

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



Reflections on the Convert/Non-Convert Divide:

In Search of Belonging

By Abdullah bin Hamid Ali

I was born in Philadelphia, grew up in Chicago, and then returned with my family to my town of birth in 1984. By this time, I had already imbibed the love for breakdancing, and started to notice how my peers were gravitating toward the latest trends. In middle school I met friends who enthusiastically expressed excitement about the latest craze: patent leather sneakers with those super-thick shoe laces that many breakdancers wore and graffiti artists loved to attach to the ill-proportioned bodies of their caricatures. It was the very first time I recall wanting to take part in anything that resembled “group-think” in my entire life. “Mom? Would you buy me a pair of patent leather sneakers” I said. Mom replied, “Ok.” So, I waited and waited, but Mom never bought me those shoes, and I never asked again realizing the financial strain that it might put on a recent divorcee bearing the sole financial responsibility for at least five of her seven children.

My father was a true believer in the man that so many still refer to as “The Honorable Elijah Muhammad,” and was often bothered by people speaking negatively about him even though my father became a Sunni under the guidance of Imam W. D. Muhammad. I guess I shouldn’t blame him. Elijah Muhammad was the first person to make some people, like my father, feel that they were worth anything. He was the first one to ever make them feel like someone cares about their physical, psychological, emotional, spiritual, and even economic well-being. In other words, he was the first to make them feel that they were full human beings equal to other people, and most importantly, to those termed “white.” My mother, on the other hand, like so many other “black” women of her generation, seems to me to have always been less trusting of human beings and more of a realist than dad was. That is to say that she knew just how much dogma to consume and she sure knew when she had her full. I can hear her now, “Don’t let those brothers convince you not to finish school.” That’s my dear mother who I love so.

People often ask me whether or not I was born a Muslim, and I always begin my response by saying that, “It’s difficult.” You see, by the time I was born, the golden age of “The First Resurrection” was already coming to a close. My father whose faith was shattered by the death of “The Messenger” and the new direction being taken by his son, Imam Muhammad, may Allah show him mercy, somehow affected what kind of Muslims me and my siblings would become. We grew up like any typical African American family living on the south side of Chicago. Besides the early indoctrination of my eldest three siblings into the Nation of Islam teachings, the rest of us grew up knowing only that we were “Muslims.” Heck! The first time I ever saw or touched even a translation of the Qur’an was when we moved back to Philadelphia when I was about 12 or 13 years old. We went to public schools,

watched all the Christmas specials with Frosty, Rudolph, the Grinch, Charlie Brown, and all that jazz, and we even traveled to Philadelphia every Christmas to my paternal aunt's house. This is how my life began. It is also how I began my search for truth and a sense of belonging. I believe that, though seemingly unintentional, the way my parents raised me has provided me with a keen insight into what it means to have a healthy religious consciousness, conscience, and attitude toward others. It is what still deters me from occultism, sectarian religious politics, being a hyper-judgmental person, and a sincere passion to see those in need helped.

What My Sore Eyes Have Seen

Though I'm no grey-haired jaded old chap, I have seen enough happen in the Muslim American convert community to know what does and does not contribute to us becoming more serious about piety and spiritual reform. If the standard Nation of Islam credo is not suitable enough for creating the Islamic notion of King's "Beloved Community", those other credos imported from Muslim lands haven't done much more to alleviate the suffering and second-class status of both Afro and Euro-American converts.

