

Multiple Identities in a Pluralistic World: Shi'ism in America

Most discussions about Islam in America have focused on Sunni Muslims neglecting, thereby, the experience of Shi'i Muslims.¹ As a matter of fact, it is correct to state that even in academic discourses, most studies equate Islam in America with Sunnism in America. This monolithic view has obscured the proper recognition and understanding of the religious experience of a significant religious minority in America.² This paper will examine the early history and contemporary religious, social and political experience of Shi'i Muslims in America. Given the dearth of literature on Shi'ism in America, I have had to rely on personal interviews that I conducted with important figures from the Shi'i community.

The early Shi'is in America

Voluntary migration to America by members of the Muslim community is said to have begun between 1875 -1912.³ Among those who migrated to America in the 1880's were Shi'is from what was then called Greater Syria, many of whom settled in Michigan.⁴ According to M'roueh, at about the same time, some Shi'is also arrived from India and Iran.⁵

Between 1900 and 1914 several hundred settlers comprising diverse religious backgrounds migrated from the Middle East.⁶ Many of these migrants were Lebanese Shi'is who settled in Detroit to work in the Ford Motor Company. Thereafter, migration by members of the Lebanese community increased further between 1918 and 1922.⁷ By the 1940s, about 200 Sunni and Shi'i families had settled in Detroit.⁸ Khalil Alwan, a

member of the Dearborn Shi'i community in Michigan, was born in America in 1930. He recalls that his father migrated from Lebanon in 1914 to work for the railroads in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and Sioux Falls, South Dakota. By the time Khalil's father moved to Detroit in the 1920s, many Shi'is had settled in that area. In the 1930s, Khalil remembers that Sunnis and Shi'is would arrange joint gatherings. This continued until the late 1930s when the Hashimite Club was established.⁹ Hajjia Marium 'Uthman, who came to Dearborn in 1949, also remembers that there was a steady influx of her Lebanese neighbors and friends after she and her family had migrated to Dearborn.¹⁰ By the 1950s there were many Shi'i families dispersed in different parts of America.

The influx of these Lebanese migrants led to the establishment of Shi'i institutions and centers of worship in America. Along with some of his friends, Khalil Alwan established an Islamic Sunday school in the mid 1940s. Khalil recalls that there were more social than religious activities held in the 1940s. Around this time, Shi'is in Detroit would rent a hall to mark religious and social events. The Hashimite club, as it was then called, served the Shi'i community until the early 1960s when a permanent mosque was built. The first Shi'i mosque in America was the Islamic Center of America which opened its doors in Dearborn, Michigan in 1963. Shaykh Muhammad Jawad Chirri, who had relocated to America in 1949, served as the imam of the center. With a population of about 35,000 Lebanese migrants, Dearborn presently has one of the largest Shi'i communities in America.

The predominance of mainly Lebanese Shi'is in the early part of this century can be contrasted with the present American Shi'i community which is composed of highly diverse ethnic and cultural groups. Most of the contemporary Shi'is have relocated in

numbers since the 1970s. They originate from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, the Indian sub-continent, the Gulf States, East Africa and parts of North Africa. In addition, a growing number of Afro-Americans are converting to Shi'ism after having initially converted to Sunnism or to the Nation of Islam.

Various factors have precipitated the proliferation of Shi'i migrants: the revolution in Islamic Iran,¹¹ the civil war in Lebanon, the civil strife and break up of Pakistan, the exodus of East African Asians¹² during the regime of Idi Amin in Uganda, the Russian invasion and ensuing civil wars in Afghanistan and the inimical socio-political conditions in Iraq. During the Gulf War, many Iraqi soldiers escaped to Saudi Arabia from Kuwait. After spending some time in camps in Saudi Arabia, they sought and were granted asylum in America. Today, Iraqi refugees, who are predominantly Shi'is, are located in different parts of America.

Gottesman's contention that there are no more than three hundred thousand Shi'is in North America is palpably outdated.¹³ M'roueh, on the other hand, claims that of the 9.6 million Muslims in America in 1995, two million were Shi'is. He further maintains that there are 256 Shi'i mosques in America, a figure that appears highly exaggerated.¹⁴ Al-Jibouri's estimate that the Shi'i community in the US forms about 15-20 percent of the total population of 6-7 million Muslims in America appears more tenable.¹⁵ In the absence of accurate statistical data, however, it is impossible to verify the figures cited.

Poston's view that Shi'is are confined to certain coastal areas can also be challenged.¹⁶ A survey that I conducted in 1996 indicates that Shi'i communities are located in virtually all the major cities of North America.¹⁷ It is to be further noted that the Shi'i community in America is relatively young in age. My survey indicates that the

mean years of existence of Shi'i institutions in North America is 10.28. This suggests that the community is at an embryonic stage, seeking to establish itself in America.

The role of the *marja'* in the establishment of Shi'i centers

The influx of Shi'i migrants to America necessitated the establishment of centers and places of worship to furnish the needs of the community. As previously noted, the first Shi'i center was founded in Detroit, Michigan in 1963. Subsequently, isolated associations and groups were established to serve the needs of the growing community. In 1973, Yasin al-Jibouri founded the Islamic Society of Georgia and began publishing a newsletter called *Islamic Affairs* which was, in the view of the author, "the most powerful advocate for Shi'ism in the country".¹⁸ In 1976, the most prominent Shi'i spiritual leader of the time, Ayatullah al-Khu'i (d. 1992) sent a representative, Shaykh Muhammad Sarwar from Quetta, Pakistan, to establish the Khu'i Foundation in America.¹⁹ This marked the beginning of an epoch in which the Shi'i religious leadership would be actively engaged in furnishing religious guidance to its followers in the west. Eleven years later al-Khu'i asked al-Sayyid Fadhil Milani to establish a similar center in London, England. Subsequently, more centers were established throughout America.

