



HAL
open science

Who owns Islam? The prism of authenticity and the specter of appropriation among American Muslims

Juliette Galonnier

► **To cite this version:**

Juliette Galonnier. Who owns Islam? The prism of authenticity and the specter of appropriation among American Muslims. *Appartenances & Altérités*, 2023, 4, 23 p. 10.4000/alterites.993 . hal-04446105

HAL Id: hal-04446105

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-04446105>

Submitted on 8 Feb 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

Who owns Islam? The prism of authenticity and the specter of appropriation among American Muslims

Juliette Galonnier



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/alterites/993>

DOI: 10.4000/alterites.993

ISSN: 1953-7476

This article is a translation of:

À qui appartient l'islam ? Prisme de l'authenticité et spectre de l'appropriation parmi les musulmans américains - URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/alterites/983> [fr]

Publisher

Urmis

Electronic reference

Juliette Galonnier, "Who owns Islam? The prism of authenticity and the specter of appropriation among American Muslims", *Appartenances & Altérités* [Online], 4 | 2023, Online since 01 December 2023, connection on 31 January 2024. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/alterites/993> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/alterites.993>

This text was automatically generated on January 31, 2024.



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

Who owns Islam? The prism of authenticity and the specter of appropriation among American Muslims

Juliette Galonnier

Introduction

- ¹ In 2013, American author Michael Muhammad Knight published a short article in *Vice* that drew much notice, entitled “The Problem with White Converts” (Knight 2013a). His article offers a critique of two historical figures, both white Americans, who embraced “other” religions: Henry Steel Olcott (1832-1907), a convert to Buddhism, and Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916), a convert to Islam. According to Knight, both converts took on the mission of reinterpreting their new religious tradition and imposed on it their own understanding of “good religion”, influenced by their shared theosophical heritage: a religion they conceived as rational, rooted in philosophy, liberated all at once from dogma, ritualism, the supernatural and clerics. In Knight’s view, both men disregarded the ways in which these religions were practiced and lived in different parts of the world, and even clearly showed contempt for their believers whom they perceived as unable to grasp the authentic spirit of their religion due to their cultural baggage and “superstitions”. Michael Muhammad Knight uses harsh words for the “two white guys”, who “treated their new religions like other white men treat entire nations: they marched in and claimed to own it”.
- ² The article spread like fire and produced its effect, not only because of its catchy title, but also because of the personality of its author, who himself identifies as a white convert to Islam. The son of a white supremacist father who was absent throughout his childhood, Michael Muhammad Knight converted to Islam at the age of 15 after reading the autobiography of Malcolm X. At the age of 17, he went to Pakistan to study theology

at the Faisal Mosque, before becoming disillusioned by an Islam he portrays as too conservative (Knight 2006). Since then, he has published a dozen books in which he describes, among other things, his immersion and initiation in different currents of Islam, including Salafism (Knight 2015), magic and esotericism (Knight 2016), but also Islamic punk (*taqwacore*, a term he coined and popularized, Knight 2004), and the black Five Percenters movement (which he managed to join even though the theology of this movement, developed in response to the context of white supremacy in 20th century America, normally considers Whites as demons, Knight 2011).

- 3 Michael Muhammad Knight's article, published while I was conducting field research on conversions to Islam in Chicago, sparked lively discussions among my interviewees.¹ My informants were mostly converts and they came from a diversity of social and ethno-racial backgrounds (but with an over-representation of white converts and people from the middle and upper classes). They were also members of a Muslim organization, The Islamic Connection, specialized in welcoming new Muslims and engaged in developing an American Islam.² The article had especially attracted their attention because, without any explanation, it was illustrated by a photograph of Sheikh Hamza Yusuf, who was not even mentioned in the article. Sheikh Hamza Yusuf (formerly Mark Hanson) is a white American born in 1958 who embraced Islam in 1977 and quickly established himself as a world-renowned Muslim scholar. Founder of an educational institution in California (Zaytuna College), he advocates a revival of Sunni Islamic teaching from a perspective he describes as "traditional and classical" but also adapted to the American context. Frequently dressed in a long robe and turban, he is a highly respected figure among my informants, many of whom have attended his lectures.
- 4 "When a white guy wears the hats of brown guys and talks about 'reviving the Islamic spirit,'³ it might be time to run fast," Knight writes. The author's thinly veiled criticism –by means of the photo's allusion– of Hamza Yusuf's reappropriation of the Islamic tradition from a position of cultural domination, while at the same time claiming to be universal, was not unanimously shared by my informants. During my fieldwork, I often crossed the path of Amina, a Sudanese-American blogger, who was active in the interfaith dialogue, advocated for a greater role for women in mosques, and frequently took part in the Islamic Connection's activities. She shared the article on her Facebook page,⁴ expressing her disagreement:

He thinks that some white converts try to take cultural practices of [brown] Muslims out of the implementation of Islam because they believe Islam should be intellectual, and that that's racist. I totally disagree with his analysis.
- 5 Jasmine, a white convert and communications consultant, commented:

How is that racist? I feel like I'm still trying to navigate what is culture and what is real. Ugh he's getting on my nerves!
- 6 Mohammed, an American Muslim of Qatari origin who works in the film industry, reaffirmed Sheikh Hamza Yusuf's unquestionable Islamic legitimacy and his respect for Islamic scholars of the global South:

Someone like Sh. Hamza didn't study alone in a library but he took his knowledge of sheikhs in Mauritania which he speaks about in high regard.
- 7 Nadia, an American teacher of Algerian origin, found, however, that there was valid criticism in the article, both of an American sense of superiority and of the

appropriation of language elements from other cultures by the students of Sheikh Hamza Yusuf's Zaytuna Institute:

I think there's an issue in general with this subtle arrogance of our American culture. [...] It equally upsets me to see a lot of zaytunites use the word "sidi" for one another lol it's a North African title!

- 8 Fazila, an American of Pakistani origin, also recognized a certain truthfulness in the article and condemned the superior attitude of some American Muslims:

Perhaps the problem is less with the white converts themselves than with other Muslims, who are so used to the white man's worldview being the "norm" [...] that they glorify white male converts and their own understanding of Islam. How many Muslims born and/or raised in North America mock the accents, cultural "baggage" of the older generation from (darker-skinned) Muslim countries? I grew up seeing this all around me, and I am ashamed to say, at one point did this as well. May Allah forgive me for this arrogance and disrespect.

- 9 Finally, John, a white convert, speech therapist by trade and pillar of The Islamic Connection in which I was conducting my ethnography, condemned the concealed and unjust attack on Sheikh Hamza Yusuf and turned the argument against Michael Muhammad Knight and his own position as a white convert:

Sounds like he is rehashing the "white devil" obsession. Not to be rude but I don't really feel like Mr. Knight has much room to speak on this matter and his under the belt jab at Shaykh Hamza says a lot about who he is.

- 10 Kareem, an African American student, agreed, criticizing the author:

Dawg, why is this guy sneak dissing so hard? this cat is outta his noggin.

- 11 Michael Muhammad Knight, the "enfant terrible" of American Islam, is a controversial figure among his coreligionists. He has pursued his writing career in the margins and recesses of the Islamic tradition (publishing on Salafism, magic in Islam, the Five Percenters, religious experimentation while on drugs, advocacy of queer Muslim movements, etc.), while Hamza Yusuf has made a name for himself as a preacher and teacher at the heart of American Islam (Zaytuna College was the first Muslim educational institution accredited by the U.S. government). The way Knight's article raises the issue of white privilege and cultural appropriation could not leave anyone indifferent (see also Tourage 2013). In response to the controversy generated by his first article, Knight published a second one a week later, this time explicitly entitled "Michael Muhammad Knight vs. Sheikh Hamza Yusuf" (Knight 2013b). He upheld some of his critiques, while making amends and including himself in this judgment:

Hamza Yusuf is a white convert. This helps his brand because his classical Islamic tradition can be presented as entirely a textual tradition, free of cultural blemish, and universal in its appeal. I am also a white convert. White privilege helps my brand too, because it's easier to sell black supremacist expressions of Islam when you have a white face.