America has been generous to many Muslim immigrants since the passage of the Immigration & Nationality Act of 1965. With the disintegration of the Nation of Islam, the assassination of Hajj Malik El-Shabazz (Malcolm X) in the same year the Immigration Act was passed, and the ascendancy of Imam Wallace D. Muhammad ten years later who brought most of the Nation of Islam's followers into normative Islam, also came the competition between a number of Eastern ideological trends attempting to win the hearts and minds of the convert community in America and the Western world in general. Groups like the Ikhwan al-Muslimin, Hamas, Hizbullah, Salafis, Habashis, Deobandis, the Murabitun, various Sufi organizations, like the Chistis, Qadiris, Naqshabandis, Shadhilis, Ba 'Alawi Haddadis, and many others all have reached the shores of North America and other countries inviting Muslim converts to join their ranks. Mentioning all of these groups together is neither intended to suggest that there is something fundamentally negative about them nor to imply that they are all of the same "political" nature. The aim is merely to underscore how difficult the challenge was for a new-convert now faced with "choosing" what kind of "Islam" he felt would best suit his goal of total conversion and reform of his character.

Each group, while bringing with it enormous spiritual and/or other potentials for Muslims (both immigrant and native-born), when adopted by large numbers [of converts or "born-again" non-converts] has often led to a promulgation of "group-think", ideological and intellectual bigotry, and at times even intellectual "terrorism." That is to say that normative customs among each ideological tradition punish for violations of the strictures of "communal" comportment: sometimes by encouraging a boycott of the intellectual efforts of dissident members; sometimes by launching *ad hominem* attacks on the member's scholastic qualifications as a way of silencing them and discouraging less learned members from interacting with the insubordinate party. And at times as a way to portray the dissident member as an exponent of religious heterodoxy to the masses, his views are challenged by allegations of them being in contravention of scholarly consensus (Ijma'), "the Salaf", the "tradition," the "scholars", or even an attempt to uproot the "Shari'a" from its foundations in extreme cases.

While most of these groups have elements in their credo that contribute positively to the spiritual well-being of the Muslims who belong to them, it is almost always common to find among adherents certain puritanical and exclusionary propaganda that devalue the members of certain perceived opponents from other groups or non-conformists. These teachings include at times things like, the idea that unless one studies in certain parts of the world, like Saudi Arabia, Yemen, North Africa or Syria, what one has learned in the Muslim world is suspect. The same goes for the way one studies; who one studies with; or even whether or not one is a member of a certain school of law (madhhab) or Sufi order (tariqa). What practically all of these groups also have in common is the promotion of the idea that both wisdom and piety are the peculiar qualities of the East. In other words, common Western traditions, like protest, activism, and political reform are not seen as types of activity

worthy of the characterization of “religious piety” even though a significant Qur’anic teaching is “Enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong.”

“Do For Self”

“Do for Self” was a saying popularized during America’s civil rights movement by the Nation of Islam. This slogan was intended to motivate African Americans to start their own businesses, handle their own internal affairs, and keep their wealth circulated among their own people. In brief, it was a total philosophy for self-empowerment and self-reliance. Though, such a slogan today would be condemned by many mainstream Muslims as “un-Islamic” being that it promotes forming alliances with certain people based strictly upon ethnicity and color, it seems that many Muslim immigrants to the Americas had and still have their own form of “Do for Self.”

A considerable number of Muslim immigrants to the US from Eastern lands come with prior expertise in things that reinforce the American infrastructure, like medicine or engineering, or they come with the predominant intention to learn how to improve their economic well-being. Because of this fundamental motivation for emigration, whenever any advice or religious direction has been offered to the native-born community from such people it was usually a second thought and given half-heartedly. Once these immigrants realized their financial aspirations, they would usually build a mosque, and then either a school or market (or both) with the aim of creating an environment for their young to be insulated from “alien” and “impious” American cultural norms.

Saying all of this is not to imply that there is something unlawful (or immoral) about seeking to improve one’s financial condition or even emigrating for that purpose (especially since Muslim immigrant money remains the lifeblood of some of the most successful Islamic institutions and enterprises), I only contend that it is because the primary concern of the Muslim immigrant and their connection to America has been and is still *primarily* financial, this is exactly what has made it nearly impossible for them to have a significant impact on the moral state of the native-born Muslim population. This is significant in that it has led immigrants to ignore the “real-life” concerns of converts. It has generally led many immigrants to avoid any study of the environment within which they live: its history, its culture, its politics, and its racial and economic hierarchy which go part and parcel with the “American” reality. It is quite understandable though, that they might not get the “race” factor in all of this, since most of them live at a distance from the liberal arts and humanities, and are used to seeing things as nothing more than coefficients. It is also because the American experience for them has been much, if not all, of what they imagined it to be prior to leaving their home countries: a thing that places them at a distance from gaining a deeper insight into the dark side of American society in the inner-cities.

