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Complex Inequalities
The Case of Muslim Americans After 9/11
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The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have redefined the meaning of religious minority identity for Muslim Americans. When religious identities are central to U.S. political conflicts, they shift from supporting adaptation to American society to facilitating inequality. Using newspaper articles published in the northeastern region of the United States and The Washington Post between May 2002 and May 2003, the following analysis investigates how Muslim religious identity comes to mimic the inequality of race identity via essentialist images of Islam, government policies, and experiences of discrimination. Benign markers of difference no longer exist in American society; instead, any identity that designates a group boundary can be used to organize social inequality. The religious minority identity of Muslim Americans following 9/11 signals the complexity of social inequality and, therefore, the difficulty of achieving social justice.

Keywords: Muslim Americans; religious minorities; September 11; racism

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, connect Muslims and Islam to terrorism within the geographical borders of the United States. These events have the potential to reshape the meaning of religious minority identity for Muslim Americans. To understand this change requires looking beyond the cultural reproduction that takes place inside ethnically based religious institutions to how religious minority identity is socially constructed external to the group in question. Rather than simply seeing how ethnoreligious identities facilitate adaptation to American society, this perspective reveals how religious minority identity is used to organize social inequality. The reformulation of religious minority identity for Muslim Americans indicates that achieving social justice is arduous in spite of the U.S. ethnic narrative of adaptation and assimilation.

Religion persists as a salient social category in the United States because the separation of church and state ensures competition among religious institutions and

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denominations if they are to survive (Warner, 1993). Rather than pluralism and modernity increasing secularization, they promote religion as an acceptable marker of difference and attachment. The social factors in religious differentiation—class, race, ethnicity, language, urbanism, region, and the like—are not simply templates on which religious association is modeled, nor are they merely identities people carry from one locale to another, identities destined to fade as the carriers die. Religion itself is recognized in American society, if not always by social scientists, as a fundamental category of identity and association, and it is thereby capable of grounding solidarities and identities. (Warner, 1993, p. 1059)

Religious institutions are sites where immigrants construct and negotiate their identity in American society. Although European and non-European (e.g., Latino, Caribbean, East and South Asian, and Middle Eastern) immigrants face pressures to assimilate, religion is an effective cultural artifact and institution for reinforcing ethnic identity (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000a; Herberg, 1960; Warner & Wittner, 1998). Among post-1965 immigrants, religion takes on more importance in the United States than it had in countries of origin, signaling ethnic cultural reproduction among the first generation and ethnic revival for the second (Warner, 1998). It is through adapting congregationalism that immigrants preserve the boundary around their ethnoreligious identity and fold into American religious pluralism.

Congregationalism promotes the voluntary nature of religious practice and institutions in the United States. The fact that immigrant religious communities adopt the congregational form is less about their taking on American democratic values and more of an indication that they have no other option; immigrants must adopt congregationalism if religious institutions are to encompass their traditions (Warner, 1998). The process of conforming to the “American Protestant” model incorporates “two dimensions: 1) structural characteristics (e.g., substantial lay leadership, voluntary membership, sense of ownership on the part of the laity, professional clergy, membership lists, and member financing) and 2) ethno-religious community centers” (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000b, pp. 135-136). The congregational structure gives immigrants control of their institutions, and community centers provide resources (e.g., employment counseling and language classes) and a place for association outside of religious services (e.g., dinners, recreational activities, and secular celebrations). Ultimately, what is common in religious theology and ritual supersedes ethnic specificity (e.g., language and unique cultural celebrations), expanding the boundary of the community to incorporate immigrants from different countries as well as converts (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000a; Smith, 1978; Yang & Ebaugh, 2001b).