- 12 Knight used his cynical tone to denounce the use of Islamic tradition for purposes of distinction, popularity and marketing.

- 13 The depth of the debate became clear to me as my fieldwork progressed. My informants were also assiduously listening to the lectures of another white convert close to Sheikh Hamza Yusuf: the Muslim theologian Umar Faruq Abd-Allah (born Wymann-Landgraf in 1948, who became a Muslim in 1970), and whose advice on educating the soul and heart, together with his writings on the need to produce a culturally American Islam, were widely appreciated (Faruq Abd-Allah 2004). As it happens, Umar Faruq Abd-Allah had

published a comprehensive biography of Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb (Faruq Abd-Allah 2006), the late 19th century convert whom Knight criticizes in his article (without citing Abd-Allah's biography, which was nevertheless Knight's reference). Faruq Abd-Allah's book does not gloss over Webb's racist prejudice toward fellow Muslims (notably the fact that he called some Indian Muslims *niggers* and attributed the Muslim world's underdevelopment to "climate and racial influence" [*ibid.*, p. 136]). However, unlike Knight, he does not use these comments to frame Webb's whole life. Instead, Webb appears at the end of the biography as a precursor of contemporary American religious pluralism, a fervent believer who carried out intense missionary work to establish his religion in the United States, to the extent that he represented Islam at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and is an example in his ability to "balance religious identity with American culture, creating a sense of self that is at once genuinely American and truly Islamic" (*ibid.*, p. 271). Umar Faruq-Abdallah seeks to defend this very position in a text much-appreciated by my informants, entitled "Islam and the Cultural Imperative" (2004), in which he declares: "We must engender a Muslim American culture that gives us the freedom to be ourselves." While Knight sees in Webb the archetype of a process of religious appropriation led by a white man persuaded of his superiority (convinced that he stands beyond cultures and represents the universal), Faruq Abd-Allah sees in Webb a visionary who was able to reconcile his faith and his American culture and is a model for American Muslims today.

- 14 This intertextual debate (i.e., a biography, an online article, a photographic allusion, and the comments they produced) around four white converts of different generations (Knight, Yusuf, Abd-Allah and Webb, born in 1977, 1958, 1948 and 1846 respectively) revolves mostly around questions of "white privilege" within Muslim communities (on this topic see Galonnier 2015). It also raises broader questions about the contrasting uses of "culture", and what is particular and "universal" in Islam: Who owns the Islamic tradition? Who decides the contours of the "Islam" entity when the need arises to extract it from the cultural contexts in which it has historically taken shape to transpose it elsewhere? Could those who are engaged in such ventures be projecting their own cultural conceptions onto the authentic Islam they claim to convey? In what ways are claims to universality and cultural legitimacy (and the ways in which they are received and perceived) shaped by inequalities of class, race and gender?

Junctures and disjunctures between religion and culture

- 15 Much has been written about the connections between culture and religion since the classic work by American Protestant theologian H. Richard Nieburh, *Christ and Culture* (1951). The book identifies a variety of religious attitudes toward culture: "Christ against culture" (the uncompromising rejection of culture as immoral) and "Christ of Culture" (harmonization, at the risk of dissolution, of religion in culture) are described as the two opposing poles. Between them, intermediate positions appear, such as "Christ above culture" (a synthesis of culture and religion), "Christ and culture in paradox" (whereby religion maintains a critical distance from culture, which can nevertheless be positively embraced for religious purposes), "Christ transforms culture" (the possibility and hope of a profound transformation of culture through

religion) (Spickard 2012; see Hermansen 2009 for an attempt to transpose these categories to American Islam). This typology is just one of many. More recently, Olivier Roy (2008) expressed the diversity of possible links between religion and culture as follows:

Each time there has been a questioning of the relations between religion and culture, prefixes have been added to the word “culture”: to *deculturate*, *acculturate*, *inculturate*, *exculturate*. Religion deculturates when it attempts to eradicate paganism; it acculturates when it adapts to the mainstream culture; it inculturates when it tries to establish itself at the center of a given culture; it exculturates when it thinks of itself as standing back from a mainstream culture of which it was part, but which suddenly or gradually took on a negative, “pagan” or irreligious –and therefore destructive– aspect. (Roy 2013: 33)

- 16 These operations of “juncture and disjuncture of Islam and culture”, to use the words of anthropologist Jeannette Jouili (2019), have led to multiple and intense discussions among Muslims, since the good and bad ways of dealing with culture generate intense definitional struggles in the Islamic context. Even though such literature is rich, it rarely enters in dialogue with studies about the notion of cultural or religious appropriation (Rogers 2006).
- 17 Most debates on the appropriation of religious practices and beliefs in Euro-American societies have focused on Eastern (Buddhism, Hinduism, etc.) or Native American, and sometimes Jewish (Kabbalah) traditions that have undergone processes of secularization and commodification. In these debates, appropriation refers to the incorporation of some of the aesthetic, ritual, sartorial or culinary attributes of these religious traditions into secular cultural practices or forms of New Age spirituality increasingly dissociated from their original religious context (Brunk and Young 2009, Altglas 2014, Lucia 2020). Unlike Buddhism (Borup 2020), Islam has rarely been included in these discussions –one author has even called it the “unpillaged Eastern religion” (Bruce 2017). However, the evolution of certain forms of Sufism (Philippon 2014) and recent controversies over World Hijab Day or the use of the *hijab* by certain fashion brands (Bucar 2022) have led here and there to accusations of cultural appropriation of the Islamic tradition. In a recent book entitled *Stealing My Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation*, American religious studies researcher Liz Bucar (2022) defines religious appropriation as follows:
- When individuals adopt religious practices without committing to religious doctrines, ethical values, systems of authority, or institutions, in ways that exacerbate existing systems of structural injustice. (p. 8)
- 18 She points out that not all religious borrowings are considered appropriation: such borrowings have always existed, and are even desirable and desired by religious actors themselves, particularly in the case of religions with universal claims such as Islam or Christianity, which are by definition intended to be “appropriated” by followers in the whole world. The appropriation category only concerns borrowings that the author defines as “ethically harmful”, i.e., those that perpetuate inequality. As Denis-Constant Martin (2014: 52) reminds us, “the appropriation relationship is most often one of inequality”.

19 However, defining the scope of appropriation is primarily an empirical question that poses a set of challenges.

- To speak of “borrowing” implies that we can identify one or more owners (or insiders), which is far from representing a consensus among religious actors themselves (who decides who is an insider or outsider of a religious tradition, particularly of Islam?).
- To speak of “harmful effects” in ethical terms implies that we can map the mechanisms of domination that are thus reinforced. However, the social relationships that contribute to reproduce inequalities are multiple and intertwined (class, gender, etc.) which implies that this domination is both multidimensional and multidirectional.
- To speak of “religious practices” is not easy either, because practices defined as “religious” by some can be conceived as “cultural” by others.
- Lastly, to distinguish religious appropriation from religious conversion requires the ability to assess the degree of sincerity of “borrowers” and their level of engagement in the practices being borrowed, which means probing their “inner selves” or determining the authenticity of their actions and declarations –operations that are potentially fraught with normative or inquisitive judgments for which the social sciences are not intended.

20 These important and difficult discussions become even more complex because of the accusatory charge of the term “appropriation” –a term “with connotations” (Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini 2015: 10), an “overused and polarizing” concept according to Liz Bucar, which often obstructs rather than encourages debate:

The term is an accusation, a condemnation, an expression of moral outrage. Once it is deployed, conversation halts, as each party digs its heels in. This polarization assumes that the ethical implications of cultural borrowings are cut and dried, which they rarely are. (Bucar 2022: 11)

21 While the concept of appropriation can be positively reinvested (Derlon and Jeudy-Ballini 2015), this article mainly examines the way its negative meaning circulates.