The point is that a significant number of Muslim immigrants have eschewed any considerable research that might facilitate the process of conversion and the transition from being a vicious person to one of virtue. If being born Muslim from a long line of Muslim descendants is to be seen as a sign of “superiority”, it would seem that such advantages would provide one with the best insight into helping others to grow in faith. However, what the emigration story post 1965 has taught us is that most Muslim immigrants are either not acquainted well enough with the spiritual teachings of the religion to help converts to grow or that many of them just do not care enough to help to find practical solutions to our myriad social problems. And, why should they care deeply about things they find difficult to understand or connect with? I, personally, do not decry the lack of passionate effort on their part to help find solutions to such problems, but I do decry the lack of empathy on the part of *some* of them. In any case, my only aim here is to highlight that Muslim immigrant concerns have remained largely for the immigrant. That sentiment should not come as a surprise to anyone, because no one should expect another people to display the same passion for the plight of one’s particular group between whom and them there is no significant historical socio-culturally shared context.

In another sense, however, the dispassion observed from Muslim immigrants concerning the insurance of converts' seamless transition from unfaith to faith should neither be seen nor promoted as a calculated failing on their part for which they are solely liable. Rather, the native-born convert community itself shares equal, if not more, blame for allowing their concerns to be shifted from those of familial, social and self-improvement to superficial ideological concerns, like the "corporeality" or God and "physical" location, hyperlegalism, the legality of membership in a Sufi order or legal school, the pseudo-deification of the "office" of sheik, and the sanctification of the soil of "certain" Muslim lands other than Mecca, Jerusalem, or Medina.

The death of Malcolm X in 1965 contributed greatly to this void and led to the subsequent brain-drain from minority communities whereas a number of black intellectuals turned their focus to achieving middle class status and the pursuit of worldly gain: a thing articulated by authors like, E. Franklin Frazier and Harold Cruise. This fact underscores that native-born American converts are not exempt from liability with respect to the dire circumstances of their communities and their lack of collective creativity to employ Islam as a tool of empowerment much as others do.

Western *Versus* Eastern Realities

One thing that one learns about the West—with all its "corruption" and "spiritual decadence"—is that Westerners are not afraid to acknowledge their dysfunction and pathology compared to the way things are in almost all Muslim countries. For example, Westerners believe in psychosis and insanity. In the Muslim world, it is normal for people to avoid psychiatric screening for apparent psychological maladies, like schizophrenia, bipolar syndrome, depression or general insanity. Instead, a person would much rather be accused of demonic possession or being bewitched than to be accused of being insane, since a serious social stigma comes with being labeled insane, while it is possible for one to rebound and even get married if one claims of being possessed by a demon. People in Muslim lands often do not seek grief counseling and the like because it is said that, "A believer does not get depressed." This sort of response is actually not new for Muslims living in Muslim lands. It, in fact, is merely an extension of a much earlier romantic tendency of glorifying the Muslim past by blaming every mishap or disastrous political dispute on outsiders, like the dubious historical character, Abdullah b. Saba', who is characterized in Sunni historical literature as a Jewish crypto-infidel (zindiq) of Ethiopian heritage. This is not to deny that the effects of witchcraft and the evil-eye are real. The point is just that sorcery and demonic possession should not "always" be the default explanation for every emotionally tumultuous episode in a Muslim's life. Insanity is a real thing. For this reason, it is discussed in all books of Islamic jurisprudence as having a disqualifying effect on the legal responsibility of a person.

