

Muslim on Main Street

Akbar Ahmed has written a book of poetry and traveled the world as an anthropologist, but perhaps his most fitting title is ambassador.

The former Pakistani ambassador to England, Ahmed has lived his life between cultures.

Growing up in Pakistan, he had great respect for the Catholic priests who educated him. As a young administrator in Waziristan, Pakistan, however, Ahmed also witnessed the ascent of literalist Islam.

When he came to the United States in 2000, Ahmed recognized that Americans knew nothing of that world. He landed at American University in Washington in August 2001—"divine providence," the interfaith leaders he works with tell him.

"From 9/11 on—and I am not exaggerating—I haven't had one 24-hour period when I've not been on TV, radio, talking to students, in the White House or the Pentagon, trying to close the gap between Muslims and non-Muslims," he says.

For *Journey into America*, Ahmed and five research assistants visited 75 communities and 100 mosques to explore the place of Islam in America. Though fear rooted in ignorance can be found both in Pakistan and the United States, Ahmed is confident that it can be countered with dialogue and education. "We need to be able to honestly explain, read about, interact with, travel to this culture called Islam in order to understand it and thereby build bridges," Ahmed says.



Ambassador Akbar Ahmed

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Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam and *Journey into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization* (Brookings Institution Press, 2010 and 2007)

Once an international diplomat, this scholar now seeks to build bridges between American Muslims and their neighbors.

The editors interview Akbar Ahmed

What does Islam look like in America?

The United States is one of the most fascinating countries in the world for the Muslim community. Islam is a global religion with communities in Brazil, Japan, and the most unlikely places, but the most fascinating community is in the United States of America for one big reason: its variety.

American Muslims are a tiny minority, about 7 million people or 2 percent of the population, and the community covers every kind of Muslim. On our year-long journey, I met Cambodian Muslims, white and Latino converts to Islam, Arabs and Pakistanis. The whole world is here.

About one third—maybe even half—of the U.S. Muslim population is African American. What is fascinating about them is that even though they aren't part of the mainstream American story, they are, in fact, as American in their narrative as WASPs or Catholic or Jewish immigrants.

When I asked about their conversion to Islam, many said, "We are not converting to Islam; we are reverting to Islam." They explained that 40 to 50 percent of the slaves brought from Africa on those terrible death ships were Muslim. I later double-checked this, and if you look at the map of Africa, where these ships landed, and the type of people they picked up, most of these tribes even today are Muslim. It's logical that in many cases the slaves would have been Muslim.

This huge population, which is American and which is Muslim, today could be the best ambassadors for America to Islam and for Islam to America.

What about immigrant Muslims?

The immigrants coming to the United States from the 1970s onward were highly educated professionals: professors and doctors and engineers and entrepreneurs. They are modernists—people who say, "We are living in America, and we live by the rules of America. We're proud of being Muslim, and yet we can play baseball and dress like Americans."

They didn't have any problems at first. You don't ask your doctor, "When did you come here? Are you here legally?" You have a doctor-patient relationship with him.

Then on 9/11 every American suddenly became aware of Islam. The same doctor now became an object of suspicion. People suddenly wanted to ask, "Aren't you from Egypt or

Pakistan? Don't you guys train terrorists?"

I was coming from England where there already was a debate about Islam, but these American Muslim immigrants didn't see it coming. They have huge houses and Mercedes, and they're all living the American dream, saying, "This is the most wonderful country in the world." Their lifestyles are almost dangerous because they are so isolated from the wider community—eating Pakistani food or Egyptian food and speaking in their own language.

I first saw this in New Orleans in 1997 when I gave the keynote address to the Association of Pakistani Physicians of North America. After the talk we were on a boat, the Mississippi Queen, when I heard the *azan*, the call to prayer.

I came onto the main deck, and I saw a sight that both excited and scared me. The visual impact of 30 or 40 Muslims in traditional dress praying in unison excited me, and I thought, "My God, look at this, how wonderful. Muslims are totally integrated as part of American society."

But it scared me because I knew something of American history and race relations. Every group, including the Catholics and the Jews, waited a long time to be accepted. These Muslims were simply bypassing all this.

