

Becoming American, Keeping My Religion -- Religion and Identity Among Second Generation New Immigrant College Students

Haroon Moghul

Today I'll be doing several things, talking about a number of items, weaving in and out of autobiography, religiosity, demography, history, and more.

I'll talk about my journey as an American Muslim--through Americanness and Muslimness.

I'll talk about how a major inflection point in my journey into and through an Islamic identity was the September 11th terrorist attacks, and that current generations have their own inflection points, from the rise of social media, to the election of Barack Obama and Donald Trump, with their own consequences.

Of course, these have also been inflection points for me, but they have had the unintended consequence of distancing me from a community I was long invested in, supported by, and defined through. Some of that may be a consequence of my personality, the accumulated weight of prior conflicts and tensions, and... or... my relatively greater proximity to my ancestral immigrant origins.

Maybe, despite my thinking otherwise, I'm not as American as I long assumed. Or, rather, younger American Muslims are more American than I was.

I'll talk about how Islam in America was not always an immigrant religion, but it appears to be becoming more and more identified as a religion of immigrants at a time when immigration itself is either vociferously celebrated or harshly rejected. That means something significant, the full valence of which we are just beginning to process.

I'll talk about how pressures from the left and more importantly the right are shaping the next generation of American Islam and therefore future generations of American Muslims in ways I was never so directly affected, taking Islam in directions beyond those I recognize, creating new forms of religious identity and community.

I will suggest contrasts between those and my own Islamic identity, forged in the crucible of small-town New England, a place that, I imagine, is very different from here. However in New England, we also have an important football team, albeit one which many people do not care for.

And where I can, I'll share some facts and figures, to leaven the oppressiveness of personal narrative, anecdote, and reflection with actual reality.

I do all this in the hopes that I meet the aim of the Scudder lecture series, which is "to address relevant topics in American religion."

And let's begin there.

Is Islam a Religion?

Because, for some people, Islam is not even a religion. It's a political ideology masquerading as a religion. More charitably, but not much more charitably, Islam is presented as a foreign religion hostile to America; as Donald Trump put it, "I think Islam hates us."

Leaving aside the fact that Islam is not a person, nor a corporation which has the legal status of a person, nor any centralized governing structure at large, this captures something of how many of my fellow Americans see me.

Islam strikes many Americans as foreign, as untrustworthy, as dangerous, as diabolical, as subversive. Among religions, or rather belief systems, American Islam consistently rates at the lowest end of approval surveys.

Being forced to confront the increasing pervasiveness of Islamophobia in American public spaces, which was ultimately a product of a deliberate campaign to amplify anti-Muslim sentiment and weaponize it, has been exhausting.

It has been unnerving.

It has shaken me and affected my participation in civil society.

The only belief system Americans trust less than Islam is atheism, and in other surveys, we are neck and neck with atheists for the bottom rung of the ladder. For those who are curious, in the last such survey I've seen, Judaism and Buddhism rank topmost.

This poor performance used to dismay me, until I realized that even by ranking below 50% on surveys of trustworthiness and esteem, Islam is more trusted than Donald Trump. Indeed, last I checked, more Americans are in favor of an impeachment inquiry into the President's conversations with his Ukrainian counterpart than supported the so-called Muslim ban, which suggests a muddled picture for Islam in America.

You may, incidentally, assume that as an American Muslim, I am skeptical of Donald Trump at best. I am not reflexively a progressive, and prefer and inhabit centrist inclinations--say, on health insurance--but it is hard for me to affiliate with the American right in any way today.

And that, indeed, is one of the more interesting characteristics of American Islam that I share with my fellow American Muslims: Not the centrism, mind you, but the inability and lack of interest in affiliating with the American right. Getting here has been a voyage long and strange, the progress of a community many may not know much about.

The History of American Islam

The first recorded Muslims in the North American continent include two explorers of the American southwest, and a half-Dutch, half-Spanish son of a pirate captain, who settled, as his Netherlandish heritage might suggest, in New Amsterdam. His family is partly the progenitor of great American families, like the Vanderbilts, but his family did not, of course, remain Muslim.

The second but first substantial wave of Muslims into the Americas were Africans. They were brought here as slaves. As Sylviane Diouf and other scholars have found, anywhere between ten and thirty percent of the slaves brought to America were Muslim.

