

Islam in America

Suhaib Webb

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ISLAM IN AMERICA

Transcript of Symposium Keynote Address

Hera Hashmi: We would like to begin our keynote address, and it is my great honor and pleasure to introduce Dean Phoebe Haddon, the Dean of the University of Maryland School of Law, to give her welcome.

Dean Haddon: Well this is a great crowd. I am just amazed at how many people are out today, sunny day, as to this point, but it is really particularly pertinent because this is one of four conferences that are going on today at the University of Maryland Law School, either here or in Washington. And what that said to me, is that we are doing everything right and everything wrong. We're doing wrong how we schedule things and the conflicts that can emerge, but it means that we are doing so many wonderful things, and things that are timely and are also very important for students and our faculty and administration, so I am very pleased to be here this afternoon to say welcome.

I understand that the discussions this morning were really terrific, standing room only and also some spill over. And as I look around I see how many different people are here today, both from the law school and elsewhere, so I want to say a special welcome to those of you who have come from farther than Baltimore to be a part of this. It's a pleasure to be with you and to explore Islamic law and the legal struggles of Muslims in America, in particular, thank you Carrie and Hera for inviting me this afternoon, and for your outstanding work and contributions on behalf of the law school, but also on behalf of the *Journal of Race, Religion, Gender, and Class*.

This is a very special journal that we have, and I hope that we will continue to nurture it and make sure it has the capacity to address these kinds of issues. I'd like to extend a special welcome to all of our distinguished guests. Particularly the panelists that have participated this morning and that will participate later this afternoon. I am especially delighted to welcome our key note speaker: Iman Suhaib Webb. It's truly an honor to have you here with us today to address this critical topic. As we know the Constitution, particularly the First Amendment of the Constitution, the Constitution as we interpret it, protects religious minorities and promotes the diversity that many of us celebrate in this nation. However, a constitutional amendment cannot always produce the levels of respect, understanding, and tolerance required to provide real protection for religious minorities

and peaceful coexistence of religious groups in this society. And we have struggled mightily with this. The summer media frenzy relating to the proposed Islamic community center in lower Manhattan proved that dialogue like this one is very important to educate ourselves about how we build bridges to achieve the goals of coming together.

Many of you have heard me speak of a global vision, a mutual, shared, collective sense of problem solving—an interdependent understanding that crosses national borders. Some of you haven't heard that at all, but that's what I really think is important and what I focus on in my talks about the law school. As today's symposium continues, I encourage you to consider, not only how these discussions relate to your immediate lives here in the United States, but also to consider the global implications of what we are talking about. I invite you to keep an open mind, challenge your own perceptions and prejudices, and most importantly, decide how you can use today's experiences to challenge bias and to have an impact in this community.

And now I would like to introduce you to this afternoon's keynote speaker: Imam Suhaib Webb. Imam Webb is an American Muslim activist and speaker. Imam Webb converted to Islam in 1992 while attending the University of Central Oklahoma where he graduated with a Bachelor's degree in Education. He also studied privately under Senegalese Sheikh for ten years and eventually served as Imam for the Society of Greater Oklahoma City, where he helped to create Mercy Islamic School. He has studied at Al Azhar University in Cairo, and the College of Sharia, and was in charge of the English translation department at Dar Al Mafta as a Mufti. Imam Webb strongly advocates for an articulation of American Islam that is authentic and for leaders that are acutely aware of the issues facing Muslim Americans and all of us. In 2010, a website that he runs was nominated and won the Brass Crescents Best Blog of the Year. He was also part of a delegation that visited Auschwitz, named by the British Government as a modern leader, and named as one of the 500 most influential Muslims in the world by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Center in 2010. He currently lives in the Bay Area of California, so he has probably traveled the longest, where he works with the Muslim American society and conducts classes at all levels of the community. Please join me in welcoming Imam Webb. Thank you very much for coming. Thanks so much.