Religion and ethnicity are interwoven in the creation of identity with the potential for political consequences. Smith (1978) argues that migration is a “theologizing” experience—prompting reflection about central religious tenets and ideals—because of the “emotional consequences of uprooting and resettlement” (p. 1161). Just as
ethnicity becomes a centralizing element of modern social movements, so too do “systems of religion” by legitimizing existing social arrangements and providing the “prophetic proclamation” necessary for “declaring a transcendent ethic not identifiable with any existing society or social institution” (Smith, 1978, p. 1157). In other words, ethnicity and religion are reformulated by social, historical, and political contexts. Religion and ethnicity are not static artifacts of the past but salient social categories of the present. Thus, Hindus and Muslims living in the United States try to define the content and meaning of Indian identity given transnationalism and their particular political interests in both India and the United States (Kurien, 2001). Chinese Buddhist and Chinese Christians find their majority–minority status reversed as they become a part of American religious pluralism, but the racialization of Chinese determines their ability to attract non-Chinese Americans to their institutions (Yang & Ebaugh, 2001a).

What major research projects have shown us about ethnicity, religion, cultural reproduction, and adaptation among other immigrant groups is also true for Muslim Americans (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000a; Warner & Wittner, 1998). Generally, Muslim Americans are characterized as showing the classic signs of assimilation: middle-class socioeconomic status in combination with the organizational density needed to advance community-specific social and political interests (Haddad & Lummis, 1987; Kahn, 1998, 2003; Leonard, 2003a). They are becoming a single Muslim American community in spite of their diverse emigrant origins (Esposito, 1998; Leonard, 2003b; Saeed, 2002) and formulating Islam without the cultural influences of their countries of origin (Badr, 2000; Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000a; Mattson, 2003). And, as with other religious minorities, their mosques are organized along the dimensions of congregationalism (Abusharaf, 1998; Badr, 2000).

Muslims’ position in current national and global U.S. politics brings to the fore what is not fully examined in research about the relationship between religion and ethnicity; that is, how the religious minority identity of immigrant groups is externally constructed. Research on religious institutions as sites of cultural reproduction and identity construction develops from efforts to explain the persistence of religion and ethnicity as salient social categories in modern societies (Smith, 1978; Warner, 1993). Yet Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000a) note that when identity is externally imposed, as in the case of Hispanics, pan-ethnic identity is more prominent than pan-religious identity. Furthermore, Warner (1998) argues that religious minorities like those defined by race maybe unable to resist externally imposed identity. The role of Muslims and Islam in the 9/11 terrorist attacks raises questions about externally imposed identity for Muslim Americans. How have the 9/11 terrorist attacks reshaped the meaning of religious minority identity for Muslim Americans? How does the centrality of religious identity in national and global political conflicts influence the identity of a religious minority group in the United States?

Past research implies that to the degree that the boundary around a religious minority group becomes externally recognized and politically meaningful, it does so
in service to group interests (Smith, 1978). Yet it is probable that when religious minority identity is externally constructed, it will support targeting for social inequality rather than advance group interests. A source of data for an empirical analysis of external identity construction is the media. The media source for this analysis is newspaper articles published in the northeast region of the United States and The Washington Post. What I present is a critical analysis of the meaning of religious minority identity that examines how it is used to facilitate systemic social inequality rather than adaptation.

Even though Muslim is a religious label and not a racial one, since 9/11 Muslim American identity has been restructured to reflect the systemic inequality that is readily associated with racial minorities. It is reorganized along essentialist, structural, and experiential dimensions of inequality. This demonstrates malleability in how social inequality is organized. As argued by Fredrickson (1981, 2002), Omi and Winant (1994), Feagin (2000), and Bonilla-Silva (1997), there is a persistent structure to systemic inequality and racism. Changes and transformations in social, historical, and political contexts mean that any identity can be used to organize social inequality. Religious minority identity can be used to contradict adaptation and social justice rather than support it.