America's slaves were, among other things, forcibly Christianized.

Many people say this Islamic heritage revived itself, or was resurrected, or rediscovered, in the 20th century, most famously as embodied by the Nation of Islam, and figures such as Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Yet, for all intents and purposes, in the immediate context of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, Islam did not survive as a visible, public presence, in most communities we would call African American.

The third wave of Islam in America appears to have been the arrival of significant numbers of Muslims from the Levant, the region of greater Syria, including what is now Israel and Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon, but which at the time belonged to the declining Ottoman Empire. Many of these Muslims settled in the Midwest, but they arrived at a time when America was not as accommodating of pluralism as we purportedly and demonstrably are today.

Many of them came to work in factories run by industrial behemoths such as Ford, and maintain roots in these industrial towns. These Muslims largely disappeared as Muslims, though some of their communities took root and flourish down to today.

The fourth wave of Islam in America is the revival of African Islam in African American communities, which produced and produces some of the most famous American Muslims and indeed Americans and Muslims of all time, such as Malcolm X and **Muhammad Ali**. This wave has had a huge impact on American society, and counts among its numbers between twenty to thirty-five percent of American Muslims.

While initially many of these Muslims belonged to the Nation of Islam, today they belong largely to Sunni Islam. The remaining sixty-five to eighty percent of today's American Muslims are largely but not exclusively what we call Muslims of recent immigrant origin.

Including me.

The fourth wave of Islam was significantly responsible for the fifth wave.

Thanks to pressure from the civil rights movement, in 1965 the United States government lifted quotas on immigration that had skewed towards Europeans and Christians, and this precipitated, among other waves of immigrants, significant numbers of Middle Easterners and South Asians.

Many were Muslim, and many were professionals at a time when such skills were handsomely rewarded, when wealth could accrue such that, thanks to the increasing immobility of American society, it might be passed on generationally, creating more permanent or perduring social classes than existed previously.

There are two points to note from this fourth and fifth wave.

George W.

First, that it has thus far largely survived and often prospered, and is responsible for changing the religious landscape of the United States of America. But a fair question, in light of recent trends, is whether this relatively small community will survive.

The most authoritative polls put the American Muslim population at 1% of the total population, and estimated to reach 2% by 2050. But it appears that for every person who converts into the faith, one person leaves the faith. Growth in actual and relative population is due to a relatively higher birthrate, which may be due to religious values or simply a residue from different cultural norms, which will fade with increased Americanization--something similar is happening in Europe, anyhow--and also due to immigration, which appears by all estimates to be slowing.

Can a community of one percent of the population survive and thrive in the face of pressures from the right and the left?

Second, despite the fact that Muslims of recent immigrant origin owe their presence in this country to civil rights activists, many of them African-American, we Muslims of recent immigrant origin have not exactly returned the favor.

It is estimated that some 74% of American Muslims voted for George W. Bush, including in places like Florida, where small numbers still had a huge effect. (Indeed, Muslims made and make up significant margins, even as minorities, in states as decisive as Michigan, Ohio, Virginia, and Florida.)

George W. Bush appealed to Muslims of immigrant origin, like my parents. And I was dense enough to go along when major American Muslim organizations of recent immigrant origin declared their intention to form a "bloc vote" for Bush, increasing the power of American Muslims in the electorate. Funnily enough, the bloc vote did, but not in the sense that they might have wanted.

Still, from their perspective, it was not a decision that emerged out of nowhere.

Bush, for one, went out of his way to embrace Muslims, and Gore did not. Every time Bush mentioned churches and synagogues, he mentioned mosques. From what I can recall, and this was my first election and my memory isn't so hot, but Gore wasn't nearly as ecumenical in his religious language, although this must be tempered by his choice of a Jewish running mate, which at that time was a far more significant decision than it seems to us now, after we have already twice elected a Muslim President.

I'm just making sure you're paying attention.

Many immigrant-origin Muslims were, and arguably still are, social conservatives. They have chosen to affiliate themselves with the right's "family values" agenda, and where they appear more liberal, are often tactically so. For example, most Muslims support marriage equality, but if you drill down, you find that many of them do on the principle that freedoms for one minority guarantee freedoms for other minorities--not that they believe gay marriage is religiously permissible.

