Muslim Women in America

The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today

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Setting the Scene

"We are now engaged in a worldwide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the Taliban," declared Laura Bush, First Lady of the United States, two months after September 11, 2001. In this unprecedented radio address to the nation, Mrs. Bush invoked a theme that echoed the Western characterization of Islam and its females. It identified the oppression of women as intimately linked to what is often portrayed as the violent nature of the religion and affirmed that the cause of liberating Muslim women from their bondage is part of the American mission to the Islamic world. Mrs. Bush argued that the cruel oppression of women experienced in Afghanistan is a central goal of the terrorists who would like to impose their will on the rest of the world. Saving the women of Islam became part of the post-9/11 Western agenda.

It is true, of course, that the Bush administration was targeting one of the most extreme interpretations of Islam, dominant in Pakistan and Afghanistan and enforced by the Taliban. At the same time the White House was attempting to assuage criticism from Muslim allies by assuring them and the American public that "moderate" Islam is a respectable faith and that the war on terrorism is not a war against Islam. For many Americans, however, the distinction is not always easy to see. When the U.S. military overthrew Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the administration asserted that women's rights would be one of the most important goals in its effort to mold Iraq into a model of democracy for the other countries of the Arab world to emulate. It is a sad irony that in some cases the war appears to have generated more restrictions

elsewhere in the Muslim world, many women pursued careers and other personal goals in spite of the generally oppressive political atmosphere. At least in the short term, they appear to have lost a great deal in the wake of chronic violence and the growth of religious conservative zeal in "postwar" Iraq.

The issue is not whether repression of women has been present in Muslim cultures or whether it is unique to these societies. It has existed and continues to exist in some Islamic countries, as is true of other cultures, and some American Muslim women have been working in collaboration with their counterparts in various parts of the world to help institute the parity between men and women that they believe to be a fundamental tenet of Islam as revealed in the Qur'an. A recent Internet article written by a woman who emigrated from Lebanon in the mid-1960s advises Americans to beware of making too-easy assumptions about Arab and Muslim women that have little to do with their realities, asserting that most women in the Middle East would find Western stereotypes of Muslim women simply alien to their own experiences. What Americans should do, she proposes, is to think of Arab and Muslim women not in terms of a bin Laden model but rather of a Betty Crocker model, with women choosing to attend to their family responsibilities rather than to their personal freedoms. The various stereotypes of Muslim women that have held sway in the Western imagination are detailed in chapter 2, "Persistent Stereotypes."

Western association of the religion of Islam with the violent oppression of women has been used by more than one American administration to engender emotional support for American adventures overseas. The by-product has been misunderstanding and prejudice, making life more difficult—not easier—for Muslim women living in the United States and Canada. They must contend not only with the rising level of anti-Islamic sentiment but also with the increasingly popular belief that Islam treats women, at best, as second-class citizens. The appeal for a better understanding of the true relationship of women and men in Islam, and the acknowledgment that many of the traditional roles and expectations for Muslim women are changing, often most notably in the West, are high on the agenda of many American Muslims who are trying to determine how they will define themselves in the early part of the twenty-first century.

Muslims living in North America today comprise the most diverse population in the history of Islam. They are immigrants and native-born Americans representing most of the races and cultural groupings of the world. They speak a wide variety of languages and represent a range of cultural, economic, educational, sectarian, and ideological positions. Muslim women in America may or may not choose to publicly identify themselves with Islam as a religion and a way of life. Yet all of them, in one way or another, are facing the compelling questions of how to understand themselves as Americans and how to define themselves so as to be understood by their fellow citizens.

Where Did They Come From?

The first Muslims to begin the process of becoming American, aside from a very few African Muslim slaves who managed to retain their faith, were those who arrived in the West in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They came from the rural areas of what was known as Greater Syria, which included the current states of Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, then part of the Ottoman Empire. They were part of a group of migrant laborers, mostly Christian men with a smattering of Sunni, Shi'ite, 'Alawi and Druze Muslims. They worked as peddlers, laborers, and merchants, intending to stay only long enough to save enough money to return to their villages and build homes or establish businesses. Men first earned their livelihood by establishing small ethnic businesses such as restaurants, coffeehouses, bakeries, and grocery stores.

As Muslims realized that the option to return home was no longer viable, they began to settle down on the East Coast, in the Midwest, and as far as the Pacific coast. The early Muslims who settled in the United States often suffered from loneliness, poverty, lack of language skill, and the absence of extended family and co-religionists. Sometimes they imported Muslim brides from the home country, and sometimes they married outside the faith. By the early 1900s more women arrived to constitute Muslim families in America. As women began to join their men, many were forced for economic reasons to find employment in mills and factories, where they worked long hours under very difficult conditions. Seldom did they find life in America to be easy. Despite the rhetoric of a country founded on the backs of immigrants and serving as a "melting pot" for all races and ethnic identities, they often encountered anti-Muslim and anti-Arab prejudice, complicated by the fact that their sometimes darker skin subjected them to various forms of racial prejudice. In many cases such designators as "sand nigger" or "rag-head" were used as epithets.

