Islam in America: History, Values and Lifestyle

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The growth of the Muslim population in America started decades ago. The existence of Islam in America has often become a controversial issue so that Muslims have to face prejudice especially since some terrorism used Islam as the cover. Clarifying this issue, this article will address the history, core beliefs and values of Islam, and Islamic lifestyle in America.

History

To discuss Islam and its development can not be separated from its birth in the Arabian Peninsula in the sixth century that focuses on the events in Makkah and Madinah. This early history is concentrated on Muhammad activities (in 570-632) as the prophet and the first Muslim. In the work of Geaves (2010), Yasin Dutton classified the differences between “original Islam” and “primal Islam”. Original Islam describes Islam as a religion that was revealed to Muhammad and taught to his companions based on the teachings in the Qur’an. People who lived during the time Muhammad lived considered him as the final prophet of God and believed that the Qur’an is the sacred text of perfect word of God. This belief has been maintained until the present by mujaddids (renewers of faith). Islam then spread abroad from the Arabian Peninsula after Muhammad is death including to the West including North America (Geaves, 2010).

The first growth of Islam in the North America began in the nineteenth century. During this time, Muslim immigrants came from the Middle East to get some kind of fortune, large or small, and then go back again to their homelands. Chronologically, migrations were distinguished into different periods. Between 1875 and 1912 was the first wave when immigrants came from Greater Syria under the rule of the Ottoman Empire, now comprising Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon. The majority of Middle East immigrants were
knowledgeable about America because of training in missionary schools. They consisted of Sunni, Shi’i ‘Alawi, and Druze Muslims (Pew Research Center, 2011).

Between 1945 to 1960, the source of immigration came from other nations other than the Middle East. Each country had an immigrant quota annually based on the population percentages in the United States at the end of nineteenth century and most of them were from Eastern Europe. Muslim immigrants now not only came from the Middle East but also from other countries such as India, Eastern Europe, and the Soviet Union. Most of them came to the large cities like Chicago and New York and were educated and some of them were from the families of the former ruling elites (Pew Research Center, 2011).

In the whole of Muslim immigration to North America, perhaps the most significant event for them in the twentieth century was the President Lyndon Johnson’s signing of an Immigration Act in 1965 in which the quota policy was removed based on national diversity within the United States. During this time, immigrants from Europe declined whilst those who were from Middle East and Asia increased significantly (Bassiri, 2010; Pew Research Center, 2011).

Based on Pew Research (2011), there was 2.75 million Muslims in the U.S. in 2011 and this number indicates a growth since 2007 by 300,000 adults and 100,000 children. Furthermore, based on the data from International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) in Austria, the U.S. Muslim population in 2010 was about 2.6 million and also it was predicted that about 80,000 to 90,000 new Muslim immigrants would come to the U.S. every year.

Many Muslims born overseas entered the U.S. after 2000 (40%) or during the 1990s (31%) while before 1980, it was just 12%. Among the Muslim population in the U.S., most of them are U.S. citizens (81%), citizen by birth (37%), or born outside of the U.S (70%). Muslim Americans firstly were people from many countries in the world. About four-in-ten
(41%) are immigrants from Middle East or North Africa, 26% from South Asian nations such as Pakistan (14%), Bangladesh (5%), India (3%) and the others come from sub-Saharan African (11%), Europe countries (7%), Iran (5%), and other countries (9%) (Pew Research Center, 2011).

For those who came to the United States, prejudice and discriminate practice did happen when they were looking for jobs as cheap laborers and peddlers. Still, it did not close their way to attain a successful life or prosperity in the States even though the way is not easy (Bassiri, 2010). In regards to the growth of Islam in America until now, Muslims still face prejudice and other negative treatment by people. However, this is the risk that Muslims have to deal with so that they can survive and show the real identity of Muslims that teaches peace and the blessing for the universe based on the values in the Qur’an and Hadith.

Core Belief and Values of Islam

*Tahwid* is the primary Islamic doctrine about God. Islam believes the unity and uniqueness of God as the creator of the universe and the king of the kings. All the practices of Islam come from this absolute monotheism. The confession of this tawhid is expressed through a clause of *Sahara* (the great witnessing of Islam’s monotheism) that proclaims there is no god but God or Allah. A Muslim will need to say this Sahara (*la illaha illa ‘Llah*) as the first step to be a Muslim. This clause not only negates idols but also acknowledges the existence of God as the sole sovereignty over humans and the universe. The *shahada* clause constitutes a statement that describes its own reality, manifested in nature, human relationship, social organization, worship and ritual and even the material dimension of the religion. Through this clause, all activities of being Muslim are centered into one point that is God (Geaves, 2010).