**Method**

The news stories used for this analysis come from newspapers published in the northeast region of the United States and The Washington Post. The stories appeared between May 2002 and May 2003 and were accessed using the Lexis Nexis database. The stories were collected between May and August 2003 or between December 2003 and January 2004. The search terms Muslims, immigrants, Islam, and Islamic were used to collect stories that focused on Muslims in the United States. Excluding duplicates, the search yielded 121 articles that included hard news, editorials, and human interest stories.

Each document was coded using Atlas-ti software for analyzing qualitative data. Blocks of text in each article were assigned codes. Texts that were coded Islamic culture, U.S. political policies, and discrimination are used for this analysis. After determining the themes in the coded data, the article in which each datum (or quote) appeared was reread to place quotes in the context of the stories in which they originally appeared.

The following analysis presents what newspaper articles reveal about how social inequality was organized for Muslim Americans between May 2002 and May 2003. By this time, the initial shock of the terrorist attacks had passed and the development of political responses to them was well underway. Many national and international events (e.g., wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; the capture of John Walker Lindh, the American Taliban; and Richard Reed, the shoe bomber) kept the issues of terrorism...
at the forefront of news reporting. Furthermore, as the U.S. government developed policies to “secure the nation,” everyone from talk show hosts to political pundits and religious leaders expressed their opinions about terrorism, terrorists, and the appropriate course of action in response to the attacks. What follows is not an effort to provide a detailed account of these events. Instead, the analysis examines the themes that appeared in news stories that inform the meaning of religious minority identity and social inequality for Muslim Americans.

**Analysis**

Newspaper articles published between May 2002 and 2003 paint an informative picture of Islam and Muslims in the United States. If one did not know anything about Islam, these stories would tell one its rituals (e.g., frequency and structure of prayers and dietary restrictions) and holidays (i.e., *Eid al-Fitr*, associated with Ramadan, the month of fasting, and *Eid al-Adha*, to celebrate Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca). They would learn that Muslims living in the United States are both native born and immigrant. Included among the native born are a large number of African Americans, although immigrants have origins in nations from around the world. The growing number of mosques, Islamic schools, and ethnic neighborhoods (e.g., Pakistani and Arab) indicate that the size of the American Muslim population is increasing. The news stories’ descriptions even capture Muslims’ perceptions of themselves as Americans and the compatibility that they see between Islam and American society (Byng, 2005). Readers might even consider the first Muslim American Heritage Day, held on October 6, 2002, in Washington, DC, to be symbolic of Muslims joining the pantheon of American minority groups (Branigin, 2002).

Appearing parallel to the outline of “What is Islam?” and “Who are Muslims?” is another set of images. This set reveals the making of systemic social inequality against Muslim Americans. It is rationalized by projecting essentialist images that present Muslims and Islam as inherently and indelibly evil. This imaging is what lies at the core of racist ideology (Fredrickson, 2002; van den Berghe, 1967). According to Hodge (1990), oppression is rationalized by the logic that those defined as good may legitimately dominate those defined as evil. For Omi and Winant (1994), what defines racism is the creation and re-creation of domination and subordination through the essentialist categorization of humans. In addition, Muslim Americans’ social inequality is structured by political policies and legislation that target them for surveillance by local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. Legislation institutionalizes social inequality, allowing it to become systemic (Feagin, 2000; Fredrickson, 1981). It provides the definition for how social relations are organized and carried out in reference to a group even after policies are rescinded or modified to make group targeting less blatant (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Feagin, 2000). Policy and legislation lay the foundation for discrimination and
social inequality to become a “lived experience” (Feagin, 2000; Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Discrimination can range from hate stares to verbal assaults, to physical violence, and to the denial of education, employment, and housing resources (Feagin & Sikes, 1994). It is through the collective and interactive process of essentialism, policymaking, and acts of discrimination that the religious minority identity of Muslim Americans is transformed from one that facilitates adaptation to one that organizes social inequality.