Immigration of Muslims was curtailed with the passage of U.S. immigration laws in 1921 and 1924 that imposed quotas on certain nations, restricting the number from the Middle East to 100 per year. During the 1930s, the movement of Muslims to America slowed to a dribble, limited specifically to relatives of persons already resident in the United States. After the end of World War II a new kind of immigrant began to come from the Muslim Middle East, often one who had been educated in European and American schools established by colonial rulers and Christian missionaries. A few emigrated for political, economic, or religious reasons, and some joined relatives who had arrived earlier and were already established in the United States.

Between 1947 and 1960, a small number of Muslims arrived from countries well beyond the Middle East, including Eastern Europe and the

Soviet Union, and a smattering came from India and Pakistan, fleeing turmoil after the 1947 partition of the subcontinent. While many of the earlier immigrants had moved into rural as well as urban areas of the United States, the new immigrants tended to be urban in background and made their homes almost exclusively in major cities such as New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Some were members of former ruling elite families. They were generally more Westernized than their predecessors and better educated, and many came with the hope of completing their education and technical training in America.

The majority of Muslim immigrants came after 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson sponsored a bill that repealed the long-standing "national origins" quota system that heavily favored European immigration. Instead of basing immigration quotas on countries of origin, the new policy established preferences for family reunification, occupational preferences in fields for which the native-born workforce was low, and the granting of asylum to refugees. This new immigration policy meant that waves of immigrants began to come from nations that had not previously been the main countries of emigration. Many Muslim professionals, most notably from Iran, Pakistan, and India, first came to the United States between 1950 and 1980 as university students. Many stayed under the provisions of the Immigration Act of 1965, finding employment in fields for which there was a shortage of professionals. The networks they formed served as the basis for future immigration of more Muslims in the 1980s and 1990s under the preference system for family unification.

A number of events in other parts of the Islamic world in recent years have created powerful incentives for those who were either affluent enough or were sponsored by relief agencies to seek haven in the West. The 1967 Israeli preemptive attack on Egypt, Syria, and the West Bank began an exodus of Palestinians to Western Europe and the Americas (particularly Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela) that still continues. It also opened up Egyptian immigration, until that time restricted by Egyptian President Gamal Abdul Nasser. The Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasions of Lebanon in 1978 and 1982 precipitated the emigration of significant numbers of Shi'ite Muslims from South Lebanon to the United States. After the Iranian Revolution that brought Imam Khomeini to power in 1979, those who were committed to the regime of the Shah, or did not agree with the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini, were prompted to seek a better and safer life elsewhere. Until 1980, the American government granted refugee status to those Iranians seeking to emigrate to the United States. Many relocated in California, where today Los Angeles has the largest expatriate Iranian community in the nation.

While immigration from South Asia (Pakistanis, Indians, and Bangladeshis) was severely restricted from 1882 until after World War II, in the last several decades many more immigrants from that area have arrived on the American scene for education, work, and family unification. Today they constitute the largest immigrant group, and many of them, including women, are skilled professionals. Despite the fact that the United States government enacted a special restriction on immigration from Muslim nations in the 1980s, political strife and civil war in various nations have brought refugees from Somalia, Sudan and other African countries, Afghanistan, and victims of ethnic cleansing in the former Yugoslavia. Lately, many North Africans have arrived under provisions of the 1980 refugee law or the 1990 immigration law. The latter created a "diversity" visa, granted by lottery, for people from nations that have had low immigration rates to the United States since 1965. Initially established in 1990 to encourage newcomers from former communist nations in Eastern Europe, the diversity law has allowed visas to be awarded to several thousand individuals from predominantly Muslim countries, such as Bangladesh, Egypt, Algeria, Sudan, Somalia, and Morocco.

A major segment of the Muslim population in the United States is neither immigrant nor of immigrant parentage but is part of the indigenous population. The majority are African Americans (perhaps a third of the Muslim population), with much smaller numbers of Latino/Latinas (some of whom themselves are recently arrived or from immigrant families), Native Americans, and Caucasian citizens who have chosen to adopt Islam. In the first three quarters of the twentieth century, most African-American Muslims were either members of the Nation of Islam (NOI), formed in the 1930s, or of much smaller movements such as the Moorish American Temple, formed by Noble Drew Ali in the early twentieth century. The death in 1975 of Elijah Muhammad, founder of the NOI, precipitated a leadership struggle. The two contenders were Louis Farrakhan and Elijah's son Wallace Muhammad. The latter, who took the name Warith Deen Mohammed, formally succeeded his father. Many African Americans have followed his subsequent leadership out of the Nation and into mainline Sunni Islam, while others have joined other Sunni mosques and communities. Some African American Muslims are part of the many sectarian or heterodox movements within Islam, and others continue to be affiliated with Farrakhan's Nation of Islam. A few African Americans affiliate with Shi'ism. Conversion to Islam of women—African American, Caucasian, Latina, Native American, and other—is the subject of chapter 3, "Embracing Islam."