Imam Suhaib Webb: Thank you Dean for that gracious introduction. I would like to thank the College of Law as well as the University of Maryland, Sister Hera as her father picked me up from

the airport last night at one o'clock in the morning. That's the vacation, I didn't have to sign a liability before I got into the car—and all of you for coming. I will just touch on a few points, and I do not want to take a lot of your time, I know we are a little bit crammed on time. But, I think we heard today from a representative whose decision to tackle an issue in Oklahoma.

I keep hearing Oklahoma and feel bad as far as relation to Sharia law. When I came back to America two months ago from Egypt, after attending the group of Imams and Rabbis and political leaders in a visit to Auschwitz Poland to try to bring some clarity and unity to a committee, as soon as I came back to America, Park 51 mosque fiasco, and although that has died down a little bit on the west coast, I am concerned that the approach may be taken by some organization with regard to what has happened in Oklahoma is going to create another fire storm. And I really applaud the University [of Maryland School of Law]; I think this conference is extremely important and relevant because that firestorm is going to be about Islamic Law. What I would like to do is just touch on a few points that I think really [are] applicable to the Muslim community in particular and its responsibility in America. And regards to what I talked about earlier in its application, how Islam is going to be defined in America.

When I moved to Egypt in 2004, I definitely don't look like an Egyptian and I probably don't look like a Muslim. A person asked me, "Were you born Islam? You don't look the part." But when I went to Egypt, I experienced of course changing cultures, changing society, but one thing that I did experience that really helped me understand some of the psyche of what is going on in America, is that people have a lot of constructs that are based sometimes on false information. So at times I would have a taxi in Egypt, and those of you who have been to Egypt know what the taxis are like, and I would get in the car and of course would speak in the Egyptian dialect, of course the taxi driver was kind of shocked to see this big white guy speaking Egyptian. He would ask me, "where are you from?" I said, "I am from America." He would say "I seek refuge in God from the devil." This didn't happen all the time, but it happened a few times. And I would ask him, "why are you saying this?" He would begin to number some of the worst atrocities which he considered Americans having a hand in. And secondly a lot of false presumptions about America. So what would happen in the course of the taxi ride, which was fifteen minutes from my job to where I lived, by the end of the taxi drive he would ask me, "can you give me a job in America?" Or he would say "can you help me get over there?" And the lesson that I learned from that, and this

happened at least ten to fifteen times in the course of seven years, is that really this principle that is found in the Quran. A shared learning process is extremely important, and taking time to listen to each other.

And I think that Muslims made a major mistake after 9/11 charging the American community in general saying you need to learn about Islam. What is actually in the Quran is that we need to learn about each other. And I think this [the Symposium] really accomplished that by being together. But some of the challenges that we face in America as Imams and as those who are engaged in teaching the community, Muslim community and non-Muslim community, really come to the forefront when these kind of problems happen. And some of the problems I have noticed in the Muslim community are: (1) our ability to understand are we from the east of the west. This doesn't necessarily apply to the convert community like myself. But as I mentioned in the talk I gave earlier today, that when you do convert to Islam and you go to the table where there is table and you find that everything, but brisket, pot roast, mashed potatoes and gravy, so you don't find a cultural connection.

So, many converts to Islam in America tell me now that they have a profound sense of loneliness, because you are culturally kind of ostracized if you come from maybe a family that may not like Islam and you convert to Islam. And then you come into a community where there are different social constructs, you tend to become ostracized and you actually feel lonely. I have had Muslim converts drive from Los Angeles to me in the northern part of California, just to visit an American. And what they mean by an American is that we share our NFL of Monday nights, we know about Jay Z and Eminem, we share certain constructs socially that are lost when we convert to Islam. And that is why I find that the number of converts becoming more, acting in a way conforming to American culture, and that leads sometimes to radicalization because of that emptiness.

