بِسْمِ اللهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Islam and the Cultural Imperative

A Nawawi Foundation Paper
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For centuries, Islamic civilization harmonized indigenous forms of cultural expression with the universal norms of its sacred law. It struck a balance between temporal beauty and ageless truth and fanned a brilliant peacock's tail of unity in diversity from the heart of China to the shores of the Atlantic. Islamic jurisprudence helped facilitate this creative genius. In history, Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no color of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow. In China, Islam looked Chinese; in Mali, it looked African. Sustained cultural relevance to distinct peoples, diverse places, and different times underlay Islam's long success as a global civilization. The religion became not only functional and familiar

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at the local level but dynamically engaging, fostering stable indigenous Muslim identities and allowing Muslims to put down deep roots and make lasting contributions wherever they went.

By contrast, much contemporary Islamist[1] rhetoric falls far short of Islam's ancient cultural wisdom, assuming at times an unmitigated culturally predatory attitude. Such rhetoric and the movement ideologies that stand behind it have been deeply influenced by Western revolutionary dialectic and a dangerously selective retrieval and reinterpretation of Islamic scripture in that light. At the same time, however, the Islamist phenomenon is, to no small degree, a by-product of the grave cultural dislocation and dysfunction of the contemporary Muslim world. Culture—Islamic or otherwise—provides the basis of social stability but, paradoxically, can itself only flourish in stable societies and will inevitably break down in the confusion of social disruption and turmoil. Today, the Muslim world retains priceless relics of its former cultural splendor, but, in the confusion of our times, the wisdom of the past is not always understood and many of its established norms and older cultural patterns no longer appear relevant to Muslims or seem to offer solutions. Where the peacock's tail has not long since folded, it retains little of its former dazzle and fullness; where the cultural river has not dried up altogether, its waters seldom run clear.

Human beings generate culture naturally like spiders spin silk, but unlike spiders' webs the cultures people construct are not always adequate, especially when generated unconsciously, in confusion, under unfavorable conditions, or without proper direction. Unsurprisingly, Muslim immigrants to America remain attached to the lands they left behind but hardly if ever bring with them the full pattern of the once healthy cultures of their past, which—if they had remained intact—would have reduced their incentive to emigrate in the first place. Converts—overwhelm-ingly African-American—are often alienated from their own deep indigenous roots and native cultural sensibility through the destructive impact of culturally predatory Islamist ideologies from abroad.

All the same, Muslims in America have been silently forging sub-cultural identities over recent decades around our mosques, in Islamic schools, at home, and on college campuses.[2] Some of these developments are promising. The upcoming generation has produced a number of notable Muslim American writers, poets, rap artists, and stand-up comedians. We experiment with dress (special dresses from denim, for example) and coin words (like *fun*-damentalist) as parts of our daily speech. Cross-cultural and interracial marriages have increased and show that many Muslim Americans now find themselves more Muslim and American than Indian, Pakistani, Syrian, Egyptian, or anything else. In other ways too, the young generation shows signs of cultural maturity and is connecting on positive levels often unthinkable to their parents. Many of them are comfortable with their American identity, while cultivating a healthy understanding of their religion, pride in their past, connection to the present, and a positive view of the future.

But, despite positive signs, much of the cultural creation taking place over recent years around the mosque, school, home, and campus has been without direction, confused, unconscious, or, worse yet, subconsciously compelled by irrational fears rooted in ignorance of the dominant culture and a shallow, parochial understanding of Islam as a counter-cultural identity religion.[3] The results—especially if mixed with culturally predatory Islamist ideology—may look more like a cultural no-man's-land than the makings of a successful indigenous Muslim identity.

Development of a sound Muslim American cultural identity must be resolutely undertaken as a conscious pursuit and one of our community's vital priorities. It is not a problem that will sort out itself

with time and cannot be left to develop on its own by default. Islam does not merely encourage but requires the creation of a successful indigenous Islamic culture in America and sets down sound parameters for its formation and growth. As we take on this commitment, we must understand that our revealed law and long history as a world civilization do not constitute barriers in the process but offer tremendous resources and latitude.