The oneness of God colors the life of human community. Human life becomes the manifestation of the concept of community in the Qur’an. This concept refers to the unity of
people around the world in different groups, tribes, nations, and other cohorts by their relationship with God. Through this concept, people are understood as different groups with different ethnic, language, culture, food or customs but they have the same ties in relation with God. Since the God is the center of every activity so, God’s revelation will guide how people to eat, dress, make family structure, run governance and ritual and other life activities through Islam (Geaves, 2010).

The unity of human nature is under the idea of fitra. This idea implies the original purpose of humanity is to be good and to worship the One God. There is no other reason for God to create human but to worship Him. We are created with no differences between us except that our worship will differentiate us before God (Geaves, 2010). Those who obey what God directs in the Qur’an will obtain a higher degree of taqwa and those who do not will have the lower degree of taqwa. Taqwa is the obedience of God’s order and the avoidance of what God prohibits. This direction also applies to people in the community. Taqwa is a value that differentiates people in their religious life. In the Qur’an, people are ordered to struggle to be better day by day. They are directed to be better people through implementing the tenets in the Qur’an. If they do not obey what has been said in the Qur’an, it means that they are in sin (Brown, 2009).

For Muslims, prayer is a response by putting him or herself in a dedication along with a spiritual attitude, halal habits, and the expression of being thankful in the mind and heart. When Muslims are doing five daily prayers in the mosque (solat), at home, or other places, they are bowing and making prostrations in each set of prayer called raka’a. Muslim are to do solat (five daily prayers) 17 raka’a everyday with this composition: Fajar (2 raka’a), Dhuhur (4 raka’a), Ashr (4 raka’a), Magrib (3 raka’a), and Isya (raka’a). These are obligatory solat and Muslims are allowed to do additional solat so-called sunnah prayers such as in
dhuha time (during the morning to midday), tahajud (in the early morning around 2-3 am), or just before and after solat time (Geaves, 2010).

The Elements of Islamic Faith and Practice

In the faithful American Muslim context, the articles of belief have been developed from the Prophet Muhammmads’ teachings and performed through the basis of Qur’an teachings. There are the five “pillars” or arkan of Islam that constitutes the basics of human responsibility. Muslims are to obey these five pillars as a taqwa or obedience to what God has ordered to become fully human beings. However, not all Muslims share this same interpretation but they prefer to choose or just pick some of the pillars and adjust them into life in America (Smith, 2010).

To ingrain Islam values, American Muslim children learn from their parents about the basics of Islamic teachings that consist of the five elements of faith in Islam. These elements are: (1) Believe in God, (2) Belief in the reality of Angels, (3) Belief in God’s Messengers, (4) Belief in the holy books, and (5) Belief in the day of resurrection and judgment. Believe in God is defined as the understanding of the oneness of God and the human acknowledgement of that oneness. God is Lord and the Creator of the universe that leads to Muslim acknowledgement of His power and authority of human life. In Islam, denying the oneness of God is the biggest sin called shirk, or impious association or participation.

The second element of faith is belief in the reality of Angels. The existence of Angels are playing active roles in religious awareness. The Angels have always been a part of Muslims’ life since at the beginning of Muhammad received divine revelation through the angel Gabriel. Based on the Qur’an, there are many angels but 12 only who are known by humans they are:

1. Jibril (Gabriel): One of Jibril’s primary responsibilities was transferring the Words of Allah to the Prophets of Allah.
2. Mika'il (Michael): According to Allah, Mika’il is responsible for directing the rain and winds.

3. Kiraaman and Kaatiben: These two angels write down the good deeds and bad deeds of the person and they are in the right and left side of each person.

4. Izraeael: His task is taking away life with the order of Allah. Some take away the lives of good persons whilst others looking very fearful take away the lives of sinners and disbelievers.

5. Israfil: He is responsible to blow the trumpet as a signal of the end of creation.

6. Ridwan: He is the primary guardian of Paradise.

7. Malik: He is the primary guardian of Hell.

8. Munkar and Nakeer: They ask questions the person upon their death in grave as to their belief and what they knew of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him). These two angels also punish those in the grave who did not believe, or were hypocrites, whilst alive.

9. Harut and Marut: These two angels came to earth (Babylon, in Iraq) and taught men some of the dark arts, such as ruining a marriage, as a test (it was to enable the people to differentiate between sorcery and the true miracle).

The third element is belief in God’s messengers. God sent his revelation to people through various ways of communication. Prophets (nabi) and messengers (rasul) are to whom God sent his revelation. When the revelation were sent to nabi, it means that the revelation was intended for a specific community, whilst to rasul the revelation would be for universal significance. All messengers are prophets but not all prophets are messengers. Muhammad is the final prophet and messenger after Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Today, relations among Muslims, Christians, and Jews in America are often related to the one path “Abrahamic religions.” This way is considered as the suggestion of common roots of these
three faiths in interfaith conversation. Jesus is the greatest prophet and messenger before Muhammad, and Muhammad is the seal of prophets which means there will be no prophet or messenger anymore after him.

