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Ismail Faruqi : Islamic ideals in North America

A portion of this essay explains how the Islamization of North America may be facilitated with Muslim immigration

Excerpts from the book *The Muslim Community in North America*, Edmonton, The University of Alberta Press, 1983

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The Muslim Community in North America



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Preface

The majority of these studies were originally papers presented at the symposium on Islam in North America held at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada from 27 to 31 May 1980, and revised by their authors for inclusion here. It was a labor of love for most of the participants because it came at a busy time at the end of the university year, and we want to indicate how crucial their active involvement was for both the success of the conference and this volume.

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Islamic Ideals in North America

Ism'ail R. Al-Faruqi

Some contemporary historians have speculated that Muslim sailors were the first to cross the Atlantic and arrive on the shores of the New World. Others have speculated that Christopher Columbus was guided to these shores by Andalusian or Moroccan Muslim navigators and assistants whose services he had hired. The spectacular nature of these speculations led not to renewed scholarly examinations of the claims, but to widespread propagation and expansion of them. The Muslims of the world were anxious to rediscover their legacy of past accomplishments, and the Muslims of North America were anxious to discover their roots in history. The greater and more daring the accomplishments, and the farther back the roots of American Muslims could be projected/discovered, the greater the psychic satisfaction. It was therefore natural for them to be delighted by such claims, and to repeat, expand, and spread them with relish.

If the origin of the Islamic presence in North America is still a subject of speculation, the settlement of African Muslims in North America in the 16th to 18th centuries is certain. The fall of al Andalus to European power was a cataclysm for millions of Muslims. It is indeed probable that some of them who had fallen captive to Spanish power might have constituted the first human cargoes shipped to America. It is equally probable that those who were unable to cope

with the cataclysm might have volunteered to travel to the unknown. Of such events we have no record. Later, as sugar plantations in the Caribbean Islands demanded more and more hands to work them, the Spaniards, the Dutch, the French, the English, and finally the Americans began a systematic raiding of the coasts of Africa south of the Sahara to hunt and seize humans for sale in the slave markets of the New World. There can be little doubt that some of these unfortunates were Muslims, for we know that by 1600 a large proportion of the populations of what are now Mauretania, Senegal, Gambia, and Guinea were Muslim.

The climate of slavery was not one in which Muslims could perpetuate their religion or culture. Slave masters gave the slaves their own names, forced them into their own faith, and rejoiced in seeing in them the reflection of themselves. Little did it matter whether the slave was replica or caricature. It was sufficient that his old identity was obliterated. If the slave failed to realize the new identity, the master saw the failure as natural, because the slave was an *unter-mensch*. Unfortunately, nothing is known about these early Muslims in America. Some of their practices may have survived in Afro-American traditions; or, having affected those traditions, the heritage may still be deducible from them. To my knowledge, no such study has yet been made. I have heard arguments pointing to the existence of village or town names, of words in the Afro-American vocabulary, and of oral traditions still being passed on. But a scholarly study of the matter is badly needed and most eagerly awaited.

Muslims from the Near East and other parts of the Muslim world began to emigrate to North America in the last quarter of the previous century. Their purpose was similar to that of other immigrants to North America, namely, to escape from undesirable conditions in the old country and search for fortune in the new. Among the oldest immigrants who lived as a group and succeeded in preserving their identity are the Muslim communities of Cedar Rapids (Iowa), Detroit (Michigan), Edmonton (Alberta), and London (Ontario). The Balkans, where the Ottoman Empire was receding; Aden, which British rule had made an open roadstop for the ships of the world; and Syria-Lebanon, where political unrest and administrative in-

migrants came. The period between the two world wars saw a large number of immigrants from Syria-Lebanon, the Balkans, South Russia, Caucasasia, and Turkey, where postwar conditions left much to be desired. There was an influx into Canada, of Muslims from the British Commonwealth countries to which Muslims had first emigrated in pursuit of service with British forces. Very few Muslims came to study since domination of their homelands by Britain, France, and Italy made it imperative for them to study in the colonizing countries.

