided to move on to what they considered to be greener “organizational” pastures. The practice of Islamic brotherhood by the Tablighis, especially those from the Indo-Pakistani sub-continent, seems to have been confined to the mosques. However, the Salafīs have tended to develop strong bonds as they socialized mainly within their own trusted Salafī “fellow travellers.” Their close knit brotherly bonds were forged and continually reinforced at the various activities of gatherings locally or across the state beyond the confines of the mosques.

The activist Muslim organizations such as the Ikhwān (Muslim Brotherhood from the Arab world) or their counterpart from the Indo-Pakistani sub-continent, that is, the Jamā‘at-i Islāmī (both have political platforms in their home countries) have not been as active in recruiting followers as have the Tablighis, the Sufis and the Salafīs. The Ikhwān and the

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\(^{32}\) See the detailed description that is provided in Umar Lee’s article, “The Rise and Fall of Salafi Dawah in the U.S.” at: <http://umarlee.com/2007/01/19>. Umar Lee is a white American convert to Islam who provides an insider’s view to the emergence and eventual decline (not “fall” as he puts it) of Salafism.

\(^{33}\) To be fair, the meetings of all these organizations also involved a sense of Islamic networking, provided an opportunity for socializing.
Jama’at-i Islami have channelled their energies into the mainstream Muslim immigrant-dominated organizations such as ISNA (founded in 1981 largely by activists from the ranks of Ikhwân and Jama’at-i Islami) and ICNA (established in 1971 by people mainly affiliated with Jama’at-i Islami) some of whose core followers are involved in ḥalaqabs (study circles). In these ḥalaqabs attempts are made to deepen knowledge of the Qurʾān by studying the Qurʾānic exegeses by scholars such as Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1386/1966) or Mawlānā Mawdūdī (d. 1399/1979) whose predominant objective was the establishment of an Islamic state. ISNA and ICNA groups have been far more interested in inviting speakers among converts to their lecture sessions than they have been in carrying out programmes of da’wah on the lines of the Sufis, the Tablighis and the Salafis.

**Salafism Enters Crisis Phase: Internal Conflicts and 9/11**

Unfortunately for the Salafis, the movement entered into a critical phase when some of their more enthusiastic followers began to take a strong stand on two divisive issues. The first had to do with determining who was a true Muslim and who was not and the second had to do with exhorting fellow Salafis to declare their loyalty to Saudi rulers.\(^34\) QSS required one to label themselves Salafī and to be loyal to the Saudi throne whereas IANA did not take such a stand.\(^35\) As a result, the two movements drifted apart and factional alignments emerged. As positions or attitudes hardened, the conflict widened, and soon engulfed other Salafīs in the dispute. The factions began to trade accusations that affected unity and ended up paralyzing the Salafī community.

To make matters worse, the 9/11 tragedy in 2001 impacted the Salafī movement far more negatively than any other Muslim group or organization in the country. For one thing, the Salafī isolationism and keeping a distance from fellow Muslims whose support they had not cultivated, left them unprepared to deal with the changed political situation; for another, their disdain for non-Muslims and the values of the larger society in which they lived equally exposed them to suspicion and misunderstanding especially as it became clear that the majority of the hijackers were Saudis.\(^36\) The dilemma they faced was this: how were they going to deal with the post-9/11 world of

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\(^{35}\) See, ibid.

the larger American society that they had so far avoided? Not surprisingly, therefore, in 2003 sixteen faculty members at the Institute in Fairfax (for instance, Ja’far Shaykh Idrīs and Shaykh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Fawzān) were asked to leave the country. This was presumably part of the effort of the State Department to curb the activities of the Islamic Affairs Section of the Saudi Embassy that was perceived to be involved in intolerant religious rhetoric.

Worse, American-born Salafī scholars such as Shaykh ‘Alī al-Tamīmī were jailed on the charge of inciting young Muslims to wage war against the United States. This threw the Salafī movement into disarray as Salafīs were now being accused of participating in or aiding terrorism. Almost immediately IANA was disbanded, especially in this atmosphere of suspicion, and Salafīs, because of their close connections to Saudi Arabia by way of doctrinal teachings and organizational funding, became easy targets. Dar al-Arqam Islamic Center in Falls Church was shut down and the Saudi-run Institute of Islamic and Arabic Sciences in America (IIASA) has no longer any students.  

