MUSLIM IN AMERICA AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY: BETWEEN ETHNIC HERITAGE, ISLAMIC VALUES, AND THE AMERICAN WAY

Hasan KAPLAN (*)

Abstract

This paper discusses the emerging challenges that immigrant Muslim community faces in the United States. Among several difficulties, issue of identity and integration of second-generation into American mainstream appears to be the most important one. This article approaches these problems through the lenses of Erik Erikson's psychosocial theory. And it argues that identity crisis that children of Muslim immigrant experience can bring about a unique American Muslim identity synthesizing Islamic and American values. They may be able to forge within themselves out of the existential requirements of adolescent existence a solution that has eluded their parents and traditional religious scholars.

Key Words: Immigrant Muslims, Identity, Islamic values, Islam and the West, Identity Crisis, Erik Erikson, Adolescence, American Muslims, Generation AM

Amerika'daki Müslüman Göçmenler ve Kimlik Sorunu

Özet


Anahtar Kelimler: Müslüman Göçmenler, Kimlik, İslami Değerler, İslam ve Bati, Kimlik Krizi, Erik Erikson, Ergenlik, Amerikan Müslümanları

(*) Dr., COMU İlahiyat Fakültesi, Çanakkale
(e-posta: htkaplan@gmail.com)
Introduction

It has been common to speak of Islam and the West, but today, as John Esposito points, any consideration of that topic must include “Islam in the West” 1. With the globalization, Muslim immigrant population has been increasing both in the West European countries and in the United States. Especially in the United States, the presence of Muslim minority has become more visible during the last two decades. After the tragedy of September 11, attentions re-focused on Muslims around the world in general, and on Muslim immigrants in the North America in particular. Their presence became more visible in the eyes of Americans. American public started to ask more and more about their Muslim neighbors and their faith. Who are they? What is Islam? Why Muslims are fundamentalist? And so on. In other words, they started to make an “identity” check on their Muslim neighbors. Yet, Muslims have already started to ask their own questions.

The American experience has provided immigrant Muslims with a variety of encounters and challenges. Many Muslims have yet to answer the question how they will remain Muslims in America? In other words, could they be part of the pluralistic American society without losing their ethnic and religious characteristics?

Having the advantage of being born and raised in Muslim environment, parent generation Muslims immigrants have a certain confidence in their ethnic and religious identity. Therefore, growing concern is not about the response of the first generation immigrants but their offspring. In their perception, living in primarily non-Muslim environments, their children face dual crises of adapting and surviving in the larger society while integrating and developing an Islamic identity. For example, here is a statement from a young Muslim mother in the United States:

I think that the one danger of interaction between my children and non-Muslim children is loss of Muslim identity. I think that integration into the non-Muslim environment has to be done with the sense that we have to preserve our Islamic identity. As long as the activity or whatever the children are doing is not in conflict with Islamic values or ways, it is permissible. But when we see it is going to be something against Islamic values, we try to teach our children that this is not correct to our beliefs practices. They understand it and they are trying to cope with that.

This testimony expresses the concern that has been shared by many Muslim immigrants in the United States. They want to integrate into the Western culture while maintaining their Islamic identity. But they are sharply aware of the dangers that such integration may entail, and struggle to maintain their specific Islamic values. This paper

MUSLIM IN AMERICA AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY: BETWEEN ETHNIC HERITAGE, ISLAMIC VALUES, AND THE AMERICAN WAY

analyzes specifically issues of identity that immigrant American Muslim community face and argues that the second-generation has a unique historical opportunity to overcome this challenge. Successful resolution of their own identity crisis may play a constructive role creating a synthesis of Islamic and Western values.

Identity as a Major Challenge

From 1996 to 2006, almost a decade I lived in the United States with my family. My own American experience has given me the opportunity, as a participant observer, to obtain intimate knowledge of what kind of difficulties American culture poses for the immigrant Muslim community. During these years, my family and I was the member of the local Muslim community participating regularly in daily and weekly prayers, and other religious and communal gatherings. In addition, in the process of my doctoral research, I participated in various local and national lectures and meetings concerned with the problems of Muslim communities in the USA. Out of all this personal experiences and my professional research, it appears that among the variety of challenges, the question of identity is the most pressing issue. This matter is perceived as “the mother of all issues” by many Muslim scholars and community leaders. For this reason, Islamic organizations such as the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA), the Islamic Circle of North America (ICNA), the American Society of Muslims (ASM) and the Muslim Student Association (MSA) put the issue of identity on the top in their agendas.

However, it must be noted here that there are two different kinds of identity issues or two separate identity crises, so to speak, distinct from each other in terms of their dynamics and expressions, that immigrant Muslim experience as a community:

1. The crisis of maintaining already formed and inherited traditional (ethnic and religious) identity experienced and voiced by the parent generation.