After World War II Muslim immigrants began to arrive in North America in significant numbers. Independence from European colonialism and the ascendancy of the United States on the world scene attracted Muslim students from everywhere. Their protracted stay and free mixture with fellow students and local communities, and the opportunities for study-cum-work programs, paved the way for them to change status or to return as immigrants if conditions at home proved to be less than expected. The failure of their home governments to provide opportunities for employment and/or advancement, to solve chronic problems whether economic or political, and their oppressive – even tyrannical – police regimes provided further impetus to professionals and to the educated to emigrate. The desire to improve the quality of life and the promise of good fortune in North America certainly played an important role. More important, however, was the near total bankruptcy of their home political regimes. That bankruptcy was evident on the moral, spiritual, educational, economic, social, and political levels. It is not surprising that all post-independence regimes were caricatures of Western models, whether democratic or dictatorial, or that their social, political, and economic ideals were caricatures of democracy, national integration, and social justice. One and all, these regimes were proper instruments of neo-colonialism, whether deliberately or otherwise. In Muslim countries, an essential failure was their separation from Islam, the only ideal capable of moving and inspiring the masses. Nationalism, secularism, democracy, socialism, and communism are all impotent, as they provide no “cause” that can appeal to idealism. They are unable to command the loyalty of Muslims, and can furnish no internal energy to push the Muslim to self-

exertion, or to hold him back from temptation. Such would have been provided by Islam and the imām-quality it develops and requires as base and criterion. But Islam was deliberately neglected – indeed combatted.

Muslims saw evidence of this bankruptcy in the dissolution of the Syrian-Egyptian union in 1961, the Pakistani-Indian War of 1965, and the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. The despair into which these debacles plunged the Muslim world vented itself in massive emigration to North America and other Western countries. In 1968, the government of Egypt declared emigration legal and free. Hundreds of thousands of Muslim professionals and other middle- and upper-class persons arrived in North America after these dates, constituting a real Muslim brain drain.

Today, immigrant Muslims in North America number about two million. One-fifth of them are here temporarily as students and visitors; the remainder are permanent residents.

There had been conversions to Islam among Americans prior to the 1930s when Elijah Muhammad launched his movement. Their numbers, however, were small, and their effect upon the Islamic presence in North America was limited. The first American-born individual to significantly change that presence was Elijah Muhammad. He began in the thirties to call the Afro-Americans to abandon the identity imposed upon them as slaves and to return to their original Muslim African identity. His call spread rapidly among them and assumed visible proportions in the big cities after World War II. The movement spread vigorously in the ghettos of American cities. The headquarters in Chicago became a hive of administrators, public relations officers, business entrepreneurs, and preachers. The appearance of Malcolm X on the scene, his rebellion against Elijah Muhammad following his conversion to Sunni Islam in Mecca, and his assassination all helped the Islamic movement to grow. The demise of Elijah Muhammad and the Sunni reforms of his son Warith Muhammad have relaxed the discipline and done away with the paramilitary youth organization, Fruit of Islam. The vigor and enthusiasm are still the same, proportionate to Muslims' capacities, and to the challenges. If anything, the movement is growing, in number, in consciousness, in understanding of, and attachment to, the genuine ideals of Islam.

Although no adequate statistics are available, American-born Muslims number about two million. One-and-a-half million belong to the World Community of Islam in the West (recently renamed The American Muslim Mission). About half a million Afro-Americans are Muslim and belong to various other organizations, mostly Sunni. About 5,000 white Americans have joined the ranks of Islam.

The Afro-Americans who responded favorably to Elijah Muhammad's call did not do so because of their ancient attachment to a Muslim African identity. The memory of that identity had been lost in the intervening centuries. The motivation for their re-entry into Islam came directly from the appeal of Islam, and from the malaise of their social, cultural, and spiritual existence. The ideals of Islam provided the external objective stimulus. An analysis of them will provide an understanding of their movement. The same ideals also attracted other Afro-Americans, as well as white Americans who were introduced to Islam by Muslim students, immigrants, or visitors.

To begin with, Hellenized Christianity, the religion of the culture in which they were immersed, could have no hold on the Afro-American mind. Whether because of their Islamic tradition, or that of African archaic religions, the Afro-American could hardly understand, and much less digest, the myths of Hellenized Christianity. The transcendence and incarnation of God, monotheism, and the trinity, salvation as fait accompli and yet-to-be-accomplished, the Kingdom of God as here and not-here, God's death and resurrection, vicarious guilt, suffering and merit, original sin and fallenness, the church as body of God – all these have remained utterly opaque and incomprehensible to him. His subscription to them hardly ever went beyond lip service. His innate innocence, his simple common sense, his awareness of being imposed upon and pushed from all directions by his masters, his will to life and happiness, and his sense of justice were all contradicted and violated by a religion that seemed to deny them theoretically while its adherents denied them in practice. Nothing in his background could serve as a base for the myths of Christianity; nothing in his veins and muscles could welcome its values; and nothing in his experience could warrant acceptance of its paradoxes. Asceticism and monkery, world- and life-denial, individualism, and personalism, ran against the grain. That

