

The Muslim Americans

By Dr. Mizanur Rahman Shelley

In a pluralist and democratic society like the USA public representatives such as senators and congressmen, governors, mayors and councillors are the prime shapers of opinion and makers of policy. The Muslims needed to get into these ranks if they were to really arrive as a community in the multicultural and multi-ethnic US society. This was the way that the Irish Catholic Americans under the leadership of personalities like President John F Kennedy followed to successfully integrate their community in American life and society.

APRIL 18, 1998... It was a warm, sunlit Saturday. I and Chicago felt leisurely and quiet. A short drive from my hotel took me to the East-West University right on one of the wide avenues near the heart of the city.

Qazi Mohsin, who drove me there, was an immigrant from Bangladesh who had spent years in Chicago. He and his wife run a fairly successful travel agency in Chicago's legendary Devon Street, the centre for sub-continental shops and restaurants. Qazi is a devout Muslim and takes keen interest in various congregations and community activities of the Muslim Americans. I happened to meet him for the first time in 1995. Mohammad Alamgir, founder-director of the Centre for Development Research, Bangladesh (CDRB) who had been living in Chicago for nearly a decade, introducing us.

Qazi Mohsin had told me about the daylong assembly and discussion of the American Muslim Conference on my arrival in Chicago from Newark, New Jersey, two days ago. He said that I would be welcome to join the meeting of the Muslim American intellectuals and professionals on the April 18, 1998. Hence, I was there in the cosy conference room of the East-West University listening to several articulate American Muslim scholars, professionals and intellectuals as they analysed the situation of the Muslims in America and offered their own suggestions for bringing the Muslims into the mainstream of US society without disturbing or destroying their religio-cultural heritage and character.

The learned deliberations were at once illuminating and exciting. These brought to focus hopes and fears, aspirations and frustrations, confusions and challenges faced by an estimated six million Muslim Americans in the largest religious community in the United States. As each speaker spoke with sound knowledge and analytical grasp of the state of the community and its perceived problems, the challenges and opportunities were revealed in clear light.

Atif Harden, a highly placed professional, dwelt on the need for greater and meaningful co-operation and collaborations among the Muslim individuals and their organisations in the USA. He pointed out that communication and interactions among the organisations of the American Muslims were inadequate and there was ample room for improvement in this regard. He, then, dwelt on the vital importance of participation by the Muslim American in the broader life of US society. He felt that it was alarming that they did not participate adequately in American life. They seem to be willing victims of a policy of "self-apartheid" which was counterproductive and did not augur well for the community. Harden thought it was imperative that the Muslims in the USA participate boldly and enthusiastically in the life and activities of the American society at large. He pointed out that groups that opted for non-participation had minimal impact and significance in the USA. Among such groups are the Amish, Jehovah's witnesses and Quakers, etc. These groups are ploughing their lonely furrows insulated and isolated from throbbing pulsation of the modern American society. In many cases such groups have been largely left behind by the society at large to only constitute a point of attraction for the occasional tourists and the devoted sociologists. The speaker said that Muslims must abandon their present policy of non-participation if they were to be spared a similar fate.

Taking the examples of groups that followed the opposite policy of vigorous participation, he pointed out their evident success in creating and sustaining a significant role for themselves in the national life of the USA. Among these groups are the Irish-Catholics, the Mormons and the Jews. The Jews are more prominent in US business, economy, finance, politics and media than they are anywhere else in the world save Israel. He further observed sarcastically that the Palestinians "also do well wherever they participate excepting in their own land".

The speaker continued his inspiring discourse with a call to public service for the Muslim American. Public service, he

observed, was the only sound way of participating in the making of public policy. This was also the path to the mainstream in national life. In a pluralist and democratic society like the USA public representatives such as senators and congressmen, governors, mayors and councillors are the prime shapers of opinion and makers of policy. The Muslims needed to get into these ranks if they were to really arrive as a community in the multicultural and multiethnic US society. This was the way that the Irish Catholic Americans under the leadership of personalities like President John F Kennedy followed to successfully integrate their community in American life and society.

