American Exceptionalism and American Muslims

Muqtedar Khan, University of Delaware

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/muqtedar_khan/13/
The Review of Faith & International Affairs

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rfia20

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND AMERICAN MUSLIMS

M. A. Muqtedar Khan

To cite this article: M. A. Muqtedar Khan (2012): AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM AND AMERICAN MUSLIMS, The Review of Faith & International Affairs, 10:2, 59-65

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15570274.2012.682509

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
American exceptionalism is part of a set of ideals and aspirations (an “American creed”) that holds American national identity together. Most nations in the world are held together either by a shared history, a shared ethnicity, or a shared religion. America, fortunately, is neither based on nor constrained by such narrow foundations. Would-be Americans arrive every day, and they will continue to arrive. The country’s immigrant foundations mean we cannot talk about a shared history in a meaningful way without discriminating between those who came early and those who are still coming. When it comes to ethnicity and religion, America hosts one of the most diverse societies in the world. This is evident even within relatively small religious minorities in America such as Islam. Indeed, as an American Muslim I am continually amazed at the diversity among Muslims in the United States. In fact, there is no Muslim society in the world that includes as many types of Muslims as the American Muslim community. Moreover, with access to the Hajj now being denied to some Muslim sects, America on any given day has a wider variety of Muslims than even the Hajj.

Given the diversity of Americans, the need for a national identity based on universal ideas, values, and vision (rather than particularist history/ethnicity/religion) is palpable. This shared vision of what America is and should be led Alexis de Tocqueville to write famously about American exceptionalism in *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville understood that America was a uniquely different nation, the first to break away from European traditions based on ethnic and religious homogeneity. America is a nation explicitly based on a social contract, the Constitution, which in principle can be reformulated and reconstituted.

As new Americans become citizens, through birth or naturalization, most embrace this vision of American exceptionalism, even as they reshape it through their embrace. The growing presence of Islam and Muslims in America is a case in point. Some (though by no means all) American Muslims are embracing the idea that America is a special and unique nation. At the same time, American exceptionalism is also re-shaped by their presence. The United States has become a place where Islam thrives in all its diversified glory. Neither the founding fathers nor Tocqueville could have anticipated how the presence of Muslims would augment American exceptionalism. The eminent social scientist Seymour Martin Lipset identified five elements of American exceptionalism: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire. American Muslims today are making major contributions to a sixth: religious diversity.

The idea of ascribing “exceptional” status to a nation’s identity is not, of course, new or even particularly American. Indeed, all the discourses of nationalism—seeking to construct, legitimize,
and sustain particular identities—employ some kind of exceptionalist imagery. (One cannot imagine a nationalist campaign that declares, “We are ordinary; there is nothing special or unique or worthy of mention about us, and by the way we need our own country!”) National identities are imagined constructs. Even when they do not provide tangible benefits, they promote unity, pride, cohesion, and, above all, loyalty.

It is also important to remember here that it is not only nations but also many religions that claim, in one way or another, “exceptional” status for themselves. The Jewish belief that Jews are “the chosen people” stems from the religion’s earliest texts, and it has sparked controversy in international forums. In Hinduism, the members of the Brahmin caste consider themselves to be a chosen people endowed with the right and privilege to monopolize religious knowledge and authority. Within Islam, alongside its egalitarian teachings, the idea exists that all Muslims are chosen by God. There is a prophetic tradition (hadith) that describes how the Prophet Moses wanted the portfolio of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon them both), but God denied his request. Then he asked to be one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad. That request was also denied. He then wished that he could be one of the followers of Prophet Muhammad. He was told they all are chosen. This hadith is occasionally used to convey the idea that God has chosen who will be a Muslim and who will not be a Muslim. Even Moses, the prophet to whom God spoke directly, sought the privilege of being a Muslim but was not blessed with it. In Islam, being a Muslim is both a special privilege and a special responsibility.

Faith and Empire

One theorist suggests that while the Catholic empires emerged from the European continent, the Protestant empire emerged from the new continent. The Protestant cultural backdrop of America’s vision for its role in the world has had complex implications. On the one hand, even though Protestantism long maintained a de facto privileged position in American culture, most Protestants did come to accept (and in many cases enthusiastically support) the idea that America is not a Protestant Christian nation, but rather a nation open and friendly to all faiths. Indeed, the American empire has become the first multi-faith, multicultural empire.