What Is Culture?

It is commonplace to identify "culture" with refined taste or "high culture" like the fine arts and humanities. In this vein, Matthew Arnold spoke of culture as "the best that has been known and said in the world" and "the history of the human spirit." However, culture as a modern anthropological concept and as treated in this paper refers to the entire integrated pattern of human behavior and is immeasurably broader than its highest expressions.[4] Beyond what is purely instinctive and unlearned, culture governs everything about us and even molds our instinctive actions and natural inclinations. It is culture that makes us truly human, separating people from animals, which frequently exhibit learned behavior but lack our capacity for the creation and adaptation of new cultural forms. Humankind has been defined as "the speaking animal," "the political animal," "the religious animal," and so forth. But speech, politics, religion, and all essentially human traits are fundamental components of culture, and, whatever else we may be, humankind is, first and foremost, "the cultural animal."

Culture weaves together the fabric of everything we value and need to know—beliefs, morality, expectations, skills, and knowledge—giving them functional expression by integrating them into effectual customary patterns. Culture is rooted in the world of expression, language, and symbol. But it relates also to the most routine facets of our activities—like dress

and cooking—and extends far beyond the mundane into religion, spirituality, and the deepest dimensions of our psyches. Culture includes societal fundamentals like the production of food and distribution of goods and services, the manner in which we manage business, banking, and commerce; the cultivation of science and technology; and all branches of learning, knowledge, and thought. Family life and customs surrounding birth, marriage, and death immediately come to mind as obvious cultural elements, but so too are gender relations, social habits, skills for coping with life's circumstances, toleration and cooperation or the lack of them, and even societal superstructures like political organization. A working democracy, for example, is as much the fruit of particular cultural values and civic habits as it is the outgrowth of constitutions or administrative bodies. In our mosques, schools, and homes, many day-to-day aggravations are patent examples of cultural discord and confusion. Often, they have little to do with Islam *per se* but everything to do with the clash of old world attitudes and expectations—often authoritarian and patriarchal—with the very different human complexities, realities, and needs of our society.

A key measure for evaluating culture is its capacity to impart a unified sense of self and community and consistent, well-integrated patterns of behavior. A culture is "successful" when it imparts an operative identity, produces social cohesion, and gives its members knowledge and social skills that empower them to meet their individual and social requirements effectively.[5] Identity and social cohesion are fundamental outgrowths of culture. Community and self-determination also hang in the balance of achieving a "successful" culture. In the absence of an integrated and dynamic Muslim American culture, to speak of ourselves as constituting a true community—despite our immense individual talent and large and growing numbers—or being able someday to play an effective

role in civic life or politics is little more than rhetoric or wishful thinking.

By setting the boundaries of the self and imparting a strong, unified sense of identity, a sound Muslim American culture would allow for dynamic engagement with ourselves and the world around us. It would also cultivate the ability to cope with complex social realities and negotiate productively the various roles which life in modern society require us to play, while maintaining a unified, dignified, and self-assured sense of who we are and a consistent commitment to the values for which we stand. People can repent from broken rules but not from broken psyches. The creation of a healthy Muslim American psyche is contingent on the creation of a successful, well-integrated indigenous culture. A well-integrated psyche and unified sense of identity make authentic Islamic religiosity, true spirituality, and moral perfection a normative possibility within the American context.

Respecting Other Cultures: A Supreme Prophetic Sunna

The Prophet Muḥammad and his Companions were not at war with the world's cultures and ethnicities but entertained an honest, accommodating, and generally positive view of the broad social endowments of other peoples and places. The Prophet and his Companions did not look upon human culture in terms of black and white, nor did they drastically divide human societies into spheres of absolute good and absolute evil. Islam did not impose itself—neither among Arabs or non-Arabs—as an alien, culturally predatory worldview. Rather, the Prophetic message was, from the outset, based on the distinction between what was good, beneficial, and authentically human in other cultures, while seeking to alter only what was clearly detrimental. Prophetic law did not burn and obliterate what was distinctive about other peoples but sought instead to prune, nurture, and nourish, creating a positive Is-

lamic synthesis.