**Essentialism: The Mark of Evil**

“It makes it seem that we’re genetically predisposed to criminality and have to be treated differently from the civilized world,” he said. “What’s next for us, internment camps?” (Ibrahim Hooper, Council on American Islamic Relations, as quoted in “New Rules Proposed to Check Foreign IDs,” 2002, p. A1)

The above quote captures what lies at the heart of essentialism and racist ideology, the idea that people marked by the identity in question are genetically different from other human groups and must be treated as such. After 9/11, the images of Muslims and Islamic theology as inherently predisposed to violence and terrorism were most prominently voiced by conservative Christian leaders. In a *New York Times* article that covered the Southern Baptist Convention, the reporter writes,

Mr. Vines [a past president of the Southern Baptist Convention] called Muhammad a “demon-possessed pedophile,” asserting that his 12th and final wife was a 9-year-old girl, and declared that Muslims worshiped a different God than Christians. (Sachs, 2002, p. A10)

Furthermore, Mr. Vines’s comments differentiate Islam and Christianity by proposing that they are not equal and that Islam predisposes its followers to violence. The report goes on,

Speaking to fellow pastors on Monday at the Baptists’ annual convention in St. Louis, Mr. Vines said pluralism wrongly equated all religions. “Allah is not Jehovah,” the Associated Press quoted him as saying, “Jehovah’s not going to turn you into a terrorist that will try to bomb people and take the lives of thousands and thousands of people.” (Sachs, 2002, p. A10)

To argue against a pluralist understanding of religious difference is to question the viability of religious minority identity. If, as Vines claims, pluralism wrongly equates all religions, then immigrants should not reproduce their religious cultures in the United States, nor can maintaining their religious minority identity facilitate their adaptation to American society.
News stories report that other Christian right leaders (i.e., Falwell, Robertson, and Graham) shared Vines’s views. Evidence that their perspective reaches beyond oratory at conferences comes from a suit filed against University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill by the Family Policy Network (FPN), a conservative Christian organization (Cooperman, 2002). The FPN claimed that requiring entering freshmen to read *Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations* by Michael Sells not only violated the Constitution but skipped over parts of the Qur’an that call for violence. The FPN sought out plaintiffs through Christian talk radio shows and filed suit on their behalf:

“*Approaching the Qur’an*” is “not a bad book, as far as it goes,” Glover [FPN president] said. The real problem, he said, “is not the sin of the author, it’s the sin of the university, which knows this book presents nothing controversial about Islam . . . . Anybody who has read this book and this book alone is still going to be ignorant about why people are killing other people in the name of Allah.” (Cooperman, 2002, p. A2)

In other words, according to the FPN, the book did not present an accurate portrayal of Islam because it did not address the violence of Muslims. Yet what is more important for the FPN is that adequate education about Islam connects it to violence. According to Cooperman (2002), for the University of North Carolina, and potentially for other universities, the problem is a demand for courses about Islam versus the perceptions of those such as Bill O’Reilly (a conservative pundit) who say that providing such courses is making freshmen study “our enemy’s religion.” This perspective filters down to individual churches through seminars on how to convert Muslims to Christianity.

In an article based on observations of a day-long seminar about converting Muslims, the reporter notes that the views of evangelical Christians on Islam are different from those of mainline Protestants and Orthodox and Roman Catholics who participate in interfaith events and discussions (Goodstein, 2003). Describing the increasing popularity of lectures and books criticizing Islam in evangelical churches, the reporter writes,

> The oratorical tone of these authors and lecturers varies, but they share the basic presumption that the world’s two largest religions are headed for a confrontation, with Christianity representing what is good, true and peaceful, and Islam what is evil, false and violent. (Goodstein, 2003, p. A1)

These words capture very directly the projection of Islam as more than violent and terrorist—as representing evil in contrast to what is good. The reporter describes the presentation of a seminar leader who had been in the Middle East and spoke at a church in Columbus:

> The teacher drew on his own life experience as evidence of Islam’s evils. While President Bush and others have depicted Islam as a peaceful religion that has been
“hijacked” by extremists, the teacher said he knew better than to believe that. (Goodstein, 2003, p. A1)

If the seminar leader was correct, his personal knowledge of Islam and Muslims will outweigh the political rhetoric of President George W. Bush among his listeners. Yet, even as Bush attempts to balance denigrating essentialism against Islam, the social and political currency of Christian conservatives is very important to his administration.