22 The American Muslim minority is currently estimated at 3.45 million, or 1.1% of the U.S. population. It is often directly involved in these issues, because it is one of the most diverse religious groups in the United States, in terms of both ethno-racial and class affiliation. A recent Pew Research Center survey (2017) indicates that 20% of American Muslims are categorized as Black (which includes African Americans but also individuals of sub-Saharan immigrant origin), 28% are Asian (including people from India and Pakistan), 8% are Hispanic, 3% have diverse origins, and 40% are categorized as “white” (a category that includes a small share of white people with no recent migratory ancestry but mostly comprises individuals of Middle Eastern immigrant origin, who do not have a separate category in the U.S. census, although discussions are underway on this subject for the next census in 2030). Foreign-born Muslims who have immigrated to the United States, and their children, tend to belong to the most advantaged fractions of the Muslim community, while native-born Muslims, mainly African Americans, belong to the most disadvantaged fractions.⁵ These differences also intersect with conflicts of religious authority between the two groups, as we shall see. Converts represent around 21% of American Muslims. Another survey of American mosques (Bagby 2021) shows that among these converts, 57% are African American, 24% are white and 15% are Hispanic. The United States is also one of the countries where religious, cultural and political experiments in appropriating, reappropriating and reinventing the Islamic tradition have been particularly varied and inventive throughout the 20th century, with repercussions beyond the country’s borders.⁶ Finally,

in a context of strong Islamophobia (Love 2017, Selod 2018, Aziz 2021) where Muslim practices and beliefs are closely scrutinized, the question of who owns Islam and who can legitimately define its contours is particularly sensitive.

- 23 This article discusses the controversies over the desired interaction between “religion” and “culture” within contemporary American Islam, where several interpretive communities (formed at the intersection of theological positionings, class affiliations and racial categorizations) express divergent conceptions of both Islam and the United States. These controversies often make use of *the prism of “authenticity”*, either cultural or religious, when defining the content and scope of what is “truly” Islamic or “truly” American. The article begins by tracing a brief history of borrowings from the Islamic tradition by groups holding different positions in the U.S. system of social and racial stratification, showing how the *specter of appropriation* is hovering or not over each one. It then examines three registers of discourse around the notion of culture in Islam, which reveal contrasting understandings of authenticity among converts. *Acculturation* (i.e., assimilation to Muslim-majority countries’ cultural codes) is condemned as a loss of self and a dilution of the religious message, and is opposed by two responses: *exculturation* or the claim to an Islam unburdened by the traditions of the countries of origin, and which considers religious purity as the condition for Islamic authenticity and legitimacy; and *inculturation*, or the construction of an American Islam, which insists on the universal and culturally adaptable character of Islam but is faced with the problem of identifying what would be an authentic American culture. As we shall see, in a context shaped by profound inequalities, these claims of authenticity raise the specter of both *appropriation* and *expropriation*, and cannot be dissociated from an understanding of the relations of domination that run through the American Muslim minority.

The circulation of Islamic references in American history and the specter of appropriation

- 24 A detour through the history of the United States confirms the presence of multiple cultural borrowings from the Islamic tradition by social groups holding different positions in the country’s systems of social and racial stratification. These groups are characterized by varying degrees of commitment to Islam as a religion, and by a more or less subversive relationship to the established social order, which leads to contrasting assessments of their degree of authenticity and the risk of appropriation.
- 25 The most representative are the Shriners, or Ancient Arabic Order of the Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AAONMS), a Masonic fraternity founded in 1870, predominantly white (WASP) and male, philanthropic and Orientalist in inspiration. In Chicago, where my research was mainly located, a flamboyant brick building topped by a dome and adorned with geometric motifs still attracts the attention of passers-by strolling downtown (600 N. Wabash Avenue, to be precise). The word “Medinah” is inscribed on its pediment, and its façade is covered with *shahada* (Islamic profession of faith) in Arabic calligraphy. Soon to house a casino, it was a Bloomingdale’s store from 2003 to 2019, but was previously owned by the Shriners, who called it the “Medinah Temple” and held their meetings there. Members of the Shriner order wore what were considered Oriental costumes and practiced Islamic-inspired rites. Their outfits included fez hats, turbans, and long robes which they wore when parading in the street

during each of their conventions (including the “Road to Mecca” parade organized in Washington in 1923, which ended with a reception soberly entitled “Garden of Allah” at the White House).⁷ They adopted Islamic symbols such as the crescent, the star, and the black stone. Candidates for induction were greeted by the following words:

By the existence of Allah and the Creed of Mohammed, by the legendary sanctity of the Tabernacle at Mecca, we greet you. (Gomez 2005: 244)

- 26 The Shriners were the product of 19th century America’s fascination with the mystical East (Marr 2006, Nance 2009, Berman 2012). Another Masonic group was founded during the same period and was given the equally modest name of “The Sheiks of the Desert - Guardians of the Kaaba, Guardians of the Mystic Shrine” (Bowen 2015: 122). Their local chapters are named Omar, Mecca, Ben Hur, and Islam. Their centers are called “mosques”. However, these groups have never defined themselves as Muslim: their use of Islamic or Oriental symbols is essentially a strategy to distinguish themselves and present themselves as cosmopolitan citizens versed in ancient cultures, and to draw attention on their charitable deeds. While they have contributed to make the American public familiar with Islam, their version of Islam is highly Orientalized (Ghanea Bassiri 2010: 199-200) and is now the subject of much criticism. In 2023, the Shriners had nearly 200 local branches in 40 countries, and almost 200,000 members; their philanthropy primarily focuses on child healthcare.⁸ Since the 2010s, they have largely abandoned the Eastern theme, both because of growing Islamophobia in the post-9/11 context, which has exposed them to attacks,⁹ and in response to accusations of racism and cultural appropriation.¹⁰ But the red fez remains their main symbol, and some sections have continued to use explicitly Islamic symbols. In July 2023, the town council of Canmore in Canada¹¹ refused to allow the Shriners’ band (known as “the Al Azhar Oriental Band”) to take part in the town’s parade on the grounds that the band was “culturally appropriative and does not fit with our community values and standards”. If we stick to the definition provided by Liz Bucar (see above), the Shriners check a number of boxes of religious appropriation: they borrow Islamic symbols for purely aesthetic reasons and often caricature them; they dress in Oriental costumes for “fun” (as mentioned on their website); the members of their order are almost exclusively male and white; they show no concern for racial inequalities (for a long time Blacks were not admitted to white Masonic lodges). Yet, without denying these facts, historian Patrick Bowen, author of two books on the history of conversions to Islam in the United States, considers that historically the Shriners were much more serious about Islam than one might think: several of their founding members were the first to join the “American Islamic Propaganda” missionary movement, created in 1892 by Muslim convert Alexander Russell Webb to spread Islam on American soil.

The fact that [...] the *founders and leaders* of the New York and national Shriner organizations were the first members of Webb’s very serious movement casts much doubt on the persistent academic characterization of the Shriners as people who simply made a joke of Arabic and Islamic culture. (Bowen 2015: 148)

- 27 If today’s Shriner members are overwhelmingly white non-Muslims (with no recent migratory ancestry), the religious sincerity of the movement’s original founders remains contested.
- 28 The specter of the Shriners hovered over my fieldwork, and sometimes, though rarely, weighed in when assessing the religious sincerity of converts. Stephan (24, social worker, Chicago), a white convert who studied Middle Eastern history at a liberal arts college and discovered Islam as a result of his commitment to the Palestinian cause,

explains that the initial reasons for his conversion were, in his view, questionable: “On some level, there really was this youthful, bougie [bourgeois], Western thing that led me to exotify Islam.” His pro-Palestinian activist friends found his conversion “ridiculous” and rolled their eyes when he told them. In his interview with me, he explained that he had since brought more reflection to the matter. As this example shows, conversion was sometimes, albeit rarely, perceived negatively and the sincerity of converts doubted because their approach was perceived as yet another Orientalist fantasy that amounted to “eating the other” with Islam functioning as a “spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture” (hooks 1992: 21). One of my interviewees, Mary (33, project manager, St. Louis), mentioned a stormy conversation she had with a Syrian-American friend of hers who refused to help her at the time of her conversion: “She reacted very strangely. Almost as if it was ‘their’ religion and she didn’t understand about people converting.” The specter of appropriation and religious insincerity also haunts all the work of Michael Muhammad Knight, who wrote the following in 2006, including himself in this characterization: “I can say with authority that every white Muslim in America [is] at least a little off” (Knight 2006: 87). “Off” here refers to being superficial, uncultured, appropriating Islam for one’s own satisfaction and from a position of dominance. In 2011, he repeated his fears: “Here I am, a white man consuming Islam. By embracing what I love, I may poison it” (Knight 2011: 89). The question of religious appropriation, while not very present in my inquiry overall, would arise from time to time in relation to converts categorized as white. It was entirely absent, however, when talking about African American converts (who represent the majority of converts to Islam).