2. The crisis of forming a new identity between two seemingly conflicting (family tradition and Western/American way) cultures, experienced by the second generation.

The characteristics of this generational distinction need to be carefully differentiated. First generation immigrants derive many benefits from their ethnic/religious identity and associations that help relieve the stress that accompanies settling in a new society. Coming to America with no English, they usually join a community established around the same faith or national group. Such communities are often prepared to offer psychological and economic support in the form of loans, employment, and housing. Thus, first generation Muslim immigrants enjoy the advantage of being acculturated in a consistent and secure cultural context that eases the stress of immigration by providing a support system made up of people who are culturally similar. Therefore, it


4) J.L. Esposito, & Y. Y. Haddad, (eds), Muslims on the Americanization Path.
is not usually the first generation that bears the burden of this transition. Indeed, they are reasonably secure in their identity.

Rather it is the second generation that faces the greatest obstacles in negotiating an Islamic identity in contemporary pluralistic American culture. Although they are better educated and skilled and less reliant on the ethnic and religious community than their parents, their psychological ties to their parents’ tradition often remain strong. Often times this blessing can turn out to be curse exerting unbearable source of stress for them.

In contrast to their parents, who were acculturated in only one cultural setting, children of Muslim immigrants are brought up simultaneously in two markedly different traditions. They are trapped between two often-conflicting sets of values, those of parents on the one hand and American peers on the other. On the one hand, this group is socialized according to the norms and expectations of their parents. On the other hand, they are acculturated to the expectations of a wider cultural context that celebrates freedom and diversity. As Elkholy has pointed out, “the second generation plays a transitional role between the old and the new cultures and is thus often the victim of both”.

Despite the growing concerns, unfortunately, this ‘drama’ of the second-generation, the complexities of their identity crisis and the tension and anxiety it causes in their emotional and social aspect of lives have not been sufficiently understood, fully recognized and properly addressed.

Identity Defined

Part of the problem is how the term “identity” is defined and framed, and where the unanimous concern of the identity is situated. The leaders of American Muslim community define identity primarily in religious terms and frame it between the borders of Islamic faith. For example, one of the recent conventions (2003) of the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) was dedicated to the identity issues of Muslims in North America. However, throughout the convention only religious dimension of the identity issues raised and addressed. The leading concern was how to instill the Islamic values and Islamic worldview in the second generation that is growing up in the American melting pot.

Intellectuals and academic communities, on the other hand, tend to define identity in a broader social and cultural term. Their fundamental goal is to sketch out the social and political functions that identity serves in maintaining group solidarity. Whereas “identity” has been conceptualized by traditional psychology as the exclusive achievement of an individual, as inextricably bound up with and formed in the context of that person’s private needs and personal problems, most research has focused on identity in its socio-cultural and political manifestations. For instance, following two well-known books; *Muslims on the Americanization Path*, edited by Hannan Yazdak and John

Esposito and Family and Gender among American Muslims, edited by Barbara C. Aswad and Barbara Bilge illustrates this approach. Both works offers sound analysis of American Muslim experiences providing valuable information on topics like gender, intermarriage, education, and intergenerational conflict. Yet only one contributor, C. J. Eisenlohor, approaches the topic from a psychological perspective.

Thus, questions of identity are situated either in the exclusive frame of Islamic faith or in a larger cultural, historical frame, but rarely in the frame of personal experience. There is a noticeable absence of a psychological perspective in the literature. Thus, devoid of psychological approach, the identity questions that Muslim intellectuals and leaders define do not reflect the totality of the identity crisis that is being experienced by the second generation.

Identity from Psychological Perspective

Identity is a complex matter. We can not deny that some components of identity are socially, historically and symbolically constructed and also we can not deny that this construction is molded by an individual in a cultural-social context. The reality of identity or personhood can not be grasped either at the extreme pole of individualism-in which the seemingly autonomous individual is the ontological reality and prime mover-or at the pole of society-in which the individual merely internalizes social expectations. For a full picture of identity issues, a theoretical lens that enable us to see the dialectical interpretation of the both the subject and object in which neither has full primacy is needed.

In this sense, among various psychological theories, Erik Erikson’s psycho-social model, which emphasizes inner psychological reordering that seeks to capture the quality of the individual’s awareness of the social practices in which he/she is engaged, can provide a valuable analytical insight to reach a better understanding of challenges and opportunities for that matter, Muslim youth face in America.

Psychological approaches, especially Eriksonian psychosocial approach, have a significant advantage over other sociological, religious and cultural perspectives that oriented toward tradition, discourse, dogma and social institutions. Erikson’s psychosocial theory incorporates cultural factors without losing the centrality of the individual. This makes following considerable difference.