The fourth element is belief in the holy books. The Qur’an is the last book of God’s revelation after the Torah and the Gospel. The Qur’an is the completion of the previous books so that it contains the message contained in the previous books. The Qur’an consistently refers to Jews and Christians as *ahl al-kitab*, the people of the book.

The fifth element is belief in the day of resurrection and judgment. The God’s oneness and the final assessment of human action in the world is the basic revelation to the prophet Muhammad. God will gather all people at the end of time and make an accounting of their activities during their life in the world. The body and soul will be joined again after the trumpet of Israfil is blown on the judgment day. Those who receive his or her “book of deeds” by the right hand (obey what God ordered and avoid his prohibition) the reward will be the garden of Eden, whilst those who receive it with the left hand (does not obey what God ordered and avoid his prohibition) the result will be the eternal fires of punishment in hell.

This judgment day emphasizes the importance of living in the Islamic way. American Muslims often discuss conduct, dress, and other issues in the context of God’s final assessment (Smith, 2010).

The Five Pillars of Islam

Young Muslims are taught the essentials of living a good and responsible life by performing what God ordered and avoiding what he prohibits. The essentials are described in the five pillars of Islam. These pillars are the essence of Muslim’s individual to be an obedience person (*taqwa*). The five pillars are: (1) Testimony concerning God and his prophet Muhammad, (2) Performance of the ritual prayer, (3) Almsgiving, (4) Fasting during
the month of Ramadan, (5) Performing the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca once during one’s lifetime.

The first pillar is testimony concerning God and his prophet Muhammad. The shahada is the basic of the five pillars. An individual should pronounce “I give testimony that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the Prophet of God” to be a Muslim. For those who fail to believe and articulate this shahada, this sin will put him or her outside of Islam community. People in America and also other countries who want to be a Muslim should pronounce this shahada three times and then could be considered as legally Muslim.

The second pillar is performance of the ritual prayer. Formal prayer is an obligation for Muslims. Before the hijra of Muhammad, believers’ praying orientation was Jerusalem and then became Mecca after the hijra. This praying or worship orientation is called qibla. In America and other non-Muslim countries, the mosque usually is a building that was originally not a mosque but another building that then is modified into a mosque by adjusting its qibla direction and other worship necessities.

The third pillar is almsgiving. Islam taught its umma to pay the alms tax or so-called zakat or zakah. Muslims are encouraged to spend privately and publicly from what they have on people who are less fortunate among them. In the Qur’an, the poor, widows, and orphans are considered the people needing attention. This zakah is determined to support people in need to be better off, maintain the community, and show gratefulness for God blessings. Generally, the zakah is 2.5 percent of the sum values of possessions and will be allocated for education, ransom of captives, and other purposes that are important for community welfare.

The fourth pillar is fasting during the month of Ramadhan. The Qur’an was sent to Muhammad as a guidance for humanity during Ramadhan. Muslims are obligated to fast during this month except those who are sick. When Muslims are fasting, they are not allowed to eat, drink, smoke, or have sex during the daylight hours in the fasting month. Moreover,
they are also expected to be careful with their behavior by being honest, thoughtful, and sensitive of others.

The fifth pillar is performing the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca once during one’s lifetime. Mecca remained the center of Muslims worship even when Muhammad had moved his community to Medina. In the Qur’an, it is stated several times to visit Mecca on pilgrimage as in Sura 2:196-197 “Fulfill the pilgrimage and the visitation unto God” (Smith, 2010). Muslims are responsible to visit Mecca at least once for those who have enough resources. However, many people return to Mecca more than once to experience the glory of joining with millions of people in the adoration of the One God. This pilgrimage time is officially in the Dhu a-Hijja month, the last month in the lunar calendar. People can also come to Mecca individually out of this month in the so-called umra (less pilgrimage) not hajj. Muslims will take about a month to do hajj and only about a week for umra.

These core beliefs are the essential values that are generally held by Muslims. The Qur’an is the main resource of living guidance and the elements of faith and the five pillars are the values that need to be taught to Muslims. All of these points will shape the soul of a Muslim to be taqwa and in this way, the peak of observance will be gained and the heaven is the prize (Smith, 2010).