- 29 Alongside the Shriners, black Masonic groups have also borrowed symbols and references from Islam. The Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order-Nobles of the Mystic Shrine (AEOANMS) or Black Shriners founded in 1893 is a case in point (the organization has been sued several times by the white Shriners for “imitation”:¹² without success). These borrowing practices have also produced movements more directly rooted in Islamic tradition. Founded in 1913 by Timothy Drew, aka Noble Drew Ali (1886-1929), the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA) is the best example. Inspired by Masonism, it developed its own Islamic-inspired theology according to which the origin of black men can be traced back to the kingdom of Morocco, which means that they are “Moors”, descendants of the biblical Moabites and Canaanites. Islam is presented as the “natural religion” of “Asian people” (all populations of color), a religion that must therefore be rediscovered and excavated from the rubble in which the violence of slavery has buried it, while Christianity must be kept at bay (Allen 2000, Nance 2002, Gomez 2005, chapter 6). Insistence on the Moorish origin of African Americans is intended to circumvent the stigma associated with the “Negro” racial category: members of the Moorish Science Temple of America refused to check this box on administrative forms (Berman 2012: 156) and were issued identity cards by the movement on which they were identified as “Moslems” and “Moorish Americans”. By adopting Arabic-sounding names and wearing Oriental clothes, a fez or turbans, they could sometimes escape the brutality of racial segregation by pretending to be foreigners. The movement is thus heavily involved in subverting the established racial order and promoting an alternative vision of American racial and religious history and citizenship; the movement aims to shape a new America (Dew 2019). And while Noble Drew Ali’s book, *Holy Koran of the Moorish Science Temple of America*, is based mainly on apocryphal Christian writings, he replaced the term God with “Allah” and urged

members of his movement to pray daily facing the east, to become vegetarians and abstain from alcohol. The relationship to Islamic tradition that Noble Drew Ali and his followers promoted is thus widely different from the Shriners' Orientalist vision of Islam. Anthropologist and historian Zareena Grewal considers that:

While white Shriners used these symbols ironically, Black participation in such lodges and parades and appropriations of Oriental signs was neither playful nor politically neutral. [...] The turbans, crescents and stars, the exotic robes worn by MSTA members [...] were far more than exotic fashion and performance; they symbolized a historical and divine recovery of knowledge lost in the tragic upheaval of American slavery that had wrenched Islam from African slaves. (Grewal 2013: 96-97)

- 30 Other African American movements also adopted Islamic references. Such was the case for the Nation of Islam, founded in 1930 in Detroit by a mysterious man, Wallace Fard Muhammad (who claimed to be a new prophet of Islam before quickly disappearing in unexplained circumstances). In 1934, leadership was taken over by Elijah Muhammad (1897-1975) who came to personify the movement. It was also represented by famous spokesmen such as Malcolm X (1925-1965, until he left the movement to embrace Sunni Islam in 1964) and boxer Muhammad Ali (1942-2016, who also converted to Sunni Islam in 1975). The Nation of Islam does not wear the Oriental outfits of the Moorish science temple (male members wear suits, ties and bow ties; female followers are encouraged to cover their hair and wear neutral colors), but instead it reappropriates elements of the Islamic tradition (greetings, dietary prohibitions on pork and alcohol, vocabulary, etc.), which it reinterprets in the context of white supremacy. Its theology claims that white men are in reality demons who were created by a mad scientist named Yakub 6,000 years ago to dominate the original black men. Islam is presented as the "true religion of the black man" and reinvented as a racial theology that resonates with the living conditions of African Americans. Other movements followed in its footsteps, such as the Five Percenters founded in 1964 by Clarence 13X in Harlem, which went even further, proclaiming that the black man is in fact God personified (Knight 2011). These movements, often characterized as "heterodox" and later abandoned by some members for Sunni Islam, have all reappropriated Islam for the purpose of subverting the American racial order. They have not borrowed Islam cosmetically or playfully, but have reinvented it to create an unprecedented African American and Muslim culture that endures to this day. When paying close attention to the lyrics of hip-hop groups from the 80s and 90s (such as Brand Nubian, Rakim Allah, Poor Righteous Teachers, Busta Rhymes, Gang Starr, Pete Rock, CL Smooth, Wu Tang Clan, Mobb Deep, Sunz of Man, Digable Planets, the Fugees, Public Enemy, Nas, The Roots, etc.), one quickly notices that they are interspersed with Islamic references that borrow the language of the Nation of Islam or the Five Percenters, or the social justice rhetoric of their spokespeople. While these movements may have been criticized for their *religious heterodoxy*¹³ (which has led to tensions with Muslims from immigrant backgrounds in particular), they have never been accused of *religious appropriation*. Their borrowing from the Islamic tradition is considered a *reappropriation*, rather than an appropriation. First, because their use of Islamic references has always been tied to a political project of denouncing inequalities, and second, because their discourse features a return to the religion of enslaved ancestors –it is estimated that between 15% and 30% of the slaves who were deported to America came from Islamized African regions (Diouf 1998, Gomez 2005). Although these movements have remained marginal in number –today, it is estimated that only 2% of African Americans define themselves as Muslim (Pew

Research Center 2019)– their influence has been considerable. They have helped to firmly anchor Islam in the political and cultural imaginary of African Americans, even non-Muslim ones (McAlister 1999). This has granted Islam a dimension of cultural familiarity and has allowed it to play a considerable role in developing an alternative and emancipatory racial imaginary.¹⁴

- 31 These debates about cultural appropriation do not, however, fully capture the complexity of the relationship between religion and culture in American Islam, which is also influenced by logics of acculturation, exculturation and inculturation.

The risk of acculturation, or the discourse of “reverse appropriation”

- 32 Interviews with converts revealed anxieties about the links between culture and religion in the context of their conversion. These anxieties frequently revolved around the fear of *acculturation*, the process by which religion adapts to the culture of the dominant group, to the point where it becomes entirely subordinated to it and loses its substance. In conversations recorded with white and black converts during my fieldwork, the “dominant culture” was described as the culture of Muslim immigrants or their descendants, mainly from the Middle East or South Asia, who were perceived as hegemonic. Thus, converts who too obviously embraced cultural rather than religious practices from these parts of the world (such as ways of speaking, dressing or cooking) were criticized for falling into the “cultural trap” of religious conversion. In Detroit, Khabir (23, hairdresser), an African American convert to Islam, with a Christian Baptist mother and a Nation of Islam father, criticized the current tendency of new Muslims to adopt the cultural codes of Muslim communities of immigrant origin:

Personally, it disgusts me. [...] Why do you want to be other than yourself? One day you are James Collar, the next day, you know what I am saying, you turn your name to Abdul Rasheed. And there, from Abdul Rasheed, you get around a community of Indo-Pakistanis. Now you want to talk with an accent, and carry yourself like you come from South Asia... It is like “Bro! you are from Dexter! You went to school in the hood. You went to Cooley high school. You and your family isn’t South Asian. Where did you get this from?” [...] Before your slave master was a European God figure. Now you think God is an Arab. Now you think God is a South Asian.

- 33 Khabir was critical about the confusion between Islamic authenticity and Arab or *desi* culture, which he believes reproduces the racial domination of African Americans in the religious sphere.
- 34 Jonathan (36, technician, Chicago), a white convert from a working-class neighborhood, who embraced Islam as a teenager and soon became part of the Syrian-Lebanese community in the Chicago suburbs, also explains that he felt drowned in the Arab culture to the point of picking up the accent: “I don’t even remember how I used to speak before I became Muslim. Everyone I meet tells me that I have this accent now.” Jonathan considers that he has been “culturally brainwashed”, a process which he said “affects Caucasian Americans [sic] much more than any other group” because they “have no culture” and are therefore overwhelmed by the culture of others. While reproducing the concept that whiteness is neutral, culture-free and therefore universal, Jonathan reverses the direction of domination: this whiteness is bland, subject to cultural contamination and under-represented in the Muslim circles in

which he now moves. He does not consider himself a dominant white person who has appropriated elements of foreign culture, but a dominated convert (because he is a novice, but also because of his working-class background, while his foreign-born co-religionists are often better off economically) on whom cultural content other than his own has been *imposed* under the guise of religious training. Here, the discourse of appropriation is completely turned on its head.