Christian conservatives are a core constituency of the Republican Party and were central to George W. Bush’s election. However, their discourse about Islam is at direct odds with that of the president. Ostensibly, there is a conflict between Bush’s efforts to recognize his constituency and to put forward a rhetoric about Islam and Muslims that contradicts their views (Stevenson, 2003). However, in light of Bonilla-Silva’s (2003) arguments, this conflict is consistent with colorblind racism; what appears to be neutrality and potential equality masks the reality of social inequality. So, for example, Bush can speak to the Southern Baptist Convention but not reference the remarks (cited above) that Vines made the day before (Sachs, 2002). And Franklin Graham, who gave the invocation at Bush’s inauguration, can be invited to hold Good Friday services at the Pentagon even though he has “called Islam a ‘very wicked and evil religion’” (Stevenson, 2003, p. A13) and has “repeated in radio and television appearances . . . that the Koran preaches violence and that terrorism is supported by ‘mainstream’ Muslims around the world” (Cooperman, 2002, p. A2). Although Bush’s comments are “evidence” of social and political neutrality or equality for Muslim Americans, the discourse that demonizes them is legitimated through Bush’s politically valid actions to stand with his constituency. Although Bush’s rhetoric allows us to believe that nothing has changed in the social meaning of religious minority identity, the discourse of Christian conservatives in association with post-9/11 political policies challenges this assumption.

Policy: Structuring Inequality

Most significantly, she observes, “When asked by the Court . . . to explain the standard used to arrest the detainees, or otherwise to substantiate the purported connection to terrorism, the Government was unable to answer.” In other words, she asks, just what is a September 11 detainee? (U.S. District Judge Gladys Kessler, quoted in Lee, 2002, p. 32)

The preceding epigraph describes government actions that create a special class of persons: September 11 detainees. Among its responses to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U.S. government passed the Patriot Act, created the Department of Homeland Security, revamped the Immigration and Naturalization Service into the National Security Entry Exit Registration System (NSEERS), and established the Joint
Terrorism Task Force that combined local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. As the policies that follow the attacks were implemented, Muslim Americans found themselves subject to search and seizure operations in their homes and organizations (“Va. Program Helping Muslim Women,” 2002), experienced terror alerts in connection to their religious holidays (Chadwick, 2003), and with the beginning of the war in Iraq, were asked to submit to voluntary interviews that could end in their arrest (Goodstein, 2003; Thomas, 2003). However, the most onerous of the new laws directed at Muslims and the one with the greatest potential to target them for current and future social inequality was the “special registration program” for Muslim men that became NSEERS.

The Justice Department’s announcement of new visa regulations that required the fingerprinting and photographing of “visitors from countries that the United States believes may harbor or encourage terrorists . . . would mostly affect visitors from Muslim and Middle Eastern countries” (“New Rules Proposed to Check Foreign IDs,” 2002, p. A1). According to John Ashcroft, the policy

would help prevent terrorism by permitting the government to more effectively identify people who pose a threat . . . [by] . . . comparing fingerprints and photographs of certain individuals with a database of known terrorists and those with criminal records. (“New Rules Proposed to Check Foreign IDs,” 2002, p. A1)

The report covering the announcement noted that the U.S. government routinely fingerprints immigrants who apply for green cards and citizenship, and the new regulations simply extend the policy to visitors:

The new rules would apply to people who enter the country on a visa and are based in an alien-registration law put in place in the 1940s during World War II. Those already here who stay longer than 30 days would have to report to the INS office to register. As an alteration of administrative rules, the new procedures do not require congressional approval. (“New Rule Proposed to Check Foreign IDs,” 2002, p. A1)