The Salafī movement continued to face attrition of membership due to the ideological fall-out within the movement itself and also the political consequences of the 9/11 tragedy. Salafīs attracted the attention of authorities precisely due to the types of literature they have produced or the style of their speeches and the things they have said in them whether or not they meant them, for instance, blaming Sufis, Jews and Christians for the problems of Muslims. Moreover, their tendency to attack other Muslims, whose practices they labelled as being deviated, left them open to criticism too by their detractors such as Shaykh Hisham Kabbani (head of the Naqshaband Sufi group in North America). He denounced Salafīs, and even other mainstream Muslim organizations/groups as extremists even as he positioned himself as the leader of “moderate” Islam. He conveniently appropriated the language of 9/11 in which politicians in America were attempting to differentiate between a small Muslim extremist group and the purveyors of more “moderate” expressions of Islam.  

37 See, ibid.

38 See, Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *The “Salafi” Movement Unveiled* (Mountain View, California: As-Sunnah Foundation of America, 1998). See also other online material posted by Hisham Kabbani’s group in defence of its Sufi beliefs and as a response to Salafi attacks. See, Jamil Effendi al-Zahawi, “The Doctrine of Ahl al-Sunna versus the “Wahhabi-Salafi” Movement” at: <www.islamicsupremecouncil.org/bin/site/ftp/salafidocctrine.pdf>. In other articles, Salafīs are equated by their critics with the Khawārij of early Islam that tended to declare other Muslims to be outside the fold of Islam. See, Shaykh Muhammad Hisham Kabbani, *The Doctrine of Ahl al-Sunnah versus the “Salafi” Movement* (Mountain View, CA: As-Sunnah Foundation of America, 1996). As for prominent leaders affiliated with ISNA such as Shaykh Taha Jabir al-Alwani, head of ISNA Fiqh Council, and prominently associated with
Prospects for Salafism in the Future

The above developments have partly led to a shift away from the strict Salafi adherence to literal Islam within the African American Muslim community. Even in Saudi Arabia itself, there are a few who are now calling for a relaxing of the strict rules or interpretations that women be fully covered from top to bottom. They also recognize the need to develop harmonious relations with other faith communities and tone down on the negative rhetoric against others. The resistance to such change is deep and is likely to remain so unless variant interpretations of Islam are introduced and become a permanent fixture in the educational curriculum of traditional Islamic schools and universities.

It remains to be seen whether Salafism is a spent force or whether it could regenerate itself and become a wave of the future in the African American community. It should be remembered that during the height of animosity to Islam following the Islamic revolution in Iran there was a surge of interest in Islam in the West as well as elsewhere. Similarly, the post-9/11 anti-Islam propaganda and negative coverage of Islam in the media as well as the vicious attacks on Islam on the internet have given Islam a certain notoriety that may attract those who feel disenfranchised in America (especially the black youth). Even among Muslims, as long as their communities continue to feel beleaguered (FBI surveillance of Islamic centers is public knowledge) and they do not see the gains of integration under such conditions some may find Salafism (and its rejection of Western values and society) to be quite attractive and welcoming.

Yet, to be successful, in the long run, Salafism needs to shed some of its oversimplistic methodological tactics of dividing the world into “us” and “them,” especially in a world where bridges of understanding need to be built to lessen inter and intra-religious tensions. More seriously, is it a coincidence that the Hanbali school of law (out of which Salafism emerges) is the least dispersed of all the four Sunni legal schools (being virtually limited to Saudi Arabia and some of the neighbouring Gulf shaykhdoms). Saudi financial

International Institute of Islamic Thought, presumably the post-9–11 air of suspicion that surrounds Muslim leaders such as himself (not to mention the FBI interrogations and searches of IIIT and its main officials homes) led him to move on to Egypt where he now lives. According to Ihsan Bagby, a lead researcher in the study by the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a Michigan-based US policy think tank, only about 8% of Muslim mosque goers identified themselves as Salafi or Wahhabi. See, Amanda Mantone, “Survey Says U.S. Muslims Not Extremist, Want to be Engaged,” Religion New Service, available at: <http://www.beliefnet.com/story/144/story_14404_1.html>.

See, Karen Armstrong, “The Label of Catholic Terror was Never Used About the IRA,” The Guardian (Monday July 11, 2005).
resources have almost single handedly provided it a platform for export to the rest of the Muslim world. The strict teachings of Ḣanbalī scholars (such as the Saudi Shaykh ‘Abd al-Aziz ibn Bâz (d. 1420/1999) and Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Uthaymīn and others provide, in the opinion of its staunch critics, too narrow a scope of interpretation of Islam to be suitable for those living in North America who, moreover, have to deal with non-Muslim family members. Besides, the attitude of reservation towards local cultures tends to invalidate the whole African American experience in the US. Moreover, it is rather simplistic to expect indigenous or American-born Muslims to give up their cultures while immigrant Muslims, especially those who belong to the first generation, retain their own ethnic and cultural networks from which they draw friendships, business alliances and even marriage bonds. This represents one of the faultlines of Islam’s development and adaptation in North America.

