Who gets to define American Muslim identity?

Muslims have become a totem in the culture war. But we have our own ideas.

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The various groups that were drawn (or in some cases, dragged) to the United States have themselves been made up of a variety of smaller identity groups: Italian Catholics and Irish Catholics; Polish Jews and German Jews; Latinos from Guatemala and Latinos from Brazil. If, to paraphrase Walt Whitman, the poetical nature of the United States is determined by the dynamics of engagement between those identity communities, then there is also American poetry to be drawn from such dynamics within those communities.

No nation has a Muslim community that is more ethnically, racially, or theologically diverse than the United States. For many years, these various Muslim groups created separate spaces, such as mosques, schools, and community centers. Those who were less ritually observant often found no space at all. But the era of

Islamophobia has forced them all together and raised fascinating questions about what it means to be American, what it means to be Muslim, and who gets to define the identity of American Muslims.

Consider the case of Aziz Ansari, a highly successful actor, writer, stand-up comic, and director born to Indian Muslim parents. He hosted *Saturday Night Live* the day after Donald Trump's inauguration. While he is not by his own admission the least bit observant as a Muslim, when he appeared on one of the biggest stages in American life, on the second day of Trump's presidency, he chose, as the hip-hop kids say, to represent.

Ansari offered lessons in the science of prejudice through a set of humorous stories about Muslims. He reminded his audience that Muslims worship the same God as Christians and Jews. If you just changed the music on *Homeland*, he joked, we wouldn't look so scary.

In a *New York Times* op-ed published a few months earlier, Ansari wrote on several of the same themes, but this time through the poignant story of instructing his parents not to go to the mosque for prayer lest they wind up the victims of an Islamophobic attack.

So far, so good. Muslim community leaders most certainly want American Muslim public figures, whether observant or not, to speak out against Islamophobia and offer basic knowledge about the religion. The bigger the stage, the better.

But then season two of Ansari's highly successful Netflix series *Master of None* came out, including an episode titled "Religion." The opening scenes show a young Muslim character, Dev, played by Ansari, gleefully eating bacon at a friend's breakfast table right after getting a phone call from his mother reminding him that pork is forbidden for Muslims.

The show cuts to Dev's father pleading with him to pretend to the religiously observant family friends who are visiting that he is fasting for Ramadan and is punctilious about making his five daily prayers at the correct times. Dev responds by convincing the son in the visiting family not to fast, to skip the Eid prayer, and to indulge in pork barbeque at a festival in Brooklyn instead.

When Dev orders pork at a dinner out with his parents and their religiously observant friends, his exasperated mother can't take it anymore and stops talking to

him. Dev doesn't understand why she's so mad.

His father explains: teaching religion is both a way of caring for your children and continuing a tradition. Dev is being dismissive about both values. Chastened, Dev opens the Qur'an his mother gave him when he was a child, finds a verse he likes, and texts it to his mother: "To you your religion and to me mine."

The episode closes with alternating scenes of Dev's parents offering greetings to diverse Muslims after congregational prayer, and Dev offering greetings to his diverse friends at what appears to be a wine tasting for hipster New Yorkers.

On the one hand, the show is terrific for Muslim Americans. The more voices speaking out against Islamophobia, and the more images of nonterrorist Muslims that Americans can identify with, the better. The show gives the lie to the Islamophobe's claim that all Muslims are the same. Ansari, with his profanity-laced tirades and his jokes about sex, is certainly not like the bearded imam at the local mosque.

But what do observant Muslims do when one of the most prominent defenders of Muslims in the public square is producing shows that encourage Muslims to skip Eid to go eat pork at a barbeque festival and suggest that the fellowship of a wine tasting is comparable to the fellowship at jummah prayers?

Somewhere in America, a 14-year-old Muslim kid has lied to his parents: he has said he is going to his room to offer the dusk prayer and is instead watching the "Religion" episode from Ansari's show and laughing hysterically. And in the kitchen of that household, there are a Muslim mother and father whose highest hope is that their kids walk the sirat al mustaqeem (straight path), and they are scared out of their minds.

Leaders of traditional Muslim institutions such as mosques, schools, and the Islamic Society of North America—institutions whose primary purpose is to shape Muslim identity—have derived their authority from their piety, their knowledge of the tradition, and their advocacy of a narrow set of international issues, chiefly the cause of the Palestinians. (Here I refer mainly to immigrant Muslims; African American Muslims have long advocated for a broader set of concerns.) They have tended to be on the conservative side of the spectrum, and their focus was almost entirely about ritual observance—doing the daily prayers, reading the Qur'an, fasting for Ramadan, and maintaining Muslim values, which are virtually

indistinguishable from the values of theologically conservative interpretations of other major world religions, especially when it comes to matters of sexual expression. These leaders grumbled occasionally about America, mainly for its R-rated popular culture and its pro-Israel foreign policy, but mostly their attention was focused on trying to make their kids Muslim in the way that they were Muslim.

A consequence of people attempting to keep an identity pure through social control is that a set of people will declare themselves deviants and leave the community. A consequence of powerful outsiders attacking an identity, however, is that people with even the slimmest connection to that identity will feel offended, find that once-small part of themselves growing in personal significance, then seek to reconnect with that identity, often by playing some role of value for that identity community.