Although the registration policy is opposed by civil libertarian and Arab Muslim organizations, the report goes on to say that it “play[s] to the mood of the country, with numerous polls indicating strong support for tightened immigration policies and, in some cases, restrictions targeting aliens from Muslim countries” (“New Rule Proposed to Check Foreign IDs,” 2002, p. A1). An editorial in support of the registration policy points out that the majority of those on the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations have “direct or indirect ties to Arab and/or predominately Muslim nations” (“Making the U.S. Secure,” 2002, p. A14). It goes on to say that “common sense dictates that officials look more closely at those coming from nations whose politics and demographics point to a higher likelihood of trouble” (“Making the U.S. Secure,” 2002, p. A14).
In other words, the special registration program is rationalized as “commonsense” monitoring and targeting of all Muslims entering and leaving the country because of the acts of others who share the same religious identity. The registration captures in its net not only those who enter the country from its implementation forward, but also those who have been in the United States for more than 30 days. Complying with the registration policy meant that Muslim men in the United States were arrested and held without charges or charged with minor immigration violations in hopes that more substantial charges of terrorism might be developed (Lee, 2002; Thomas, 2003). Once detained, Muslim American men were denied access to lawyers and had their identities kept secret on the supposition of national security concerns (“Arab, Muslim Groups Sue INS,” 2002; Fainaru & Eggen, 2002; Lee, 2002; “Threats and Response,” 2002). Furthermore, the list of national origins requiring registration was slowly expanded (Casimir, 2003; Son, 2003), and with the beginning of the war in Iraq, there was a new reason for intense surveillance in the form of door-to-door questioning by Federal Bureau of Investigation and Joint Terrorism Task Force agents (Goodstein, 2003; Thomas, 2003).

The special registration program in effect criminalized the entire Muslim population by relying on old and new institutionalized procedures for targeting specific groups for differential treatment. Even the fact that coming from a Muslim country provides the initial mark for disparity harkens back to old policies restricting immigration (Steinberg, 1981) and rationalizations for who might be legally enslaved (Fredrickson, 1981). The end of special registration (Swarms, 2003) and revisions that expanded it to all visitors to the United States (i.e., NSEERS) do not eliminate the assertion that Muslims are a special class of persons who need more monitoring because they are the most likely perpetrators of terrorist acts. The institutional structuring of unequal treatment through policy indicates systemic or structural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Feagin, 2000). Furthermore, the presentation of the policies as simply common sense without recognizing the persistent social inequality that results is colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). In the most simplistic and frequently used term, registration policies are profiling on the basis of identity. It does not matter whether race, ethnicity, religion, or some other group signifier is the preceding word. Once formally marked for discrimination through political legislation and policies, social inequality becomes the experience of Muslim Americans. Rather than religious minority identity being a facilitator of adaptation, it becomes the designator for discrimination.

Discrimination: How it all Becomes Real

“We are being targeted as if violence is something innate to our community,” said Dalia E. Mogahed, a business student active in Muslim concerns here. “But we don’t think we have any power to stop the targeting, so we’d rather have a working relationship with law enforcement.” (Goodstein, 2003, p. A1)
The above quote comes from a news story describing the decision by leaders of Islamic organizations in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, to cooperate with the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s request for assistance with its efforts to question local Iraqis at the beginning of the war in Iraq. The student’s comments capture her recognition that the policy is discriminatory and driven by essentialism and Muslims’ feelings of powerlessness in challenging it. Acquiescence is one response among many as Muslims make announcements in mosques and social organizations about registration requirements, hold workshops on civil rights—especially about refusing to answer questions and having a lawyer present—and leave the country.