is why Christianity had a different meaning for Afro-Americans than for white Anglo-Saxons. That is why it gave rise among the former to a great variety of evangelistic churches whose range extends all the way to heterodoxy. That is why for the most part, Christianity for the Afro-American was little more than an exercise in self-excitement, a subjective attempt at self-transport, where the tribal dance was replaced with singing. That is why the inner quietude of Western Christianity gave way to orgiastic celebration; and its disciplined resoluteness and patient resistance, to surrender and acquiescence.

Christianity's apparent collusion with misery, its blessing and recommendation of poverty, agreed with the slave master's design to exploit the Afro-Americans and keep them in poverty. Its rejection of culture and emphasis on simple faith agreed with the design to keep them ignorant. Its denigration of the body, of the flesh, and of the world agreed with that of keeping them in abject conditions. Finally, its doctrine of original sin implanted in them a complex of inferiority, impotence, and submission, and its eschatology implanted a renunciation of any will to improve their conditions in this world. Their adherence to Christianity, of whatever sect, was an ideal case for the Nietzschean analysis of slave-morality, for the Marxist theory of religion as opium.

The irrelevance of social justice to Christianity enabled white racism to make the Afro-American a pariah in the land of his birth, even after his emancipation from slavery. He is a *de facto* second-class citizen, even when his acculturation has reached very high degree. His color is a pollutant always to be kept at a distance. Indeed, the gap between the races is widening, not contracting, despite the gains on the legal front. Official pronouncements on the part of government and public bodies run far ahead of implementation, and real gains may or may never follow upon them. The ideal of equal opportunity remains empty without the prerequisites of equal preparation of Afro-Americans and equal disposition towards them by the whites. Like so many whites in all classes of society, Afro-Americans turned their backs on Christianity as time proved its incapacity to deal with social problems. True, the modern library is full of books and essays that seek to present Christianity as religion

of social concern. Their logic is unconvincing because none dares to address itself to the world- and life-denial endemic to Christianity, or to the paradoxes at the core of its creed. The result is that these attempts of the theologians hardly ever go beyond the classroom. Outside, in the high-rise office building where decisions are made, Christian concern is hardly ever a motive or factor in politics, education, government, or business.

Islam, on the other hand, offered a more attractive creed. In contrast to the Christian view of the fallenness of man and creation, Islam teaches that man is created innocent. Adam's disobedience was Adam's, not humanity's. Moreover, it was repented by Adam and forgiven by God. Man is placed on earth as God's viceregent, to fulfil the will of God and to prove himself morally worthy in the process. Indeed, Islam teaches that God created man perfect, in the best of forms, and equipped him with all that is necessary for fulfilment of his *raison d'être*. Hence, man is responsible and God will reckon with him. This world is the only world. *Al Akhira*, or the other world, is judgement and consummation of reward and punishment, not another world projected as an alternative to this world. Nor is it postulated out of a condemnation of this world and the need to make man accept his misery in the here and now. Islam finds the meaning of human life in man's cosmic function as the sole bridge through whose free action the higher part of God's will (namely, the moral) becomes fulfilled in history. Islamic humanism does not deify man. Nor does it make him the measure of all things. It regards him as the crown and ultimate purpose of creation, but under God Whose servant he is.

Islam teaches that poverty is the promise of Satan, that the good things of life belong to Muslims to enjoy, that Muslims ought to be healthy, clean, strong, and productive. It holds men responsible for their own misery, and urges them to rise, to strike out in the wide world and seek God's bounty. It regards productive work, bringing welfare to oneself, to one's dependents and neighbors, and to mankind, as worship. Even the rituals of worship Islam regards as possessing dimensions of worldly welfare whose non-realization vitiates the rituals themselves. God's viceregency on earth consists of *tamkīn fī-al-'ard* (seizing the earth with strength), *iṣṭīṣar* (recon-

struction of the earth), and doing good deeds for the sake of and in obedience to God. God has made the world beautiful: He ornamented the firmament and created beautiful and goodly objects for man to use and enjoy. He has made the whole creation subservient to man to the end of proving himself morally worthy. Islam teaches that the realization of the absolute in this world is indeed possible, that it is precisely man's obligation to pursue and actualize it. Hence, Islam impinges upon history and seeks to move it toward fulfilment of the divine patterns. For Islam, history is of crucial significance.

