

## MUSLIM-AMERICANS

*Mike Itashiki, PhD, ISB\* & Basima Shaheen, PhD (June 2020, v.Nov'22)*

Since Muslims are seen as facing the most discrimination than any other group in society, even Blacks (Pew, 2019), this is an important issue to be studied. Following is an overview of Muslims in the U.S.

### **FACTS**

Islam is the second largest religion in the world and is the fastest growing (Pew, 2017a). Muslims are present all over the world; Europe, Africa, North America, South America, Australia; most Muslims, followers of Islam, are Asian with most located in (Indonesia), contrary to the myth that most Muslims *in the world* are Arab.

In the U.S. there are approximately 4 million Muslims, mostly DESI (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh...), 81% concentrated in 8 states: Texas, New York, Illinois, California, Virginia, Florida, New Jersey, and Michigan (Pew, 2014).

The growth of Muslims in the U.S. comes mainly from immigration and reproduction; conversion amounts to 23% of all U.S. Muslims, mainly in American prisons, mostly African American; however apostasy (leaving) is 32%, with many incarcerated converts leaving (Nowrasteh, 2016). 82% of Muslims in the U.S. are citizens, both born and naturalized. About 60% are immigrants and the rest were born in the U.S. (Pew, 2017). 20% were from South Asian countries (Pakistan, Bangladesh...DESI) and 14% from Arab countries (Pew, 2017). There is no single ethnic majority (Pew, 2018).

A racial and ethnic examination of Muslims shows that 41% of U.S. Muslim adults are "white," which can mean European, Arab or Persian (Pew, 2017b) or even Hispanic. The 28% of Muslims who are Asian can be from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia, China, etc.

Studies show that many Muslims are enjoying an upper-middle class livelihood. Approximately 25% of Muslims have a college education (compared to 33% of U.S.) and 31% of Muslims are full-time students (Nowrasteh, 2016).

They are both richer and poorer than the average American; 24% earn over \$100k and 40% earn less than \$30k, annually. 44% of Muslims are employed full-time compared to 49% of the general U.S. population; and 29% are *underemployed* compared to 12% of all U.S. workers (Pew2017jul26).

It is difficult to get consistent figures on Muslims or any religious group since the U.S. census does not ask about religion. Many estimates come from small sample studies, from a variety of methods, time-frames, and populations.

### **BELIEFS**

Islam is the third religion, chronologically, after Judaism and Christianity. Like its Abrahamic siblings, it started in the Middle East, in the Arabian peninsula, specifically in Mecca (part of what is known as Saudi Arabia now).

The Holy Quran is the holy book for Muslims and was revealed to Prophet Mohammad in 603, in parts, over a duration of 20 years. The revelations of approximately six-thousand verses were delivered by the archangel Gabriel.

The essence of Islam is not different from the other main religions. It is an updated version of the fundamental principles that Judaism and

Christianity have preached upon their foundation and throughout history.

Islam is a monotheistic religion, this means that Muslim believe in one god, and they submit to its power, authority, and instruction. Prophet Mohammad is the teacher who learned, embodied, and practiced these instructions and principles, which he then taught to his followers. To Muslims, he is the perfect example to what they aspire to achieve.

Believers do not need a mediator between them and God. There is no "pope" nor even an organizational structure of authority. While there are mosques, schools, and associations, these have no religious "authority" in which to direct beliefs, other than to provide instruction and interpretation (Al-Masjid, 2020).

Muslims can individually pray, fast, pay alms, and above all, learn the principles and Quran by *themselves*, a kind of self-learning. This does not mean that theological scholars and teachers are not significant in Islam; on the contrary, they are a necessity and crucial in the lives of Muslims. The "Imam" (pastor) and other theologians' responsibilities are to provide guidance, interpretation, and solutions to theological issues that accompany the changes and the development in Islamic societies and communities, but in no way is he considered divine nor "closer to God."

Islam is the continuation of the previous two religions. The belief in Jesus and other prophets, such as Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham, is mandatory in Islam. The difference is that Muslims do not believe that Jesus was crucified nor is the *divine* Son of God. As much as Christians, Muslims believe in the resurrection, that Jesus is coming back and that he will lead humanity, including the

message that Prophet Mohammed is to be believed and followed. The Virgin Mary is another important figure, as much as her son. She is the only woman whose name is mentioned in the Holy Quran. There is a whole chapter with her story: her pregnancy, birth labor, and the struggle over the lineage of her son with her people (Quran, Ch. 19).