Between 2002 and 2003, reports note the rise in incidents of discrimination against Muslims (Bayoumi, 2002; “Bias Incidents Against Muslims,” 2002; Wilgoren, 2002). According to a poll conducted by the Council on American Islamic Relations, in the year following September 11, 2001, “57 percent of American Muslims report they have experienced bias or discrimination . . . [and] 48 percent of respondents believe that their lives have changed for the worse” (Bayoumi, 2002, p. B2). Classic discrimination comes to define the lives of Muslim Americans, from the impact of registration policies to face-to-face discrimination to discrimination in employment. Just as classically, discrimination has an impact on the mental health of Muslim Americans.

Although the special registration of Muslim immigrants may have made non-Muslim Americans feel more secure, it created panic and fear among Muslims and devastated their communities (Solomon, 2003; Son, 2003). One report focusing on Muslims in New York says,

First [came] the post–9-11 sweeps in Muslim and Arab neighborhoods that resulted in thousands of detentions and deportations. . . . The roundups were experienced as racial profiling of the lowest order, tearing apart families and disrupting whole communities. . . . Then came “special registration” . . . . The program has decimated neighborhoods like Midwood, Brooklyn, which has seen hundreds of breadwinners detained because of visa violations, and hundreds more trying to flee to Canada. (Solomon, 2003, p. 26)

What is argued to be a rational policy in light of security concerns had a destructive impact on Muslim families and communities. Yet the terror of discrimination is revealed most starkly in instances of face-to-face discrimination.

Face-to-face discrimination can range from silent stares to violence that results in death; what holds the actions together is the thread of common targeting. In talking to a reporter about the fears that Muslims have as a result of the discretion that law enforcement is given by the Patriot Act to eavesdrop on and detain immigrants, a Muslim woman turns to her experiences because she wears hijab:

She says, she’s noticed a renewed tendency on the part of some people to shake their fist at her while she’s driving. Then there’s also a different sort of reaction in restaurants. It used to be that people would be mildly curious when she walked in wearing
the head scarf, she said. Today, “when I walk in with my hijab, the whole restaurant will fall silent. It’s very disconcerting.” (Dujardin, 2003, p. D1)

Although sudden silence and stares can make a person uncomfortable, when the emotions and prejudiced attitudes behind them are acted on, people’s lives are in danger. In an article citing the discriminatory incidents recorded in 1 month by the Council on American Islamic Relations, the reporter writes,

On Saturday, Larme Price, saying he was motivated by a desire to punish people of Middle Eastern descent after the attacks of 9-11, confessed to killing four New York immigrants. An Afghan American was severely injured last Monday when two people burst into his restaurant in Indianapolis and set him on fire; projectiles were fired at a mosque in suburban Chicago; graffiti scrawled around the campus of San Jose University warned that “Muslims will be shot”; in Illinois, a Muslim family’s van was destroyed with an explosive device; in a Pathmark parking lot in Essex County, New Jersey, a man from Pakistan was beaten unconscious by two white men screaming profanities about Islam. (Solomon, 2003, p. 26)

This quote not only captures the reality of life-threatening violence against Muslims in the United States, it also reveals that the incidents are taking place across the nation. On one hand, discrimination can range from making Muslims uncomfortable in public places to threatening their lives. On the other, it can mean that they are denied resources even though they may have had access to them in the past.

Employment discrimination is very clearly resource denial that has a direct impact on people’s living conditions. For many Muslims, 9/11 opened up the issue of employment discrimination in a way that had not previously been associated with them. For instance, a reporter tells the story of a man from Yemen who had been in the United States since 1976 and had “worked as a welder in a factory for 15 years—until Sept. 12, when his boss sent him home, screaming, ‘Go pray,’ and ‘Go to your leader’” (Wilgoren, 2002, p. G5). Then there is a case reported to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission about an Afghan Muslim who had been in the United States for 20 years and was a citizen when his job with a computer science firm was moved to another state. He was made to “interview for a job he had done for six years” (Mason-Draffen, 2003, p. F4). In spite of good reviews by his supervisors and a promise that

the employees of his former company [would be given] preference over consultants, some consultants were hired and he was let go. . . . He said he could think of no reason he wasn’t hired . . . other than religious discrimination, since the company said in a rejection letter that he wasn’t a “good fit.” (Mason-Draffen, 2003, p. F4)