Relations between Immigrant and Indigenous Muslim Communities

The tensions delineated above clearly set up and promote ongoing issues between immigrant and native born Muslims, some of which are class based and others cultural. For instance, should American-born Muslims assimilate all the values of the immigrants, along with their cultural baggage that they bring with them, or seek to define their vision of Islam in terms of the American experience? Are immigrants willing to commit their resources to solving the ongoing social problems that affect African Americans and especially those living in the poor neighbourhoods? It is one thing for an African American Muslim to seek an “authentic” experience of Islam; it is another for him to live virtually an isolated life with no meaningful social interaction between himself and his/her economically well positioned immigrant co-religionists. 41 African American Muslims cannot understand why immigrants will send donations to all sorts of causes in other countries forgetting to address the economic plight of their religious compatriots here in the US. Moreover, they do not understand why prayers are addressed to God to ease the problems of Muslims in Palestine, Kashmir, etc., whereas no mention is made of the problems of the inner city dwellers in the US. Furthermore, there have been complaints by African American Muslim leaders that immigrant Muslims have not been as

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41 This reverses the situation where in early Islam assistance flowed from the local Muslim community of Madīnah (Helpers/Anṣār) to the Muslim Migrants from Makkah (Muhājirūn). In America it is the local Muslim community (“Anṣār”) that need assistance given the unique historical circumstances in which they find themselves by virtue of “race” as economically marginalized.
willing to join in the rallies to protest police brutalities, for instance, after the shooting in 1999 of the West African Muslim, Amadou Diallo.\textsuperscript{42}

The situation in America is such that during the last several decades Islam in America has come to be dominated by the immigrant experience with its emphasis on the authority of the texts and religious developments within Islam during the formative period of its history. This has become the normative Islam against which expressions of Islam within the African American community have to come to terms with. The dilemma here is the fact that the Islam of the immigrant Muslim communities brings with it a different cultural experience to the table. This includes reservations or disaffection with American foreign policies in the Muslim world on the part of some as well as the fear of its permissive or sexually saturated pop culture on the part of others even as they, ironically, embrace its American dream of making it in the consumerist or consumption-driven white world.\textsuperscript{43} The African American “Western” experience (born out of the culture of black oppression but being rooted in America) was seen as lacking authenticity of the “stamp” of normative Islam. This is something that African American Muslims have struggled with—their choices ranging from and seeking full immersion in Islam as it is practised by Pakistanis or Arabs to the black


\textsuperscript{43} Young South Asian Muslims have complained about parental pressure to pursue certain professions (medicine, engineering, etc.) that bring one closer to the parents’ dream of their sons/daughters acquiring a big house, a big car, etc. The problem is that the son/daughter may want to specialize in what they consider to be of interest to them (for instance, training to be an English or history teacher) much to the disappointment of their parents. See, Aminah Mohammad-Arif, “A Masala Identity: Young South Asian Muslims in the US,” \textit{Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East}, 20: 1&2 (2000), 67–87. There is a further complicating factor for these Muslim and non-Muslim young South Asians who have to deal with the issue of skin colour and marriage marketability as Zareena Grewal and others have shown in their studies. See, Zareena Grewal, “Marriage in Colour: Race, Religion and Spouse Selection in Four American Mosques,” \textit{Ethnic and Racial Studies} (11 April 2008). This is further exemplified by online matrimonial sites such as Shaadi.com that perpetuates the South Asian tradition of privileging fair-skinned over dark (thus reinforcing skin colour hierarchies) and promoting prejudice based on skin colour. See, “JADE magazine.com” (May/June 2006). In fact, skin lightening creams are very popular among South Asians as they have been among black Americans. While race is important in the US and functions as caste does in India, yet, as Jennifer Hoschild put it, ultimately, skin colour rather than race is the better indicator of status in the US (where the darker you are the worse off you are on any scale of desirability). See her article, “From Nominal to Ordinal: Reconceiving Racial and Ethnic Hierarchy in the United States,” in Christina Wolbrecht and Rodney Hero, eds. \textit{The Politics of Democratic Inclusion} (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005).
nationalism/empowerment experience of Louis Farrakhan’s group that seeks a different experience.