This is what appears to have happened with Ansari, who prior to recent events had rarely if ever mentioned his Muslim heritage in public. A *New Yorker* profile published a few years before did not make a single reference to it. The era of Islamophobia woke that part of him up.

Muslims are changing America, but it is also true that America is changing Muslims.

And he is not the only one. Consider the story of the writer and comedian Zahra Noorbakhsh. For many years, Noorbakhsh did a stand-up routine where she jokingly referred to herself as the “pork-eating, alcohol-drinking kind of Muslim.” She had tired of Muslim ritual practice as a child, and she didn’t like the sexism of the tradition or the community. She effectively declared herself a deviant and walked away. In an essay for the National Public Radio program *Fresh Air*, Noorbakhsh described how the election of Trump made her want to learn Muslim prayers again, to reconnect with the tradition and community in which she was raised, and to defend it.

More and more Muslims like Ansari and Noorbakhsh are becoming more and more visible. If you needed to put me in a category, it is probably with them. There are certainly enough such Muslims to consider us a sociological category, especially in comparison to the Muslims who have defined what I call “internal Muslim spaces.”

The most useful distinction between the two groups is that people like Ansari and Noorbakhsh view themselves (and are viewed by others) as principally interpreting the contemporary Muslim social experience, whereas the Muslims who created internal Muslim spaces view themselves (and are viewed by others) as principally

interpreting the Islamic tradition, meaning the Qur'an, the hadith, and figures in Islamic law and philosophy. Let us call the Ansari types social Muslims and the people who started mosques traditional Muslims.

The most significant distinctions between social Muslims and traditional Muslims involve sources of authority, the spaces they tend to occupy, and the topics on which they most frequently focus. Traditional Muslims derive their authority from knowledge of sacred sources and vocal emphasis on personal piety. Social Muslims derive their authority from their ability to create positive impressions about Muslims for the broader society. The individual who does a sermon during Friday prayers at the mosque or some other kind of internal Muslim space is likely to be a traditional Muslim. The person being interviewed on CNN, doing stand-up comedy in a club, or writing an op-ed for the *New York Times* is most likely to be a social Muslim.

In my mind, the most interesting part of the social Muslim category is that it is in large part created by Islamophobia, which for some people has had the effect of reviving a small, even dormant, piece of their Muslim identity.

The discourse of social Muslims requires both a group of people willing to speak and a group of people interested in listening. In our time, the desire by the growing number of social Muslims to speak up as Muslims is matched by the growing interest in stories about Muslims.

The audience for these stories—on Netflix, in the *New York Times*, on NPR, CNN, Comedy Central, Judd Apatow films—is important to note. The *New Yorker* in the Trump era alone has run pieces on a Muslim poet, a Muslim cop, a Muslim lawyer, a Muslim comedian, and a Muslim tamale vendor. Such media are associated with urban, multicultural, progressive Whole Foods America, not with white, rural, conservative Cracker Barrel America.

One gets the sense that if Trump's America insists on casting Muslims as villains and seeking out (or making up) characters who fit the bill, then Barack Obama's America will respond by promoting Muslims whom they consider heroes. In fact, Whole Foods America is equally adept at inventing Muslim characters who live up to our heroic multicultural fantasies: behold the best-selling comic book series, Ms. Marvel, about a Pakistani-American Muslim female superhero who lives in New Jersey.

Muslims, in other words, have become a totem in the current chapter of the American culture war, a symbol that signals, above all, a tribal belonging, with each

tribe doing its best to foist upon the category Muslim its preferred set of characteristics. There is no better illustration of this than the Shepard Fairey poster, made for his series *We the People*, which features a steely-eyed woman wearing bright red lipstick and an American flag hijab. For Whole Foods America, Muslim women have become the visual symbol of anti-Trump progressive multiculturalism.

As social Muslims grow in numbers and migrate into the warm embrace of identity politics based on the experience of marginalization, the contaminants of progressive politics will inevitably seep into what (for traditionalists) ought to be the pure waters of Islam.

All of this is to say that while Muslims are changing America, America is changing the Muslim community. For traditional Muslims, the dynamics of the era of Islamophobia present severe complications. For the longest time, they had the topic of Islam to themselves. They could present it to their children the way they wanted to. Yes, American culture was cacophonous and sexually explicit, but they could say, "We Muslims are not like them." But what do you do when it feels like you are being given a choice between keeping the identity pure and keeping your children safe? Ansari, by creating a positive impression of Muslims in a large segment of America, obviously helps with the latter, but he does it by compromising the former.

In the era of Islamophobia, Muslims by and large have found that the American language of diversity offers them the best chance for establishing a safe place within the national story. But once the value of diversity is invoked to gain a place in the larger American story, it is hard to turn around and deny a place to people (whether gay Muslims, Shia Muslims, non-hijabi-wearing female Muslims, or less-observant-than-you Muslims) who demand a similar place in your neighborhood based on that same value. Especially when those people are doing work that benefits you.

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