Atif felt that for long the "surrender aspect of Islam" has been more stressed than the tenets that call Muslims to participate in public service. Quoting the example of Prophet Yusuf, he stated that here was an extraordinary person, who came from a dysfunctional Jewish family, his brothers had been sold as slaves. He was also a member of a minority group in a society where a majority had different faith and way of life. In addition, though well conversant with realities, he did not have the benefit of education. Yet by participating in public service he stood out tall and distinguished and carved a place for his community in the court of the great king. Prophet Yusuf was sent to jail for his moral stand, but even imprisonment could not dampen his zeal for public service. While in jail, he started organising the prisoner for achieving as good a life for themselves as the harsh conditions of the prison permitted. The example of the indomitable prophet is part of a proud heritage that Islam inherited from hoary antiquity. The strength of a Muslim flows from inner composure and unflinching courage in the face of heavy odds in the conduct of public service. Atif said that he himself, as a Muslim, did not do so on having been impressed by the resolute courage and composure of a Muslim who stood strong in the face of harassment by the hooligans at school. He did not embroil himself in animal-like fights. He tolerated the beatings and resisted peacefully. But never gave in. He thus represented an unshakable force for positive psychosocial change. Two more Caucasian Americans were also inspired by the noble example of the quiet and strong Muslim in Cleveland and converted to Islam. Atif added.

Another speaker Riaz Ahmed pointed out that management and organisation were the strong points of American society. Muslims in America were weak in both. Though a significant portion, nearly 40 per cent of the Muslim American are in the highest tax bracket, the members of the Muslim Community are not present in important areas of public life and policy making. Although members of other communities have made inroads in these fields by entering the staff of congressmen and senators, Muslims are not there. He added that on an average the representatives of the Congress had 17-34 and the senators had 40-80 members in their staff, there was no Muslim to be found among these hundreds of important staff. By comparison the Jews have much greater representation in these staff than their proportion in the total US population. Ahmed further observed that the next speaker A Maiek struck a different note. In his deliberations Maiek called attention to the dictate in the Holy Quran requiring Muslims to live for the future and to share in the broader life of society. The major problem of the Muslim American was the lack of a forum where they gathered to discuss and settle the various problems facing them. Mosques in the USA are not effectively used for this purpose. He pointed out that out of 300,000 Muslims residing in the greater Chicago area some 5000 attended the weekly Jum'a prayers on Friday. Maiek said that while participation has positive impact, there were points in favour of non-participation also. But the problem was lack of a forum where such vital issues are debated and discussed threadbare by the members of the community. He also observed that even the journals published by the community had very small circulation; only some five to six thousand

subscribers in a community of six million. Many of them were highly placed but scattered, disjointed and divided by lack of effective mechanism for communications.

Dwelling on the splendid intellectual attainments of the Muslims in the middle ages, the speaker said that the Muslim African City of Timbuktu once had 20,000 foreign students. As a result of historic degeneration that magnificent centre of international learning has today become reduced to a town of a paltry 20,000. Before the invention of the printing press all Europe had only 30,000 books. But within 50 years of the introduction of printing press the number rose to nine million. The table thus turned and intellect and wisdom became the prime components and propellers of western civilisation.

That civilisation has become dominant force in the present-day world. This is a fact of life despite the oft-repeated criticism of the ways of the West. The speaker referred to Gandhi's sarcastic comment on western civilisation - "that

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would be a nice idea", like it or not, the idea has indeed become a reality. Maiek then went on to saying that present-day world civilisation was taking a positive turn in terms of communication knowledge. The computer revolution has taken gigantic strides. Computers are now newer, cheaper, compact and more powerful. This happening is something as major as the Renaissance of 1453. It has made communication beyond imagination; it has opened new horizons in the acquisition, preservation and transmission of information and knowledge. Access to knowledge has at once become easy and difficult. The considerable expenses associated with comprehensive computer installations have made these more difficult for access to individuals. On the other hand, governments and multinational corporations with their massive resources tend to be in position of control and direction of this powerful mechanism of knowledge and information.

Maiek thought that the new developments could offer much greater opportunities to the Muslim American. They could take full advantage of their situation as citizens and residents of the USA and reap all benefits of the most advanced computer - society of the world of our times. He noted with satisfaction that the young Muslims in America were now more active on the internet and the possibilities before them were immense.

