Islam in New York City

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Mahommah Baquaqua could not speak English and he was without friends in New York City. Still, he courageously decided that he would put his trust in God and try to escape his bondage aboard the Brazilian ship, Lembrança. In 1847, he broke down the door to a room in the ship's bow, where he was confined, bowed to his master's wife, and ran for Manhattan's docks. A Portuguese speaker who was born in Benin but sold into Brazilian slavery when still a teenager, he knew only one word in English. Out of breath once he reached the shore, he barely managed to utter it: f-r-e-e.

That was not the end of the story, however, since New York authorities, legally required to return escaped slaves under the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act, detained Baquaqua. Baquaqua was brought before a judge and put in a local jail. Fortunately, abolitionists from Boston heard about his plight and managed to spring him from captivity. First traveling with them to Boston, he then went to Haiti and then in 1850 returned to New York, where he attended Central College in McGrawville. In 1854 he left for Canada, where he co-authored *The Biography of Mahommah Baquaqua: A Native of Zoogoo*, one of the most important African American biographies of the 19th century.

Not all Muslim New Yorkers' life stories are as dramatic as that of Mahommah Baquaqua, but they have shared something in common. Most Muslims have either moved to New York City or in the case of local converts stayed in the city to seek freedom and opportunity; they have been, in other words, typical New Yorkers. For some, like Baquaqua and "Prince of Slaves" Abdul Rahman Ibrahima (ca. 1762 – 1829), who raised donations from New Yorkers to purchase the freedom of his family back in Mississippi in 1828, the search for

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freedom meant freedom from physical bondage.

For others, like Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, a white convert, New York City meant freedom of religion and the right to seek converts to Islam. Webb was a Presbyterian Democrat from Hudson Valley who converted to Islam while serving as U.S. Consul to the Philippines during Grover Cleveland's administration. Securing the financial support of a Muslim businessman from India, he established the "American Islamic Propaganda" in February 1893 and set up an office in Manhattan. Webb's goal was to recruit middle-class white people to the religion, as he explained to the *New York Times*, noting that he wanted to avoid contact with Muslim peddlers and other working-class Muslim immigrants from the Middle East and South Asia who already lived in New York.

After falling out with Webb, two other white Muslims, John A. Lant and British immigrant Emin Nabakoff, established a competing group, the First Society for the Study of Islam in America, in December 1893. The local press covered the competing missions as fascinating novelties and was especially impressed by what was billed as the city's first public *adhan*, or call to prayer, issued by Lant from a third floor window in Union Square in 1893. But both missions, unable to attract followers or funding, failed by 1894.

The first viable Muslim religious congregations in 20th-century New York City were instead established by immigrants from Europe, the Middle East, and South Asia. These immigrants came primarily for economic opportunity, but also managed to establish sustainable religious communities. For instance, Lithuanian, Polish, and Russian Muslims created the American Mohammedan Society in 1907. They settled in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where they prayed together in each other's homes or rented space until 1931, when they purchased three buildings on 104, 106, and 108 Powers Street for a permanent mosque.

Thousands of Arabic-speaking Muslims also arrived in New York from 1878 to 1914. Some of them settled in "Little Syria," located on Washington Street in lower Manhattan, near what would become

the World Trade Center site, and later in South Ferry, Brooklyn. By the second decade of the 20th century, Arab Americans from the Druze community, an offshoot of Shi‘a Isma‘ili Islam, started an Arabic newspaper called *al-Bayan*, located on 391 Fulton Street in Brooklyn. Other Muslims founded a New York chapter of the Young Men's Moslem Association, which took an active interest in U.S. foreign relations, especially concerning the fate of Arabs in Palestine.

South Asian American Muslims began to arrive in the late 19th century, as well. Composed largely of male sailors, these Muslims from Bangladesh worked in the British merchant marine, occasionally ditching their ships for good when they docked in New Orleans or New York. Some married African American and Hispanic women, settled permanently in the United States, and if allowed by the authorities, became U.S. citizens. Their children had names such as Roheamon, Rostom, and Bahadour, and they lived in the so-called ghettoes of the city, including the Lower East Side of Manhattan, Harlem, or Hell's Kitchen. For example, one South Asian Muslim who married a Puerto Rican woman was Habib Ullah, a restaurateur who threw parties that featured both salsa music and Indian food spiced with ingredients purchased at Spanish Harlem's La Marqueta.

During this period, some notable Muslim immigrant intellectuals and religious leaders targeted their political activism and religious missionary activities toward black New Yorkers. For example, Egyptian-born intellectual Mohamed Dusé Ali (1866 -1945), who was foreign affairs columnist for the *Negro World* and head of the African Affairs office of the New York-based Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), actively encouraged African Americans to support the liberation causes of other colonized peoples. He linked the interests of Muslims abroad to those of African Americans at home.