Approaching from the psychosocial stand point, first thing one notices that those who having the most difficult times among Muslim community is the second generation Muslim youth. They are going through a transitional period called adolescence. Identity, according to Erikson, is the chief achievement of this stage in human life cycle6.

Characteristics of Adolescence Stage

Adolescence is known as the most difficult and critical stage of human development. Because, growing person experiences serious of changes during this period. These

changes include the emergence of more advanced cognitive capabilities, the onset of puberty, and the transition into new societal roles. Such shifts not only can create the developmental need to establish a sense of identity but also can cause confusion and make adolescents vulnerable to risky antisocial behaviors such as associating with delinquent peer-groups, engaging in fights, carrying weapons, drinking alcohol, using illegal drugs, and practicing sexual promiscuity.

Adolescence stage in human development and its vulnerabilities that partially referred above are also recognized by non-psychological approaches. However, the strength and advantage of Erikson’s psychosocial theory surfaces after this point.

Drawing on his psychoanalytic thinking and clinical experience, but with an emphasis on ego development in the tradition stemming from Freud’s late work, Anna Freud’s seminal contributions, and Heinz Hartmann’s refinements, Erikson defines identity as “the ego quality of the existence.” Explicating the “ego quality” of identity, he states:

Ego identity then, in its subjective aspect is the awareness of the fact that there is a self sameness and continuity to the ego’s synthesizing methods, the style of one’s individuality, and that this style coincides with the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for significant others in the immediate community.

Thus, according to Erikson, adolescence stage is not just about risks and vulnerabilities. This stage is also characterized with its immense potential for the individuals and their communities. One of this potential is the ego’s synthesizing power during this transitional stage. For Erikson, the adolescent identity crisis is a necessary turning point, a crucial moment, when development must move one way or another, marshalling resources of growth, recovery, and further differentiation of self. By subjecting the individual to a series of crises or developmental turning points, the process of identity formation stimulates him or her to deliberately explore life choices. During this stage, individuals have the chance to explore different social roles, career options, recreational activities, friendships, dating partners, religious beliefs, and ideologies without having to commit them. Erikson calls this period of experiment a...


8) E. Erikson, Identity: youth and Crisis, p.50.


MUSLIM IN AMERICA AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY: BETWEEN ETHNIC HERITAGE, ISLAMIC VALUES, AND THE AMERICAN WAY

This phase allows young people to re-evaluate their childhood beliefs, ideals, and value systems and recreate them based on their own experiences amplifying and encoding what is worthwhile to them.

Muslim Adolescents

To sum up earlier discussion, the period of adolescence challenges youth to deal with the various biological, psychological and social changes that are usually associated with this major transitional stage in human development. In addition to these challenges, Muslim adolescents face extra difficulties resulting from their unique context: surrounded by traditionally oriented parents, backed by Islamic institutions, these young people have to make their own way in a mostly secular, partly Protestant Christian American culture with radically different messages and expectations. The question is where they fit in?

Therefore integration of this youth into American society appears to be the most critical matter. How they can be part of the American cultural, religious and political landscape. Which way will the second-generation turn? Will they resist integration into American society or will they merge their dual identities (Muslims, Americans) into one American-Muslim identity? Will their dual identities as Americans and Muslims be largely contradictory or complementary?

Much depends on how they resolve their identity crises. If Muslim adolescents fail to negotiate an acceptable way of being both Muslim and American in a way that preserves their sense of social continuity, they risk identity confusion and possible alienation from both communities.

It has been frequently reiterated that the main obstacle to successful adaptation to American culture is the widespread hostility that Americans have exhibited towards Islam and Muslims (see works of Yvonne Yazbeck-Haddad, Muktadir Khan, and John L. Esposito). In America, Muslims are often marginalized and, especially since 9/11, demonized. For example, a recent study of anti-Muslim sentiment in the U.S. conducted between June 23 and July 2, 2004 found that only 2% had a positive response when asked “what comes to mind when you hear ‘Muslim’”.

Muktedir Khan sees this cultural situation as giving rise to the following dilemma for many American Muslims:

...[T]he demonization of Islam by the American media compels Muslims to indulge in identity politics. They concentrate on defending their faith from a perceived American assault rather than on their role as American residents seeking liberty, equality, and prosperity. The negative image of America, a consequence of its foreign policy in the Middle East, inspires a paradoxical response from Muslims. Its prosperity and freedom

attracts them, but once they are here, its policies and attitudes towards Muslims and Islam alienates them. The result is dilemma for American Muslims: they like living here but they love to hate America

On the other hand, studies indicate that it is not just prejudice people and biased media, American institutions too discriminate against Muslims. In schools, offices, factories, the armed services, social service agencies, and the courts, Muslims are treated differently; remaining on the periphery, rejected by Americans and American institutions.