Much of what became the Prophet's *sunna* (Prophetic model) was made up of acceptable pre-Islamic Arab cultural norms, and the principle of tolerating and accommodating such practices—among Arabs and non-Arabs alike in all their diversity—may be termed a supreme, overriding Prophetic *sunna*. In this vein, the noted early jurist, Abū Yūsuf understood the recognition of good, local cultural norms as falling under the rubric of the *sunna*. The fifteenth-century Granadan jurisprudent Ibn al-Mawāq articulated a similar outlook and stressed, for example, that it was not the purpose of Prophetic dress codes to impinge upon the cultural integrity of non-Arab Muslims, who were at liberty to develop or maintain their own distinctive dress within the broad parameters of the sacred law.[6]

The Qur'an enjoined the Prophet Muḥammad to adhere to people's sound customs and usages and take them as a fundamental reference in legislation: "Accept [from people] what comes naturally [for them]. Command what is customarily [good]. And turn away from the ignorant [without responding in kind]."[7] Ibn ʿAṭiyya, a renowned early Andalusian jurist and Qur'anic commentator, asserted that the verse not only upheld the sanctity of indigenous culture but granted sweeping validity to everything the human heart regards as sound and beneficial, as long as it is not clearly repudiated in the revealed law. For classical Islamic jurists in general, the verse was often cited as a major proof-text for the affirmation of sound cultural usage, and it was noted that what people generally deem as proper tends to be compatible with their nature and environment, serving essential needs and valid aspirations.

The story of the "sons of Arfida"—a familiar Arabian linguistic reference to Ethiopians—provides a telling illustration of the place of culture (here, of course, Black African culture) within the Prophetic

dispensation. In celebration of an annual Islamic religious festival, a group of Black African converts began to beat leather drums and dance with spears in the Prophet's mosque. ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb—one of the chief Companions—felt compelled to interfere and stop them, but the Prophet intervened on their behalf, directing ʿUmar to leave them alone and noting to him that they were "the sons of Arfida," that is, not his people. The Prophet invited his wife ʿĀʾisha to watch the dance, took her into the crowd, and lifted her over his back, so that she could watch them clearly as she eagerly leaned forward, her cheek pressing against his. The Prophet made it a point to dispel the Ethiopians' misgivings about ʿUmar's intrusion and encouraged them to dance well and, in one account of this authentic story, reassured them to keep up their drumming and dancing, saying: "Play your games, sons of Arfida, so the Jews and Christians know there is latitude in our religion."[8]

The Prophet's intervention to stop ʿUmar made it clear that the Ethiopians were not to be judged by ʿUmar's indigenous Arabian standards or made to conform to them. The "sons of Arfida" had their own distinctive cultural tastes and conventional usages. The fact that they had embraced Islam did not mean they were also required to commit cultural apostasy or become subservient to Arab customs. The Prophet allowed Muslim Arabs agency in their social expression and extended a similar right to non-Arabs. By his affirmation of the "sons of Arfida," he established an overriding *sunna* and abiding legal precedent for respecting different ethnic and cultural traditions and acknowledging the emotional needs, tastes, and cultural inclinations of all who embraced his teaching.

The Prophet cultivated openness and objectivity toward others—this was also part of his lesson to ʿUmar—and such openness enabled his Companions to acknowledge the good in other cultures even when, as was the case with the Byzantine Christians (*al-Rūm*),

they were not only hostile to the rise of Islamic power on their southern flank but constituted Islam's most formidable enemy. When it was related to ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ—a Companion of the Prophet and victorious commander in the Byzantine wars—that the Prophet had prophesied that *al-Rūm* (specifically the Byzantines but understood, in this context, as a general reference to Europeans) would predominate at the end of time, ʿAmr responded to his informer:

> "If, then, you have related this honestly, know that they have four excellent qualities. They are the most forbearing of people in times of discord. They are the quickest of people to recover from calamity. They are the most likely of people to renew an attack after retreat. And they are the best of people toward the poor, the orphan, and the weak." ʿAmr then added: "And they have a fifth attribute which is both beautiful and excellent: They are the best of people in checking the oppression of kings."[9]

ʿAmr drew attention to those European cultural traits which he knew and regarded as both compatible with Islam's ethos and universally desirable as human qualities. His response demonstrates his understanding that the future prominence of Westerners would be an outgrowth of their exceptional cultural traits, which his mind immediately began to search out after hearing the Prophet's prophecy. Four came at once to his mind, and the fifth ("they are the best of people in checking the oppression of kings") occurred as an afterthought but was clearly regarded among the most important (it was viewed as "beautiful and excellent").

The Cultural Imperative in Classical Islamic Jurisprudence

Classical Islamic law did not speak of culture *per se*, since it is a modern behavioral concept. Instead, the law focused on what we may call culture's most tangible and important components: custom (*al-ʿurf*) and usage (*al-ʿāda*), which all legal schools recognized as essential to the proper application of the law, al-

though differing on definitions and their measure of authority.[10] In Islamic jurisprudence, *al-ʿurf* and *al-ʿāda* connote those aspects of local culture which are generally recognized as good, beneficial, or merely harmless. In no school did respect for culture amount to blanket acceptance.[11] Local culture had to be appraised in terms of the transcendent norms of Islamic law, which meant the rejection of abhorrent practices like the ancient Mediterranean custom of "honor killings"—now reasserting itself in the context of contemporary cultural breakdown—or, at the other extreme, the sexual promiscuity prevalent in modern culture.

One of Islamic law's five universal maxims declared: "Cultural usage shall have the weight of law."[12] To reject sound custom and usage was not only counterproductive, it brought excessive difficulty and unwarranted harm to people. Another well-known principle of Islamic jurisprudence emphasized this fact and advised: "Cultural usage is second nature," by which it implied that it is as difficult for people to go against their established customs as it is for them to defy their instinctive natures. Consequently, wise application of the law required broad accommodation of local norms, which should be altered or obstructed only when absolutely necessary. Being attentive to local norms implies meeting people halfway and leads necessarily to broad cultural resemblance. In this regard, Islamic jurisprudence distinguished between subservient imitation of others (*tashabbuh*), which reflects a problematic sense of one's own identity and was generally regarded as forbidden or reprehensible, and the mere fact of outward resemblance (*mushābaha*), which was required, recommendable, or simply neutral as the case may be.[13]

ʿAbd al-Wahhāb al-Baghdādī, a famous judge and legal authority of the eleventh century, declared: "The rejection of cultural usage has no meaning at all. To follow sound custom is an obligation." Al-Sarakhsī, a noted jurisconsult of the same epoch, emphasized:

"Whatever is established by sound custom is equally well established by sound legal proof," meaning that Islamic law implicitly endorses all good aspects of local culture. The famous fourteenth-century Granadan jurisconsult, al-Shāṭibī —unquestionably one of the most brilliant minds in Islamic legal history—cautioned that juristic incompetence could impose no difficulty upon a people harsher than to require them to repudiate their sound local customs and conventional usage. By contrast, he insisted that the art of handing down legal judgments in harmony with the good aspects of local culture fulfilled the fundamental Islamic legal objective of buttressing society's general well-being. In the same spirit, a later judicial authority, al-Tusūlī, asserted: "Allowing the people to follow their customs, usages, and general aspirations in life is obligatory. To hand down rulings in opposition to this is gross deviation and tyranny."