Religious Identities

Reflecting the affiliation of the Muslim population of the world, most American Muslims of all racial-ethnic identities are Sunni. While only an estimated 10 percent of the world's Muslims are Shi'ites, however, in the United States they may constitute about 20 percent. Most are Ithna 'Ashari or

Twelver Shi'ites, with smaller numbers from the Isma'ili or Sevener and the Zaidi branches. Both Sunni and Shi'ite communities are to be found in all of the major cities of North America. Many American Muslim women do not actively practice their faith. While those who do share many commonalities, certain religious practices serve to distinguish them. Conservative Sunnis are increasingly looking to the wives of the Prophet, designated as the "Mothers of the Believers," as role models or guides providing images of strength, learning, professionalism, and piety worthy of emulation. These models are especially important to American women who are eager to find validation for the full participation of women in the public arena and particularly in leadership positions. Chapter 7, "Claiming Public Space," explores some of these new leadership roles. Many Shi'ite women look to the Prophet's daughter Fatima, mother of Muhammad's martyred grandson Husayn, as a model for spiritual guidance, and participate in ritual activities remembering the suffering of Fatima and the family of the Prophet.

A small but important number of Muslims, cutting across sectarian and racial/ethnic lines, are part of Sufi or so-called mystical movements of Islam. Along with a few traditional orders existing in America in the middle of the twentieth century, Sufi groups often reflected aspects of the New Age movement. More recently there has been a growth in adherence to more traditional Sufi orders in the United States, with leaders trained in the classical disciplines. The music, the dance, the ritual, and the fellowship make Sufism an engaging practice for some American women. A few Sufi orders in the West allow women to take part in ceremonies that formerly were available only to men. Others find in Sufism the opportunity to combine the mystical and spiritual (often very emotional) aspects of faith with the intellectual rigor required of the serious student of Sufism. Many women see Sufi Islam as liberating all Muslims from legal restrictions and freeing women from many of the customs that suggest men have more rights and responsibilities in Islam. Increasingly Sufism is being cast by some as the valid expression of Islam compatible with American policies, a counter to the more legalistic expressions propagated by conservative movements such as the Salafis and Wahhabis.

Some women express their allegiance to Islam in very public ways. Rejecting the social norms of Western culture, they try to dress, speak, and live in as close adherence as possible to what they understand to be the dictates of the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet. Others may practice Islam in private and with their families but do not choose to show publicly that they are Muslim. Only a fairly small percent actually participate in the life of a mosque, however, or attend services, except perhaps for the major festivals. For the majority, being Muslim may not be their most important focus of identity, and they seldom if ever frequent the mosque, even for Islamic holidays, and would never consider wearing conservative Islamic dress. See chapter 4, "Practices of the Faith," for a fuller examination of the religious activities of

both Sunni and Shi'ite women and some of the new ways in which women are challenging what they see as outdated and patriarchal traditions.

Islamic Dress

Among the most visible ways a woman can affirm her identity with Islam is by wearing Islamic dress. The majority of Muslim women in America choose not to wear garb that would distinguish them from the rest of society for a variety of reasons: they never did so before coming to America; they were born in America and have no desire to wear distinguishing garb; they do not want to be pushed into such a choice by friends or family; they do not want to draw attention to themselves or to have other Americans know they are Muslims because it may cause discomfort or discrimination; they believe that in time they may decide to dress more modestly but are not ready to "take the step"; they do not like the look of most Islamically-fashioned outfits; or they refuse to wear anything that will make them uncomfortable ("Summers in Houston are bad enough without all that extra material wrapped around me. . . ."). Many simply have never given serious consideration to wearing so-called modest dress. "I'm a very modest person and I hope my dealings with others reflect that," says a young university student in the Midwest. "Why do I have to prove it by what I choose to wear?"

Various terms are used to describe the clothing that is loosely referred to as Islamic dress. *Hijab*, veil, and scarf refer to a head cover, which is worn either with conservative clothing such as a long skirt and long sleeves or with some kind of robe which may have different names determined by regional or cultural association. Only a portion of the female Muslim population in America wears the *hijab* or other Islamic dress, and not all religiously observant women feel that it is required. What most Muslim women do agree on, whatever they choose to wear, is that conservative dress does *not* represent constriction, repression, or any of the other terms by which Westerners have generally understood the Muslim woman's "condition." Women who dress Islamically insist that their choice affords them freedom, liberation, relief, and even great joy.