Muslim Lifestyle in America

To have knowledge as much as possible is an essential issue in Islam. This issue becomes important for American Muslims to provide education for Islam community, including religious education for children, mosque instruction, and adult education (Smith, 2010). American Muslims believe that the prophet Muhammad has determined that education is a salient issue for all ages of Muslims. Young Muslims in the United States now are concerned to pursue better education focuses in fields such as history, technology, the sciences, and other subjects that open more chance for their professional success.
Muslims in America believe that Islamic education system would be beneficial for both academic content and values training. Many Muslims then initiated the establishment of Islamic educational institutions such as K-8 or K-12 in America. Through these schools, they believe that these alternatives can support character development, protect children from stereotyping and taunting, and reduce the risk of social ills such as pre-marital sex, drugs, and violence, and allow children to avoid public school curricula that sometimes have different views or misinterpretations about Islam (Smith, 2010). In these Islamic education institutions, students will acquire education activities based on Islamic values in a more detailed way that refers to Hadith for example about halal food, fashion, and many other aspects.

Hadith is one foundation of Islamic law that is drawn from Muhammad’s behavior during his life. As a Muslim, somebody should imitate the behavior of Muhammad and through this way, he or she could attain blessing from God. According to the belief of pious Muslims, Muhammad lived his life perfectly and the events of his life form the necessary context of understanding Qur’an. Because of this quality, the words and actions were one of the foundations of Islamic law. Historically, there are some resources of hadith that refer back to prophet Muhammad. The valid hadith or par excellence is hadith that is traced back to prophet Muhammad. To make this clear, a scholar usually will investigate through historical reports so that prophetic tradition could be obtained (Brown, 2009).

For Muslims, food is one issue that needs to be of concern especially in relation with the material it contains in the meal or the way it is cooked. Muslims do not consume alcohol and pork and its derivatives. In this condition, Muslim will only consume meat that is halal certified by an Islamic institution that guarantees that the animal is slaughtered in the Islamic manner or with saying “Bismillah” or Allah’s name. Muslims also are not allowed to consume pork or other kind of food that contains pork in it such as its oil, gelatine, and glycerol from pork (University of Toronto, 2012).
One of the most visible identities of Muslim is fashion especially for female. Woman Muslims should wear hijab that cover their hair, ears, and neck with exposed face. They also should cover their body thoroughly with clothes that are not tight including when wearing jewelry. In Islamic school, Muslim female students will not be allowed to wear hot pants or any other short t-shirt or pants including when they are doing sports (Smith, 2010). This fashion is the way to cover female body that sometimes trigger male’s desires of sex or other sexual harassment. Muslims also believe that by using this kind of fashion they will be more respected among people and blessed by God (Haddad, 2007; Samaa, 2006).

With the growing number of Muslims in the United States, Islamic schools grow slowly and are now still less than 250. Some schools are well financed and equipped with a high quality of teachers and resources and some are not. The goal of these Islamic schools development is to provide children education and environment based on the Qur’an and Sunna (Smith, 2010). In these schools, some non-Muslim children are also enrolled because their parents want their children in parochial education. A few Muslim families prefer to educate their children at home or in private institutions. To provide education at home parents could access any resources that can be attained from various Muslim organizations that provide courses, suggestions for new literature and curricula, handbooks for educators, and other useful tools and information. Through the internet service, the access of significant educational material can now be obtained easily. Muslim families also worry about their children becoming lacking of social life with American society if they learn at home however, some also argue that being in Islamic education does not mean being separated from mainstream American society (Geaves, 2010).

Since the 9/11 attack, Islamic education in America has been assumed to produce young radicals. Many Islamic individuals have been impeached or stigmatized as related to terrorism such as wearing hijab, having long beard, turban, and other identities that are
related to Islam. While there is an effort to present images that Islam is a moderate and peaceful religion, in 2008 many Americans continued to be uncomfortable with the coming of Muslims to America (Allen, 2010). In that time, most of the prominent U.S. Christian leaders illustrated Muhammad and Islam in insulting ways. Muhammad was drawn as a wild-eyed fanatic and a killer, a terrorist, a demon-possessed pedophile, and Islam as an evil religion. Unfortunately, this phenomenon does not help create better understanding through interfaith communication between Islam and Christianity in the U.S. (Smith, 2010).

Until recently, the prejudice and other discriminative treatment still happens to Muslims in the United States. Crime and vandalism sometimes happens to American Muslim mosques and public buildings that are related to Islam. Most Americans report that they sometimes are very worried of radicalism within American Muslim community. Not all Muslims in America are concerned about this phenomenon and also not all Muslim participate in every religious event but the growth of Muslims in America support the continued existence of Muslim and its way of life based on the truth written in the Qur’an and Hadith. Prejudice and other discriminative treatment are unavoidable challenges that Muslims have to deal with. In this situation, both Muslims and non-Moslems need to identify and address the misrepresentation and unfair treatment that happened so far as a means to develop harmonious life by appreciating cultural differences or unity through diversity (Allen, 2010).
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References