But, above all else, there were economic reasons in addition to cultural reasons.

Economically, immigrant-origin Muslims were often entrepreneurial, self-employed, or of means, and as such supported a pro-business, low-tax agenda; who would not want to keep more of his income when there was more income to begin with?

Many also came from countries with overbearing or incompetent governments, and so the rhetoric of limited government appealed to them.

And then there was Joe Lieberman.

Anecdotally, at least, I can tell you that some American Muslims opposed Joe Lieberman's nomination because they thought he could never be impartial on Israel and Palestine, or because they were motivated by a casual anti-Semitism, which provoked them to vote for Bush. How badly American Muslims regretted this can be discovered by looking at exit polls from 2008, when it appears that some 90% of American Muslims voted for Barack Obama, and not only because he was Muslim.

Of the remaining ten percent, my guess is that half couldn't figure out how the machines worked, which is funny, because right now the only people invested in understanding how our elections work appear to be the Russians.

Move To The Left

Today, from what I see, American Islam appears to be moving farther and farther to the left. The American Muslims who, from what I can tell, anecdotally speaking, support Joe Biden are the same American Muslims who might have voted for a moderate Republican like Mitt Romney, had Obama not been such an appealing choice, and had

the Republican Party not become increasingly welcoming of Islamophobia. Meanwhile, younger American Muslims appear to be lining up behind social democrats.

Making them--and here's a surprise--very much like other young Americans.

American Muslims are affected by the same local, regional and national trends, and creating the same trends, as their counterparts of other faiths, and younger American Muslims overwhelmingly lean left.

In a recent issue of *The American Conservative*, Ben Sixsmith vociferously argued that American liberalism, by which he means cultural liberalism and progressive politics, were "co-opting" Islam; "rather than attack directly," he wrote, American liberalism was "transforming the faith into something more individualistic and materialistic."

I think there is something to this, and suggests, as I will return to later, that American Islam is increasingly finding itself stuck between a rock and a superficially tempting place. The former is easy to understand: Islamophobia, on the right, unashamed, unabashed, and unafraid to bash us come election time.

You only need to consider the hostility shown to two of the three Muslim members of Congress, Representatives Ilhan Omar of Minnesota and Rashida Tlaib of Michigan.

But what is that superficially tempting place?

On the left, and by the left. American Islam is being pushed to transform itself from a religious and spiritual identity concerned with a divinely-mandated moral and ritual code into an ethnoreligious identity, wherein American Islam is a tribe among other tribes, differentiated by markers which have been transformed into secular symbols of cultural affiliation, and less so belief.

In this scenario, American Islam is embraced because it is a minority, encouraged to jettison those elements of itself which do not accord with a secular liberal worldview. In effect, Muslims are being embraced on condition they render themselves less Islamic. Whereas, on the right, Muslims are collapsed into a single, negative definition of Islam, and indistinguishable from it.

It is therefore a little ironic that I am here, assuming that I am using ironic correctly. Very much like Alanis Morissette, I don't know.

Because I used to spend lots of time on college campuses, as a reasonably in-demand speaker, and now I do not, because I am not so in demand. I don't say this to complain. I accept that I have aged out, that there are younger, more compelling, and I do not say this lightly, more relevant and topical speakers out there, who speak a language increasingly unfamiliar to me, but I do wish I spent more time on college campuses and around young Muslims because I would like to understand how they perceive, respond to, and reconstruct the very forces that appear to be buffeting them.

At least, from my vantage point.

Their experiences are so different from my own.

Speaking Very Personally

I speak as an American Muslim of recent-immigrant origin. That's the story I can tell you. As the son of Sunni, Pakistani immigrants to the United States, both of whom were doctors. I fit into the mold of a certain one percent of American Islam, and I am conscious of that, and keen to emphasize that I tell this story not because I think it's more important, but because it's the story that I best know.

And while I have tried and will try in this talk to share data, I will also share experience and anecdote, because I think these are valuable things.

I am a writer, and writers try to observe.