On the other hand, American Protestantism has been prone to support the adoption of a kind of semi-secularized “Zionism” into an American “civil religion.” It is premised on the idea that America is the new Zion, the “city on the hill” specially chosen and blessed by God to act as a moral beacon and champion of freedom and democracy for the rest of humanity. Historically, civil religion has been popular across almost all of American Christianity’s theological and political divisions. But today it is defended most fervently by religio-political conservatives—and in ways that exacerbate the linkage between civil religion and an attitude of arrogant triumphalism about US foreign policy and America’s role in the world. For example, during the 2012 Republican presidential primaries, at least one candidate criticized President Barack Obama by claiming that he apologizes for America. Many partisans of civil-religious exceptionalism find it difficult to imagine ever having a need to profoundly apologize for American foreign policy. Their worldview results in a highly selective perception of foreign policy realities.

The connection between American exceptionalism and empire is very old. In the first part of the 19th century, doctrines such as Manifest Destiny were employed to justify America’s continental expansion westward and its war with Mexico. The notion that American values and institutions are special became the moral justification for imperialism. Historical beliefs like Manifest Destiny—and, more recently, a belief that it is America’s duty to spread democracy worldwide—stem from a conception of America as being special, blessed by God, and holding unique and special virtues.

Former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright once described the United States as an indispensible nation. She asserted: “If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.” Since the end of World War II, American values and American power
have been the cornerstone of international security and economic order, maintaining a kind of *Pax Americana*. Even today, as more and more historians and commentators are writing the obituaries of the American empire, citizens and policymakers are cognizant that without any significant contribution and leadership from the United States, the international community will not be able to make a meaningful intervention in major crises, such as the current violence in Syria. The military and economic capabilities of Europe are declining, and even though India, China, Russia, Brazil, and Turkey are emerging as strong powers with expanding economies, none is willing to share the responsibilities of maintaining the global order. A much-weakened America, after two long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a long economic recession, still remains the only power that everyone looks to in moments of crisis. This awareness of America’s global power and influence helps to sustain the belief in American exceptionalism.

American Muslim Perspectives on American Exceptionalism

As noted above, the American Muslim community is far from monolithic or homogeneous. It is best to think of the American Muslim community as a community of communities. But nevertheless, one important demographic distinction is between African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims (including the integrated children of the immigrant Muslims). While the political positions within each of these groups are neither uniform nor consistent, there are certainly identifiable common views on politics. I intend to summarize their views on American exceptionalism based on the various positions they have taken in the past.\(^{14}\)

The political views of the African American Muslim community are very strongly influenced by racial identity and the context of racism and black marginalization in America. Many of the traditional struggles of the African American community to escape the structural discriminations in American society remain the overarching political umbrella for African American Muslims. Many find that when they convert to Islam, they move from one periphery to another—from the margins of American society to the margins of American Muslim society.

Without revisiting the history of racism and its impact on black consciousness, it is safe to suggest that, historically, the idea of American exceptionalism excluded black Americans and treated black Americans as “other.”\(^{15}\) African Americans did not share in the privileges that America granted to white citizens. Malcolm X captured the sentiment quite elegantly when he pronounced: “We’re not Americans, we’re Africans who happen to be in America. We were kidnapped and brought here against our will from Africa. We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock—that rock landed on us.”\(^ {16}\) Most African American Muslims, from Malcolm X to Sherman Jackson, reject the idea that America is a nation of special virtues that are superior to those of any other society in the world and worthy of emulation. African Americans continue to experience race-based discrimination, and Islamophobia is widespread in American society. Needless to say, the idea of American exceptionalism does not appeal much to the black Muslim.\(^ {17}\)

Members of the second group of American Muslims, the immigrant Muslim community, can be further subdivided into two groups that diverge sharply in their views toward American exceptionalism.\(^ {18}\) First, those Muslims who cannot see beyond America’s sometimes flawed and bellicose foreign policy in Muslim-majority countries hold a very negative view of American society and American values. Their attitude tends to be quite cynical and they believe that all rhetoric about American values is hypocritical and a discursive cover for racism, imperialism, and Islamophobia.\(^ {19}\)

There are several grievances against US foreign policy that are frequently voiced by Muslims of this group. The most prominent example is US policy toward Israel/Palestine. American leaders talk about freedom as the most important of all political values and often present the United States as a champion of freedom. But when it comes to a peaceful solution in Palestine, America’s unwavering support for Israel is seen as the single biggest barrier to the freedom of
Palestinians. Generations of Palestinians have suffered tyranny, occupation, and daily humiliation because of US support for Israel and Israeli occupation of Palestine. Many Muslims who hear American presidents talk about freedom sigh in disgust. They question why the United States ignores Israel’s illegal nuclear arsenal but punishes Iran for pursuing a nuclear program that it is entitiled to as a signatory of the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons treaty (NPT). If the United States is opposed to nuclear weapons in principle then it should send inspectors and sanction Israel, they argue.