It is no secret to anyone who travels, watches the news on television, or reads even popular journals that Muslims overseas have moved steadily toward the adoption of Islamic dress for a great many personal, religious, social, and political reasons. In the late 1980s, at an international women's gathering at Harvard's Center for the Study of World Religions, two of the doyennes of women's rights in Islam were discussing the apparently growing adoption of the veil in Cairo. Fellow Cairene Nawal Sa'dawi, famous for her work in opposing female circumcision practices in Egypt, argued that the veil was a passing fad that the great majority of Egyptian women would never tolerate.

Her Morroccan colleague Fatima Mernissi, best known for her expose of the traditional treatment of women titled *Beyond the Veil*, agreed entirely, and the two laughed merrily at the images on a new video showing Cairene women in various stages of "Islamic cover." They both felt that the filmmaker was distorting reality and presenting a false image of the situation in Egypt. They regarded veiling as a very limited phenomenon connected to the pressures of urbanization as more rural peasants moved to the city centers for jobs and education. They also questioned the filmmaker's motives and wondered whether she was a CIA agent who was propagating the veil! At the time, they were not ready to concede that the re-Islamization movement was underway in Egypt. To some real extent it must be acknowledged that the appropriation of Islamic garb by Muslim women in the United States is part of an international movement whose complex causes have been analyzed in a range of contemporary literature.

For many American Muslim women, dressing Islamically—which in its most common form means covering the hair, arms, and legs—is not about coercion but about making choices, about "choosing" an identity and expressing a religiosity through their mode of dress. Some women say that by veiling they are making a statement against Western imperialism, which sees Muslim piety as a sign of terrorism, and against conservative Islam, which seeks to impose a traditionalist understanding of Islam that oppresses women. Others consider it a signal of purity, and say that it curbs their sexuality and/or their sex appeal. Paradoxically, some have noted that they had expected that wearing the headscarf would end the objectification of their bodies but instead have found that they became more frequent "objects" of Western gaze. Many young Muslim women are wearing the headscarf as a means of expressing identity and spirituality as well as modesty. One group of college women raised money selling T-shirts with the logo, "We cover our hair, not our brains."

Most immigrants continue to wear the Western dress they were wearing before coming to the United States. Others who had turned to Islamic garb before they moved continue to wear it in the new environment. Many convert women, though far from all, decide to wear a form of Islamic dress. In general, Muslim women do cover themselves in one way or another when they attend the mosque. Within the Islamic community itself the issue can be divisive. Those who choose to wear the *hijab* are sometimes sharply critical of other Muslims who are not comfortable with it or do not feel that it is appropriate for them. Those who leave their heads uncovered may consider some of their sisters a bit overzealous in the degree of their insistence on Islamic dress.

A few families allow daughters to begin dressing Islamically at a very young age, perhaps pressured by Islamic schools or other groups to do so. At the Shi'ite Islamic House of Wisdom meeting of the Muslim Scouts of Michigan in May of 2004, a play titled "The Path" portrayed the struggle of prepubescent girls (ages eight through eleven) about whether or not to veil.

Devils were represented as tempting the young girls at the time of the Taklif festival, which marks their entry into adulthood, telling them it was too early to hide their cuteness. Angels then appeared, reminding them that their real beauty is in their faith. Some parents agree that the age of puberty is the right time for girls to adopt the veil, while others encourage them to postpone such a decision until they are older. Many Muslim families strongly disapprove of a daughter's desire to veil, no matter what her age, while a few may force their daughters to veil as early as kindergarten.

Wearing Islamic dress is growing in popularity among Muslim youth, both in high schools and on college campuses. Some Muslim Student Association members report that girls need to wear *hijab* to be considered "cool" in the MSA, although they may remove it when not at association meetings. Dressing Islamically sometimes presents practical problems on college campuses. Andrea Armstrong, University of South Florida women's basketball star who was seeking NCAA approval to wear religious clothing during practices and games, quit her team in September 2004 on the grounds that she did not want her religion to be a distraction to the team. Friends say that the real reason was the hate e-mails she was receiving. Another basketball player who wanted to wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, and a headscarf with her uniform during games was approved by the NCAA, only to be told by her coach that such dress would make her teammates uncomfortable and thus was not allowed. Young women in sports such as volleyball, track and field, and even kick-boxing may get official approval for special dress by school boards and athletic associations, but experience significant disapproval at the local level.

Islamic dress, along with being religiously mandated for some, is also big business. Women can find all manner of dress available, from head coverings of many different kinds to long robes and pantsuits. Some outfits are ready-made while others can be fitted to the individual customer. Production houses with names like "The Hijab Boutique" or "Islamic House of Beauty," for example, offer ready-made or styled-to-order clothing for women, men, and children, and many items are available from online catalogs. Women running such establishments are generally able and willing to create any special fashions that their customers would like. Some Islamic boutiques offer a wide variety of Islamic wedding gowns "for your special day." Or for those who need individualized styling, "full figure designs" are readily available. Many stores feature imported Islamic wear such as the *hijab*, *niqab* (full-face veil), and long dresses or robes called *jilbaab*, *burqa*, or other names depending on the style and country from which it comes. Some companies offer dress tailored in the style of the Indian subcontinent, featuring loose trousers and tunics known as *shalwar khameez*. Tailors report a steady flow of orders for various kinds of Islamic dress, while stores and retail houses specializing in assorted styles are burgeoning. Many accessories are available, including matching shoes, gloves, and jewelry. Pendants, earrings, pins, and other gold

and silver jewelry often contain words or brief passages from the Qur'an. Opportunities to dress both Islamically and stylishly are seemingly endless. General Network Limited, for example, advertises conservative but stylish clothing for the modern Muslima with the tagline: "Modesty is her way... elegance is her style."