Limited polygamy is allowed in Islam. Prophet Mohammed was monogamous to his first wife of 25 years, Khadijah, who was an older widowed woman. After she died, he eventually married others (Aleem, 2007). In a close examination of the reasons behind these marriages, all have political and social purposes. Some are demand to set foundation for relationships, political and social unions, lineage and allies. For example, prophet Mohammad was ordered to married his "adopted" ex-wife, to clarify that there is no adoption in Islam, and fostered kids must keep their biological lineage if it is known. You may have heard that Muslims are allowed up to 4 wives, but this was instituted in an era where there was an unlimited number of wives allowed, and that many widows needed protection. This situation is conditional and allowed, only if a man can treat all of the wives equally, and by all means it is hard to accomplish. Thus one wife becomes the only practical option to a genuine Muslim male, if he wants to save himself from the sin of injustice and its consequences. Of course, this practice can be abused in a patriarchal manner. In the U.S., Muslims follow the U.S. law of monogamy. In addition, it is unlikely that a woman would allow her husband to marry another wife.

## **ATTITUDES**

Most (92%) Muslim-Americans are "proud to be an American" (Pew, 2017). Political ideology of Muslim-Americans leans towards liberal, Democratic positions, as with many minorities. Minorities would benefit from a more pluralistic society, at least while they are a minority.

American Muslims' view regarding the importance of religion in their lives is not much different from Christians. They both exhibit similar levels of religious commitment. 65% of Muslims claim that religion is important in their life, compared to 68% of Christians (Pew, 2018).

The significance of "Jihad" in Muslims belief is entirely misunderstood, and has been taken out of its context. "Jihad" has different meanings in Arabic and Islam. It could be physical or spiritual struggle. However, the priority in the Muslim life is the spiritual one—the struggle to follow the "Shariah" or Islamic teachings. The usage of "Shariah law" is equivalent to saying "Biblical guidance." A devoted Muslim, will be in a continuous process of cleansing, in which they discipline themselves and their behavior to avoid sins and wrong deeds.

In the U.S., the term "Jihad" has been taken out of context and attributed to fights, wars, and conflicts. It is used by opponents to reinforce the idea of Islam as a "bloody religion," using extreme examples in which to attribute this term.

## **BEHAVIOR**

Religious behavior according to the "5 pillars of Islam" consists of 5 daily prayers starting just before sunrise, annual charity, fasting during the month of Ramadan, declaration of one god and the prophet Mohammed as the last messenger of God, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. Additional

commandments include the abstinence of pork and alcohol, avoiding extra-marital sex, avoiding usury (interest on debt), and conducting themselves in good neighborly behavior. A close look at these rules will show that they do not clash with any civilized rules or principles that defined any good citizen in modern societies.

About 43% of Muslims attend worship services every week (compared to 45% of Christians) (Pew, 2018), or even sometimes for all 5 daily prayers. Mosques do not have traditional church membership—Muslims are free to attend any mosque. While mosques in religious nations are often funded by the government, mosques in the U.S. depend on tithing and donations. This kind of daily/weekly congregations works toward creating a sense of belonging and solidarity within the community, whether in a foreign or native Islamic country. Prayers are conducted in Arabic the language of Quran, while the sermon (khutba) is spoken in the local language of English.

The traditional Islamic Marriage is arranged, that is, potential spouses are recommended by family, and this has been practiced by many cultures across history. It is still practiced among royal, wealthy and powerful families in many societies to maintain relationships and allies. Though cultural rituals may overlap, what usually occurs is that, upon family approval, an introduction is made, several chaperoned "dates" occur, and a mutual decision is made between the couple.

Of course, the family will have a strong say in who they marry, and cultural/ethnic rituals will prevail. Muslims tend to be endogamous, like most social groups (Korson, J.H., 1971), marrying others with a similar ethnicity and social class.

With the increased number of educated women and men in Muslim society, arranged marriages are encountering resistance by the young generation.

If a couple agrees to marry, a marriage contract (nikkah) is drawn up, which includes a dowry and financial divorce contingencies for the woman, and a reception planned. Marriage in Islam is a contract not just a certificate. This means that both partners can state their conditions, including the right to divorce. The state marriage license is signed off by a state-licensed Imam. At least in Arab/Islamic tradition, the couple doesn't consummate their marriage until after the reception, at which the woman will leave her family home, or after the public announcement of the marriage. During the time between the contract and reception, the couple may still go on chaperoned dates to get to know each other, and may choose to break off the engagement.

Not surprisingly, many of the younger generations are rejecting arranged marriages. Some even secretly date and conveniently stage an "arrangement" at some point. This is becoming more prevalent even in Islamic countries (Itashiki, 2016).

Devout Muslims will follow certain dietary and business practices. You may have heard of some religions that forbid the consumption of pork and alcohol. Muslims avoid these products and the devout will seek out "halal" meat, similar to kosher, which is slaughtered a certain way to make sure that the blood is drained. Alcohol and other intoxicants are forbidden (Stone, 1998).

In the world of business; financial transactions using interest is also forbidden. You may wonder

then how can Muslims buy a house or car. Islamic lenders have solved this by "buying" the property and then reselling to the customer at a profit (Hassan & Khanb, 2019).