These are justifiable arguments. Yet, it seems the dominant rhetoric obscures a significant part of the picture. How about Muslim community itself? Don’t they have any responsibility? What is the role of Islamic institutions (mosques, Islamic schools, and national and local associations) and Muslim leadership, in this matter? Do they motivate and facilitate Muslims to integrate into the American mainstream? Until 9/11, Muslim institutions generally were against the integration. However, it appears that, changing its pre 9/11 attitude, now American Muslim community shows some eagerness to be part of the American cultural, religious and political landscape. That is where the key role of the second generation comes into the picture.

The Second Generation/Generation AM

The differences and ongoing tensions between the Muslim world and the West cannot be ignored. Many Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals (i.e. consider Samuel Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations), see Islam and the West as inherently conflicting dually rival civilizations or worldviews. There have been various forms of encounters between the West and the Muslim World that justifies this theory.

Today, however, the existence of Muslim communities in the West is quite an exceptional moment in the history of the West-Islam relationship. People of both worlds did not have such a chance before to live together without a hegemonic relationship between them. They always perceived each other through dogmatic lenses and political interests. Today we are not completely free from this problem. However, a new generation of Muslims is growing up in the Western hemisphere relatively free from the territorial and cultural binds.

MUSLIM IN AMERICA AND THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY: BETWEEN ETHNIC HERITAGE, ISLAMIC VALUES, AND THE AMERICAN WAY

Especially in the United States, though their parents preserve their cultural heritage, the second generation, which I call Generation AM, can go beyond the age-old “clash” mentality between the two worldviews. We need to look at the second generation as a great opportunity, a new hope and a historical moment, to resolve this on going tension and conflict. This is due to the fact that these young people have the chance of being raised at best and educated in Western culture. This can give them an exceptional opportunity to understand the West in a way that was not possible for their forefathers, in relation to their faith and to engage to an extent in constructive negotiation. Likewise, they also have the capacity at this period of their life to form a new unique identity as they make decisions about political, religious and vocational issues. Because, free from the pre-scripted approaches, they go through the chaotic adolescence stage in comparatively freer American cultural environment. This first hand-experience of the west can give confidence them to develop an inclusive identity that achieves a more extensive synthesis, incorporating Islamic values with American way.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Erikson sometimes talks about identity as “silent” work of the Ego. Generation AM is like “the Ego,” the consciousness of the Muslims in general and American Muslim community in particular. Their struggle with the issues of identity silently brings two different worldviews into a constructive dialogue with one another. Their successful integration to American society can be a prelude to the larger cultural negotiation to come. But realistically, the transformation will not come overnight. I have some reservations that the excessive religious and ideological socialization of this generation or their excessive Americanization for that matter may defeat such hope and jeopardize the successful development of such a distinct identity. In the end, what are the ideal yet logical standards for consideration at this juncture? As long as both communities continue to demonize each other, the integration of American Muslims into the American mainstream will be discouraged; and the prolonged alienation of Muslims will continue.

The Second-Generation Muslim adolescents have a great potential to reinvent a viable Muslim identity in America. Nevertheless, the success of a truly American Muslim identity and the successful integration of second-generation Muslim adolescents depend on the power, wisdom and tolerance of leadership of American Muslim community and acceptance by American society.

American Muslim community, first, must recognize characteristics of adolescence period in human life cycle; not only just its vulnerabilities but also its potentials must be understood. That is, critical questioning of adolescents, their trial and error experiences, and delayed commitment should be tolerated and even encouraged not just by parents, but also by the local communities, and larger society.

Muslim leadership should understand that with the significant successful increase of Islamic institutions such as Mosques, Islamic schools, Islamic media and printed

17) E. Erikson, *Childhood and society.*
materials in the USA, assimilation or alienation of this young generation from their faith is not a risk any more. But the danger is now their alienation from American mainstream. Because intense religious socialization, though helpful for preventing youth from risky behaviors, may impose too many “dos” and “don’ts” on young individuals, it may lead to the creation of fragile identities based on fear, suspicion and anxiety rather than constituting firsthand experience.

Furthermore, Muslim institutions must avoid dividing, marginalizing and demonizing discourse. Overzealous religious affiliations of this youth may increase the differences and widen the gap between their peers during their early formative years, thus diminishing their adaptive strategies. The more Muslim adolescents receive support only from members of their own religious group, the more they will adhere to that group; and, consequently, they may learn less about how to deal with American cultural environment. Thus, strong adherence to traditional values and practices may complicate the Muslim adolescents’ participation in the wider society, and correspondingly increase their distance from it.

Finally, Muslim youth needs a leadership that is in harmony with Islamic tradition and at peace with American values in order to facilitate their integration into American society, without marginalizing them one way or the other. The role of the American public and institutions is also crucial. These young people need to feel at home; they need to be accepted, recognized and represented in American public sphere.