So when 9/11 happened, I knew how disconnected the Muslim immigrant community was and how little Americans knew about it. Ten years later the gap has never been greater.

Will Muslims eventually be accepted as Americans just as Catholics have generally been accepted?

There are real differences that will make it harder for Muslims to be accepted. First, Catholics are part of the Christian tradition. They have an organic relationship with Protestants, even if there are disagreements. Culturally they are similar. European Catholics are white from an outsider's perspective, and as an anthropologist I very quickly discovered the importance of color in the United States.

It took Catholics more than 100 years before they were accepted, until John F. Kennedy was elected president, and the stories are horrifying—churches were burned, Catholics were lynched. But an outsider would see no difference between Protestants and Catholics today.

When I traveled throughout America, people constantly

asked me, “Can a Muslim really be an American?” They were challenging the capacity of the doctor who came decades ago to be an American. It’s going to take a long time for Muslims to be fully part of America.

What is preventing Muslims from becoming part of the United States?

We have a double failure. Americans simplify Islam, reducing it to a caricature, and Muslims fail to explain it.

When I talk to Muslim leaders, I say, “Americans want to know about shariah (Islamic law), polygamy, jihad, attitudes to Jews and Christians. Have you answered them?” They just keep saying, “Islam is a religion of peace.”

We haven’t provided good enough answers. The diversity of the community also creates problems because leadership is divided and uncertain about which way to go.

Apart from the fact that 7 million American citizens are Muslim, it is in

statements from then-Attorney General John Ashcroft and other officials following 9/11, that the 7 million U.S. Muslims could be locked up in internment camps, even though this would be impossible and unwise.

I hear—and not too softly—that we can’t trust Muslims. A girl in a hijab—a head scarf—couldn’t stand behind Obama during his campaign. Obama can’t go to a Sikh temple on his visit to India because he’d have to wear a head covering and someone would say he’s a Muslim. Twenty-five percent of the country already thinks he is a Muslim.

A lot of people hint very darkly at what could happen if, God forbid, some idiotic, confused young Muslim from the United States killed hundreds of people. The backlash would be so intense, it could lead to anything.

Should we be afraid of homegrown terrorism?

It’s a real issue, and it’s classic anthropology, even though self-described experts pin it on theology. If terrorism was motivated by faith, why weren’t the previous generations of Muslims blowing up everyone?

Potential homegrown terrorists are confused young men. They grow up in American culture, but after 9/11 American culture implicitly or explicitly rejected them. In the meantime their parents’ culture has faded away.

Being suspended between two cultures is the most dangerous position for any individual to be in, and both are pulling. To be fully accepted in America, a young Muslim may have to say, “Damn Islam, barbaric religion. I hate this religion.” But Muslim culture may say, “You’ve become too American; you’re drinking and sexually promiscuous like all these other kids.”

When this young Muslim needs answers, he goes to the imam, the reli-

gious teacher or leader of the mosque, and says, “I’m in turmoil. Give me advice. Should I drink, should I do drugs? All my friends are doing it at school.” These imams are largely from the Middle East or South Asia. They have little knowledge of American culture and will not be able to answer. He’ll just say, “How dare you talk about this.”

The young man won’t talk to his parents because in our culture there’s a formality between the generations. So who does he turn to? He’s a confused teenager, and as a Muslim he’s doubly confused. He has all these ideas in his mind, is reading the media here and abroad. He’s going to go online. He may start talking to radical imams who say, “Come to us. We have the answers. Take revenge for Islam.”

At a New York mosque, we met two little boys born around 9/11. They are Americans; they only know America. They’ve been beaten up at school and called terrorists. One boy’s parents went to Pakistan, and the mother was killed in a bus blown up by the Taliban.

If there is a 10-year-old boy whose mother was blown up by terrorists and who has been called a terrorist, he will likely be a very confused, angry teenager. He’s going to want to express his anger and hatred for the world that has taken away his mother and abused him. And that is the danger.

Can we do anything to prevent this?

I tell Muslim leaders to be sensitive to young people and channel their energy. Tell them, “You want to do something for Islam and America? Go to Pakistan or Afghanistan. Work in a hospital, become teachers. Become ambassadors for Islam and for America. See the impact you will make.”