Similarly, we find that the reaction of many Muslim immigrants when it comes to American (or Western) converts to Islam who are still troubled by their pasts is to do nothing more than act as if such people were never genuine Muslims to begin with since they are, after all, converts. Western Muslims come to Islam with loads of baggage. Some are murderers, rapists, drug addicts, drunkards, and thieves. Others are prostitutes, pimps, pedophiles, drug dealers, single moms, deadbeat dads, gays, lesbians, and people troubled with so many other things. It's easy to display dispassionate neglect and lack of concern to such people, since after all, "My son isn't addicted to drugs or in prison. If those people were REAL Muslims, they wouldn't be on drugs or in prison."

The kind of Islam that has inundated the ranks of the native-born since the Immigration & Naturalization Act of 1965 and dominated the religious discourse has been a kind that has focused converts on dogmatic theological inquiries with a puritanical twist that usually ends up with the overly simplistic solution to each inability to resolve the internal spiritual conflict of the people listed above: excommunication (takfir) or at

the least disassociation (bara'). This is not to ignore the fact that many of these same problems exist amongst Muslims in Muslim lands. But even for many of them, the same solution is adopted. It's always easier to just say that someone is not a Muslim than to seek a solid solution for his problem.

In my view, the demands of fraternity and sincere concern for the welfare of one's socially challenged brethren dictate collective collaborative actions, like spending time in prison ministry, opening treatment centers for alcoholism, drug addiction, prison reentry, job training, tutoring, and other forms of social service. If people are worried about how they are perceived by "American" (and "Western") society and hope for people to see the power of Islam, what better way to do it than to showcase the lives of those people (former convicts and addicts) whose lives have been changed drastically by Islam? How can we complain about the public perception of Muslims if many of our Eastern brethren find no uneasiness about selling wine to minorities? The message this sends to these people is that, "We Muslims believe wine is poison and from the handiwork of Satan, but who cares about you people? Go ahead and drink it." Why would I respect a so-called Muslim who does such a thing? Just because you got a fatwa that says to you that it's ok to sell wine in America because America is a non-Muslim country (Dar al-Harb) from a notable scholar in the Muslim world makes the matter even worse. What moral argument could Muslims make against the West who mercilessly murder innocents in the Muslim world?

Whose Religion?

Globalization coupled with liberal capitalism may be ravaging world economies and the ecosystem, but one potentially positive consequence of it is the fact that there is greater cross-cultural communication and negotiation. The resulting multi-media from globalized society today makes it harder for dictators both blatant and those masquerading as democrats to streamline meta-narratives and completely control the public discourse. Cultural cohesion is primarily produced by and begins with a "shared understanding" of the "normal", the "right", and the "wrong." In this sense, all human beings have culture; aspects that are universal and others that are exclusive.

In the view of the French sociologist, David Emile Durkheim, all societies are fundamentally "religious" in nature. They all draw lines between the sacred and profane. All promote and universalize sacred symbols. And all operate on the basis of social norms. Whether or not people collectively or individually are monotheists, polytheists, agnostics, or atheists has little bearing on the fact that all human beings have a sense of what is moral and ethical. The problem with not having a unified definition of both culture and religion makes it easy to conflate the two: one with the other. It is even easier to conflate the "normal" with the "natural" at times. This is like how many classical Muslim scholars were able to conclude things like the idea that men are "naturally" superior and more intelligent than women. As for the proof of their superiority for some scholars, "Why else would God make all the prophets men?" As far as intelligence goes, the advantage of men was such an undeniable fact that it was deemed a religious precept by many scholars since for them this understanding was confirmed by the Prophet's own statements to that respect.