The promise of exculturation and the specter of expropriation

- 35 In response, comments made during interviews often included a critique of “culture” and a desire to separate “cultural” markers from “religious” ones and identify an authentic Islam, purified from the cultural influences that would have contaminated and distorted it. These discourses, which are the product of secularization and of the era of “religion without culture” so well analyzed by Olivier Roy (2008), are typical of the Islamic renewal that is sweeping through Muslim communities worldwide, and to which converts are particularly sensitive. This idea is expressed by Jasmine in her Facebook post quoted above (“I feel like I’m still trying to navigate what is culture and what is real”), and what is *real* here is explicitly distinguished from what is cultural.
- 36 The belief in the existence of a pure or “real” religion that could be clearly distinguished, while wishful thinking, nonetheless functions as a powerful criterion for distinguishing conversions considered authentic from those that are not (Galonnier et al. 2019). This was why Jonathan criticized his past practice of the religion (in the early days of his conversion) and now subscribed to a Salafist version of Islam. This branch proposes a return to the pure or “fundamental” Islam of the time of the pious predecessors, and promotes an “exculturation” approach, i.e., “the reformulation of this religion in a number of norms” (Roy 2008: 234), detached from the cultural context of the regions of the world in which it has historically developed. It is interesting to note the appeal of Salafism among converts worried about distinguishing cultural markers from religious ones and about affirming the legitimacy of the fact that they belong to Islam (Adraoui 2019). Another white convert interviewed for this inquiry, Umar Lee (40, cab driver, St. Louis), also from a working-class background, wrote in a book published online *The Rise and Fall of the Salafi Da’wah in America* (Lee 2014), that Salafism was the only Islamic movement in the United States in which “he did not feel like a tourist” as a white American. This supposed absence of culture is what makes Salafism so attractive to newcomers in search of legitimacy, while chasing away the specter of appropriation. Indeed, fundamentalism “accepts its own deculturation and makes it the instrument of its claim to universality” (Roy 2013: 5): it minimizes relations of domination by implying that there are no differences other than religious between the faithful.
- 37 However, it cannot be excluded that these processes of exculturation are also exercised from a position of domination, as Michael Muhammad Knight suggests in his article (which, however, does not deal with fundamentalism) and as well documented by Esra Ozyurek in the case of converts to Islam in Germany, some of whom have embraced Salafism. According to her:
- Salafi puritanism –that is, a conversionist, literalist, anticulturalist, and antihistorical version of Islam– is attractive to both converts and born Muslims who

did not necessarily grow up as practicing Muslims. [...] Salafism even permits them to feel superior to Muslims with immigrant backgrounds and invites them to true Islam, which is not Turkish, Arab, or Pakistani. (Ozyurek 2015: 130-131)

- 38 The aim is no longer to appropriate, but to expropriate the different cultures (Arab, Indo-Pakistani, North African, Senegalese, etc.) that have become too closely associated with the Islamic tradition, and to free it from the cultural fog that shrouds it.

“The cultural imperative”: attempts at inculturation and the return of appropriation

- 39 The exculturation typical of fundamentalist movements was not, however, the posture most observed in my fieldwork. The desire was greater to develop an Islam culturally compatible with the American context than to see the emergence of a totally “deculturated” Islam. Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, the American convert and Muslim theologian discussed above, even considers the path of exculturation harmful. In his seminal article “Islam and the Cultural Imperative” (2004), he is critical of the “cultural phobia” that characterizes certain currents of Islam, and he explains:

Many in our community today look askance at culture but with only the vaguest notions of what culture actually is and the fundamental role it plays in human existence. For them, “culture” is a loaded word, something dangerous, inherently problematic, and “un-Islamic”. Culture, for them, is a toxic pollutant that must necessarily be purged, since Islam and culture are mutually exclusive in their minds. [...] Such cultural phobia is untenable in the light of classical Islamic jurisprudence and is antithetical to more than a millennium of successful indigenous Islamic cultures and global civilization.

- 40 Conversely, what Faruq Abd-Allah describes as the “cultural imperative” is the need for the emergence of an American Islamic culture, which he describes as “indigenous”:

Islam must be indigenous –not in the sense of losing identity through total assimilation or of being the exclusive property of the native-born– but in the word’s original sense, namely, being natural, envisioned, and born from within. We must be producers of culture, not passive consumers of it.

- 41 For him, this cultural imperative takes on the dimension of a sacred obligation: “Our sacred law requires us to undertake the task.” In everyday life, the development of an American Islamic culture involves a whole range of practices involving culture, language, food, clothing, etc. In terms of language, the American accent is proudly claimed when pronouncing Arabic terms. Brian (23, Islamic studies student, Chicago), an American convert of Italian origin, has a perfect command of Arabic pronunciation, but he deliberately keeps his American accent when using Islamic expressions, and explains:

I can do the whole *as-salaam’alaykum* [perfect pronunciation according to classical Arabic standards]. But I refuse to do that shit. For me *salamalekum* will always be *salamalekum* [pronounced with an American accent]. [...] So I am just like blatantly disrespecting rules of pronunciation or like cultural bullshit. I don’t know... It’s like if you came into my house and I told you “We are going to have *gnoocchi* [exaggerated Italian pronunciation] today.” I would not expect you to say *gnoocchi*! And if you said *gnoocchi*, I would be like “get the fuck out of here!” You are not Italian, you are never going to be Italian, so why try?

- 42 Brian explicitly refuses to adopt the speech norms of languages other than English in order to maintain what he considers to be authenticity in his religious practice and to

remain true to his American-ness. These efforts can also be seen in the relationship of converts with eating customs and the question of what represents “Muslim cuisine”, beyond the South Asian, North African or Levantine style of cooking usually represented. On the Facebook page of the organization The Islamic Connection, an African American convert explains:

Muslim food is the mac & cheese, collard greens, turkey sticks, Lima beans, corn bread, BBQ, sweet potato, and bean pie that I was raised on. Muslim food is so diverse!

- 43 It is worth noting that bean pie, a recipe invented by the Nation of Islam as part of the diet prescribed by Elijah Muhammad in his famous book *How to Eat to Live* (1967), has become a symbol of American Muslim culture. Clothing is also an issue. Ubaydullah Evans, an African American convert and Muslim intellectual who frequently taught religious classes in Chicago at the time of my fieldwork, was known among all my informants for his distinctive way of dressing and his taste for three-piece suits, cufflinks, double-breasted jackets, American collar shirts and bow ties. He explains in a video for ALIM (American Learning Institute for Muslims) that, at the time of his conversion, he had packed away all his clothes and exclusively worn the *thawb* (a long white robe common in the Gulf states) until he met African American convert and Muslim theologian Sherman Jackson who convinced him that it was possible to be authentically Muslim and keep his clothing preferences at the same time. At the end of his studies at Al-Azhar University in Cairo, he proudly remembers that he was the only one to wear a bow tie at his graduation ceremony.¹⁵ Note that Latin Americans, who account for 8% of American Muslims overall (Pew Research Center 2017) and 15% of converts to Islam (Bagby 2021: 13) have the same dilemma. Their experiences of conversion date back to as early as the 1920s, following the footsteps of African Americans (Bowen 2013). They have created their own organizations such as the *Alianza Islamica* (founded in 1987), the Latin American Da’wah Organization (LADO, founded in 1997 with the slogan “¡Puro Latino! ¡Puro Islam!”), and Islam in Spanish (founded in the early 2000s and which opened the country’s first Spanish-speaking Islamic center in Houston in 2016). These organizations emphasize Latin American language, culture and cuisine. They also contribute to the inculturation of Islam on American soil (Morales 2018).
- 44 However, this inculturation process is complicated by the fact that there is no consensus on what “American culture” is, and who its legitimate representatives may be. In June 2013, I went with several of my informants to a much-anticipated event at the University of Chicago.¹⁶ It was a conference entitled “Exploring American Spiritual Authenticity”, and Sherman Jackson, the highly respected African American Muslim theologian mentioned above, was to be the speaker. While Jackson’s plane was stranded in Detroit, the conference was transformed into a conversation between several local Islamic figures, including Ubaydullah Evans and Tahera Ahmad, a female Muslim chaplain (Northwestern University) and Qur’an reciter. Tahera Ahmad opened the discussion by quoting long extracts from Umar Faruq-Abd-Allah’s article on the cultural imperative. Ubaydullah Evans, true to his legendary humor, then spoke, saying:

It’s a sign that we move forward and we make progress when the scholars invited to speak don’t even know what the topic means. American spiritual authenticity... I don’t even know what it means!