Another professional Tipu Siddiqui dwelt on the requirement of appropriate leadership for the Muslims in America. He also analysed the nature of the process of the return of the African-American Muslims to Islam. Speaking on leadership, he said, the lack of leadership of vision and ideas handicapped the Muslims in the USA. In the USA, he said, leadership was not necessarily the outcome of mere politics and manipulation. On the contrary, it was the function of hard work, continuous struggle, suffering and sacrifices. The speaker pointed out that the African-American Muslims returned to Islam through the "Nation of Islam" which they viewed as a force for liberation. Far-rahman, the leader of that movement, was right as he stood for the weak and the suffering African-American Community. Tipu thought there was a great need for dialogue among the votaries of Islam among different ethnic background and settled in the USA.

For 30 years, the people of Syria had not known any other leader. "He was the big tree under which we gathered," one distraught mourner said. More accurately, perhaps, Assad was the grumpy old grandfather one misses terribly after his death, though he had become impossible to live with!

But did Assad hand over power to his successor to be in closer touch with the younger generation? Certainly not.

Dealing with the comparative backwardness of the American Muslims at the top level of the US society, he pointed out, that of the top 750 professionals working in the Silicon valley and earning more than a million dollar a year, there were 300 Jews, 11 Hindus and only eight Muslims.

There was an urgent need to change the quality of leadership in the community of Muslim Americans. The speaker thought that the children of the most powerful factors in shaping a leading role for any community in a sophisticated and modern society such as the USA. The Jewish community in America has been successful in captivating the society with ideas and thoughts favourable to that community. These they have achieved by working steadfastly and skilfully through the media, movies and scientific pursuits. The Muslim Americans, if they were to come into their own, will need to generate an alternative "top of the line ideas" in the society they inhabit. Tipu Siddiqui concluded.

The next speaker was Dr. Cheema who dwelt on evolution of Islam in the resurgent African-American community in the USA. He traced the beginning of this phenomenon with the rise and career of Elijah Muhammad. Elijah stimulated powerful pulsation by involving what he thought was Islam and the entire Muslim African-American Community robbed with that pulsation. Main stream Muslims considered him a deviant and his brand of Islam a distortion. Dr. Cheema recollected how Allama Alauddin Siddiqui of Pakistan tried to persuade Waris Deen Mohammad, the elder son of Elijah, to take up pure Islamic studies in a college at Lahore. This was not to be. Waris did not go to study in Lahore. However, in course of time, he came back to the path of original Islam by what could be described as a path of self-correction. So did his younger brother Akbar. Thus, Dr. Cheema underscored the process of "self healing" through which Islam in its original shape was securely established among the disciples of Elijah Muhammad.

Turning to the successful interventionist role of community organisation like the American Muslim Council (AMC), Dr. Cheema pointed out that the AMC was effective in intervening to reshape President Bill Clinton's anti-terrorism law so that it did not bear unfavourably on the Muslim American. He felt that this role needed to be strengthened in order that the Muslims in the USA were effective as citizens.

He further pointed out that before the 1996 election, the state of California had 1,04,000 registered Muslim voters. He lamented the fact that despite this large number, the Muslim Community in that State did not exert its proportionate influence on politics and public life there. They needed to be more active and positive if they were to make their presence felt. Dr. Cheema added.

It was his turn to speak next. I spoke on Bangladesh in general. I underscored the success stories of the country in the field of food production, ready-made garments manufacturing and export, micro-credit and NGO efforts in empowerment of the poor especially of the women and poverty alleviation, expanded programme of immunisation (EPI) of children under one year. While these areas showed the resilience and sign for success, there were till a lot to be achieved in the field of improvement of health, spread of literacy and education, human resources development through health and education and training and industrial development. The predominantly Muslim society, I pointed out, being surrounded on three sides by a mighty and vast and overwhelmingly non-Muslim neighbour, I felt that this could be overcome by stressing the positive and tolerant core values of Islam. This would help bring peace and understanding within the national society and also in the regional contexts. In a way, the problems of the Muslim Bangalis were similar to that of the Muslim Americans. "A complex and accompanying lack of self-confidence in a perspective of neighbouring societies that were predominantly non-Muslim."