Another example is the lack of consistency between American foreign policy rhetoric about democracy and the reality of decades of US support for brutal dictators in Muslim-majority countries. Even in the wake of the Arab Spring, the United States continues to pick and choose where it will support democracy and where it will support monarchy. These Muslims believe it is impossible to make the case that US foreign policy is guided by moral principles in its policies toward Muslim-majority countries. For those who focus on US foreign policy alone, American exceptionalism sounds hollow and ridiculous.

Members of the second group of immigrant Muslims, by contrast, focus more on their positive personal experience in American society—on the freedoms and opportunities they enjoy in America—and have an entirely different opinion of their adopted country and its exceptionalism. They have a more nuanced view of US foreign policy and understand that some measures are necessary, and others are driven by special interests. This group understands how US media misrepresent Islam and Muslims, and how media in the Muslim-majority countries demonize the United States and its policies. Above all, they also acknowledge that many of the United States’ ill-advised policies in the Middle East and North Africa were influenced by undemocratic regimes. For example, the United States’ aggressive opposition towards Islamic movements was in part shaped by the intelligence fed to it by Muslim dictators.

These Muslim Americans are enamored with American democracy, its freedoms, and the tremendous economic and cultural opportunities that it has provided to Muslims and people of other nationalities and faiths from all over the world. They recognize that America is indeed based on an experiment with freedom of religion, expression, and thought. They like how religious values play a role in the public sphere without resulting in theocracy or religious tyranny. Muslims intuitively reject the idea of secularism. They more or less understand secularism as the French do—barring religion from politics. Accordingly, they like what they see in America. The idea of religious pluralism is for these Muslims a vibrant alternative to the two extremes of secularism and theocracy. These Muslims tend to be very successful and they recognize that their ethnicity, religion, or former nationality did not undermine their ability to enjoy the opportunities available in America. For them, the American model is in many ways consistent with Islamic values, and therefore they actually wish to export the American model to other countries. In spite of some reservations regarding American foreign policy, they genuinely believe in American exceptionalism.

American Muslims who uphold the ideal of American exceptionalism are clearly influenced by their exposure to American democracy and the tolerance and acceptance that Muslims have experienced in the United States. But that does not mean they are indifferent to foreign policy issues. These Muslims are critical of American foreign policy and argue that America could be a force for the good in Muslim-majority countries. They imagine an America that is free from the overriding "security" needs of Israel and is instead a force
for justice and human rights. They glimpsed just such an America in the US intervention on behalf of the Muslims of Bosnia in 1999, and again when it helped the rebels in Libya in 2011 and supported the Arab Spring movements in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011. In the post-9/11 era, however, several of the policies begun under President George W. Bush and continued under President Obama—such as the invasion of Iraq, the use of torture, kidnapping and profiling overseas, the abuses at Guantanamo, and the use of drones—have dismayed even the most ardent of Muslim fans of America.

An Exceptional Islam in an Exceptional Nation

Since 9/11, the American Muslim community has often been on the defensive, fighting allegations that it supports radicalism, facing extensive scrutiny and intrusive spying by the government, responding to harassment by several law enforcement agencies, and feeling threatened by rising Islamophobia and a culture of hostility towards Islam and Muslims. The community seems to be endlessly reacting to some new challenge, and these trends have reduced the constituency for American exceptionalism within American Islam.

Before 9/11, the American Muslim community was more proactive and was in many ways crafting a new vision for itself. American Muslims were in the process of developing a public philosophy of what might be called “American Muslim Exceptionalism”—an idea that American Muslims were different from other Muslims, that they were special and unique. I attended several seminars and day-long workshops (I even led some of them) of American Muslim leaders, scholars, imams, and intellectuals from 1995 to 2001, for the explicit purpose of articulating a vision for the American Muslim community and developing the moral, political, and theological contents of what was to become “the American Muslim.”

Momentum stalled after 9/11, but the good news is that gradually some American Muslim intellectuals are now beginning to revive the spirit of the pre 9/11 period, when they expected so much of themselves. In March 2011, for instance, there was a day-long conference in Northern Virginia, which attempted to restart the conversation that was so dominant before 9/11. American “Muslim exceptionalists” believe that God brought Muslims to America, the world’s richest and most powerful country, for a purpose. They recognize that American Muslims constitute one of the most highly educated, most advanced, and wealthiest Muslim societies in the world. They hope that in America’s society, where both freedom of religion and freedom of thought are protected, a genuinely authentic Islamic revivalist and reformist movement will emerge that will not only prove that Islamic principles are truly divine, but that will also establish a path for the Muslim community worldwide to negotiate the challenges of modernity.