The Alawi foundation, based in New York, has helped to establish Shi'i religious centers in different parts of America. Before the Iranian revolution, the Alawi Foundation (then called the Pahlavi Foundation) looked after Iranian financial interests in America. After the revolution, the Foundation was placed under the direct management of the Mostazafan Foundation in Tehran. Subsequently, the Foundation's name was changed to

Alawi. The Foundation was able to distribute books on Shi'i Islam published either in Iran or in America.

Whereas the activities of Khu'i Foundation are restricted to providing religious services to Shi'is living in New York, the Alawi Foundation finances and has a major say in the overall direction of many centers. Iranian politico-religious ideologies and teachings are disseminated through them. The Alawi Foundation sponsors centers in Houston, Washington and New York. In addition, it has helped to establish small Shi'i centers in America. The World Federation of Khoja Shi'a Ithna'asheri Communities based in England has also financed many Khoja centers in America. I have collected addresses of more than 150 Shi'i centers and mosques in North America, a figure that is constantly increasing.

The Shi'i experience in America is different from the Sunni one due to the influence exerted by the Shi'i scholars and the institution of *marja'iyya*. A *marja'* is the most learned juridical authority in the Shi'i community whose rulings on the *shari'a* (Islamic moral-legal law) are followed by those who acknowledge him as such and commit themselves to base their religious practices in accordance with his juridical edicts. In the absence of the twelfth Shi'i imam,²⁰ the *marja'* is seen by the Shi'is as legitimately invested with the authority to make binding decisions for the public interest in the Shi'i community. He is also responsible for re-interpreting the relevance of Islamic norms to the modern era, thereby enabling him to influence the religious and social lives of his followers. The process of following the juridical rulings of the most learned jurist (*a'lam*) is called *taqlid* (literally imitation). It is the *taqlid* factor that has acted as the main catalyst for unity in the Shi'i community in America by fostering ties between

different Shi'i centers and establishments that have often been divided by cultural, ethnic and linguistic considerations. Due to this factor, Shi'is are allied to the *maraji'* (pl. of *marja'*) rather than to any foreign government.

A corollary to the institution of *taqlid* is the practice of giving a fifth (*khumus*) of the net savings to a *marja'* or his representative. The revenue generated from *khumus* has enabled the Shi'i *maraji'* to finance the running of Islamic centers and the salaries of religious preachers in America. Traditionally, *khumus* has made the Shi'i centers independent of government control, empowering their religious leaders to address any issue they deem appropriate. In the American context, the *khumus* factor has enabled the religious leaders, although residing abroad, to direct the religious and socio-economic lives of the Shi'is in America.

The *maraji'* are represented by their agents (*wukala'*) whom they send to guide their followers and to administer the running of the centers. The appointment by the *maraji'* of financial and religious deputies to act as their representatives has enabled the community members to engage in major projects to provide facilities for religious education for the Shi'i community in America. Major cities like New York, Los Angeles, Washington and Detroit have a sizable Shi'i population. It is in these cities that the centers have daily religious-secular schools in addition to places of worship. At present, there are less than ten such schools within the Shi'i community in America. Shi'i religious schools differ from their Sunni counterparts in that the religious content of the courses offered is structured on the hermeneutic model provided by the Shi'i imams.

The institutionalization of different centers under the leadership of the *wukala'* has also resulted in competition for *khumus* money flowing into the centers. As noted, the

earliest Shi'i center in New York was founded by a prominent *marja'* Ayatullah al-Khu'i. Besides providing basic religious services, it also has a daily Islamic school where both religious and secular subjects are taught. After the death of Ayatullah al-Khu'i in 1992, al-Khu'i Foundation chose to ally itself with Iraqi based Ayatullah Seestani, who was regarded by many as the most learned (*a'lam*) after al-Khu'i.

Located quite close to al-Khu'i Foundation is the Iranian-based Imam 'Ali Center which runs a daily Islamic school and offers services similar to those provided by al-Khu'i Foundation. Although the Imam 'Ali Center caters mainly to the Iranian community, there is frequent competition between the two institutions. Moreover, al-Husseini madrasa, run by the Khoja community, is also located in the vicinity. Similarly, in Dearborn, Michigan, seven Shi'i centers compete in rendering similar services to the local community. Shi'i institutions in America have become a source of dissension between followers of different *maraji'*, duplicating services and competing for public attention and *khumus* dues. This point was emphasized in my survey. When questioned on the contemporary challenges confronting the Shi'i community in America, a center responded: "To get different nationalities to work together and to communicate with other Shi'i groups".