Though these scholars do not typically utilize the word "natural" (tabīʿī) to explain the superiority of men over women, it is clear from their declarations that they believed this distinction to be innate to the human condition (fiṭri). What this view neglects is that the superstructure and the hierarchical stratification of society can have a bearing on how a person perceives reality and nature. This problem has assailed all three Abrahamic faiths during the pre-modern and modern periods, and has influenced cultural-religious jurisprudence. Such opinions presuppose that societal norms are part of a "natural" immutable order. For this reason, they have been placed beyond the realm of critique. In other words, if people living in any society suffer injustice, exploitation, or exclusion from the privilege offered to the dominant ruling classes, that person is "religiously" obliged to negotiate space and accommodation for that structure within one's own heart, mind, and soul. This is because the inner psychological and emotional disturbance one experiences is "only" because of a lack of mastery over one's self. Factors exterior to that inner strife have little or no bearing upon the life of the person.

What this means is that the fact that women have historically been excluded from government, politics, the marketplace, the military, education, and other spheres of male dominance and activity has not been seriously considered before concluding that their ineptness (compared to that of men) to govern and manage well, offer sound military counsel, distinguish themselves as scholars, and serve the public in the political arena is a result of their “femaleness” instead of their “lack of experience and agency.” Even the Prophet Muhammad when speaking about women’s “intelligence” or “deficient discriminatory capacity” did not say that this was an innate (*fitrī*) characteristic of women. Male scholars have “understood” this to be the case. As for the argument that “all” prophets and messengers were men, this is merely a majoritarian theological “argument”, not an established non-negotiable tenet of faith since there are some scholars who acknowledge women like, Mary—mother of Jesus, Asiya—wife of Pharaoh, and the mother of Moses to be prophetesses.

With that context, it is my hope that Muslims understand how when the religion of Islam (or any religion for that matter) is appropriated by the administrative authorities of any polity, the “official” jurisprudence and laws adopted in that particular region become an important element of the local culture. When cultural exchange was far less than it is today, it was much easier for governments to uniformly manage their populations. The locals who rarely would interact with foreign or distinct cultures grew up with the belief, not only that Islam is what “my people do.” They also entertained the notion at times that the world was either the same as where one lives or at least should ideally be that way.

A Muslim living under a Hanafi or Shafi’i regime quite often does not realize that his society is nothing more than a particular cultural-legal Islamic modality. He does not see his tradition as being just “an” Islamic view. He sees it, rather, as Islam itself; such that when he encounters a somewhat dissimilar Islamic cultural-legal modality, like Malikism, or a distinct doctrinal modality like, Ibadism, Shiism or Sunnism, he does not merely see something dissimilar to his own tradition. He sees something that is fundamentally “not” Islam.

Even those who have come to acknowledge and understand the nuances between different Islamic paradigms and interpretations often fail to include the government appropriation of religious theological doctrine and legal traditions among the causes of their perpetuation and survival. The Four Schools have not survived merely because of their philosophical-legal strengths which convinced scholars to adopt and promulgate them. One must also include in this explanation the fact that Islamic regimes made use of these schools to uniformly govern Muslim citizens and invalidated the legality of the other schools as happened during the 7th Islamic century when the ‘Abbasid Caliph al-Zahir founded four different courts in Egypt and Damascus that privileged the rulings and scholars of the Four Schools. This practice later spread throughout the Islamic empire, and the other schools that were popular alongside the Four Schools eventually disappeared with the help of fatwas that condemned anyone for following any school other than one of the four above. The establishment of these courts did not merely grant ideological supremacy to the Four Schools. Their establishment provided a clear incentive for unemployed up and coming scholars to adopt and study one of those schools.

“Let Us Fashion Man in Our Image”

Immigrants leaving Muslim lands to non-Muslim territories with the primary concern of improving one’s financial condition traveled without deep consideration of the distinct demands their cultural perspectives place on the receiving societies in general and the converts encountered in those societies in particular. In other words, if a person accepts Islam, he/she “must” necessarily become not only a Muslim. Rather, being culturally a Pakistani, Indian, Arab, or Persian is an inseparable part of being an authentic Muslim. Since, after all, “It is OUR religion.” Furthermore, anything that is foreign to Eastern culture must be flung off and out of one’s thinking as being a valid alternative to “Muslim” thinking. For this reason, there are still considerable debates today over the possibility of being both “Muslim” and “American.”