The speaker was Mehdi from Philadelphia. An African-American and a teacher, he underscored the unity that bound the Muslim Americans together despite their diversity. He pointed out that there were few visible Muslims in the mainstream of US national life. Whatever success stories they had were of marginal character. That, however, should not be a cause for worry, Mehdi said. He opined that this weakness could be overcome by continuing the strategy of strong family ties as was done by the African-American Muslim. Furthermore, the Muslim American could utilise to good effect the positive things Islam said about other religions. He further pointed out that the 21st Century would pose great challenges of bringing forth the human aspect of technology. Genetic engineering, leading to cloning of animals and possibly of human beings will raise immensely complex and challenging moral questions. This will bring to focus the need for humanistic undertaking of sciences and moral control over science and technology. Islam can pioneer a path in the 21st Century to bring science and humanity together in a humane blend, Mr. Mehdi concluded.

Despite some apprehensions the deliberations of the AMC closed on a note of confidence and hope.

The Muslim Americans are part and parcel of the American society. The meeting seemed to be aware throughout of this undeniable truth. What the thinkers and the social workers assembled there grappled with was the right way of defining and finding their cherished role in that prosperous and technologically advanced society itself engaged in determining the terms of its evolution and development in the coming millennium.

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An insider's tale

A Mexican in New York sends money, and hope, to distant family

By Ian James, AP
New York

His grandfather picked cotton in Arizona. His father made glass picture frames at a factory in New York. So when his time came, at age 13, Roberto Fructuoso Perez followed the same path away from his family's home in Mexico and set out for the United States.

Ten years later, he earns 340 US dollars a week unloading boxes of vegetables and meat from a delivery truck at Chinese restaurants. He puts aside about a fourth of his earnings, and he manages to send a steady trickle of money back to Mexico.

With his help, his parents have built a house, paid tuition for one of his sisters and opened a sandwich stand.

"It's very important that I'm here to give them a little more support," Fructuoso says during a ride in the delivery truck between restaurants. "I came with that wish to be able to give them what they might have wanted to give us but couldn't."

He shares that wish with countless other young Mexicans who head north when hope runs out in their homeland. But Fructuoso, like his father and grandfather before him, pays a high personal price to help support his family.

Because he has no documents, returning to Mexico to visit would mean risking arrest and possibly even death trying to cross the US border on the way back. So for the past five years, the 23-year-old has put aside thoughts of seeing his family, even though he believes he should have the right to come and go.

He says it's wrong that he should be treated like a criminal while he and other illegal immigrants help keep the US economy going.

"Supposedly they say America is the land of freedom. But we really don't see it that way," he says. "We came with a dream, supposedly to the land of freedom, and we found what we have - sometimes more barriers than in our countries of origin. Many times, our dream is frustrated."

Without a coveted "green card" to allow him to work legally in the United States, Fructuoso is limited to toiling in the hardest, lowest-paying jobs. At work, he carries buckets of tofu and 100-pound (45 kilograms) sacks of rice into restaurants. Light bulbs hang from a jumble of wires. On one wall is a board covered with postcards from New York. They are blank on the back.

The kitchen is outside, with an old, rusted stove. A cistern holds water because service comes only every third day. A small washing machine hasn't worked for years.

"We bought the land and built the house - all from what Roberto sends," his father says. "We thought we could put up walls around the kitchen this year, but we couldn't do it. It adds. He hopes they can afford it."

The only hope comes from Roberto, because here, it's tough.

Back in New York, Fructuoso recalls that when his father was in the United States, he sometimes didn't send the family enough money, so his mother had to struggle to feed the children. Early in the morning, she went door to door selling dough for making tortillas.

Later in the day, she took a bus to fields in the surrounding hills, where she would fill a large sack with tomatoes and other vegetables discarded in the rows.

"I wanted to come because my mother was suffering a lot," Fructuoso says. "She always had fought for us."

The situation at home prompted him to leave for the United States with an uncle in 1989 even though he hadn't finished school. As the only son in the family, it was his duty to help provide for his mother and four sisters.

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leave their sandwich stand in the hands of a younger sister even though they just opened it days earlier.

At 9:30 am, the family takes a bus to the town's tree-lined main plaza and waits in line at the Mexico Express office behind a woman with a baby bundled on her back.