Most of the religious centers affiliate themselves with different *maraji'*. Khoja, Pakistani and Iraqi centers generally follow the rulings of Ayatullah Seestani whereas Iranian centers do the *taqlid* of Ayatullah Khamenei. Lebanese Shi'is tend to follow either Ayatullah Fadlallah or Seestani. Traditional differences generated abroad between the camps of the Ayatollahs have resurfaced in America, engendering further fragmentation within the Shi'i community. This was clearly evident when both

Khumayni and al-Khu'i were alive. Followers of the respective leaders frequently accused each other of abandoning the ideals of the imams. Al-Khu'i, in particular, was criticized by the followers of Khumayni for being too passive and for not supporting Khumayni's notion of *wilayat al-faqih* (the comprehensive authority of the jurist in conducting the affairs of the community). Similarly, Lebanese Shi'is in Dearborn are frequently divided about the positions adopted by Ayatullahs Fadlallah and Mahdi Shams al-Din.²¹

In addition to differences generated by *taqlid*, political allegiances adopted abroad also impact the stances adopted by some Shi'i centers in America. The Islamic center of America (Jami') in Dearborn is sympathetic to the cause of the Lebanese based Harakat 'Amal whereas the Majma' is more closely linked to the politically active Hizb Allah movement.²² Hizb al-Da'wa, a politico-religious movement opposed to the Iraqi regime, has recently purchased a mosque in Dearborn. This center (called Islamic Cultural Center) has been partially financed by Ayatollah Fadlallah. His call for active resistance to injustices is propagated in such centers.²³ The Majlis, which is also based in Dearborn, is Iranian influenced. It maintains a very strict dress code, adopts a more rigorous interpretation of Islam and reflects views ascribed to Iran.²⁴ Centers run by the Khoja community in America traditionally maintain a politically quiescent posture. Hence they do not reflect the political ideals of any Islamic country.

The preceding discussion suggests that apart from the *taqlid* factor, differences between centers arise due to differing political alliances engendered in the Middle East. It is correct to state that although *taqlid* has united different ethnic groups under the leadership of a *marja'*, the fact that institutions are affiliated to different *maraji'* has often

precipitated differences between Islamic centers. This is most evident at the time of celebrating the *eid* holiday when, depending on their affiliations, different centers often commemorate the beginning or end of Ramadhan on different days.

Leadership within the American context: The Shi‘i ‘*ulama*’

In an effort to unite the diverse ethnic groups that make up the American Shi‘i community, an indigenous council of Shi‘i ‘*ulama*’ was formed in 1993. Composed of seventy ‘*ulama*’ in North America, the Council of Shi‘a Muslim Scholars in North America meets annually to discuss issues germane to the community. Among the stated aims of the council is support of the Shi‘i community of North America by strengthening unity and co-operation among the Shi‘a ‘*ulama*’.²⁵ In addition, the council seeks to deal with issues that require the collective efforts of ‘*ulama*’ and to defend Islam in general and the *madhab* (school of law) of the *ahl al-bayt* (the progeny of the Prophet) in particular. It further seeks to unite all Muslims by bringing various Muslim schools of thought closer to each other.

At the head of the central committee of the council is an executive committee that manages the activities and affairs of the council of Shi‘a ‘*ulama*’ of North America. Although it has been in existence for seven years, the council has yet to produce a body that resembles the Sunni based Fiqh Council of North America. This is a body of fiqh councilors that seeks to “confront the many legal issues facing Muslims in North America”.²⁶ The Fiqh Council further seeks to extract juridical rulings from the revealed texts and rational sources by employing principles and methodologies of *usul al-fiqh*

(principles for deriving juridical rulings). It may even depart from rulings stated by classical jurists.

The council of Shi'i *'ulama'*, on the other hand, has not provided a comparable viable hermeneutic of the *shari'a*. The council has also failed to formulate any definitive direction for the Shi'i community nor has the council been able to bridge the chasm that has divided different ethnic groups within the community. A comment heard from many council members is that they are too preoccupied with activities of their own centers to be concerned with the council of *'ulama'*. The fact that leadership of the council is centered on a single individual and that it does not rotate among different council members has made the council inert and has created general apathy among members of the council. The council of *'ulama'* also suffers from a dearth of financial and administrative resources. There is thus a distinct lacuna in the leadership which could direct the social, economic and political activities of the Shi'i community in America. Many Shi'is are not even cognizant of the existence of the council of Shi'a *'ulama'* or of its objectives and mandates. As Yasin al-Jibouri, a prominent member of the Shi'i community candidly admits, "Shi'is in America are neither organized nor united. The institution created by the *'ulama'* has so far failed to unite the community or provide it with any direction."²⁷

As with other Muslim groups, there is a paucity of Shi'i *'ulama'* who understand the socio-religious challenges confronting Shi'i Muslims in North America. Few *'ulama'* in the west are conversant with issues relating to the local community and are fully instructed in Islamic tradition to give an authentic Islamic solution to the problems faced by community members. *'Ulama'* imported from India, Pakistan or the Middle East have little understanding of western culture or the pressures encountered by the modern youth.

Frequently, these scholars are not able to converse in English and the contents of their sermons are deemed by many to be irrelevant to modern issues.²⁸ While the traditional '*ulama*' have not been able to address issues posed by the younger generation, Muslim intellectuals and leaders who have become a significant part of the American academic scene have been able to provide an interpretation of Islam relevant to life in America as well as to the modern world. Shi'i scholars like Mahmoud Ayoub, Abdulaziz Sachedina, Seyyid Hossein Nasr and Soroush have been able to capture the imagination of many Shi'is living in America and abroad. In recent years, statements made by these scholars as a result of their academic research have differed with views traditionally enunciated by the '*ulama*', thus challenging their authority as the sole interpreters of the teachings of the *ahl al-bayt*. In particular, there is much debate in the Shi'i community on topics like religious pluralism, apostasy, slavery, the testimony and inheritance rights of women and the correct mode of dressing for women. Views of Shi'i scholars trained in both the traditional centers of Islamic learning and in the universities differ appreciably from those propounded by the '*ulama*'.