One of the responsibilities that we have is to ensure that we teach religion in America as leaders in the community and as Imams and Clerics in a way that is relevant to our people. And until this day we still have kind of a clash of understanding. For example, if you look at the number of publications that have been written by converts to Islam in America of forty years, most of them have been translations of medieval texts. The convert community has not developed a sense of pride and ownership and comfortability where they are actually going to start writing books that speak to their people. And this is a very important challenge that we have. When you look at Muslim women that are converts to Islam, I don't know about the east

coast, I'm from Oklahoma, but I know that when I was young, if I did something wrong, my mother would put me against the wall. Sit against the wall boy and think about what you said. Now as a white or African American convert to Islam, or even as a young Muslim woman, who is born in America you will find a wall, and that wall separates you from the men. Now psychologically we have to take into consideration what that wall is doing to the women in our community and is that from that five percent that can't change, or is that from the ninety-five percent that changes over time.

In fact, women would openly debate at the Friday sermons with the person giving the Friday sermon. Whereas now in order to do that if you are a woman in a Muslim community, you have to take an airplane and some paper and throw it over the law. Or you know how to tap Morris code and the Imam might understand. I'm not saying this to put out our dirty laundry, but saying this is a systemic problem and finding now that young Muslim women are not sensing value in the Muslim community.

I said earlier that if the goal of Sharia is to cause people to feel dignified, to look what benefits them and a great scholar of Islam law said that "A benefit is something that is tangible, and the majority of people responded saying the benefit, saying the benefits that Islam seeks to protect are not only tangible but also psychological." The emotions of the community have to be taken into consideration. So we find now, as I have come back to America, young women in our community have a profound sense of depression because they are not feeling valued in their community, and that's where as Muslim clerics in America, we have to ask ourselves, this reality and society where we're living is not going to support this type of understanding and this type of articulation of religion. And this is a challenge, because what happens as a cleric and I am sure now that some Muslims in the audience want to tear me to pieces, which is fine, because I am bigger than you and from Oklahoma. But, from the progressive community, you will not find the support. They have abandoned the mosques because within the mosque if you say these kind of things, you would be met with a respectable difference.

But we have to ask ourselves, what type of religion Islam are we teaching to our communities and America? Is it empowering them to articulate Sharia which people can respect, or by not educating them we are having a community of young people who have been neglected where someone can come on the internet a certain type of romanticized message. And immediately they will go for that message. So number one, our problem is relevance, and I gave a speech about

this, it is on You Tube from about two years ago at the largest Muslim conference, called The Need for Relevance in the Muslim Community. The prophet Muhammad spoke Arabic because they were Arabs. He wore whatever clothes were given to him. Till now, some circles in our community if you don't dress a certain way, people will judge you. I went to conference and my beard was like this, and guy came a told me that I needed to make it a little longer. I told him that my beard is not your business and there are other things you may want to worry about. But understanding [there is a] need to be socially relevant to our community, because the problem now is Sharia has been defined by people on the right. For example, if the people in Oklahoma, the definition that I saw, if they are saying we don't want this Sharia, I don't want this Sharia either, but that's not Sharia, but if they look at a community that's not relevant to them or bringing benefit to them or able to speak a language that they understand, then it can only be expected that they are going to generate their own definition about things that they have a lot of inhibitions about. And as a Muslim community, Muslims in general were faced with a very very difficult problem. That is that we have a community of people who do not necessarily hate Islam, but they fear Islam. Where more educated based on false information than the Muslim community is educated on the right information. By being relevant and speaking to our community we will empower our community to offer a proper definition for what Sharia is. What Islam is and who Muslims are.