Fructuoso's mother, Rufina Perez, proudly hands her voter card to the teller, then signs her name in studied letters. She smiles when the teller turns over nine crisp 20-dollar bills.

Fructuoso's father, also named Roberto, says most of the money will disappear immediately.

"We have to pay what we owe," he says. "If there's anything left, it will be a little money for the house, for food."

A big chunk of the money - 490 pesos, or 53 dollars - goes toward monthly tuition for Fructuoso's 17-year-old sister, Veronica.

Some will go for rent on the tiny yellow-walled sandwich stand, which costs the family 500 pesos (54 dollars) a month.

Some will help pay off the 4,000 pesos (430 dollars) loan they took out to buy the stove and refrigerator and pay for permits they needed to open the business. They must make a loan payment of 200 pesos (22 dollars) each week.

Without the help, the family wouldn't have enough money. The father's job of digging wells on poor ranches, a trade he learned from his father, doesn't bring in much.

The family's sandwich stand has a single table with four chairs. Without a sink, Fructuoso's mother and sister fill a garbage can with water from a spigot and scoop it out with a bowl to wash dishes and clean the lunch counter. The women sell fruit drinks for four pesos (43 cents) and sandwiches for five pesos (54 cents).

The family's house is tiny and ramshackle. A cracked car mirror is nailed to a wall, and ancient mattresses sit on cinderblocks. Light bulbs hang from a jumble of wires. On one wall is a board covered with postcards from New York. They are blank on the back.

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how his grandfather worked in the fields in Arizona for a time, and when the boy arrived in New York, his father was already there working in a factory.

Before long, Fructuoso says, his father was badly cut when glass fell on him while working at the frame factory and he later returned to Mexico when the homesickness became too much.

But the son stayed, growing accustomed to a backdrop of skyscrapers instead of modest one-story homes. He saw snow for the first time, and he got used to wearing a thick jacket in the winter. His salary gradually rose as he went from working in a supermarket to working in warehouses.

A decade later, the money Fructuoso sends home - often between 300 and 350 dollars a month - is the only regular connection he has with his family aside from occasional phone calls.

"He's the only boy, so we miss him. I tell him he has to come back," his mother says. "I didn't want him to go, but he said, 'No mama, there's no work here and there isn't anything to eat.' So he went."

The phone calls are usually brief because of the expense. Fructuoso asks about the family, about how Cuautla has changed from the sleepy village it was in his youth into the bustling town it now is.

His parents and sisters never expected him to be gone so long, but they understand it's too expensive and difficult to come and go.

Fructuoso returned to the town once for a three-month visit when he was 18. He passed a test to complete his basic schooling.

Afterward, getting back into the United States was tough. He tried unsuccessfully to cross the border 13 times. Each time, he was caught by US Border Patrol agents and sent back to Mexico.

Finally, after two weeks of trying, he made the crossing into the Arizona desert jammed into the back of a van with 22 other people. Once on the other side, he paid 1,500 dollars to the coyote guide who took him across.

The money he carried wasn't his. He had borrowed it from a great-aunt and a friend, and he paid them back, with interest, after resuming work in New York.

"I took him a whole year to pay it back," says his father.

When Fructuoso first returned to New York, he had nightmares of being apprehended by immigration officers. The nightmares eventually went away, but he still worries about the possibility of being sent back.

"You always live with a little fear," he says.

Fructuoso believes it's wrong that despite his years of work, the United States still considers him an "illegal alien." Last year, he took a bus with others to Washington and marched in front of the White House to urge the government to declare an amnesty that would let immigrants like him stay legally.

"I don't know what the reason would be that they don't want to accept us to live legally here," he says.

An estimated 7 million Mexican-born adults live in the United States, and the money they send home - by all accounts more than the documented figure of 5.9 billion dollars a year - is one of Mexico's largest sources of income.

New York, like many places in the United States, is dependent upon Mexican labor. Young men and teenagers mop its restaurants, stock its shelves and whittle thorns from roses outside its corner stores.

The city estimates its Mexican population has more than tripled in the past decade, rising from about 64,000 in the 1990 census to an estimated 200,000 last year. Other experts say the number of Mexicans in the city is probably much higher.