The community is becoming aware of the need for Islamically trained but indigenous American religious leadership. This is also because the ambit of activities that imams have to perform in America has increased considerably. Besides offering basic religious services, they are also required to provide pastoral care, counsel members of their congregation, visit the sick and needy, adjudicate on disputes between members of the mosque, participate in interfaith dialogue and promote a positive understanding of Islam.²⁹

To produce indigenous scholars who can provide an authentic Islamic solution to the challenges of living in the west, some members of the Shi'i community established an Islamic seminary (*hawda*) in Medina, New York in the 1980's. After completing four years of studies many students trained at Medina are sent to Iran for further studies. Others choose to serve local Shi'i communities. However, the courses taught at the Medina seminary closely resemble the subjects offered in Qum (Iran) and Najaf (Iraq). Since these courses do not relate to issues pertaining to Muslims in the west, students who have graduated from the seminary have yet to make a significant impact on the religious lives of Shi'is in America.

A comparison of the Shi'i experience with that of the Sunnis in America indicates that the latter are influenced by mass movements from the Indian sub-continent and the Middle East that try to permeate mainstream Muslim life, using mosques as bases for their activities. The main objective of movements such as the Tablighis is to preach to Muslims, urging them to return to the *sunna* of the Prophet and early companions.³⁰ The Shi'i experience is quite different in that it is the religious guides residing abroad who exert much influence by sending their representatives to establish centers and to guide their followers. However, there is a distinct lacuna in the leadership to direct the social, economic and political activities of the Shi'i community in America.

Cultural and ethnic diversity within the Shi'ite community

In America, the smaller, ethnically oriented, communal Islam appears to have more validity than the Islam with its universal appeal. The increasing number of ethnic immigrants has led to the fragmentation of the Shi'i community. Instead of forming religious organizations based exclusively on Islamic provenance, other characteristics

such as ethnic, cultural and even national have prevailed. The process of ethnicization, involving linking a specific population to distinctive cultural characteristics,³¹ is important to many communities as it unites communal members and perpetuates customs imported from the home country. Thus mosques have tended to fragment along ethnic lines and the leadership has remained tied to customs fermented in home states. In the processes of cultural negotiations, re-definitions and re-appropriation of a different culture, members of the Shi‘i community have pursued different ways to adapt to the American milieu.

The immigrant adult population prefers to cleave to the imported ancestral traditions and cultural practices rather than cede to the demands of modernity. The younger generation, on the other hand, has appropriated a distinctly American culture engendering much friction within the centers. A new culture appears to be spreading among Muslim youths – the American culture. As one youth states: “We are less likely to identify with the home-sick mosque culture and more likely to assert a very active political role for the Islamic center, and to do it as an American Muslim community – not as Egyptian, Pakistani or Malaysian Expatriates, but as Americans.”³²

The Shi‘i community in America is increasingly shaped by associations tied by cultural and sectarian convictions, defining itself as a socio-cultural or ethnic entity assuming a common regional and linguistic background. The linguistic and cultural bias of programs held at the centers also means that Shi‘i communities often experience Islam in a culturally conditioned form, marginalizing them from other Shi‘i communities. Many centers hold programs in languages that reflect their countries of origins (Urdu, Persian or Arabic) thus alienating Shi‘is from a different cultural or linguistic background. The

predominance of ethnic centers has also meant that integration within the Shi'i community is confined to those members originating from their own ethnic backgrounds. There are few inter-ethnic marriages and few Shi'is have friends outside their own ethnic background. Due to this factor, Afro-American converts often complain that having converted to Shi'ism, they are discriminated against by both Sunnis and their fellow Shi'is. It is only in smaller Shi'i communities that pluralistic centers can be found. In communities such as those in Indianapolis, Seattle and Austin, the ethnic divide is almost non-existent as different ethnic Shi'i groups coalesce under the common banner of the *ahl al- bayt*. Others may even hold joint religious programs with local Sunni communities.

It is important to bear in mind that the ethnic factor is more accentuated in Shi'ism than Sunnism. Whereas Sunni religious events are confined to prayers in which Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds congregate, the Shi'i calendar is punctuated with events marking the birth and death dates of imams.³³ These events are commemorated differently by the various Shi'i communities. Thus Pakistani Shi'is who congregate at the *Husayniyya*³⁴ mark events like the martyrdom of Husayn b. 'Ali, the grandson of the Prophet, differently from the way that Iraqi or Iranian Shi'is do. Shi'is from the Indian sub-continent and East Africa re-enact the events in Kerbala with their own culturally generated symbols and modes of expressions. These include representations of the flag of 'Abbas³⁵ (*'alam*) and the cradle of Husayn's six month old child. These symbolic representations of events in Kerbala are alien to Arab and Iranian Shi'is. Acts of kissing and expressions of reverence to these symbols are often rejected by Shi'is from the Middle East who view them as subtle forms of idolatry.

Ethnicity and rituals endemic to a particular community have become the main categories of identification in America. Diversity has made it difficult for Shi'i centers to create a common agenda to direct the lives of community members. In large cities like New York and Los Angeles, Iranian, Pakistani, Iraqi, Lebanese and Khoja mosques exist with little interaction among them.

To unite the different Shi'i ethnic entities the *ahl al-bayt* assembly of America was formed in 1996. The assembly's stated aim is to promote Islamic teachings according to the Qur'an and *sunna* as interpreted by the household of the Prophet. The assembly's mandate also requires it to introduce Islamic education, produce and distribute Islamic literature and communicate with the media to provide an Islamic perspective to news items affecting the Muslim world.