There is an additional reason I share this personal perspective. There is data-driven learning, and affective or emotional learning. Both are important, I would argue. After all, someone can hear all kinds of positive facts and figures about Islam in America, and yet continue to raise a Spockish eyebrow at the religion, or its adherents. It's hard to overcome mistrust, and data alone isn't going to do it.

Maybe connecting to something personal will, or does. So, let's have at it.

My Story

I grew up in a suburb of Springfield, Massachusetts, in a pleasant small town that is one of those ideal places many Americans would love to live in. Our town is dotted by houses constructed in the 19th, 18th, and even, I believe, 17th centuries, landmarks of history that is ancient by republican American standards, and quite beautiful. My parents worked in Springfield, Massachusetts, as doctors; my father was an orthopedic surgeon, and my mother a radiation oncologist.

I was born with a number of physical and medical challenges, which made my upbringing rather cloistered. I was by nature introverted, and probably still am--there are reasons why that's changed, or maybe I should say fluctuated throughout my life--and spent a lot of time indoors, or otherwise by myself. I had many best friends, most of which were books. I preferred fantasy and science fiction, because these were worlds in which I did not have to feel limited.

My parents were both very religious, but in different ways. My mother's family was more literary and artistic, and I think passed that on to me... or it's genetic... who can say?

Suffice it to say that along with reading, I was always fond of writing, and was encouraged in this by my parents, who to their credit have always supported my academic dreams, and lamented those times when I came up short, even as I did, even as I was afraid to say I did too.

This was America before September 11th, and white America at that. When I was eleven, we moved to an even smaller town across the border in Connecticut. There I came of age, and in a social circle where there was little anti-Muslim sentiment, little overt racism--although plenty of confusion as to who or what I was--and little knowledge of Muslims or of difference writ large. I have to say, though, that I was and am fortunate.

Growing up, I faced little hostility to myself as a brown Muslim. The Muslim part I get: This was before 9/11 and the age of the endless war. The brown part I also get, or at least can explain: My town was really welcoming.

If I was held back, it was by my own shyness and awkwardness. Which I began to grow out of as I approached my teenage years. I began to find myself more and more attracted to the more liberal lifestyles of my peers.

You see, that was a problem.

My parents raised me in an Islam that was orthopractic. Religion was not just about what you believed, but what you *did*. And if you didn't do it, you were likely to go to hell. Contrary to the common stereotype that religion is a way of making the in-group feel better and the out-group, well, go to hell, in this case it was the reverse. The more you know about religion, I was taught, the more responsible you are for it. Spider-Man's great power and great responsibility.

And I knew a lot of religion, which meant I had a lot to answer for.

When I was younger, this didn't pose that much of a problem. You see, I could be spending lots of time on Star Trek: Deep Space Nine, or The Lord of the Rings, but while these distracted me from youthful piety, they did not undermine it. What did undermine it was my budding desire to be part of a world my parents had no room to understand, and only condemn, and to be part of a world which my religion had no room for except, also, to condemn.

I wanted to date and to drink. I didn't want to dance, because I knew, even then, that I sucked at dancing. I am possibly the only Punjabi to so suck.

Atheism Then Catholicism

But I couldn't pursue that lifestyle with religion hanging over my head, and so I made the decision, amusing in retrospect, that the way out of divine oversight is divine retirement.

I didn't make a substantive, genuine commitment to atheism, but a strategic or at least tactical choice. I chose not to believe in God, because belief in God made me feel awful about what I wanted.

And once I was freed of God, I went about pursuing the lifestyle I wanted. Still, this was not an atheism of genuine conviction, and as I became free of an Islamic worldview, I decided I would look into other religions, and found myself especially attracted to Catholicism. It was capacious enough that it appeared it could accommodate me.

It was the religion of many of my peers and friends.

It was ancient and storied.

But above all, I loved the idea, the figure, the person, the role, of Jesus, which brought a humanity and intimacy into Catholicism and therefore into religion that I felt was lacking in Islam as I had been taught it, which stressed rule of religious law, conformity, and commitment to a community that had no idea what to do with me--and that, in fairness, I had no idea what to do with, too.

The world of Islam was the world of my parents, attached, umbilically, to Pakistan and to Muslimness, while the world of Catholicism was the world of my peers.