An example of particular note is the recent resurgence of interest in the Maqasid approach to Islamic law. The basic idea here is to focus on the already-present agreement within the Islamic tradition that all specific Islamic legal rulings must conform with the core purposes of the divine law, and to show that protection of human rights, minority rights, and gender equality falls under the purview of the Maqasid (the underlying goals of Islamic law). The idea of the Maqasid al-Shariah approach has been revived with great enthusiasm by the International Institute of Islamic thought, an American Muslim research institute based in Virginia. This institute has published both new research and translated and republished classical texts on this approach.

Conclusion

Muslims all over the world face serious intellectual challenges from the fundamental social shifts that have occurred as a consequence of modernity. What is the revised role of women in an increasingly free society? What should be the proper place of religious minorities within Muslim-majority countries? What is the relationship between Muslim minorities and the societies that they choose to live in? Democracy is becoming the preferred form of governance in our times—hence, what is the proper role of Islam in the public sphere of a pluralist society?
American Muslims, and their think tanks, have taken upon themselves to answer these questions not only for themselves but also for the rest of the Muslim world. Muslim exceptionalists hope that American Muslims will become the intellectual hub of the Muslim ummah, utilizing their intellectual and material resources to advance critical research and new thinking about Islam. I still believe that, inshallah (God willing), this will come to pass.

1. For example, the Ahmadiyyah Muslim community is not allowed to perform Hajj; it is deemed as a heretical branch. Individuals from this community do go on pilgrimage, but only from Western countries where their passports do not reveal their sectarian identity. But in the United States this community has thrived, like the mainstream Muslim community. In Muslim-majority countries, especially in Pakistan and Indonesia, they suffer discrimination.
2. See de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, part 2, 36.
3. To get a sense of these dynamics see my essay “American Muslims and the Rediscovery of America’s Sacred Ground.”
5. For example, Brazilians have often used the idea of Brazil Grande, and Hindu nationalists in India talk of an Akhand Bharat, or Grand India, that will extend from Iran in the west to Myanmar in the east.
6. See Anderson, Imagined Communities.
7. See Gurkan, Jews as a Chosen People, for a useful study of the various ways in which this idea has been understood.
8. By “portfolio,” Muslims suggest that Moses wanted the role of Muhammad, i.e., to be the Prophet to whom the Qur’an is revealed and the last Prophet of God.
9. This tradition can be found in Allama Jalaluddin Al-Sayyuti, Al-Khhasaisul Kubra, and in Ashraf Ali Thanvi, Nashr-ul-Tub Fi Zikr-un-Nabi Alhabib.
10. Carla Gardina Pestana published a fascinating work titled Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World. It supports the idea I am advancing that America began as a sort of Protestant empire.
12. See Lieven, America Right or Wrong, 88–122.
13. Interview with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright on NBC TV’s “The Today Show” with Matt Lauer, Columbus, Ohio, February 19, 1998. Albright was making the Clinton administration’s case for possible strikes against Iraq.
14. My summary of these perspectives is based on several conversations and seminars that I have attended with American Muslim leaders and groups in the past 15 years.
15. For an understanding of the black Muslim experience in America, see C. Eric Lincoln’s, The Black Muslims in America and Richard Brent Tumer’s Islam in the African American Experience.
16. This is a very famous statement made by Malcolm X. See http://www.malcolm-x.org/quotes.htm (accessed 8 March 2012).
17. See Sherman Jackson’s Islam and the Blackamerican for a sophisticated reflection on the condition of African Americans by a black American Muslim scholar.
18. See Bukhari et al., Muslims’ Place in the American Public Square.
19. See my chapter, “Living on Border Lines.”
20. See, for example, my chapter, “Muslims and Identity Politics in America.” See also my chapter, “Collective Action and Collective Identity,” in Haque’s Muslims and Islamization in North America. Haque’s entire volume is full of essays by American Muslims hoping to carve a special and unique destiny for Islam in America. See also Haddad, Becoming American.
21. See “Seminar on American Muslim Identity.”
22. For more on the American Muslim exceptionalist ideal, see my book American Muslims.
23. Examples of contemporary works on Maqasid Al-Shariah include Auda, Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law and Kamali, Maqasid Al-Shariah Made Simple. For more classical works see al-Raysuni, Imam Al-Shatibi’s Theory of the Higher Objectives and Intents of Islamic Law and Ashur, Ibn Ashur: Treatise on Maqasid Al-Shariah.

References