During its three years of existence, the *ahl al-bayt* assembly has serviced the needs of the Shi'i community in Washington D.C. However, it has failed to realize its goal of uniting the Shi'i community in America. The attempted unification of different ethnic centers under an eclectic and centralized institute that would provide strong leadership to the American Shi'i community still remains a distant dream.

Shi'i interaction with the non-Muslim communities: Interfaith dialogue

The challenge for American Shi'is is two-fold: ensuring that the younger generation within the community does not get assimilated with the west and that it does not get influenced by anti-Shi'i propaganda instigated by Wahhabis. In America, Shi'is have been more concerned with maintaining their distinct communal and sectarian identity than with engaging in dialogue with other faith groups. Moreover, since they

form a small percentage of the wider Muslim community in America, the primary focus for the Shi'i community has been the preservation rather than extension of their spiritual boundaries. This is corroborated by a question posed in my survey. Few centers are involved in any extensive dialogue with other Muslim or non-Muslim communities. Instead, more stress is laid on providing basic religious services to members accentuating thereby the distinct beliefs and rituals of Shi'i Islam. It should be noted that since Shi'is do not engage in inter-faith dialogue in their own countries of origins, they have not been able to construct an effective medium of dialogue with non-Muslims in America. In their own countries, many Shi'is have been trained to vindicate the preponderance of Shi'i faith and liturgical practices over corresponding Sunni praxis. The emphasis on sectarian polemics in their own countries has limited the exposure that Shi'is have to other monotheistic religions.

The focus on preservation rather than extension of boundaries is further corroborated by my survey, which indicates that most converts from the Afro-American community convert to Shi'ism as a result of their own research rather than due to extensive proselytization activities from the Shi'i community. Shi'i missionary activities have been limited to a few poorly funded organizations that are not properly structured for extensive *da'wa* (proselytization).³⁶ Thus contrary to the Sunni experience, Shi'i discourse in the American public square is extremely limited. It is correct to state that American Shi'is are introverted rather than outward directed. The activities of most centers are directed to providing basic religious services like prayers, weddings and funerals for community members.

Due to the negative western image of Islam in general and Shi‘ism in particular, some Shi‘is centers have initiated dialogue with local communities to promote a more tolerant understanding of their faith. The Islamic Education Council of Maryland organizes annual inter-faith events that discuss topics affecting other faith groups in America. Issues like marriage and the importance of inculcating proper values in modern youths have been discussed with local Christian and Jewish communities. The Khu‘i Foundation of New York also participates in a number of national, international interfaith and intrafaith initiatives. The Islamic House of Wisdom (IHW) in Dearborn is more open to interfaith dialogue and adopts a more liberal view toward American society since the imam of the center, Imam Elahi, is considered to be “liberal” and “open-minded”. Accommodation to American society and refusal to compromise with the west is contingent on the origins and outlook of the imams serving a center. IHW’s community newsletter of December 1998, called *Salaam*, proudly states: “With the spirit of giving thanks to God for all His blessings, the Islamic House of Wisdom opened its doors to metro Detroit’s premier interfaith event: the Interfaith Family celebration of Thanksgiving on Wednesday evening, November 25 (1998)”. Imam Elahi goes on to say: “Islam is the most misunderstood religion in this country and hopefully by showing our openness, respect and love for our guests, we will have an opportunity to remove some of this misinformation about our faith”.

Areas that have a sizable Shi‘i community engage in more dialogue with other communities. Several institutions like the Islamic House of Wisdom in Detroit broadcast lectures on television. Los Angeles has witnessed occasions where Christians and Jews have been invited to mosques to participate in inter-faith dialogue.

Shi'i political discourse in America

In the classical period of Islam, Shi'i jurists, like their Sunni counterparts, divided the world into the realms of belief and unbelief - *dar al-Islam* and *dar al-kufr*. It was assumed that Muslims would live in *dar al-Islam* and, if they ventured into *dar al-kufr*, it would be on a temporary basis for specific purposes. A Muslim residing permanently in *dar al-kufr* seemed to be an anomaly.³⁷

In the contemporary period, adverse social, political and economic conditions in their countries of origins have forced Shi'is to settle in the West on a permanent basis. As a matter of fact, since there is nothing in the revealed texts that explicitly forbids Shi'is from living in non-Muslim states, the *maraji'* have not prohibited their followers from becoming citizens of a non-Muslim country. On the contrary, they have enjoined their followers to become law abiding citizens of the country they choose to live in.³⁸ Hence there is little discussion in Shi'i circles in America as to whether it is legally permissible to become citizens of a non-Muslim country. Most have used the legal system to apply for citizenship.

The question of political participation by the America Shi'i community is premised on two important considerations. Traditionally, Shi'is have eschewed political involvement since Shi'i political theory is based on a hermeneutic structure that views that all governments in the prolonged absence of the twelfth Imam to be illegitimate.³⁹ Due to this factor, even in their own countries, most Shi'is have remained politically inactive. Lack of Shi'i involvement in the American political process can also be explained by the relatively young age of the centers. Since most Shi'i centers in America

have been established since 1985⁴⁰ Shi'is have used their limited financial resources to build and consolidate their centers rather than to engage in projects outside the community.

Traditional Shi'i aversion to American politics can be discerned from the following anecdote. In 1996, there was a major discussion on the Shi'i based internet discussion group called the ahl al-bayt discussion group (ABDG) as to whether Shi'is should support candidates running for federal elections. The majority felt that since they are living in a non-Muslim country, Shi'is should eschew all political involvement. Others even argued that, given American penchant toward Israel, voting for a candidate would be tantamount to supporting the Israeli cause. Therefore they decreed that it was *haram* (religiously prohibited) to support or vote for a candidate. A small minority disagreed, arguing that voting for a candidate of their choice might help the Shi'i cause in America and perhaps influence American foreign policy.