African Americans have been particularly creative in developing fashions that fulfill the requirement of modesty but add a particular flair. *Azizah Magazine* recently featured a series of outfits produced by different clothing companies using African American models. The titles suggest the innovative design: *Urban Verve*—black gauze peasant top with a tangerine A-line skirt; kimono-styled wrap with vicuña-brown sash of crushed silk over slim harem pants; *City Style*—T-shirt with denim lettering over a long denim skirt with leather pockets, celery-green asymmetrical peasant top in crushed silk with boat neck and bell sleeves over flared denim skirt with floral silk paneling; *Urban Chic*—moss-green A-line dress with embroidered sleeves; green army fatigue A-line dress in comfortable rayon; *Modern Vintage*—A-line dress made from three pairs of denim pants; multicolored floral print cotton skirt with black diamond-shaped shirt; *After Five*—paisley and sequined wide-leg jumpsuit; rayon wrap dress in two tones of burnt orange. All models for Islamic dress wear some kind of head cover, from more traditional *hijab* to turbans or large beret-style hats. Designing and making these styles, referred to as "fiber arts," is the province of women in the United States, as opposed to most other countries where men are the stylists and tailors.

It is becoming very popular in various parts of the country to feature Islamic dress at specially designed fashion shows. The Council for American Islamic Relations in Dallas/Fort Worth, for example, hosted a show in April 2004 in which a variety of clothing stores participated. Attendees were offered a special discount on the clothing, with the option of donating the savings to the work of CAIR in that area. In the Silicon Valley of California in September 2003 a company called Flippant, headed by three Muslim women, featured its line of clothing at the Santa Clara Marriott Hotel. Its pitch was to "second-generation Muslim hipsters hungry to dress in something more than floor-length robes." Denying that their outfits were sexy, as that would be forbidden by Qur'anic injunction, they featured "beautiful fashions" such as splashy tie-dyed sari skirts, silky beaded formal wear and '60s-style flared jeans with embroidery. Some dresses had thigh-high slits, with modest leggings to be worn underneath.

What to wear, and how to wear it, is an important issue for many Muslim women in America, and non-Muslims are watching with interest as fashion, as well as modesty, plays a role in their choices. Chapter 2, "Persistent Stereotypes," discusses the veil as the most stereotypical symbol of what it means to be a Muslim woman in the eye of the average American.

Woman as Participants in American Society

Muslim women increasingly are full and active participants in American society and play major roles in virtually all aspects of professional life. Many immigrant men and women who arrived after 1965 on preference visas were highly educated professionals, including physicians, engineers, pharmacists, and similar professionals, coming from societies in which education is highly valued. For other Muslim women, however, education was not easily accessible in the countries from which they came, and life in the United States provides access to new freedoms and opportunities. Since primary and secondary education is mandated by law, all girls and women are guaranteed to receive an education in the American public school system. Muslim leaders are vocal in their insistence that education for all Muslims was part of the platform of the Prophet Muhammad, and that a viable American Muslim community must consist of well-educated females as well as males.

Increasingly, especially in the last several years, women have become more aware of the importance of being educated and well-versed in religious traditions and policies so that they can help spread accurate information about the religion of Islam to an often skeptical American public and can participate in the general movement of *da'wah* or calling to Islam. More conservative families, most notably first-generation South Asians and Yemenis and some of the refugees from South Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan, may prefer not to have daughters or wives continue with higher education, fearing that it will discourage them from fulfilling responsibilities at home or expose them to currents and trends contrary to traditional Muslim structures. In general, however, support for women's education in the American Muslim community is high.

While family support for the idea of Muslim women from immigrant families working outside the home is not always enthusiastic, many women are employed either by choice or because additional income is needed to meet family expenses. Most American Muslim women can and do drive or use other means of public transport, do the shopping for themselves and their families, and are able to access health care. Their particular needs can often be met by local social service centers offering assistance and counseling. Women increasingly are encouraged to vote and to participate in political processes by local and national Muslim organizations.

It is also true, however, that not all American Muslims feel that the growing rights and opportunities available to Muslim women are appropriate within the traditional understanding of Islam. As women differ in terms of place of origin, racial-ethnic affiliation, education and professional involvement, and observance of Islamic practice, they also differ in the degree to which they choose to identify with mainstream American life and culture.