The American Muslim market is estimated to have a combined \$125-200 billion in buying power (AIC, 2020).

## **SOCIETY**

Like many minorities, Muslims have always faced prejudice and discrimination in the U.S. and other Western countries. However, the 9/11 terrorist attack has dramatically increased the intensity and focus against Muslims (FBI, 2020) (Levin, 2016).

Muslims are seen as facing the most discrimination than any other group in society (Pew, 2019). Hate crimes are increasing (FBI, 2020). Muslims are often a visible minority because of their ethnicity, language, or wardrobe. Hijabis, women who wear a headscarf, are most visible, which is why many have stopped wearing it. The hijab concept also applies to general wardrobe and behavior, to maintain modesty and avoid looking provocative.

43% of Muslim women wear a hijab regularly, while 40-50% never do. There are many reasons to wear a headscarf: 54% religious reasons; 21% sign to others; 12% modesty; 1% required by family (PEW, 2017). The meaning of hijab will be different for those from a country which forces women to be covered e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran.

While discrimination against Muslims is because of their religion, it is used "racially," as if there was some offensive inherent qualities of individuals of this religion. Some people become confused between culture and religion of Muslim-

Americans. Nationality, ethnicity, language, generation, religiosity and ideology also make characterizing the average Muslim impossible.

Some opponents believe in and promote myths about Muslims. Trump supporters "argued that Muslims rejected the concept of separation of church and state, inclined toward separatism and implementation of Sharia law, and that they reject key American values... Muslim values...are deeply antithetical to American values, i.e. gender equality, religious pluralism, extolling dissent and the ability to freely criticize anyone and anything" (Brookings, 2019). It would be safe to guess that Muslim-Americans would strongly disagree with this attitude.

As with race, both personal and institutional discrimination exist. Personal acts of discrimination and hate crimes are increasing, from micro-aggressions to murder (NPR, 2018) (FBI, 2020).

There are laws against discrimination, such as 1st and 14th amendment of the Constitution, Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), Title VII-Civil Rights Act of 1964, and

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) (ACLU, 2018). However anti-Muslim legislation also exists in the form of anti-Shariah laws implemented by far-right politicians in various U.S. cities (Shanmugasundaram, 2018, 2019), and the U.S. ban on travel from certain Muslim countries (ACLU, 2018a) (Anderson, 2019).

Organizations such as Council of American Islamic Relations and Muslim Legal Fund of America are helping to defend Muslims against discrimination.

### **SUMMARY**

American Muslims, while heavily immigrant, are generally assimilated in education, professions and also, personal lifestyle. If Muslims stand out, it is likely that cultural rather than religious characteristics are the cause. Cultural practices may even conflict with religious ones. Muslims come from such diverse backgrounds, widely varying conformity to the religion, and have assimilated so much that it is hard to paint a picture of the "American Muslim."

### **REFERENCES**

- ABC. (2015). [abcnews.go.com/US/5000-muslims-serving-us-military-pentagon/story?id=35654904](http://abcnews.go.com/US/5000-muslims-serving-us-military-pentagon/story?id=35654904)
- ACLU. (2018). Timeline of the Muslim Ban. Retrieved from [aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban](http://aclu-wa.org/pages/timeline-muslim-ban).
- ACLU. (2018a). Discrimination against Muslim Women—Fact Sheet. Retrieved from [aclu.org/other/discrimination-against-muslim-women-fact-sheet](http://aclu.org/other/discrimination-against-muslim-women-fact-sheet).
- AIC. (2020). Faith, Money, Power: Leveraging the Buying Power and Influence of American Muslims. Retrieved from [aicongress.org/programs/gov-relations/engagement/fmp](http://aicongress.org/programs/gov-relations/engagement/fmp).
- Aleem, Shamim (2007). "12. Mothers of Believers". *Prophet Muhammad(s) and His Family*. AuthorHouse. p. 85. ISBN 978-1-4343-2357-6.
- Al-Masjid. (2020). Organizational Structure of Islam. Retrieved from [almasjid.com/content/organizational\\_structure\\_islam](http://almasjid.com/content/organizational_structure_islam).
- Anderson, S. (2019). Muslim Travel Ban: Less Immigration And Few Waivers. Forbes. Mar. 11, 2019. Retrieved from [forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2019/03/11/muslim-travel-ban-less-immigration-and-few-waivers/#3263adef27f0](http://forbes.com/sites/stuartanderson/2019/03/11/muslim-travel-ban-less-immigration-and-few-waivers/#3263adef27f0).

FBI (2020) 2018 Hate Crime Statistics. *Incidents, Offenses, Victims, and Known Offenders by Bias Motivation, 2018*. Retrieved from [ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/topic-pages/tables/table-1.xls](http://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2018/topic-pages/tables/table-1.xls) June 4, 2020.