I was thus caught between two visions of religiosity, the Islam of my upbringing and the Catholicism of my environment, and leaning towards the latter, but afraid, understandably enough I suppose, of making that final leap into the unknown. About all I knew was that I was not in any recognizable way an atheist. I was a monotheist who was agnostic about religion.

But a chance trip to Saudi Arabia upended my calculations and directions. My brother invited me to visit him in Saudi Arabia, and to perform the minor pilgrimage in Mecca, and to visit Medina, the site of the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, and I agreed, it being the summer before my freshman year of college--I'd chosen New York University, or NYU.

I had nothing much else to do, and the idea of a trip abroad sounded exciting, and a relief from boredom. Most of my friends had already left or were on their way out of Connecticut, or at least out of my hometown. I decided to make the most of it, and calculated that if a trip to Saudi Arabia, to Islam's holiest sites, did not decide my religious choice for me, then maybe nothing could.

Then maybe I would be an agnostic monotheist for the rest of my life. The kinds of decisions we believe we are making at the age of eighteen, mind you.

Mecca didn't affect me as much as I thought it would, or more accurately as I thought it should. But I had a moment in Medina. As prayers finished, I joined a huge crowd of

worshippers pushing and shoving and otherwise making their way to the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad, and I had a few moments before his tomb.

Legend has it there is space beside his tomb for Jesus, who is also the Messiah in Islam. When he returns to the world, and lives out the rest of his life, he will be buried in Medina, beside his brother-in-faith, Muhammad. When I left Muhammad's resting place, I emerged out into the sunshine of the plaza outside the great mosque.

Come To Muhammad Moment

I had a coming to Muhammad moment.

If I accepted Jesus as Catholicism outlined him, then I would have no room for Muhammad. Indeed I would not only have no room for him, but I would have to discount him. I would have to conclude that he was a liar, a fraud, or deluded, or delusional. I would have to dismiss him and everything he stood for.

Whereas, if I accepted Muhammad, I could accept some kind of Jesus.

What I did was a kind of Hegelian synthesis, powered by my discovery of the first part of Islam that appeared to belong to me genuinely and entirely. I had a personal attachment to the person of Muhammad, almost of the kind that my Catholic friends had to Jesus. I didn't know I had this, or that it existed buried somewhere deep in my faith.

And I could not bring myself to believe Muhammad was false or fraudulent or otherwise misled, because I loved him and what he stood for too much.

It was through another American religious tradition, and a very American experience of a small-town in which Muslimness played almost no role, that I became Muslim again. Or, rather, that I converted to a new kind of Islam.

NYU

Thus reconverted, or reconstructed, as a Muslim, I found myself at New York University, where the Muslim community had not that much in actuality but a tremendous amount in potentiality. Alongside a number of talented and broad-minded Muslim peers, we worked to reconstruct the Islamic Center at New York University, to transform it into a different kind of institution.

I was working to create a space where all self-identifying Muslims could feel welcome, where there would be a community unlike the community I had known--and I don't mean to knock my parents, or their efforts.

In retrospect, they were remarkably committed, remarkably dedicated, deeply concerned with communicating religion as they understood it and, above all else, so generous with their time and their resources in not only giving back to their community but creating that community. They founded a mosque, transforming the landscape of America like many American immigrants do.

And though we can find fault with these mosques, with these communities, perhaps we shouldn't be overly hard on them. Religion is a generational project, and America is a generational project, and each changes in its own ways, and always one is trying to catch up to the other.

It is the task of my generation to fill in the gaps, to make up for the unintentional and unintended mistakes, to reconstruct--to use a favorite word--Islam for this moment in time. Yet I wonder if the Islam I knew and the Islam I adhered to has any place in that temporal moment anymore.

I was elected President of the Islamic Center at NYU for my senior year, which academic year began with the September 11th terrorist attacks. As a leader in one of the larger Muslim communities in proximity to Ground Zero, I found myself at the center of national and international inquiry.

I must have done dozens of interviews, performed Islam at numerous events, and otherwise made myself into a symbol of the kind of Muslim community we both were--relatively pluralistic and welcoming--and we wanted to be seen as.

As I wanted to be seen.