Like other recently arrived immigrants, some who come from more conservative Islamic cultures believe that their children should keep as separate as possible from the prevailing culture. They worry that too much exposure to Western ways of doing things may lead Muslims away from their faith and diminish the importance of Islam as the basis for daily decision-making. Those who share this concern sometimes believe that women should be discouraged from engaging in activities outside the home. Some immigrant Muslim leaders in America have encouraged their co-religionists to keep as isolated as possible from public life.

Subject to pressures from within and without the Muslim community, women struggle to determine what is possible, acceptable, and workable. Some might wish that they could be more open about their criticisms of certain elements of Islamic tradition but do not wish to be seen as participating in American prejudice against Islam. Others regret that they are not able to be more public about their affiliation with Islam, or to wear Islamic dress, but know that such a choice may have serious professional and social ramifications that they are not able or willing to assume.

Among the many challenges faced by Muslim women and their families in the American context is that of raising children in Western society. Parents struggle with such issues as:

- Keeping their children insulated from what the parents perceive to be dangerous Western secular values at the same time that they acknowledge their children's citizenship in the West and want to prepare them to be able to live their lives in a Western culture. Mothers are working with public schools to share elements of faith and practice with teachers and non-Muslim children, and are cooperating with other interested citizens to see that school curricula are free of demeaning stereotypes and inaccurate information about Islam.
- Educating children in the elements of the faith, if they so desire, at the same time that parents provide their children with an academically sound education. A few Muslim families are opting for home schooling as an alternative to public education. Others work together to establish Islamic schools, besieged by concerns for finances and quality education. Some Muslim homes are the venue for after-school or weekend classes in Islamic subjects, especially if mosques or Islamic centers are not available for such purposes. Educational materials produced in great quantity and with technical sophistication by many Islamic groups and organizations often reinforce the ideal of a family that serves to protect its children from the temptations of a basically secular Western society.
- Keeping children aware and appreciative of the values of the "home culture," wherever that may be, while supporting the efforts of young people to work toward an indigenous form of Islam. While some young Muslims slide almost effortlessly from their public "American Muslim" personas to their familial cultural identities at home, others resent the degree to which their families seem to cling to the "old cultural ways."

Chapter 5, "Gender and Family," expands on the concerns faced by American Muslims in terms of women's education and employment and relationships among husband, wife, and children.

Anti-Muslim Prejudice

Immigrants who have come to the United States since 9/11 looking to share in the promise of America and seeking religious and political freedom have arrived at a difficult moment. "I used to think that this was the best place in the world to be safe and protected," said one, "but it is impossible to feel that way now that the government is cracking down so severely on Muslim immigrants." In some cases, males who have done nothing wrong other than be born in a Muslim country such as Pakistan, Bangladesh, or Yemen have been detained and deported, while the women of their families remain in the United States often without the resources to cope. Other women have returned to their countries of origin because of the loss of income when their husbands—the breadwinners—were detained. Although the restrictive immigration and counterterrorism laws enacted by the Clinton administration in the mid-1990s served as a first platform for these tough measures, laws authorizing such deportations have been enacted and strengthened significantly since 9/11.

Immigrants and women of color, recent arrivals or American born, are all finding that the level of prejudice against Islam is on the rise in the United States, validated by recent surveys of the American population. Many hundreds of incidents have been recorded over the past four years of Muslim women being subjected to offensive and even physically harmful abuse by those who find their Islamic dress objectionable or think that wearing such clothing somehow identifies them as being terrorist. Specific cases illustrating such incidents are described in chapter 6, "Muslim Women in the Crucible." Immediately after 9/11 a few non-Muslim women expressed their solidarity with Muslim sisters by themselves wearing headscarves, though that response has faded in the succeeding years. Paranoia appears to have prevailed in some quarters. Some incidents are simply ridiculous. In June 2004, for example, the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) reported that law enforcement officers were called to investigate the accusation of a Virginia man that a group of Muslim Girl Scouts was waging "violent jihad." The six Scouts

were selling cookies outside of a grocery store, but happened to be wearing Islamic headscarves over their Scout uniforms. National Muslim organizations like the many branches of CAIR are vigilant in identifying harassment of Muslim women in the workplace, in schools, and in other public venues and often are successful in providing public exposure as well as justice for the abused women.

Issues of Identity

The roles that women play in Islamic culture(s) are generally related to factors such as age, family relationships and responsibilities, and status in the community. In traditional societies it is very clear that expectations for females are specifically related to their movement from childhood through puberty, marriage, and aging. A growing number of American Muslim women are actively engaged in the effort to identify which elements of Islam are essential, mandated by Qur'an and Sunnah (the way of life exemplified by the Prophet Muhammad), and which are culturally determined rather than religiously prescribed. Definitions of women's roles are clearly subject to cultural and ethnic variations that come into play as Muslims try to determine how closely they want to or are able to adhere to traditional ways and what kinds of adaptations or changes are desirable or necessary in a new context.