Islam teaches an ethic of action. In its purview, personal intention, good will, and purity are indeed values. But if the moral agent does not go beyond them to enter space and time, and there so interfere in the events as to deflect their courses towards the good, their value becomes very small. That is why Islam had to develop the law, to institute the umma with political, judicial, economic, administrative, and social organs to implement it. The unity of God, Islam interprets as transcendence before which all humans are equal in creatureliness, and hence as equally subject to the law of God whether as agents or subjects of moral action. That is why the umma is necessarily universal, intended to cover humanity. Islam countenances no color, no race, no chosen people complex, no nationalism, no relativism in anything that matters. Political action is viewed by Islam, to use the expression of Muhammad Iqbal, as the expression of its spirituality. Every individual, it holds, is a shepherd responsible for his circle; and the umma is responsible for mankind. The highest standard is justice. The Muslim is obliged to realize it in his person, his family, his country, the world, or on the other side of the moon. Likewise, he is obliged to redress the balance of justice whenever and wherever it is upset by anyone, be he commoner or king.

The evil of social injustice in North America is sufficient to pull its victim away from the status quo and urge him to seek a change. If he happens to be Afro-American, the dominant ideology or religion which had never penetrated his mind has less attraction and less power to keep him from preparing for conversion to another faith. The inherent merits of Islam, its values, its capacity to correct the evils of racism and injustice, and to inspire men to assume the burdens of self-salvation by their own effort, do the rest. Hence, Islam has spread through da'wa, the clear call of men and women to

specific duties and rights presented as God's commandments and perceived as sure solutions to the problems facing them.

Islam confers upon the Afro-American, or the victim of injustice, a new identity as well as a new dignity. It teaches him that his misery is not imposed by God, but by His enemies; that its removal is both possible and obligatory. And it promises him success here as well as in the hereafter if he succeeds in getting rid of injustice. In fact, it teaches him that with Islam, he cannot lose. Islam convinces him that he has right of usufruct in the world under God. It sobers him up with a feeling of responsibility, with the demand that his burden is worldwide in scope and comprehensive in coverage. Islam balances this universal responsibility with ummatic mutuality, reassuring every member that the whole umma is responsible for him. Upon conversion to Islam, the forsaken, downtrodden victims of injustice, and the racially discriminated Afro-Americans, acquire as their own the world community of Islam with its billion souls.

Muslim immigrants have come to these shores to study or to seek livelihood and opportunity for professional advancement. In most cases, they are beggars at the Western altar of knowledge; or receivers of Western affluence and economic development. This is the way Muslim immigrants see themselves.

The "immigrant" mentality stands on two necessary assumptions: a home country and culture perceived as bankrupt, despised, hated, forsaken, left behind; and a new country and culture seen as alien, awesome, superior, admired, and desired but not yet appropriated or mastered.

However, many Muslim immigrants, who may have come in search of Western knowledge, professional advancement, or well-being, have awakened in this process to a fuller recognition of Islam, their religion and their cultural tradition. It is immaterial that their awakening has come late in life, or that it has come only at the challenge of the new culture. It takes a rubbing stone to prove the gold present in a piece of ore; but that does not change its golden nature. Once the Islamic vision is recaptured, a radically new outlook on life, emigration, on the new world and one's role in it, is obtained. How does Islamic consciousness achieve this?

First, the Islamic vision removes all consciousness of guilt which

the immigrant may feel at having emigrated and, as it were, forsaken the country of his birth. In this view he is personally responsible for the unfavorable temporal circumstances which led to his decision to emigrate, and would have been to blame had he suffered their continuation. Allah – May He be glorified – incited him to take his fate into his own hand and alter it radically by emigration, if the road to a radical transformation of the home country and its circumstances is blocked (Qur'ān 4: 97-98).