And yet, I was not the kind of Muslim I projected myself to be. Though I had a renewed commitment to Muslim identity after high school, it was not of the orthodox variety, a personal Muslimness that I had to suppress, deny, or dissimulate about, in order to achieve the things I wanted to achieve for my community.

I am not sure if that was deeply dishonest or simply political necessity; to the latter, I never preached what I did not practice. But I did pretend what I did not practice. I am happy to elaborate on this distinction later, if there is interest.

In the meanwhile, I dedicated myself to increasing my knowledge about Islam while I educated the wider public about Islam.

It felt like something I was born to do, even as I was unclear what my own relationship to Islam was. I felt pressured to perform, and performed on demand, making myself into, for lack of a better term, a professional Muslim. My religion was my expertise, and my expertise was my religion.

Needless to say, I rocketed forward, highly in demand in that environment, but exhausting myself in the process. I broke down physically, mentally, and financially, my

life spinning out of control by the time I was just about thirty, and it has taken me the better part of this decade of my life--my thirties--to figure out who I am and who I am supposed to be.

On My Way Out

Growing up in small-town New England created a Muslim identity that, for me, was very anchored in the context of that suburban reality. Going to college saw me expand that identity into a sense of belonging to a collectivity, which process was cut short, or redirected, by the September 11th attacks.

But as the years went by, I found myself more and more exhausted by what I was doing, and finding many of the debates I participated in to be tiresome--they didn't seem to be going anywhere, and Islamophobic sentiment was, on the right at least, getting worse all the time, no matter that 9/11 was farther and farther away.

I began to think another direction was necessary, and I proceeded to begin to move along a trajectory set perpendicularly to my community as I had thitherto understood it. This isn't meant to be a pity party, mind you. It's just me telling you how things unfolded.

When Donald Trump was elected, I was on my way out of professional Islam, right when it was about to come back into vogue. (The Obama years were a general, or relative, respite.) And I learned how distant I was from the consensus positions.

For example, I expected that the response to Trump's divisiveness would be a renewed commitment, among American Muslims--or maybe a new commitment--to centrism, moderation in politics--and here I'm not talking about extremism, I'm talking Amy Klobuchar versus Bernie Sanders--and a more conciliatory tone.

Unsurprisingly, though, the anger that courses under the surface of the American body politic includes the left and includes minorities. The response to radicalism on the right was radicalism on the left, and the response to radicalism on the left was radicalism on the right. I'm not equating the two, mind you.

One excuses violence, and the other does not. There are no democratic socialists who call neo-Nazis "very fine people." There are no democratic socialists arguing or embodying the subversion of our political norms. But all the same, though this seems rather obvious in retrospect, it was surprising to me in the moment.

How had I become so different from my erstwhile colleagues in the worlds of professional Islam? Why, when they were increasingly invested in short-form journalism, was I abandoning that medium for long-form writing?

Zarb-e Kaleem: Anti-Social Media

Part of the reason for this divergence is a personal transformation. What I've seen on Facebook, and on Twitter, has turned me off of most of social media. I maintain a Facebook page and have no idea why. I deleted my Twitter account a long time ago. I only use Instagram, or at least largely use Instagram, so I can remember my book tour, and that's about that. I disconnected from the conversations most Americans were connecting themselves to, or influenced and inflected by, including and especially including younger Muslims.

I don't fit into those spaces anymore, and those spaces generally don't welcome me into them. I am not saying this to stress lack of belonging as a problem. Simply as a fact that is interesting. Why am I so different from where so many Muslims are going? Did the exhaustion of the post-September 11th era finally break me? How did I go from being so politically and socially engaged to so disinterested in and uninterested by the norms of the present moment? Most young American Muslims I know are lining up behind Bernie Sanders, which says interesting things about Islam and anti-Semitism.

I am not. I have diverged.

I believe that I tended towards conciliatory politics after Donald Trump because, firstly, I thought this would heal the divides in our nation, but also because I felt concerned that no demonized minority should make itself too much of a target. Keep your head down, in other words. Incoming fire has the right of way. There is something of the immigrant parent in this; my parents didn't care for American politics as a vocation, which is perhaps understandable.

Immigrants are keen to make better lives for themselves, and often unlikely to make themselves the center of attention. Better to stay out of the spotlight, especially when you feel like you don't fully belong, or your position is precarious.