Increasingly, Muslims who serve as spokespersons for Islam in America, often self-appointed but also representing some of the political, intellectual, and religious groups formed in the United States, are eager to stress that such diversity is to be celebrated. Tolerance for other Muslims is a by-product of American pluralism and has been learned by those who have been resident in the West for a period of time. However, they also understand that particularly in today's political climate it is urgent for Muslims to try to fashion a common identity whenever possible and to stress those things that do unite them in the bonds of Islam rather than separate them religiously, culturally, ideologically, or in any other way. Young people, sometimes influenced by associations such as the Muslim Youth of North America (MYNA), may be eager to tell their parents that while following a particular custom is historically and culturally interesting, the most important thing is to understand their commonalities with others as Muslim Americans. The beauty of Islam, as Malcolm X claims to have discovered in 1964 in his first pilgrimage to Mecca, is said to be that it does not distinguish on the basis of race, ethnicity, color, or national origin. Many Muslims today are urging that this list of "no distinctions" also includes the lack of discrimination on the basis of gender.

An emphasis on commonality is also extremely appealing to Muslims who may be part of the more disadvantaged sectors of American society. Immigrant Muslim women are often forced to think through and perhaps negotiate their personal, sometimes called "hyphenated," identities—is one a Muslim-American-Pakistani, for example, or a Pakistani-Muslim-American? While emotional ties to ethnic and cultural identities are generally respected, many affirm that their dual orientation is to be both Muslim and American, with the understanding that these identities are mutually supportive rather than exclusive.

The rhetoric of commonality may represent an important development in American Islam, and certainly has its advocates in many corners of American Muslim society. Still, such identification is easier said than done for many women who reasonably think of themselves first as Arab or Indonesian or Nigerian, with Islam simply an understood ingredient in that identity. What it really means to be American, for them, may be somewhat more difficult to figure out, and some immigrant Muslim women simply do not have the educational or emotional resources to deal with it. Their concern is rather with their children and making sure that somehow cultural particularities are not completely lost in the search for new identities. "I don't care what you call yourself," said a Muslim mother from Bangladesh to her teenage daughter, "but in my house you can behave properly and that means doing things as we have always done them."

For those who are immigrants or come from immigrant families, it is crucial to come to terms with one's identity, although often that process may take place more on a subconscious than a conscious level. On the one hand, women who come from Islamic countries, or who are from families who immigrated in earlier generations, must find a balance among the various commitments that claim them: to the particularities of the cultures to which they are related, to Islam as the common bond among all American Muslims, and, given their current residence or citizenship, to the reality of living in the United States. They must determine whether one or another of these options claims priority or whether it is possible to try to balance them altogether. Different kinds of occasions tend to bring out unconscious allegiances that may affirm the sense of community of American Muslims or may serve to emphasize the differences and distinctions. Attending a national meeting of an Islamic organization may engender strong feelings of pan-Islamic association, while celebration of an 'Eid, or ceremony ending one of the major Islamic holidays, in a culture-oriented mosque such as Pakistani or Turkish may solidify one's identification with the country of origin. Many local and national organizations are formed around particular ethnic activities and relationships that are not concerned with religion per se. Muslims from Bangladesh, for example, may enjoy Bengali music and literature, while those from Pakistan may enjoy Urdu poetry. These activities may be seen by conservative Muslims as distracting from Islamic solidarity or even may be deemed as the allurement of Satan.

That Muslim women have the freedom to think about identity questions is an opportunity that forces some into a process of redefinition. In most Islamic

societies one's identity is given according to the culture of the society as well as by ideologies fostered by the state itself, or adopted as women join organizations that foster modern options. In America more options are at least theoretically possible, although it is obvious that the opportunities for any given woman to consider them vary according to her personal situation. Among the variables are the opinions and pressures of her individual family and of her community (if she has been able to find or establish one in this country), the particular religious leadership she and her family may subscribe to, and the exercise of free choice and decision that increasingly characterizes many Muslim women in the United States. Who should be involved in the adoption of identity and the selection of personal choices is being debated in a range of public and private forums today. The range of alternatives adopted by Muslims themselves will determine the future of American Islam; there seems little question that the door will continue to open and horizons to expand for women.

Growing numbers of American Muslim women see themselves not so much as Muslims who also hold other identities but as Americans who are part of an Islamic heritage. They understand that almost everyone chooses to make certain compromises in order to be successful, to be happy, or perhaps simply to survive. Unwilling to abide by the detailed prescriptions either of cultural expectations or of the foreign or American leaders of Islamic movements and groups, they are searching for appropriate guidelines as to their own identity and place in their families, their communities, and American society as a whole. Some are convinced that Muslims not only can find a way to live "Islamically" in Western culture but that those efforts are legitimate and important. Practicing their religion or not, Muslims know that if they are to have a significant voice in helping shape American attitudes and policies, they must not isolate themselves but become more publicly active. This mandate, in general, is understood to include Muslim women. Muslims hope that with increased representation in local and national governing structures they may become empowered to better control their lives. Chapter 7, "Claiming Public Space," suggests some of the many ways in which women are seeking and achieving empowerment through public participation.