The “Third Resurrection” of Islam in the African American Community?

Surveying the Islamic scene in America, Sherman Jackson has argued, quite correctly, that the current challenge for African American Muslims has become “how to negotiate a dignified, black, American existence without flouting the legitimate aspects of the agenda of Black Religion [which authenticates black experience in the US] or vesting the latter with too much authority, and without falling victim to the ideological claims, prejudices, and false obsessions of Immigrant Islam.” For him the way to overcome this challenge will be for African American Muslims to attempt to acquire both a mastery and an appropriation of the overarching or super-tradition of Sunni Islam. This is what he calls the Third Resurrection following the historical trajectory that starts with the Nation of Islam and ends with the Sunni phase of Islam under the leadership of Elijah Muhammad’s son, Warith Deen Muhammad. This will enable them to forge an American-Islamic identity within their community that is informed by Islamic teachings yet is free from domination by the immigrant Muslim community due to its privileged position in terms of access to sources of historical Islam. The Third Resurrection (as Jackson hopes) more than likely will represent the phase of Islam within the African American community in which discourses on Islam will take the place of charismatic leadership of figures such as Elijah Muhammad, Warith Deen Muhammad or even Louis Farrakhan as his group negotiates a path to the future, especially after his demise.

A legitimate question to ask is why it is that the African American community has not produced a sufficient or large number of Islamic scholars even after three decades of having embraced Sunni Islam? One is more likely to find an abundance of Islamic activists, preachers and mosque imāms but not scholars well versed in Islamic learning who can competently offer fatwās

45 See, ibid.
46 I believe Sherman Jackson is using the words “charismatic leadership” not so much to mean leaders with oratorical skills (which both Warith Deen Muhammad and his father Elijah Muhammad lacked) but those with special power or authority that inspires loyalty and obedience from their followers (the way they have done). As a matter of fact, as I have been informed by Dante Tawfeeq, an African American Muslim professor at Adelphi University, Clemen al-Amin or Fahim Suhaib are far better speakers than their leader, Wallace/Warith Deen Muhammad.
(religious rulings) and tease out new meanings/interpretations from Islamic texts and legal precedents to apply to the local situation in America. What is needed at best is a type of Majlis al-‘Ulamā’ or Scholars’ Council whose task is to offer fatwās that are inspired by ideas of reform to harness Islamic teachings of fairness and fair play, keeping appointments/punctuality, cleanliness in our neighbourhoods, trustworthiness and reliability, accountability and mutual consultation, equitable treatment of women, to equivalent local ideas within the American culture. This should free the local scholars from slavish acceptance of every religious ruling by scholars of a different age or those who are living in far away Muslim lands where conditions of life are different from those that exist in the US. This process would initiate a discussion on Islam in America that does not remain fixated at the level of ritual or social practices (how long the beard should be, should a wife ask permission to go out, etc.) but more substantially would seek to realize the basic precepts of Islam in an American environment. This would affirm the necessity of independent reasoning (ijtihād) on the basis of Qur’ān and Hadīth and would widen the fiqh discourse beyond the discussion and uncritical imitation (taqlīd) of the standard interpretation of the schools of law. Even though Hanbalism/Salafism recognizes ijtihād but does very little with it by way of bold new interpretations. This will contribute to shaping new forms of religious expression and new and different voices will be heard as more conceptual and even gender spaces open up.

American-born ‘ulamā’/scholars could operate through an ‘Ulamā’ Council that could begin to articulate religious positions that reflect the needs of the community. They could also act as spokespersons for the Muslim community on various issues as they arise. For this to happen though their training has to be diverse with some receiving their Islamic training in countries as far apart as South Africa at one end and Indonesia at the other. In other words, transmission of religious ideas should not be from only one country or one part of the world such as the Middle East. Other regions of the Muslim world should not be ruled out as possible centres for pursuing Islamic studies. This does not in any way diminish the role of the Middle East as a major player in training the future scholars; after all, the fortunes of Islam are tied up with this region where the location of Islam’s holy places and hallowed centres of learning are found.