45 Laughter broke out among the large audience that had gathered that day in the university auditorium. The panelists then expanded on the subject, focusing on the notion of “spiritual authenticity” and offering several perspectives on what this authenticity implies in terms of humility, self-sacrifice, generosity –skillfully leaving aside the adjective “American” which was nevertheless in the title of the conference. They went on until the audience was allowed to respond. Amina, the Sudanese-American blogger mentioned above, with whom I was sitting in the auditorium, playfully brought up the subject by repeating the words of Umar Faruq Abd-Allah’s article: “What does it mean to be an *indigenous* American Muslim?” Silence fell among the panelists, who looked at each other smiling, each waiting for the other to speak. Finally, Ubaydullah Evans spoke up, side-stepping the issue:

I know the label indigenous is controversial. I would say that it depends on how you see America. Do you see America as home or do you see somewhere else as your home? But I recognize it is a problematic term.

46 References to being indigenous are effectively problematic in more ways than one in the American context. First, because the American nation was founded on settler colonialism and the removal of Native American peoples. Those who could be characterized as truly indigenous were not present in the auditorium that day, with the exception of Jessica, of Choctaw lineage, and her cousin Lucinda, both Native American converts to Islam.¹⁷ Second, this type of discourse is often associated with conservative anti-immigration rhetoric, which does not correspond to the political views of most of the participants.

47 Identification of the locus of American Islamic authenticity is therefore a source of conflict. In their efforts to indigenize Islam, American Muslims could certainly draw on the long legacy of the movements of the early 20th century (Moorish Science Temple, Nation of Islam, etc.), which helped reinvent the Islamic tradition and adapt it to the American context. Deepa (38, social worker, Chicago), an American convert of Indian origin from a Christian family points out:

There wouldn’t be an American Islam without African American Islam. They really paved the way for us. They are our first teachers, they are our first models to combine that, America and Islam.

48 For Deepa, African American Muslims paved the way for the development of a distinctly American expression of Islam. But this idea is not self-evident in Muslim circles dominated by Muslim immigrants or their descendants for the next two generations (who, as we have seen, tend to belong more frequently to the middle and upper classes in the United States) where the African American heritage (mainly rooted in poorer classes) is often ignored, kept in silence, or even despised. For Sherman Jackson (2005), an African American convert and Muslim theologian, what he calls “immigrant Islam” has long functioned as a “false universal” that imposes on American Muslims a set of specific cultural norms (South Asian, Levantine, North African) falsely qualified as universally Islamic. In his view, the relatively affluent position of Muslim immigrants in the United States has contributed to establish this claim and to relegate to the shadows “African American Islam” associated with the margins, with prison experiences and underprivileged inner cities and a reputation for heterodoxy. Sherman Jackson firmly defends the need to re-examine the centrality of the African American experience to allow the development of an indigenous American Muslim culture. At a conference held at the Masjid al Faatir¹⁸ mosque on Chicago’s South Side (a

predominantly African American mosque built in 1983 on a plot of land donated by boxer Muhammad Ali) and moderated by Umar Faruq Abd-Allah himself, Sherman Jackson referred to African Americans as the “*Banu Hashim*”¹⁹ of America, a local community that has accepted Islam as its very own, even if not all have converted. In this respect, he expressed concern for European Muslims, who, in his opinion, do not enjoy such “indigenous” roots:

Look at the Muslims in Europe. Frankly, I don’t know what they are going to do there. Because they have no indigenous Muslim community. America is unique in that regard. It is the only country which has a home-grown Muslim community.

- 49 Such discourse on the need to promote an authentically American Islam circulates in different circles, is defended from different positions in the American racial stratification and draws on multiple historical heritages. Umar Faruq-Abdallah refers to this in his article:

One size does not fit all. [...] But to embrace all and foster a true sense of continuity and community among us, our culture must address Islam’s transcendent and universal values, while constructing a broad national matrix that fits all like a master key, despite ethnic, class, and social background. [...] In drawing upon the fertile resources of the American cultural legacy, we must pay special heed to the rich and often neglected heritage of Native Americans and Hispanics as well as Anglo- and African Americans.

- 50 By listing them, he suggests a rediscovery of the too-often despised heritage of Native Americans, Latinos, Anglo-Americans and African Americans, to promote an alternative vision to the Islam of immigrant communities from South Asia or the Middle East, too often placed at the center of narratives about Islam in the United States.
- 51 This strategy of shifting the center to allow the invention of a Muslim grammar that can survive in the American context implies a separation from what is not considered “indigenous”. It is now the heritage of immigrant Muslim populations from South Asia or the Middle East that is cast aside and considered as less relevant. In the Chicago suburbs, not far from my field of research, a foundation created in 2004 called the Mohammed Webb Foundation,²⁰ in honor of Alexander Russell Webb, seeks to implement Faruq Abd-Allah’s program of “positive synthesis of American culture and Muslim identity”. Its founding members have actually all studied under Faruq Abd-Allah (Howe 2018: 36-37). Anthropologist Justine Howe, who conducted an ethnography at the Webb Foundation, describes the ambivalence that necessarily surrounds the project of the cultural imperative. Within the context of this foundation located in a predominantly white, affluent suburb, it was the name of a historic white American convert that was chosen to promote the image of a reassuring Islam, culturally adapted to the American context. Half of its members are first- or second-generation South Asian immigrants, a quarter are white converts and the last quarter are Arab Americans (Howe 2018: 3), and all of them have an ambivalent relationship with “culture”:

At Webb, culture is at once the problem and the solution. [...] The inclusive rhetoric of “American culture” at Webb is itself laden with appeals to American superiority. (Howe 2018: 56-57)

- 52 While the culture of Muslim immigrants is rejected as religiously inauthentic and culturally unsuited to the American context, the American culture, though vaguely defined, is established as a condition for freedom. The cultural solution to the problem of Islamic authenticity in the American context therefore raises other issues, namely

that there are competing visions of cultural and religious authenticity that intersect with unequal race and class relations. The attempts to reinvent a culturally American Islam presented above revisit the African American heritage and draw from it, but often strip it of its most radical elements. Practices from the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam such as community engagement, clothing, food or the arts are kept, but not necessarily their theology of subversion of the established racial order. In a historical loop effect, African American Islam, itself the fruit of a reappropriation of the Islamic tradition, is now being selectively appropriated for purposes other than those for which it was initially intended: to promote a culturally “comfortable” Islam for Muslim Americans of all backgrounds. This takes place in a context of strong Islamophobia in which American Muslims are challenged to demonstrate their allegiance to the American nation and culture, and where any speech deemed radical or subversive is under surveillance (Curtis 2013, Kamali 2017).