Feminism

The discourse about Muslim women's participation in American society inevitably is influenced, positively or negatively, by the claims of Western feminism. Some Muslim women choose to call themselves feminists. Others qualify its meaning by placing feminism within the parameters of what they define as an Islamic understanding. They may adopt certain of the feminist assumptions about freedom of access and opportunity for men and women.

They reject, however, the common assumption that Western feminist formulations of equality are necessarily appropriate in the Islamic context and struggle to determine which ideas are most effective and consonant with Muslim values as they try to define their identity within their own family and communal settings. Muslim women's participation in and support for Islamic organizations both in North America and abroad has often provoked a strong response from Western feminists across a broad range of perspectives. A common reaction on the part of non-Muslims who are feminists is that Muslim women are mere pawns in an intrinsically patriarchal system. If liberated from their religious ties, they would be able to see the fundamental contradiction in the term "Muslim feminist" and how inimical Islam is toward women's rights. Despite these presumptions, however, the groundswell of Muslim women studying and teaching each other Islamic scriptures, doctrines, and social practices (see chapter 4, "Practices of the Faith") and the growing number of Muslim women in academia (see chapter 8, "Competing Discourses") have forced feminist scholars to reconfigure some of their beliefs about women's subordination within Islam.

The right of both men and women to exercise *ijtihad*, individual interpretation of Islamic law, is being invoked as some Muslim women and men struggle to argue on the basis of texts and traditions that Islam does not discriminate between men and women. They reason that while roles and opportunities may differ between the sexes, the overall Islamic prescription for gender relationships is fair and equitable. Some converts to Islam who are attracted by the modern interpretations of women's role in Islam, in particular, may be troubled by what they experience as sexism on the part of some immigrant communities and turn to serious study of the Qur'an in the effort to find gender equity. Nonetheless, the specter of Western feminism in its many permutations looms over these discussions, with the result that most Muslims insist vigorously that whatever new interpretations they try to coax from Islamic tradition are categorically different from the assertions of non-Muslim feminist activists in the West.

Since the 1970s, African American women in particular, including those who were part of the earlier Nation of Islam movement and more recent converts, have favored arguments for women's equality with men and their full participation in American society. By and large, however, they do not embrace the Western feminists' critique of the nuclear family as a source of women's oppression. Instead, they have argued that freedom, for them, has entailed the ability to form families, since the long history of slavery and racism in the United States has served to break up their families, communities, and social networks. For the most part these women do not believe that men and women should perform the same societal or even familial roles and look for alternative ways in which to support the parity of women. Although most of them need to work outside the home, they take very seriously the role

of women as nurturers and maintainers of the family and the faith. Being a good mother and wife is ordained by God, they believe, and is a role that involves a greater degree of responsibility than working in the public sphere.

A few African American women are writing about the sexism they experienced as members of the Nation of Islam in its early days. They argue that true Islam supports complementary relationships between men and women, not ones of inferiority and superiority. Both as Muslims and as African Americans they reject the term "feminist" as white and elitist, abstract and alienating, and often turn to the interpretations of African American "womanists" for an understanding of how to effect their own empowerment. The term "womanist" has been adopted by African Americans as an alternative to "feminist," which they believe contains assumptions of race and class that do not include their experiences as black women. Often working from narrative rather than theory, they tell stories and share their life experiences in the struggle to create a harmonious family life based on Islamic values of reciprocity and respect. See chapter 8, "Competing Discourses," for a detailed discussion of "Islamic feminism" and new models of Qur'anic interpretation.

Muslim women who are working for a contemporary reinterpretation of Islam in the West are struggling to determine a viable alternative to traditional structures that have served to repress women on the one hand and to the influences of Western secularism (and sometimes feminism) on the other. Many call for women to exercise their right of individual interpretation of the Qur'an and traditions of Islam. They see Islam as a dynamic and flexible system, rather than a static and rigid set of rules and regulations, and want to open up avenues of participation in which women as well as men are the public faces of Islam. In the process they will be important contributors to the definition of an American Islam that flows directly out of its many contributing streams but that will have its own structures, definitions, and contributions to make to the complex picture of religious society in the United States and Canada.

Many women in America for whom Islam is a cultural identifier are professionals, homemakers, and others who have no particular interest in religion or in being recognized as Muslim. We, the authors of this volume, acknowledge that the material we are presenting concentrates primarily on Muslim women who are actively affirming Islam as a religious and/or a cultural association and are living their lives in ways that make that affirmation clear. The many different ways in which they publicly and visibly identify with Islam, and the consequences of their choices as they struggle to be both Muslim and American, are described in the succeeding chapters.