Not only do Easterners (and Arabs especially) control the discourse about “how” to identify with Islam and the Muslim community and what areas are of primary concern for us. They also control what is deemed to be an authentic modality of Islamic “piety.” In other words, unless someone is soft-spoken with *dhikr* beads in hand, wearing a turban, traditional Eastern dress and speaking about matters of the heart, theology, or jurisprudence only, it is hard to imagine that one is a pious person. If one includes in one’s public teachings topics that have an

activist connotation, like societal injustice and racism, you're deemed to be a nuisance and looked upon as one involved in an impious pursuit even though activism is what defines the "best-ness" of the believing nation.

Consequently, one witnesses a significant amount of pretentious piety among converts who learn to act in a way that goes against their nurtured and distinctly acculturated impulses. This also results in a strong degree of schizophrenic behavior among people who try their best to emulate their Eastern mentors and teachers in many of their public pietistic gestures and idiosyncrasies.

If Muslims in America desire to pursue a particular legal interpretation of some sort, they can only do so after receiving authorization from the Muslim world. I am not suggesting that Muslim converts are necessarily in a formal hierarchical relationship with leaders in the Muslim world. What I mean is that if a convert scholar has a particular legal breakthrough, other members of the community do not warm to that opinion typically until they find out there is at least one notable Muslim scholar in the Arab world who holds the same view. This is the case, even though the standard books of Islamic legal theory (*usul al-fiqh*) and legal responsa (*fatwa*) forbid a scholar who does not fully comprehend the dynamics of a foreign society to offer his legal opinion concerning an issue in the society. In spite of that, violations of this principle are committed all the time.

Even the discussions today in the Muslim world and among converts about the concept of "minority *fiqh*" give only marginal consideration to the real concerns of converts. While many of the opinions discussed in the works of those scholars show true concern for the convert community in America, it appears that the original impetus for researching matters related to minorities in majority non-Muslim societies was the attempt to facilitate life in Western countries for Muslim expatriates. This is evidenced by the constant use of the phrase "Jaliya Islamiya", which does not mean "Muslim" community in the West. It means the "expatriate community" living in the West.

Some initial major concerns for expatriates were the permissibility of conventional interest-based mortgages and financing the purchase of an automobile. The scholars of the Muslim world moved swiftly to find answers that would make the lives of expatriates easier for them. However, the most troubling of those *fatwas* in my view was the one issued in 2005 by Shaykh Ali Gomaa, Grand Mufti of Egypt, allowing Muslims living in Europe to sell wine to non-Muslims.

At present, the same expatriate community is under serious pressure to conform to the demands of the dominant white protestant Christian nationalistic concerns, and they are constantly demonized and intimidated. Those same expatriates constantly express their desire to be understood, dealt with fairly, and trusted by the mainstream. With a *fatwa* like this one that sends the message to Americans—especially those minority communities wherein wine is sold—that your lives, minds, and well-being mean nothing to us, it's no wonder that Arabs and other Easterners are having a hard time trying to win over the hearts of Americans. Are studies about the effects of alcoholism in the inner-city important enough for consideration for scholars prior to issuing such a damning *fatwa*?