Whereas, on the other hand, younger American Muslims appear to be much more assertive, which is an indication to me that they feel more confidently American, that the passage of time in this country, or perhaps the pressures of coming of age, at a much younger age, in an environment of marked Islamophobia, has generated more oppositional politics. Suffice it to say, it is not how I grew up, and that shows in our reactions to this absurd political moment.

And here I'd like to begin to end. Every ending, after all, should be prepared for.

When Trump made his call for a Muslim ban, I called a friend from London and asked him if our communities had futures in the West. I wasn't proposing leaving, not for myself or for anyone else; anyhow, where would I go? But I did wonder if the mainstreaming of this rhetoric would not constitute a terrible blow against the long-term vitality of our communities. I was accused of being paranoid, or panicked, but I did not think Trump should have been underestimated.

The Contradictions of America(n Islam)

It is of course never a good thing when a minority community finds itself under partisan threat, by which I mean when a minority community is hated, feared, and rejected, by one of the two political parties in that country. But in an age of hyperpartisanship, there is something to be said for hyperpartisanship. When one party closes itself off to Muslims, often by default that other party opens itself up to Muslims. The question is: On whose terms?

And what happens in the process? What happens if Democrats lose in 2020? What happens if Republicans pack the courts, and sustain challenges to the vitality of democratic liberalism--small 'l' liberalism--for a generation to come? The first wave of Islam in America did not survive. Neither the second nor the third. The fourth and fifth waves continue to survive, although some of my colleagues in Black Muslim communities portray those communities as struggling religiously.

Losing, not gaining, adherents.

I can't say for sure if that's true, and I don't know anyone who's done rigorous analysis on this question.

Immigrant-origin Islam seems to have finally struck down roots, but that has more to do with a welcoming political and social environment, which might be dying off. Pressure from the right, in trying to exclude an American Islam, increases and accelerates the Americanization of these Muslim communities, by which I mean their confidence as participants in the American experiment, something people in my generation have relatively less of.

The danger is that this can become an oppositional identity. (If there's time, mention the Hartman anecdote about MLI applicants--Islamophobia was the concern of nearly all 50.) Can a religion, a minority religion, survive generationally if its primary concern becomes opposition to it? What happens if that opposition is too much to bear, or if it goes away.

Meanwhile, the left is hardly the refuge it appears to be. Pressure from the left means a certain kind of secularization; the secular left, and even the religious left, prefers to read society politically, ethnically, economically, materially, leaving less room for the transcendent. One of the great shifts in the last decade has been the rise of secular Muslim identity.

This diversification of the American Muslim landscape has been a good thing, but there is a downside too. I have noticed over the past few years that more and more space is created in popular culture for Muslims, but that these are secular Muslims, and they are outpacing and outdoing traditional, theologically conservative Muslims.

That is all well and good, at least from the perspective of increased room for different kinds of Muslimness, but Islam does not, unlike Judaism, have an ethnic component; the rise of a secular Muslim identity is fascinating, but also worrying. An Islam as heritage is not sufficient to sustain itself, is it? Can it be passed on generationally?

Will it survive demographically?

I don't know, and I can't know for sure, but we can at least wonder and worry.

My own story of American Islamic identity has as one of its major inflection points the rediscovery of faith through other American religious traditions at a time WHEN ISLAM WAS NOT UNDER SUSPICION. My subsequent struggle with religious identity occurred at a time when Islam was under suspicion, and Muslims expected to speak up, qua Muslims, to defend themselves.

My response to this moment has been to withdraw to a political position that I think is valuable, but which many people, other than myself, have abandoned; centrism is valuable, I think, but clearly most Americans do not agree.

I wonder what that means for young Muslims living in a country where a demographic and xenophobic minority fears and distrusts their religion, and yet has the power to translate this into policy, and a majority of their peers are increasingly skeptical of organized religion itself. My hunch is that the internal picture of American Islam is dynamic and promising

But the external circumstances are troubling and worrying.

I certainly don't think American Islam is disappearing. I do think it is changing, and may change beyond recognition, beyond what I expect or maybe even, if I'm honest, would have wanted it to be. You could say, in other words, that I feel old.