According to al-Sayyid Mustafa al-Qazwini, an Imam of a Shi'i center in Orange County, California, few, if any, Shi'i mosques have considered engaging in inter-faith dialogue or involvement in American political discourse on a regular basis.⁴¹ In a few isolated cases, some Shi'is have nominated themselves to run for Congress by seeking votes from local Shi'i and Sunni communities. However, most of these candidates run independently and are not directly supported by any Shi'i institution. An example of such a candidate is Habib M. Habib, a Shi'i from East Africa. He was appointed to the Washington State Commission on Asian-Pacific American Affairs by the Washington State Governor, Gary Lock. The group started as an advisory council to the governor and the Legislature made it a statutory body to address issues of Asian affairs. It is in this

capacity that Habib also addresses issues that affect Muslim interests. Habib aims to be involved in the political system as a Muslim legislator for it is in the legislative rather than executive branch that Muslims can fight for equal rights, education and fair immigration laws while opposing unjust and morally indefensible laws. As Habib says: “As legislators and politicians, Muslims will be able to effectively define themselves and their values. This will prevent others, who have agendas of their own, from defining Muslims”.⁴² Habib frequently lectures to the Muslim community, seeking their support in his political activities.

Shi‘i political aspirations in America have yet to crystallize into a concrete body with a properly formulated political agenda. In the absence of such political institutions, political activism manifests itself in public discourse on moral and social issues that impact the Muslim community. In Dearborn, an advertisement in the November 1998 issue of the Islamic Center of America’s (ICA) newsletter called “*Islamic Insights*” urges its readers to go to the polls to vote against proposal B, a proposal that sought to legalize assisted suicides. As it states: “As Muslims we have a responsibility to the society in which we live....Go to the polls on November 3”.

Like many other imams in Dearborn, Imam al-Hasan al-Qazwini of ICA encourages the community to be more politically active especially in local elections. Thus when the local school board planned an expansion project that was against the interests of the Muslim community, local Sunni and Shi‘i communities rallied together to defeat the scheme. Gradually, Muslims are playing a more active role in the policies adopted by local school boards.

Participation by local mosques and centers in the American political process is not restricted to lobbying. Some mosques are fostering closer ties with local political figures so that their particular concerns are addressed. The October 1999 edition of the Islamic House of Wisdom's (IHW) newsletter "*Salaam*" contains a letter from the Michigan based Senator, Spencer Abraham. The Senator states that he is "sponsoring the first congressional resolution regarding tolerance towards Islam that is aimed at expressing Congress' view of religious tolerance in America today". The resolution further calls upon the Congress to take the lead in condemning anti-Muslim intolerance and discrimination and recognizes the contributions of Islam. The fact that Senator Abraham informed the Muslim community in Detroit of his pro-Muslim political stance is indicative of the closer ties being fostered by some centers with local politicians. Increasingly, American politicians are acknowledging the need to rely on Muslim support in their constituencies. The March 1999 issue of the "*Islamic Insights*" of the Islamic Center of America carries eid greetings from the State Representative to the local Muslim community. Eid greetings were also sent by Michigan Governor John Engler. The governor had initially sought support from the Michigan Muslim community in running for his post. He attributed his victory in part to the support he received from the local Muslim community.

The Islamic Center of America of Dearborn has also tried to build relations with candidates running for nomination in this year's election. George W. Bush was invited by Imam al-Hasan al-Qazwini to visit the Islamic center in Detroit. When Vice President Al-Gore wanted to meet representatives of the Muslim community in Michigan, he was introduced to Imam al-Hasan Qazwini. The imam encouraged him to include more Arabs

and Muslims in his administration. The encounter with the Vice President led to the imam's being invited for a breakfast meeting arranged for religious leaders at the White House. The imam was the first Shi'i leader to receive such an invitation. President Clinton affirmed his support for Islam and Muslims and encouraged Muslims to participate in the political process.⁴³

Increasing political activism in the Detroit community is apparent from the fact that many community members are politically engaged with Arab organizations. The Arab American Political Committee (APAC) in Detroit has lobbied for certain political issues. Although most APAC members are Shi'is, they prefer to identify themselves with an Arab rather than an Islamic political entity. In all probability, this is to avoid stereotypical images associated with Islamic organizations.

In some areas of America, Shi'i political activity has taken the form of establishing eclectic bodies that transcend sectarian boundaries, co-operating with Sunnis to create a unified and effective challenge for local posts. Shi'i institutions like al-Khu'i Foundation in New York have persuaded their members that their votes and involvement in the political process can make a difference to their lives in America. Thus some Shi'is co-operate with Sunnis to provide Muslim candidates for school boards, municipal posts, working for the election of Muslim mayors and state legislators. The intent is to get Shi'is to vote for fellow Muslim candidates, planning for an eventual Muslim presence in Congress or the Senate. As a political commentator said: "The onus of repositioning Islam as an element of American national interest and not a threat to it lies with the American Muslims."⁴⁴

Some Shi'is have also allied themselves with the Sunni based American Muslim Council (AMC). Dr. Hashim, a Shi'i proselyte living in Maryland, recalls how he used the offices of AMC to write to senators who made statements deemed offensive by Muslims. Like Dr. Hashim, many Shi'is have subscribed to CAIR's (Council of American-Islamic Relations) mailing list and have taken positive steps to defend Muslim interests. They condemned the initial United Nations' indifference to the Bosnian crisis.⁴⁵ They have even taken CAIR's advise to seek out "Muslim friendly" candidates in the election year. However, due to financial and administrative constraints, Shi'i political exertions have yet to concretize into independent political bodies or lobby groups that would represent their political aspirations in America.