Of all immigrant Muslim leaders, however, the most successful and important in this era was Daoud Ahmed Faisal (1891-1980), a black emigrant from the Caribbean, who in 1939 rented a brownstone at 143 State Street in Brooklyn Heights for his Islamic Mission of America. It would become

New York's most successful Sunni Muslim mosque during and after World War II. Inter-racial and inter-ethnic, this mosque tailored its message for African Americans but invited Muslims from all backgrounds, including diplomats from the United Nations, to attend its prayer services.

Despite his success, Daoud was not the public face of Islam in New York City. That label belonged to members of the Nation of Islam (NOI). In 1946, the NOI opened Temple No. 7 at the Harlem Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) building and received a significant boost in 1954, when the charismatic NOI leader Malcolm X was named to head the temple.

Noticed first by black New Yorkers, Malcolm X became a national figure in 1959 when WNTA-TV journalist Mike Wallace featured him as a protagonist in an exposé on the NOI called "The Hate that Hate Produced." His fame only increased when he famously split from the NOI in a news conference held on March 12, 1964, at the Park Sheraton Hotel, and when he was assassinated in Harlem's Audubon Ballroom on February 21, 1965.

But in the 1970s, the public face of Islam would change once again. The passage of a new immigration bill in 1965 liberalized the restrictions on immigrants from Africa and Asia. From 1968 until 1997, perhaps 1.1 million Muslim immigrants entered the United States. Hundreds of thousands of them settled in New York.

One new and prominent Muslim was Muhammad Abdul-Rauf (1917-2004), a graduate of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, and the British School of Oriental and African Studies in London, who became director of the Islamic Center of New York, located on Riverside Drive and 72nd Street. In response to the tensions between Jewish and Muslim New Yorkers in the wake of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Abdul-Rauf initiated interfaith dialogues with Jewish groups. His son, Feisal Abdul Rauf followed in his footsteps. In 1983, became the imam, or religious leader, of a Sufi mosque in lower Manhattan. He, too, supported various interfaith movements and founded his own organization called the ASMA Society, which was later taken over by his wife, Daisy Khan.

This generation also embraced New York City as a place of both economic opportunity and freedom of religion. New York's physical landscape was altered as Muslims built a number of new mosques. In Queens, Pakistani Muslims built the Islamic Center of Corona on 42-12 National Street in 1983 and the Muslim Center of New York on 137-64 Geranium Avenue in 1991. In Manhattan, Muslims finished in 1991 what is likely the most prominent mosque in New York, the Islamic Cultural Center at 3rd Avenue and 96th Street. By the end of the 20th century, there were perhaps 140 Muslim places of worship in the city. Their architectural styles ranged from grand mosques to rented halls and converted storefronts.

Muslims also participated in that most obvious sign of communal and ethnic arrival in New York: the staging of an annual parade. Beginning in 1986, the Muslim World Day Parade transformed the intersection of Lexington Avenue and 33rd Street into an outdoor mosque, where parade participants would prostrate themselves on sheets of plastic in the direction of the Ka'ba, Islam's most sacred shrine, in Mecca. Marching south down Lexington toward 23rd street, participants carried banners with messages about God, the prophet Muhammad, and the Qur'an As they passed by Muslim-owned stores that sold South Asian food and dress.

The parade drew from a population of Muslim New Yorkers that was becoming increasingly diverse. By the end of the 20th century, nearly two-thirds of all Muslims in New York were immigrants. Over 35 different ethnic groups, speaking dozens of languages, were represented in New York's Muslim community. Muslims in New York came from sub-Saharan Africa, all parts of Asia and Europe, and from Latin America. Large Arab American Muslim communities lived around Atlantic Avenue, Bay Ridge, Crown Heights, and Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn and around Jerome Avenue and the Grand Concourse in the Bronx. South Asian American Muslims were more concentrated in Queens, largely in Flushing and Jamaica.

By 2000, approximately 7% of the city's 8 million residents, or about 600,000 people, were Muslim, making New York the home of the largest Muslim American community in the nation. Perhaps

100,000 public school students, about one in ten, were Muslim. Along with an ever-increasing number of African American and other indigenous Muslims, Muslim immigrants became involved in every aspect of the city's life. Despite incidents of discrimination here and there, Muslim New Yorkers were largely confident of their social status. They had helped to make New York one of the most dynamic international crossroads in the world. As Muslim New Yorkers imagined the future, they had little reason to predict that their lives and their freedoms would be so scrutinized, questioned, and even threatened in the decade ahead.