Islam is both a legalistic and moralistic religion, even though the aim of its legalism is to realize true authentic morality and virtue. What that means is that the mere fact that a legal opinion exists in an early legal work on Islam permitting or forbidding a particular practice or action should not be presumed to be sufficient justification for validating that opinion in every time and clime. It should also not be any scholar's intention to look merely at the individual utilitarian interests of one's specific people living in a non-Muslim country without taking into account the socio-political and historical context of that land, and how his legal opinion may potentially negatively affect the indigenous population and their opinions about Islam. On the other hand, a scholar living in the host country (convert or not) who understands the society should also not assume that a single *fatwa* or opinion can and/or must be applied universally in the entire country. This in particular reminds me of an opinion offered that Muslim women should not wear face-veils in the US, because it has a negative impact on Islamic propagation (*da'wa*). That is, it discourages non-Muslim women from accepting Islam. Well, the face-veil is popular in Philadelphia, PA, and people have not been deterred from Islam for decades now. It is important to avoid essentialising the cultural sensitivities of people in offering one's legal opinions also especially when one decides that a particular type of non-Muslim's conversion to Islam is more desirable than another's.

Scholarly credentials and a pious exterior are not the only important considerations before we decide that a particular person's opinion and direction are to be taken seriously. Even saints can be wrong and have incorrectly

interpreted the signs during their generations. There have been plenty of misogynist, racist, and elitist scholars in human history, precisely because of many of the reasons I have already mentioned above especially with regard to excluding a critique of the superstructure or using that critique as an important element of one's scriptural hermeneutic. Anger, pride, and envy are not always vices. Rather, political protest is also an aspect of authentic Islamic piety. Quietism, on the other hand, is a vice. Muslims are under no obligation to accept meta-narratives or official versions of popular events. In reality, Muslims have an obligation to judge every matter in accord with the Qur'anic teachings of justice and equity. On that basis, Muslims are under no obligation to accept the "official" version of whatever happens. Muslims are also not to naively believe that if all of us were uncritically following the traditional scholars, 9/11 would have never happened or the same if everyone was a Sufi. To insist upon such an absurdity would only plunge us deeper into confusion, since it is only through the dynamism of Islam that we will be able to address the accidental concerns of each age and society; not some imagined predetermined static and reified religion that never existed. One thing that is clear to me, and that is that in addition to avoiding hyperlegalism and returning to a focus on Islam's moral teachings, we need to give a greater place to the prophetic biography (sira) in our praxis and legal theory if we hope to make Islam work in the world we live in today. The prophetic biography is important in that it helps us to see Islam's moral and legal teachings in action, in context, and in contact with the divine wisdom. As for legal theory, through it we are reminded of the fickleness, speculative and subjective nature of jurisprudence (fiqh): a thing that reminds us that the final word belongs to God. And that word will only be within the grasp of acquisition on the day when the only significant judge will judge our actions.

Native-born Muslims in the West are at a major crossroads. We have matured beyond paternalistic subordination to others, and now demand that our voices be included in this religio-cultural tapestry called "Islam." Our desire is not to discard with "our" rich legal, theological, and moral tradition. Rather, we continue to cherish it, infuse it with our ethos, and seek to build upon it in ways that preserve *and* expand Islam's transhistorical beauty. We do not reject the classical scholars and their views. We are, however, constantly seeking to discover the historical-cultural contexts that led them to hold the views that they held. Combining the text with the context is the most guaranteed way to properly comprehend and apply the rulings of the premodern and modern periods. The "tradition" has never been monolithic or myopic in its scope, even though many today would lead us to believe that. None of the esteemed Imams in Islamic history ever insisted that Muslims should always and everywhere uncritically adopt the "opinions" they extrapolated from the Islamic sources. In response to that call by them, American scholars have a mandate to remain "respectfully" critical of medieval opinions that appear to be inapplicable in modern-day contexts. In doing so, I believe that a scholar does not contravene the tradition. He, rather, remains sincere to that scholastic tradition, much like the many scholars throughout our history who have shared their remarkable breakthroughs in the Islamic sciences. Furthermore, the only truly inscrutable tradition is the "prophetic" tradition of our master, Muhammad, God's mercy and peace upon him. My hope is that these words will add greater context and understanding to why it is important for Muslims (native-born and immigrants) living in non-Muslim majority lands to take ownership of their collective destinies without the typical efforts at ideological and cultural imperialism.