A key consideration in Shi'i politically motivated activities is to influence American foreign policy especially as it impacts Muslim countries. Shi'is have often felt the need to voice their concerns against American foreign policies especially those which pertain to Iraq. While Shi'is do not support Saddam Hussein, they do not condone American policy endorsing economic sanctions that continue to impoverish the Iraqi people. Such instances have forced Shi'is to abandon their traditional ambivalent stance toward political intervention.

Shi'i encroachment in the political arena so as to safeguard the interests of Muslim countries can be discerned from the fact that al-Khu'i Foundation of New York enjoys a Non Government Organization (NGO) status with the United Nations. In 1997 the Foundation applied for General (Category 1) Consultative Status at the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations (ECOSOC) at the UN's headquarters in New York. In 1998, Sayyed Nadeem Kazmi was appointed as the Foundation's representative to

ECOSOC. Since it enjoys a general consultative status, the Foundation is allowed to observe UN proceedings and make submissions on important issues. When the Taliban government in Afghanistan turned against the Hazara Shi'i community in North Afghanistan, the Foundation's NGO representative was quick to alert member states in the United Nations Council on the religious discrimination endured by the Shi'is in Afghanistan. The Foundation's representative also liaises with ECOSOC and other UN bodies, identifying UN priorities and themes and linking those with the Foundation's own agenda and program of activities. These include combating racism and HIV/AIDS, creating mutual understanding among different cultures, ethnicities and religions and providing humanitarian needs like equality of access to education and eradication of poverty. Existing projects of the Foundation also include humanitarian services adult literacy, distribution of aid, and education including addressing Islamophobia in the media. In addition, al-Khu'i Foundation undertakes other humanitarian services like affiliation to Amnesty International's Religious Bodies Liaison Panel and hosting the United Nations Human Rights Day in December 1997.⁴⁶

Conclusions

The past decade has witnessed diverse Shi'i communities migrating to America. The major challenge that the community has faced is translating a majority religion to an area in which it is a nascent minority.

For a community that exists as a distinct minority within the minority Muslim community in America, the sense of alienation is heightened as the identity of its members is hyphenated and broken into many components. The identity of a Shi'i

originating from Pakistan, for example, would be a Pakistani - Shi'i - Muslim - American. It is to be remembered that the problem of identity confronting the Shi'is in America is greater than that facing the Sunnis. This is because the Shi'is seek not only to assert their Islamic identity in the west but also to maintain their own distinct Shi'i identity. It is therefore correct to say that Shi'is are in a double (and sometimes even triple) minority status.

The preceding discussion indicates that like the rest of the Muslim community, the Shi'i community is characterized by diversity than homogeneity. The community includes immigrants who cleave to the tradition and culture of their ancestors. Cultural differences and perceived ways of responding to the Islamic message arise not only within centers but also among centers. The ethnic divide within the Shi'i community is most obvious in cities that have large Shi'i populations. Instead of integrated religious gatherings, it is the racial-ethnic identity that is accentuated in Shi'i mosques in America.

The struggle among American Shi'is for the definition of the self, to give meaning to their new identity as American Muslims, and to the new socio-political context of their existence is manifesting itself in tensions between the traditional and modern, intellectual and conservative, indigenous and immigrant, young and old and between Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. The community also comprises youths and Afro-American converts who identify with an American culture. Indigenous conflicts have arisen due to an immigrant community having to come to terms with an alien culture. Discussion about whether to assimilate with or isolate from the west has created much dissension between the adult and younger generation within the community.

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¹ In this paper, the term Shi'is is used to refer to Twelver Shi'is only. Therefore it excludes other Shi'i groups like the Zaydis, Bohra and the Agha Khani Isma'ilis.

² Amongst the few studies on the Shi'i experience in America are Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting the Imam: Lebanese Shi'ism in an American Community* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1997). Abdulaziz Sachedina, "A Minority Within a Minority: The Case of the Shi'a in North America," in Haddad and Smith eds., *Muslim Communities in North America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3-14. See also Vernon Schubel, "Karbala as Sacred Space among North American Shi'a," in Barbara Metcalf, ed., *Making Muslim Space in North America and Europe*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996) and Vernon Schubel, "The Muharram Majlis: The Role of a Ritual in the Preservation of Shi'a Identity in E. Waugh, S. M. Abu-Laban, R Qureshi , eds., *Muslim Families in North America* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1991).

³ Yvonne Haddad, ed. *The Muslims of America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 11. Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah in the West*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 27, Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis, *Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 13-15. The first identifiable Muslim in America is said to be Estevan, a black Muslim guide and interpreter who came to Florida from Spain in 1527 with the Panfilo de Narvaez expedition. Richard B. Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 11.

⁴ Yvonne Haddad and Jane Smith, *Mission to America: Five Islamic Sectarian Communities in North America*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), 19. This was confirmed to me in an interview that I conducted with an informant in Dearborn, Michigan in 1996. She was 67 years old and her mother was born in Michigan at the turn of the century.

⁵ Youssef M'roueh, "Shi'a Population in North America" in *Ahlul bayt Assembly of North America: Abstract of Proceedings of 1996*, (Beltsville: International Graphics, 1997), 44.