The second concern that I have as a Muslim in America in relation to Sharia and what's going on is that, when we talk about Islam and Muslims in general, that we move beyond constantly having to say Muslim. So now we have a Muslim comedian. I don't see Christian Comedians, or Buddhist Comedians, or Satanist Comedians. We have Muslim Country Western Artist, I saw him on, I know him, he is also from Oklahoma. But, he was on *Good Morning America*, and instead of just introducing him as a person, they had to say Muslim Country Western artist. Muslim professional basketball player, Muslim football player, Muslim yoga instructor, Muslim this, as a community we are going to have to move beyond that dichotomy and be comfortable enough that we a Muslim no matter what you call me. And in Islamic law we have a principle that concerns giving meaning not for the names. But if we live our faith it should be correct in practice. And we bring benefit to people, they are going to stop saying Muslim, Muslim, Muslim. It's almost as though people are excited that a Muslim can bring benefit to others.

Thirdly, the concern that I have is that we have to quit whining and crying about things, and address a problem of leadership that exists in the Muslim community across the board. Very rarely do we find women on the boards of mosques in America or on Muslim organizations [. . .] Very rarely do we find converts to Islam or children of immigrants on boards of mosques. What you find are the *Sopranos*. And I am saying this in all honesty. And this *Soprano* generation is now reaching its 60s. And what we're seeing now on a mosque is that mosques are empty. Because the message of the mosque is the message for the baby boomer crowd, but not for a younger Muslim generation. And this also is creating a massive vacuum. A vacuum of leadership, a vacuum of direction, that decisions can be made without consulting the general body of Muslims. And what happened in New York is a very good example of this. That the mass community of Imams in New York were not even consulted by leadership. That the Muslims in general in America were not asked are we willing to put ourselves on the fire for this mosque in America. Where people with money, influence and connection will have no mandate from the community itself are able to dictate what happens to our community. And this is very problematic. That we have to have a leadership that has a mandate, a leadership that can be called to be responsible for the community, and that we need a leadership that addresses the concerns of not only the Muslim community but also the larger Muslim and non-Muslim community.

I will finish there and say that there are a number of challenges that we face. I alluded to a few of them. But I think that most importantly understanding and appropriating an Islamic identity within the context and framework of our environment. Does Islamic law order us to go to the white house that says there is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God. In fact, classical legal scholars said that one of the greatest covenants that exists is the covenant of citizenry. That you are guaranteed rights by government and you will obey and abide by the laws of that government. Imam talked about this in great deal. Secondly, from the point of Sharia, are Muslims in America even asked by Islam to establish stoning, cutting the hands, judicial enterprise, they are not. And according to the vast majority of scholars because of the statement of the prophet "peace be upon him," when Fudaque came and lived in an area of non-Muslims, when he came to the prophet and said "I live with my Muslims, should I leave that area and move to live with you, or what" the prophet said "if you can establish your prayers, and you can do what is good, and stay away from what is evil, stay with your people." He did not tell him

that he should establish a state, replace their government, destroy them, create the United States of Islam. Is it even remotely possible to imagine that this can happen to Muslims and their own Muslim countries that until now have not been able to establish a viable working state, so how could Muslims of America think of doing this?

So Muslims in America have asked to do this, are not required to do this, the questions that I have received from the masses of people who write to me saying I have never seen a question when are we going to get down and take over. When can we force non-Muslim women to wearing things on their head? When can we start cutting off people's hands? This just has not happened. But the question I am getting from Muslims in America that is very promising don't deal with the clash of civilizations, but deal with the synthesis of civilization. Many young Muslim Americans are struggling to synthesize their religious practices within the context of America. It is upon the leadership of American Muslims in general to foster that. My concern is that if this Sharia debate explodes, which I think it is probably going to do, that this is going to be justification for the extremists in the Muslim and extremists in the non-Muslim community. We are going to continue, not as a threat, but as a concern, and we are going to see an explosion of this dichotomy, where those who are extreme on the Islamic side and those who are extreme on the other side are going to continue to demonize each other. And the voice of those in the middle will become less and less and less. I really appreciate your time and I thank the college of law for organizing this. I usually don't take red eye flights to programs at 8 o'clock in the morning on the east coast. But for Hera and her father I will of course do this and for the Dean. May God bless all of you. Thank you.