- 53 In turn, the appropriation of the African American cultural and religious heritage gives rise to further dissension. Mia is a 37-year-old social worker of Puerto Rican origin from a working-class Christian family, who first encountered Islam through African American friends in her neighborhood (some belonging to the Nation of Islam, others Sunni) and later embraced it as she became more and more involved in the local hip-hop scene. In an interview, she mentioned her uneven interactions with what she characterized as middle- and upper-class Muslim women of South Asian immigrant descent living in affluent suburbs. One day, as she was driving one of them home after an Islamic artistic event in Chicago, she played the album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (1998). Although hip-hop artist Lauryn Hill is not Muslim, she draws inspiration from the heritage of African American Islam, and some of her lyrics include Islamic references (“I make *salah* like a Sunni” in the track “The Final Hour”; “Don’t forget about the *deen*, *sirat-al-mustaqeem*” in the track “Doo Wop”, etc.). Anyone who listens to the whole album will notice that it is organized around skits inserted at the beginning of each song, in which a class of teenagers can be heard discussing various topics (love, etc.). However, when the songs are played on the radio, the skits cannot be heard. Mia tells how her *desi* fellow Muslim raved when she heard the Lauryn Hill CD but did not seem to recognize the skits, which in Mia’s eyes betrayed the inauthenticity of her music consumption.

These [Muslim girls], they kind of talk like me, and they are quoting these hip-hop songs that I literally listened to my whole life... You know, like, it was just weird! [...] And I remember giving a ride one time in my car, and I had Lauryn Hill... Are you familiar with the CD, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*? So, there is the songs, but she has these little skits in-between the songs. So, anybody could know the song, it is always played on the radio. But I was playing the CD and I remember one of the girls being like “what is this? I never heard... these little comments in the middle! What are they doing?” And I was like “It is the whole story! They are at school and they are asking these kids these questions!” And I remember being offended, like “How can you talk about how cool this song is and you got no idea what was going on!” It does not seem authentic to me. It is authentic to them, because in their home, they are the only person who probably listen to American music, right? But it is not authentic to me.

- 54 In this ordinary conversation inside a car, the details of the composition of a musical album are no longer details. They serve to define the contours of authentic belonging to an American Islamic culture which, for Mia, is anchored in an experience of inner-city life, an immersion in the world of hip-hop and an intimate knowledge of the

African American Islamic heritage which, she believes, only represents a cosmetic reference for some Muslims.

Conclusion

- 55 In his article “What is Universal and Local in Islam?”, anthropologist John Bowen (1998) shows that Muslims are torn between “struggles to define the universal qualities of the ‘religious’ and attempts to develop distinct identities, local by definition, with regard to these universal qualities”. Culture holds a central place in these struggles, and is approached in different ways, whether to acculturate, exculturate or inculturate religion. This article demonstrates that efforts to connect and disconnect Islam from “culture” in the American context are received differently depending on the social position of those who defend them. Converting to Islam, proposing to reform it, adapting it to the American context and reinventing its heritage are activities that take shape in the intertwined power relations that run through American society, and which take on a different meaning depending on whether one is categorized as White, Black, Hispanic, Arab or Pakistani, and whether one belongs to the lower or upper class. The specter of appropriation –and of expropriation as well– hovers over these attempts, and raises the question of ownership of the Islamic tradition: who has the right to take, reshape, culturalize or deculturalize Islam? In their contrasting responses to these questions, American Muslims show above all that they are a “community of debate”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adraoui, M.-A. 2019. “Trajectoires de convertis au salafisme en France: marginalisation, socialisation, conversion.” *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 186(2): 53-70.
- Allen, E. Jr. 2000. “Identity and Destiny: The Formative Views of the Moorish Science Temple and the Nation of Islam.” in Y. Yazbeck Haddad and J. L. Esposito (eds) *Muslims on the Americanization Path?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 163-214.
- Allen, E. Jr. 1996. “Religious heterodoxy and nationalist tradition: the continuing evolution of the Nation of Islam.” *The Black Scholar* 26(3-4): 2-34.
- Altglas, V. 2014. *From yoga to kabbalah: Religious exoticism and the logics of bricolage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aziz, S. F. 2021. *The racial Muslim: when racism quashes religious freedom*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bagby, I. 2021. *The American Mosque 2020: Growing and Evolving. Report 1 of the US Mosque Survey 2020: Basic Characteristics of the American Mosque*. Dearborn: Institute for Social Policy and Understanding.
- Berman, J. R. 2012. *American Arabesque: Arabs, Islam and the 19th Century Imaginary*. New York: New York University Press.

- Borup, J. 2020. "Who owns religion? Intersectionality, identity politics, and cultural appropriation in postglobal Buddhism." *Numen* 67: 226-255.
- Bowen, J. R. 1998. "What is 'Universal' and 'Local' in Islam?" *Ethos* 26(2): 258-261.
- Bowen, P. D. 2013. "U.S. Latina/o Muslims Since 1920: From 'Moors' to 'Latino Muslims'." *Journal of Religious History* 37(2): 165-184.
- Bowen, P. D. 2015. *A History of Conversion to Islam in the United States, Volume 1, White American Muslims Before 1975*. Leiden: Brill.
- Bruce, S. 2017. *Secular beats spiritual: The westernization of the easternization of the west*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brunk, C. G. and J. O. Young. 2009. "The Skin Off Our Backs: Appropriation of Religion." in *The ethics of cultural appropriation*. Oxford: Blackwell, 93-114.
- Bucar, L. 2022. *Stealing My Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation*. New York: Harvard University Press.
- Curtis, E. E. IV. 2013. "The Black Muslim Scare of the Twentieth Century: History of State Islamophobia and Its Post-9/11 Variations." in C. Ernst (dir.) *Islamophobia in America: The anatomy of intolerance*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 75-106.
- Derlon, B. and M. Jeudy-Ballini. 2015. "Introduction. Arts et appropriations transculturelles." *Cahiers d'anthropologie sociale* 2: 9-23.
- Dew, S. 2019. *The Aliites: Race and Law in the Religions of Noble Drew Ali*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Diouf, S. A. 1998. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims enslaved in the Americas*. New York: New York University Press.
- Faruq Abd-Allah, U. 2004. "Islam and the Cultural Imperative." Burr Ridge IL: Nawawi Foundation.
- Faruq Abd-Allah, U. 2006. *A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Galonnier, J. 2015. "When 'White Devils' Join the *Deen*: White American Converts to Islam and the Experience of Non-Normative Whiteness." *Notes&Documents*, Sciences Po Paris/OSC, February 2015, <https://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-01422847/document>.
- Galonnier, J. 2017. "Choosing Faith and Facing Race: Converting to Islam in France and the United States", sociology thesis, Institut d'études politiques de Paris and Northwestern University.
- Galonnier, J., A. Puzenat, H. Khateb and G. Mossière (dir.). 2019. "Conversions à l'islam, culture et religion: tensions et articulations." *Archives des sciences sociales des religions* 186.
- Galonnier, J. 2021. "'Venez comme vous êtes à l'islam tel qu'il est': Individualisme religieux et travail de conversion dans une organisation musulmane américaine." *Genèses* 124(3): 9-30.
- Ghanea Bassiri, K. 2010. *A History of Islam in America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gomez, M. A. 2005. *Black Crescent: The Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grewal, Z. 2013. *Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority*. New York: New York University Press.