Fathers groom their sons in youthful Arab world

With the death of President Hafez al Assad on 10 June, Syria became the first Arab republic to revert to a hereditary system of government, Hazhir Teimourian writes from London

AS mourners gathered in old Omayyad Square in Damascus to await President Hafez Assad's coffin, it was remarkable how many faces in the crowd were those of youths.

Did so many turn up on 13 June because they were grief-stricken by the death of Assad? Or was it because the overwhelmingly young population identified itself with the 34-year-old successor, Bashar al Assad, hoping that under him Syria would open up to the modern world and become part of it?

In authoritarian countries, school children, soldiers in civilian dress and government servants are often bussed in to where the cameras want them to be. "But here such efforts seemed superfluous. Hundreds of thousands of people had turned up and their tears were genuine."

For 30 years, the people of Syria had not known any other leader. "He was the big tree under which we gathered," one distraught mourner said. More accurately, perhaps, Assad was the grumpy old grandfather one misses terribly after his death, though he had become impossible to live with!

But did Assad hand over power to his successor to be in closer touch with the younger generation? Certainly not.

It was the preservation of that privilege - in the name of "national stability" - that would have been on Assad's mind when he began grooming Bashar to take over from him some years ago.

He certainly knew that hereditary rule was an anathema to all the principles of his governing Socialist Arab Renaissance (Ba'ath) party, and that he was humiliating the vice-presidents and senior ministers bypassed in favour of his son.

This apparent conversion to the merits of a kind of monarchy is not, however, confined to Syria. Apart from Saddam Hussein in Iraq, where Uday Hussein is said to be eyeing the top job, several other Arab presidents are also clearly grooming their sons to take over from them.

They include: President Ali Abdullah Salih of Yemen, whose son Ahmed is a colonel in the army and a member of parliament; Chairman Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, whose elder son Seif ed-Din is a businessman with extensive links to the Libyan oil industry; and President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, who has never appointed a vice-president since he came to power in 1981. But his younger son Kamal was recently appointed to the secretaryship of the ruling National Democratic Party.

Of the 21 states in the Arab world, eight are formally hereditary systems - Saudi Arabia, Oman, Jordan, Morocco, and the emirates of Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. Kuwait has a reasonably powerful parliament, but women have no vote. And Jordan's parliament has weak opposition.

If Iraq, Yemen, Libya and Egypt join Syria and go the same way, more than half of all Arab countries will be ruled by dynasties.

The Palestinians have even made up political jokes about it. "No matter how unattractive our leader may be," one runs, "at least he [Chairman Yasser Arafat] has no son to inflict on us."

The Syrian parliament's hasty amendment of the constitution to allow Bashar al Assad to succeed his father (by lowering the minimum age), led to another joke.

"We are now making preparations for an amendment to the Palestinian constitution. The minimum age for a presidential candidate will be four, and women will be allowed to serve as president." (Arafat's daughter Zahia is four years old)

Before coming to the United States, Fructuoso imagined it differently, a place with "there was less racism." Now, he spends some free time in the evenings at the Mexican community group Association Tepeyac helping organize cultural events and marches for immigrant rights.

He begins his days early, loading boxes into a graffiti-covered delivery truck. The work has given him the build of a weightlifter. He and his boss, a Chinese man who owns the truck, unload their goods at restaurants across the city.

Fructuoso does this work six days a week, even when it's snowing. Holidays are rare, and his boss sometimes doesn't pay on time. But Fructuoso is grateful for what he has.

"Estoy bien, gracias a Dios," he often says. "I'm fine, thanks to God."

He buys some clothes second hand, and he shares a small one-bedroom apartment with an uncle and a cousin, together paying 700 dollars a month in rent. Fructuoso sleeps with his cousin on a mattress on the floor.

He warms tortillas on the stove's gas burners. He says they don't compare to the ones his mother makes fresh at home.

Fructuoso misses his parents and sisters, and he has no photographs of them. He lost one family picture when someone stole his backpack during the crossing from Mexico. But he says he doesn't need a photo to remember them by.

"They are always here, in my mind," he says. "I know that my mama prays for me. I pray for them."

The author is a writer specialising in Middle Eastern politics and history.