We need a Muslim Peace Corps. I think the government has to be involved. Americans don’t want to involve the government, but the FBI and Department of Homeland Security are

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America’s interest to have good relations with the Muslim world. We have tens of thousands of troops in the Muslim world. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama and General David Petraeus constantly talk about winning hearts and minds, but unless you understand the Muslim world, you’re not going to win hearts and minds.

The Muslim American community is a kind of hostage community now.

What do you mean by “hostage”?

It’s as if we’re being held hostage for the chaos in the Muslim world from which we escaped. There’s a fear, based on

involved already, sometimes making people feel like criminals.

We need positive programs for the next generation that give young Muslims self-confidence and a sense that America doesn't hate them.

We cannot pretend this crisis does not exist, and I am very nervous because America is continuing to demonize Islam in the media. There's so much Islamophobia. It's a miracle that there haven't been more home-grown terrorists.

I can't say that there's no problem, that we love you and you love us.

My personal experience—the respect and hospitality that I've received—cannot be taken as a typical American response to Muslims. If I want to do a favor to American society, I can't say that there's no problem, that we love you and you love us. I have to be honest.

Were the congressional hearings on the radicalization of the American

Muslim community necessary?

It's tempting to say no because of the poisonous atmosphere. There have been attacks on mosques and women in hijabs. Schoolchildren are called terrorists because they have Muslim names. Even if there are just a few incidents, we need to do everything possible to dampen that atmosphere of distrust and hatred.

I initially had some reservations because some of the panelists are very hostile to Islam. At the same time this is a democracy. It has certain institutions, and as Muslims we need to respect them. I saw the hearings as

Honor, Islam, and American women

What do converts to Islam tell you about Islam in America?

Four out of five white converts to Islam are women, and they tell us a lot about how Muslims and non-Muslims see each other.

I sympathize with the argument that a woman in Dearborn, Michigan dressed in the niqab (completely covered in black) and speaking only Arabic is bound to agitate a lot of Americans. And the conversion of white women to Islam would also agitate a lot of Americans.

American women are the freest women in the world. When many Americans see a Muslim woman in a hijab (head scarf), they see the boundaries she's putting around herself. Many Americans also have boundaries, but hers are more prominent. The hijab is a symbol of un-American dress and behavior. Why would a woman opt out of this freedom?

Nicole Queen is your classic case study. She was at the height of her career as a fashion photographer, standing next to Justin Timberlake, when she thought, "Life has got to be something more." She'd go to these clubs and see women prepared to take their clothes off, have sex, and expose themselves to everybody just to be photographed.

A spiritual awakening forces someone to either look at Catholicism more deeply or Judaism or, in Nicole's case, Islam. She felt that she needed these boundaries. Many Muslims worry that freedom has been taken to excess in the United States. Nicole is completely at ease with herself as an American. She has double pride as an American and a Texan.

Here's a great ambassador between Islam and America, I thought, but then she told me about the abuse she received. People called her a "whore" for "selling out" Christianity. A lot of the Muslims asked if she was an FBI informant.

She's very serene about it, though, and she has earned a

lot of respect in the Muslim community. She has so much to give to Americans and to Muslims in trying to bridge this gap.

Is it fair to call the wild life that Nicole Queen rejected "American"? Isn't that like calling honor killings or female genital mutilation "Muslim"?

In a sense, the lifestyle isn't "American," but at the same time it is because you can't pretend it doesn't exist. Likewise you can't escape that honor killings and female circumcision are widespread practices in Muslim countries, though even Bernard Lewis, seen by many as a critic of Islam, says these are not Muslim practices.

My team of young people asked questions about American identity at Mardi Gras at 3 a.m. in New Orleans. Craig Considine, a Catholic boy from Boston, talked to this huge drunk guy on camera and this guy leaned across him and said, "You're not Muslim, are you? Because if you were, I'd have kicked you in the nuts." This is on camera. One girl said, "American? American means being f-ed up and being f-ed up again, having chicken wings and then being f-ed up again."