Second, the Islamic vision removes all consciousness of guilt that the immigrant may feel at his success in the new station. Many successful immigrants are overwhelmed by feelings of gratitude to their adoptive country, which they seek to express by extraordinary acts of charity and thanksgiving. Noble as these sentiments may be, they mask a guilt complex which is appeased by the said acts of generous giving. Far more serious is the realization, implied in such guilt feeling, of the absolute goodness and superiority of the new location. The Islamic vision wipes out this feeling by convincing the immigrant that the success is not his, but God's; that it is God Who so oriented and manipulated his life and his new circumstances as to bring about success. Being God's grant to him, his success is innocent and free, perfect ḥalāl which he may appropriate, possess, and enjoy in good conscience (Qur'ān 48: 18-20). Indeed, the Islamic vision opens the immigrant's mind to a new vista of opportunities for greater success by its teaching that the whole world is the Muslim's to develop in fulfilment not only of his basic needs, but also of his need for comfort, pleasure, joy, and even luxury (Qur'ān 67: 15; 8: 26).

Third, the Islamic vision lays before the eyes of the immigrant a new challenge and a new promise, by imposing upon him the duty to call all non-Muslims to Islam, and reminding him that in word as well as in deed he is obliged to be the witness of God on earth, His viceregent who establishes the institutions of Islam and makes God's word and judgement supreme. In North America, and the West generally, there is so much atheism, so much abnegation of religious truth, so much rejection of the most fundamental tenets of Judaism and Christianity, so much skepticism, as to arouse and shake the least sensitive religious conscience. The person endowed with the vision of Islam cannot witness the scene with indifference.

Sooner or later, he must come to the realization that his emigration from his land of birth, permitted and arranged by God, and made by Him successful through re-establishment in the new land, were links in a nexus of purposes leading to his new assignment as "caller to God." His is a new task whose fulfilment awaits him as a new glory, a completion of his faith, a discharge of the most sacred duty, a testament unto history. Hasn't God sent him to his new *Medina* that he may freely call the people to the truth? that he may by his eloquence, his "bon example" and his "greater jihād" convince mankind of the truth that God is God, ultimate Cause and ultimate End, sole Creator and Master, Whose commandments are before all humans to be obeyed?

Fourth, the Islamic vision provides the immigrant with the criterion with which to understand, judge, and seek to transform the unfortunate realities of North America. Here is a whole continent giving itself to alcohol and drugs, to sexual promiscuity and exploitation, to family destruction and individualism, to cynicism and pessimism, to racism and discrimination, to the pursuit of Mammon at the cost of morality and justice, to the rape of Mother Nature, to political and economic imperialism against the rest of humanity. Certainly, the continent is groaning with pain, and it is crying out for help which only the person with the vision of Islam can give. For such a one is the only person professing as well as living a categorical NO! to all these evils at once, the only one whose "No" is backed up by the strongest arguments, the longest history, and the greatest achievements of success at implementation.

Fifth, the Islamic vision provides the immigrant with the deepest love, attachment, and aspiration for a North America reformed and returned to God, to carry forth His message and Law unto mankind, in this and all other spaces. Nothing could be greater than this youthful, vigorous, and rich continent turning away from its past evil and marching forward under the banner of Allahu Akbar! And none could be more motivated to bring it about, to serve it with all his energies and to lay down his life for its cause, than the person with the vision of Islam. Above all, the Islamic vision provides the orientation necessary for the health and sanity of this continent, namely, the subjection of the life of its peoples to the moral law; of their corporate and political conduct to peace and justice, to international

assistance and co-operation with the victims of injustice and poverty everywhere. The Islamic vision enables North America to increase its mastery and use of nature, but disciplines it with responsibility to the generations of the future and to God for His gift of nature and his other creatures who are no less our equals. The Islamic vision endows North America with a new destiny worthy of it. For this renovation of itself, of its spirit, for its rediscovery of a God-given mission and self-dedication to its pursuit, the continent cannot but be grateful to the immigrant with Islamic vision. It cannot but interpret his advent on its shores except as a God-sent gift, a timely divine favor and mercy. It will not fail to recognize in the person with Islamic vision a true son, though born overseas, whose spirit is nearly identical with that of the early founders of the New World, who ran away from oppression and tyranny seeking a haven where they would remold their lives under God, seek His bounty, and raise high His banner.

Sixth, the Islamic vision provides immigrants, as well as native-born converts, with a sense of mission. A new calling stirs them from their complacency and spiritual lethargy. Their life is infused with a new meaning, a new significance whose dimensions are cosmic. In short, whereas before the vision of Islam has taken possession of them they were matériel and instruments for processes of history which they did not understand, let alone control, now they are subjects of these processes, orienting them towards greater goals. They are people with a cause, with the noblest cause! As such, they are entitled to respect above all by themselves, and certainly by their hosts whom they can now define better than the latter can, and whose goals in history and ultimate destiny they can better articulate.