However, if there is ambiguity about whether this man’s experience was about religious discrimination, this is not so with Muslim women who are daycare providers
in Northern Virginia. After receiving a list of providers that included their religions and ethnicities from a daycare center, the center’s director reported that a father called back and said, “I want more names—not Muslim names” (Raghunathan, 2002, p. B1).

Discrimination brings essentialism and the policies that structure inequality into the lives of Muslim Americans. It makes social inequality something that really happens to them simply because they are Muslim. The impact of these experiences has resulted in psychological trauma, depression, and psychosis for some Muslim Americans (“Va. Program Helping Muslim Women,” 2002; Wilgoren, 2002). Religious minority identity has allowed Muslims in the United States to be targeted for discrimination. Their case indicates that religion has changed from being the unique identity that immigrants keep while facing the changes brought by assimilation to one that can be marshaled for the organization of social inequality.

Conclusion

The 9/11 terrorist attacks shifted the social and political context for Muslims in the United States. Terrorism within the geographical borders of the United States carried out by Muslims places that identity at the center of national and global politics. As a result, the meaning of religious minority identity has been altered for Muslim Americans. As their case indicates, religious minority identity can be used to organize social inequality. This contradicts the adaptation hypothesis of the American ethnic narrative and its implicit assumption of social justice.

Past research demonstrates that immigrants to the United States are faced with external pressures to give up their ethnic culture and identity to assimilation. At the same time, immigrants and their children attempt to hold on to some elements of their ethnic culture to preserve their traditions and identity. Religious institutions have been the sites where immigrants can create, maintain, and revive their ethnic identity. Ethnoreligious identity has facilitated adaptation to American society by allowing immigrants to hold on to cultural distinctiveness inside their religious institutions in spite of the conformity that is required in other social institutions and settings. In addressing the persistence of and connection between religion and ethnicity, researchers have focused on internal identity construction: how immigrants and their children create their identity and maintain their culture within their religious institutions.

Although this research is informative, it does not reveal how religious minority identities are externally constructed. It is reasonable to argue that religious minorities are more free from the influences of externally imposed identity construction than, for example, racialized minorities. However, as Muslim Americans demonstrate, when religious identity lays at the center of political conflicts, it can be woven into systemic social inequality using the same ideals, structuring, and experiences.
that are common to racial minorities. In other words, essentialist ideals defining
good and evil, structuring inequality through policy and legislation, and targeting for
discrimination can be applied to religious minorities just as they are applied to racial
minorities. This then challenges the argument that ethnoreligious identities facilitate
adaptation to American society. Instead, the external construction of religious minor-
ity identity can allow it to be used for organizing social inequality. This shift indicates
the complexity of social inequality and the difficulty of achieving social justice.

As social scientists and sociologists, we must be willing to understand how social
inequality becomes a systemic characteristic of societies and to move away from
assumptions about which identities define these social relations. Howard Winant
(2000) argues that the challenge in developing an applicable race theory in the 21st
century is the need to explain the persistence of social inequality given political
movements to eliminate it. What the foregoing analysis demonstrates is the mal-
leability of systemic social inequality; it can be formed, re-formed, and shaped to
subsume any identity that marks a group. The organization of social inequality
around religious minority identity is the same as that of racial minority identity. This
flexibility means that it can be much more difficult to locate where social inequality
is organized, even though we know how it is organized. If we are to meet Winant’s
challenge, we must become much more vigilant in our analysis of how identities are
externally constructed and given meaning. Quick recognition of the new façades,
like Muslim American religious minority identity following 9/11, on the old struc-
ture of systemic social inequality is the scaffolding needed to promote social justice.

References


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