All evening and all morning this went on. We hit a nerve. Something is going on in the underbelly. I can't imagine any American family encouraging this, but this is happening. It's not mainstream America, but it is part of society and we can't pretend it doesn't exist.

This is precisely where you get the organic link between a Nicole Queen saying, "We have crossed the boundaries," and saying, "I want out. I want to do something else." She could have become a Catholic or a Jew or a Muslim.

Perhaps she found Islam because it has not adjusted or compromised. Obviously there's a theological reason—like St. Paul, a convert will suddenly see or hear God—but as an anthropologist I also look to society for clues.

a challenge to Muslim Americans to participate, write letters to the editor and articles, be in the media, and explain Islam—explain the richness, the sophistication of Muslim cultures. The panel also included three Americans who are more than capable of handling false or distorted ideas.

The question is why they investi-

ing angry, or rejecting any questioning, Muslims feed into the sense that “well, these Muslims aren’t really good, proper Americans.”

Some say Muslims can’t be real Americans because of shariah. Should we worry about Islamic law being imposed in the United States?

I had a little exchange on *Anderson Cooper 360* with Frank Gaffney, a so-called expert on shariah. He’s written a book and claims that shariah has taken over America.

“My mathematics are not very good, so you’ll have to help me,” I said. “Please explain how 2 percent of the population—assuming that every one of the Muslims wants shariah—can impose its will in a democracy on 98 percent of the population?”

Only literalist Muslims *might* want shariah, but modern and mystic Muslims would be its first victims.

I’ve been an administrator in Pakistan, a country that is 98 percent Muslim. We don’t have shariah. Indonesia, Afghanistan, and Malaysia are 90 to 95 percent Muslim. It would take them three minutes to pass a resolution to impose shariah on everyone. Yet, most of the time Muslims are not imposing it in their own countries where they can. Why are we worried that they are going to impose it in America where they can’t?

What can we learn from the uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East?

I’ve been saying for years that ordinary Muslims want nothing more than dignity, security for their families, jobs, and education. They don’t want corrupt, incompetent leaders eating up their countries’ resources. They don’t want tyrants ruling them for decades.

I was told by the so-called experts

that somehow Muslims are a distinct species that like to be ruled by strong men. This is sheer nonsense. It’s neither Islamic nor rational. So I was thrilled that in Cairo we saw a genuine Arab revolution, led by ordinary Muslims.

American experts had no idea how to cope with this. The challenge isn’t for those rising against the tyranny of a pharaoh. The challenge is for America. Is America going to say, “Wait a minute, these people want exactly what we want: democracy, human rights, civil liberties. Let us help them.”

What can Catholics do to help Muslims become part of America?

The first thing is to begin to understand Islam. They need to read books like *Journey into America* so they can understand American Muslims, wars and all.

I also would suggest that they visit a mosque. Go talk to the imam or the women in the mosque. Invite them to a Catholic church or to a gathering. The dynamics will change very quickly because there’s nothing like seeing the bonds that already exist between our faiths for creating understanding and then friendship.

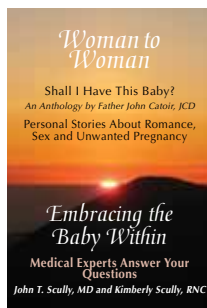
On a flight to Denver, one of my assistants told the lady sitting next to him that he was going to visit a mosque. She said, “How are you visiting a mosque? Muslims never allow outsiders to go into a mosque; they kill them or something.” He said, “I’ve been to 100 mosques with Professor Ahmed.” She responded, “Out of the question, that’s impossible.”

People have very strange ideas of each other, whether between Catholics and Protestants, Christians and Jews, or Buddhists and Hindus. It’s not surprising that there are so many questions. But the only and the shortest way to dispel misperceptions is through knowledge of each other—knowledge and this personal relationship. Everything changes from there. **USC**

There’s nothing like seeing the bonds that already exist between our faiths.

gated Islam and not any other religions, but that is the reality of living in the United States after 9/11. We cannot pretend that 9/11 did not happen. We cannot pretend that there isn’t a generalized Islamophobia.

A lot of well-meaning, sensible Americans really don’t know anything about Islam. And by sulking, becom-



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