- Hermansen, M. 2009. "Cultural worlds/culture wars: contemporary American Muslim perspectives on the role of culture." *Journal of Islamic Law and Culture* 11(3): 185-195.
- hooks, b. 1992. "Eating the Other." in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Boston: South End Press, 21-39.
- Howe, J. 2018. *Suburban Islam*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- ISPU. 2022. "Native American And Indigenous Muslim Stories: Reclaiming the Narrative." Dearborn, Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, URL: <https://www.ispu.org/naimsvisions-and-voices/>.
- Jackson, S. 2005. *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jouili, J. S. 2019. "Islam and Culture: Dis/junctures in a modern conceptual terrain." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61(1): 207-237.
- Kamali, S. 2017. "Informants, Provocateurs, and Entrapment: Examining the Histories of the FBI's PATCON and the NYPD's Muslim Surveillance Program." *Surveillance & Society* 15(1): 68-78.
- Knight, M. M. 2004. *The Taqwacores*. New York: Soft Skull Press.
- Knight, M. M. 2006. *Blue-Eyed Devil. A Road Odyssey Through Islamic America*. New York: Soft Skull Press.
- Knight, M. M. 2011. *Why I Am a Five Percenter*. New York: Tarcher.
- Knight, M. M. 2013a. "The Problem with White Converts." *Vice*, March 12, 2013, URL: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/vdyay3/the-problem-with-white-converts-to-islam>.
- Knight, M. M. 2013b. "Michael Muhammad Knight vs. Hamza Yusuf." *Vice*, March 19, 2013, URL: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7be3y4/michael-muhammad-knight-vs-hamza-yusuf>.
- Knight, M. M. 2015. *Why I Am a Salafi*. New York: Soft Skull Press.
- Knight, M. M. 2016. *Magic in Islam*. New York: Tarcher.
- Lee, U. 2014. *The Rise and Fall of the Salafi Dawah in America: A Memoir by Umar Lee*. Kindle Edition.
- Love, E. 2017. *Islamophobia and Racism in America*. New York: New York University Press.
- Marr, T. 2006. *The Cultural Roots of American Islamicism*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Martin, D.-C. 2014. "Attention, une musique peut en cacher une autre. L'appropriation, A et Ω de la creation." *Volume!* 10(2): 47-67.
- McAlister, M. 1999. "One Black Allah: The Middle East in the Cultural Politics of African American Liberation, 1955-1970." *American Quarterly* 51(3) 622-656.
- Morales, H. D. 2018. *Latino and Muslim in America: Race, Religion, and the Making of a New Minority*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nance, S. 2002. "Mystery of the Moorish Science Temple: Southern Black and American Alternative Spirituality in 1920s Chicago." *Religion and American Culture* 12(2): 123-166.
- Nance, S. 2009. *How the Arabian Nights Inspired the American Dream 1790-1935*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Niebuhr, H. R. 1951. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Özyürek, E. 2014. *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*. New York: Princeton University Press.

- Pew Research Center. 2021. *Faith among Black Americans*. Washington: Pew Research Center.
- Pew Research Center. 2019. "Black Muslims account for a fifth of all U.S. Muslims, and about half are converts to Islam." *Short reads*, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/01/17/black-muslims-account-for-a-fifth-of-all-u-s-muslims-and-about-half-are-converts-to-islam/>.
- Pew Research Center. 2017. *2017 Survey of US Muslims*. Washington: Pew Research Center.
- Philippon, A. 2014. "De l'occidentalisation du soufisme à la réislamisation du New Age? Sufi Order International et la globalisation du religieux." *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 135: 209-226.
- Rogers, R. A. 2006. "From Cultural Exchange to Transculturation: A Review and Reconceptualization of Cultural Appropriation." *Communication Theory* 16: 474-503.
- Roy, O. [2008] 2013. *Holy Ignorance: When religion and culture part ways*, translated by Ros Schwartz. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Selod, S. 2018. *Forever suspect: Racialized surveillance of Muslim Americans in the war on terror*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Spickard, J. 2012. "A sociologist re-reads Niebuhr's Christ and culture." *Ogbomoso Journal of Theology* 17(1): 19-37.
- Tourage, M. 2013. "Performing belief and reviving Islam: Prominent (white male) converts in Muslim revival conventions." *Performing Islam* 1(2): 207-222.

NOTES

1. The material on which this article is based is drawn from my doctoral research on conversions to Islam in France and the United States (Galonnier 2017). This article focuses on the American side of the inquiry, which is the context in which discussions around issues of cultural appropriation were most lively and frequent. Forty converts to Islam, women and men of various generations and socioeconomic backgrounds, were interviewed in several major cities in the American Midwest: Chicago (26), St. Louis (6) and Detroit (8). Ethnographic observations were also conducted in convert organizations, such as *The Islamic Connection* founded in 2005, and in different study programs for new Muslims in Chicago, from January 2013 to May 2014.
2. For more details on this organization, see Galonnier (2021).
3. Reviving the Islamic Spirit (RIS) conferences, at which Hamza Yusuf is a frequent speaker, are large-scale Muslim conventions held each year in North America since 2001.
4. Facebook, March 15, 2013, names have all been changed.
5. Thus, according to a Pew Research Center survey, 15% of foreign-born Muslims have a college degree, compared with just 5% of American-born Muslims (against 11% in the general American population). Similarly, 29% of foreign-born Muslims have an annual household income of \$100,000 or more, compared with only 18% of native-born Muslims (and 23% of the general population). Respectively 37% and 45% of foreign-born Muslims and U.S.-born Muslims have an annual income of less than \$30,000 (compared with 32% in the total population). This socioeconomic assessment shows a community highly polarized in terms of education and income (Pew Research Center 2017).
6. Historically, figures such as Malcolm X or Muhammad Ali have represented American Islam on a global scale. In recent years, several American Muslim personalities are included each year in the list of the 500 most influential Muslims in the world, published by the Royal Islamic Strategic Studies Centre in Amman [<https://themuslim500.com/>]. Sheikh Hamza Yusuf is always in a good

position (in the top 50). This influence is noteworthy when compared to the small size of the American Muslim population (1.1% of the total population).

7. John Kelly, "In June 1923, Washington was transformed into the Middle East", *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2023, URL: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/02/25/shriners-convention-dc/>.

8. <https://www.shrinersinternational.org/en>

9. Chicago Tribune, "Harassed, insulted, Shriners pay price for Islam imagery," October 21, 2002, URL: <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-2002-10-21-0210210200-story.html>.

10. John Lee, "Shriners march to a different tune," *Maisonneuve*, November 18, 2002, URL: <https://maisonneuve.org/article/2002/11/18/shriners-march-different-tune/>.

11. Ryan White, "Canmore Canada Day parade turns away unregistered Shriners, band deemed 'culturally appropriative'," *Global News*, July 5, 2023, URL: <https://globalnews.ca/news/9813416/canmore-canada-day-parade-shriners-denied/>.

12. See for example U.S. Supreme Court, Ruling *Ancient Egyptian Arabic Order of Nobles of the Mystic Shrine et al. v. Michaux et al.*, June 3, 1929, URL: <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/279/737>.

13. Thus in 1994, when the Nation of Islam organized its first International Savior's Day in Accra, Ghana, the Secretary General of the Ghanaian Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs criticized the movement for its heretical dimension, declaring "any other additional message that comes after the prophet Muhammad is not proper and must be rejected" (quoted in Allen 1994: 22).

14. In a recent opinion survey, more than half of African Americans polled consider that Black Muslim organizations such as the Nation of Islam have worked for equality for Blacks in the U.S. (Pew Research Center 2021).

15. The video in which Ubaydullah Evans reflects on his career (and his different experiments with clothes) can be found on the ALIM website: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Hnii7AFUY4&t=147s>, April 8, 2013.

16. Field notes, June 22, 2013.

17. Native Americans represent about 1.1% of the U.S. population today, and about 2% of the American Muslim minority. In my fieldwork, they were often kept out of sight in discussions about Islamic authenticity (see nonetheless ISPU 2022).

18. Field notes, December 8, 2013.

19. *Banu Hashim* was the clan of the Prophet Muhammad. In Islamic tradition, it is described as having always supported him, even if its members did not all subscribe to his religious message.

20. <https://www.webbfound.org/>

ABSTRACTS

This article discusses the controversies over the desired interaction between "religion" and "culture" within contemporary American Islam, where several interpretive communities (formed at the intersection of theological positionings, class affiliations and racial categorizations) express divergent conceptions of both Islam and the United States. Relying on interviews and ethnographic observations among Muslim converts in Chicago, the article unpacks these controversies by placing them in the social context in which they arise. It shows that American Muslims often make use of *the prism of "authenticity"*, whether cultural or religious, to define

what is “truly” Islamic or “truly” American, but that these qualifications of authenticity are also haunted by *the specter of appropriation* and inseparable from an appraisal of the relations of domination that run through the American Muslim minority. After outlining a brief history of borrowings from the Islamic tradition by groups holding different positions in the U.S. social and racial stratification system, the article examines one by one three registers of discourse on the notion of culture in Islamic circles: *acculturation*, *exculturation* and *inculturation*. These three registers are based on different understandings of “authenticity” and give rise to contrasting views of what constitutes appropriation.

AUTHOR

JULIETTE GALONNIER

Assistant Professor

CERI/Sciences Po