Hassana, K., & Khanb, A. (2019). What is Islamic Finance and What Can It Do? Decision Sciences Institute. Retrieved from [decisionsciences.org/what-is-islamic-finance-and-what-can-it-do](http://decisionsciences.org/what-is-islamic-finance-and-what-can-it-do).

Hawley, G. (2019). Ambivalent nativism: Trump supporters' attitudes toward Islam and Muslim immigration. Retrieved from the Brookings Institute website: [brookings.edu/research/ambivalent-nativism-trump-supporters-attitudes-toward-islam-and-muslim-immigration](http://brookings.edu/research/ambivalent-nativism-trump-supporters-attitudes-toward-islam-and-muslim-immigration).

Itashiki, M. (2016). *The Status and Aspirations of Young Women in Palestine*. Documentary video. Retrieved from [youtu.be/Q17B5hNnzPM](https://youtu.be/Q17B5hNnzPM).

Johnson, T.M., & Grim, Brian J. (2013). *The World's Religions in Figures: An Introduction to International Religious Demography* (PDF). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell. p. 10.

Korson, J.H. (1971). Endogamous Marriage in a Traditional Muslim Society: West Pakistan: a Study in Intergenerational Change. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*. Vol. 2, No. 2 (AUTUMN 1971), pp. 145-155.

Levin, B. (2016). *Hate Crime in the United States: 20 State Compilation of Official Data*. Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism. California Stat University, San Bernadino. Retrieved from [documentcloud.org/documents/3110202-SPECIAL-STATUS-REPORT-v5-9-16-16.html](http://documentcloud.org/documents/3110202-SPECIAL-STATUS-REPORT-v5-9-16-16.html) June 4, 2020.

Nowrasteh, A. (2016). Muslim Assimilation: Demographics, Education, Income, and Opinions of Violence. *CATO at liberty*. Retrieved from [cato.org/blog/muslim-assimilation-demographic-education-income-opinions-violence](http://cato.org/blog/muslim-assimilation-demographic-education-income-opinions-violence).

NPR. (2018). Muslims In America: Telling Your Own Stories. *Muslims In America: A New Generation*. <https://www.npr.org/2018/04/20/603246583/muslims-in-america-telling-your-own-stories>

Pew. (2014). Retrieved from [pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/muslim/](http://pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/muslim/), Pew. (2016)

Pew. (2017a). Why Muslims are the World's Fastest Growing Religious Group. Retrieved from the Pew Research website [pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group](http://pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/06/why-muslims-are-the-worlds-fastest-growing-religious-group).

Pew, (2017b). Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans. [pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans](http://pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans).

Pew. (2017). Muslims Concerned about their Place in Society, but Continue to Believe in the American Dream. *Findings from the Pew Research Center's 2017 Survey of U.S. Muslims*. Retrieved from the Pew Research website: [pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2017/07/U.S.-MUSLIMS-FULL-REPORT.pdf](http://pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/7/2017/07/U.S.-MUSLIMS-FULL-REPORT.pdf) (p50)

Pew. (2018Apr17). Muslims in America: Immigrants and those born in U.S. see life differently in many ways Retrieved from the Pew Research website: [pewforum.org/essay/muslims-in-america-immigrants-and-those-born-in-u-s-see-life-differently-in-many-ways](http://pewforum.org/essay/muslims-in-america-immigrants-and-those-born-in-u-s-see-life-differently-in-many-ways).

Pew. (2019). Sharp Rise in the Share of Americans Saying Jews Face Discrimination; Discrimination seen as widespread against Muslims, other groups. *U.S. Politics & Policy*. Apr 18, 2019. Retrieved from [people-press.org/2019/04/15/sharp-rise-in-the-share-of-americans-saying-jews-face-discrimination](http://people-press.org/2019/04/15/sharp-rise-in-the-share-of-americans-saying-jews-face-discrimination).

Shanmugasundaram, S. (2018). Anti-Sharia law bills in the United States. Southern Poverty Law Center. Retrieved from [splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/02/05/anti-sharia-law-bills-united-states](http://splcenter.org/hatewatch/2018/02/05/anti-sharia-law-bills-united-states).

Shanmugasundaram, S. (2019). Tracking Anti-Muslim Legislation Across the U.S. Southern Poverty Law Center. Retrieved from [splcenter.org/data-projects/tracking-anti-muslim-legislation-across-us](http://splcenter.org/data-projects/tracking-anti-muslim-legislation-across-us).

Stone, L. (1998). A Contextual Introduction to Islamic Food Restrictions. Third year paper. *Digital Access to Scholarship at Harvard*. Retrieved from [dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/8963873/lstone.pdf](http://dash.harvard.edu/bitstream/handle/1/8963873/lstone.pdf).

\*ISB: Islamic Speakers Bureau member