⁶ Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting*, 16-17.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42. Some Lebanese migrants settled in Alberta, Canada in the early part of this century. Coming from La-la in Baka valley Ali Hamilton took up fur trade and settled in Lac La Biche, north of Edmonton, Canada. He also served as President of Lac La Biche Chamber of Commerce. See *al-Ilmu Noorun*, Edmonton, Alberta, (June 1995): 4. Subsequently, other Lebanese migrants settled in Lac La Biche.

⁹ This was conveyed to me in a personal interview that I conducted in December 1999.

¹⁰ This was conveyed to me in a personal interview conducted in 1996.

¹¹ According to some estimates, there are approximately a million Iranians in America, most of whom are Shi'is although a considerable number follow the Baha'i faith. See Jane Smith, *Islam in America*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 53.

¹² Most of these Asians are Khojas, a term that refers to an Indian caste which initially converted from Hinduism to Nizari Isma'ilism. Today, there are Isma'ili, Sunni and Twelver Shi'i Khojas living in parts of India, East Africa and the West.

¹³ Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wa in the West*, 30.

¹⁴ Youssef M'roueh "Shi'a Population in North America" in *Ahlul Bayt Assembly*, 57. The author does not cite the source of his figures.

¹⁵ Al-Jibouri, "A Glance at Shi'a Communities in the US" in *Islamic Affairs, Virginia*, (October 1993): 1. See also Jane Smith, *Islam in America*, 61.

¹⁶ Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah*, 30.

¹⁷ I would like to thank my research assistant, Mr. Carl Gabrielsen for his help in sending out various questionnaires and collating the results. I would also like to thank the Islamic Education Center of Potomoc, Maryland, for sharing their survey results with me.

¹⁸ Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah*, 108. Later on, Yasin al-Jibouri relocated to Virginia where he founded the Islamic society of Virginia Inc.

¹⁹ This was achieved with the considerable help from Yasin al-Jibouri, See Larry Poston, *Islamic Da'wah*, 109.

²⁰ Twelver Shi'is believe that before his death, Muhammad appointed 'Ali to be his successor. They also believe that 'Ali was succeeded by a series of divinely guided imams, the last of whom, the twelfth imam, went into an occultation when he was four years old in 874 C.E.. He is the messiah whose re-appearance at is expected at the end of time.

²¹ See the discussion on this in Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting*, 79-81.

²² *Ibid.*, 53.

²³ On the transformation from a politically quietist to an activity oriented Shi'i movement See Abdul Aziz Sachedina, "Activist Shi'ism in Iran, Iraq and Lebanon" in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, M. Marty and R. Appleby eds., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 403-456.

²⁴ Linda Walbridge, *Without Forgetting*, 54-5.

²⁵ I am grateful to Shaykh Fadhil Sahlani, chairman of the Council of Shi'a Muslim Scholars of North America for sharing the Council's constitution with me.

²⁶ Yusuf Talal DeLorenzo, "The Fiqh Councilor in North America," in Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito eds., *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 83.

²⁷ This was stated in an interview conducted in November 1999.

²⁸ See also Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis, *Islamic Values*, 63.

²⁹ On the increased role of imams in America see Yvonne Haddad and Adair Lummis, *Islamic Values*, 59.

³⁰ On the mass movements in Sunni mosques in America see Barbara Metcalf, “New Medinas: The Tablighi Jama‘at in America and Europe”, in Metcalfe, ed., *Making Muslim Space*, 113.

³¹ Rachel Bloul, “Engendering Muslim Identities: Deterritorialization and the Ethnicization Process in France” in Metcalfe, ed., *Making Muslim Space*, 234.

³² Steven Barboza, *American Jihad: Islam after Malcolm X*, (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 58.

³³ See also Vernon Schubel, *Religious Performance in Contemporary Islam: Shi‘i Devotional Rituals in South Asia*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 71.

³⁴ *Husayniyya* refers to a place where Shi‘is congregate to commemorate the death and birthdays of the imams. It is distinguished from a mosque in that rules governing ritual purity of mosques are not applied there.

³⁵ ‘Abbas b. ‘Ali was the half-brother of Husayn. He was also killed in Kerbala.

³⁶ I am grateful to Dr. Ahmad Hashim, a Shi‘i proselyte living in Maryland, for sharing this observation with me.

³⁷ Larry Poston, *Islamic Da‘wah in the West*, 32. See also Karen Armstrong, *Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today’s World* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 41.

³⁸ Ayatullah al-Sayyid ‘Ali al-Husayni al-Seestani, *Contemporary Legal Rulings in Shi‘i Law*, Translated by Hamid Mavani, (Montreal: Organization for the Advancement of Islamic Knowledge and Humanitarian Services, 1996), 74.

³⁹ Said Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order and Societal change in Iran from the beginning to 1890*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 36-8.

⁴⁰ According to my survey, the average age of the centers is 10.28 years.

⁴¹ This was related to me in a personal interview in December 1999.

⁴² See “Muslims in Politics” *Living Islam*, Dallas, (Summer 1998): 34.

⁴³ I am grateful to Imam al-Qazwini for sharing his political experiences with me.

⁴⁴ Jane Smith, *Islam in America*, 186.

⁴⁵ I am grateful to Dr. Hashim for sharing his political experiences with me in an interview conducted in November 1999.

⁴⁶ Nadeem Kazmi, al-Khu‘i Foundation’s NGO representative to the United Nations, kindly shared this information with me in December 1999.