Whither Islam?: Negotiating between Black Experience and Historical Islam

Will African American Muslim leaders continue to make black struggle a part of their Islamic mission? Is their community, given the concern about the
crisis of black leadership, producing a more efficient leadership than their counterpart in the Christian communities? How would these leaders be classified following Cornel West’s topography?: race-effacing managerial leaders, i.e. those who seek to fit in with whatever is mainstream; race identifying protest leaders, i.e. confine themselves to the black turf as Louis Farrakhan does; and race transcending “prophetic” leaders, a rare type who have personal integrity and political savvy, moral vision and prudential judgement, courageous defiance and organizational patience. Cornel West criticizes the race identifying protest leaders such as Louis Farrakhan as being committed to protecting their leadership status over the black turf and serving as power brokers with powerful non-black elites e.g. Libyan. One can seek black empowerment at the same time that they develop common goals with all justice-loving activists of all ethnic and racial backgrounds. In any case, Farrakhan’s Nation of Islam (NOI) seems to be less involved in public debates over issues of race and is less posturing for leadership within the black community since the Million Man March of 1995.

Prospects for Cooperation between Immigrant and African American Muslims

One of the interesting consequences of 9/11 is that immigrant Muslims are now more willing to consult African Americans on civil rights issues over which African Americans have a lot of experience. There are also more attempts by immigrant-run Muslim organizations and some mosque centres to reach out more to African American leaders to forge alliances and to seek solution to common problems. This partly stems from the fact that African American Muslim leaders felt betrayed by a coalition of immigrant Muslims who endorsed George W. Bush as a candidate for Presidency [in 2000], supposedly due to a promise to end the profiling of Arabs. This led African American Muslim leaders, such as Imam Siraj Wahhaj of Masjid Taqwa in Brooklyn, NY, Imam al-Hajj Talib Abdur-Rashid of the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood also in Brooklyn and others to establish their own organization called the Muslim Alliance in North America (MANA) that would address social and economic problems within the Muslim community and meet the

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49 In any case, holding on the same weekend two conventions in separate parts of the same city (Chicago) one sponsored mainly by the immigrant community (ISNA) and the other by Wallace Deen Muhammad’s Muslim American Society is hardly the way to build Muslim unity.
urgent needs, especially of those who live in the inner cities. The immigrant Muslims soon regretted having endorsed Bush for Presidency as they realized that they had become the prime targets of not only profiling but also routine FBI surveillance, something African Americans had experienced since the days of the radical black activist movements of the 1950s/60s onwards. This unfortunate turn of events has forced the two Muslim groups, immigrant and indigenous, to come together to address civil rights concerns that affect Muslims and to map out areas where their efforts should be channelled. African Americans have better mobilization skills, given their civil rights struggles and their continuing experience of police brutality in some of the big cities, etc. The immigrant Muslims have more financial resources that are reflected in better run and better funded facilities/mosque organizations compared to some of the African American Muslim centres such as the Mosque of Islamic Brotherhood in Brooklyn whose members are mostly working class and up to a third, former convicts.

Muslim leaders, in pursuit of social justice and promotion of the good of the community, have the example of the trail blazers such as Malcolm X and others to guide them in dealing with the chronic problems affecting the African American community, including unemployment, high incarceration rates especially among black men, broken families, gang wars, drug and violent crime. Moreover, they also have to come to terms with the problems of psychological despair, especially nihilism or horrifying meaninglessness, described by Cornel West as an intractable disease of the soul, that continue to affect black communities of the inner cities. Failure to address these issues on Islamic platforms by simply substituting detached, uncaring faith for social analysis and social programmes that seek to make a difference in people’s lives will not be the solution for a community that prides itself on its legacy of compassion and care for the poor. Beyond this the need for reconciling diverse Muslim communities calls for immigrant and indigenous Muslims to interact at a more meaningful level to make the Islamic brotherhood not merely an empty rhetoric of *khutbahs* (sermons). Accordingly, Imam al-Hajj Talib Abdur-Rashid’s reported statement that he “feels more comfortable with the Senegalese and Guinean Muslims who have settled in Harlem than with many Arabs or South Asians” stands out as a gauntlet thrown down to the two sections of the North American Muslim community to work harmoniously.

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51 See, Andrea Elliott, “Between Black and Immigrant Muslims: An Uneasy Alliance.”
53 See, Andrea Elliott, “Between Black and Immigrant Muslims: An Uneasy Alliance.”
together. This is the challenge that needs to be boldly faced to bridge the cultural, ethnic/race and class-based chasm that separates the Muslims of middle class suburbia from those of the inner city.  

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54 There has been some accommodation at the elite level, with a number of African American Muslim leaders/scholars/Imams being regular speakers at ISNA and ICNA annual conferences and some have served in leadership position in organizations such as the American Muslim Council. Imam Siraj Wahhaj has served in a leadership position with ISNA. Khalid Griggs has served as the Editor of The Message, Magazine published by ICNA.