Times change, and viable cultures adapt. It was a matter of consensus among Islamic legal thinkers that the legal judgments of earlier times had to be brought under constant review to insure that they remained in keeping with the times. A standard legal aphorism declared: "Let no one repudiate the change of rulings with the change of times." By the same token, Islamic legal consensus renounced mechanical application of the law through unthinking reiteration of standard texts. The eminent nineteenth-century Syrian legal scholar Ibn ʿĀbidīn warned that any jurist who held unbendingly to the standard legal decisions of his school without regard to changing times and circumstances would necessarily obliterate fundamental rights and extensive benefits, bringing about harm far exceeding any good he might possibly achieve. Ibn ʿĀbidīn asserted further that such blindness constituted nothing less than oppression and gross injustice.

Al-Qarāfī, a renowned thirteenth-century jurist, declared similarly:

Persons handing down legal judgments while adhering

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blindly to the texts in their books without regard for the cultural realities of their people are in gross error. They act in contradiction to established legal consensus and are guilty of iniquity and disobedience before God, having no excuse despite their ignorance; for they have taken upon themselves the art of issuing legal rulings without being worthy of that practice…. Their blind adherence to what is written down in the legal compendia is misguidance in the religion of Islam and utter ignorance of the ultimate objectives behind the rulings of the earlier scholars and great personages of the past whom they claim to be imitating.

These words resounded well in the ears of Ibn Qayyim, a great jurisconsult and scholar of the following century, who commended al-Qarāfī by saying:

> This is pure understanding of the law. Whoever issues legal rulings to the people merely on the basis of what is transmitted in the compendia despite differences in their customs, usages, times, places, conditions, and the special circumstances of their situations has gone astray and leads others astray. His crime against the religion is greater than the crime of a physician who gives people medical prescriptions without regard to the differences of their climes, norms, the times they live in, and their physical natures but merely in accord with what he finds written down in some medical book about people with similar anatomies. He is an ignorant physician, but the other is an ignorant jurisconsult but much more detrimental.[14]

Reflecting on Islamic Cultural History

Unity in cultural diversity was the hallmark of traditional Islamic societies. Ibn Baṭūṭa, the renowned fourteenth-century Moroccan world traveler, traversed over twice as much territory as Marco Polo, his older European contemporary, who, in his celebrated expedition, found himself in an essentially alien world only a few-days' distance from his native Venice. Ibn Baṭūṭa, by contrast, hardly ever left behind the Islamic cultural zone familiar to him. Even when his travels took him as far afield as the heart of China, the Indian Ocean islands, and sub-Saharan Africa, he generally felt at home. Despite their distinctive local color, the Muslim societies he witnessed reflected traditional

Islam's cultural instinct for balancing regional diversity within the overriding framework of the revealed law's transcendental unity.

On the material plane, Islamic architecture exemplifies the same spirit of unity in diversity. The Prophet's mosque was modest and rustic with neither dome nor minaret—both later regional accretions—but it provided the underlying ideas and basic purposes informing the spirit so elegantly expressed in the mosques of later Islamic civilization. In all regions, the great mosques of Islam translated functionality into beauty in a manner suitable to their physical environments and cultural contexts. They gave fullness to stone, wood, and other materials by borrowing basic motifs from local traditions and transforming them into epiphanies of light and easily recognizable precincts of sacred space. Andalusian and North African mosques gracefully combined elements of the native Roman basilica with Visigothic elements like the horseshoe arch. The Ottomans adopted the lofty domed structures and basic outlay of indigenous Greek churches along with pencil-thin, obelisk-like minarets based on native Anatolian themes. In China, the mosque brilliantly incorporated ancient Chinese symbolism of the sacred, while the mosques of East and West Africa captured a distinctly African spirit in local materials. In a similar vein, the mosque-like Taj Mahal flawlessly blended Indian and Persianate elements to become one of the most successful cultural statements of Muslim India, so effectively expressing the sub-continental ethos that it became the symbol of India around the world.

The ancient Islamic culture of ethnic Chinese Muslims (the Hui) is especially instructive for us in America today, since it flourished within the confines of a consummately brilliant non-Muslim civilization. Chinese Muslim culture empowered the Hui psychologically, allowing them to maintain a unified sense of self, take interpretative control of their faith, and

work out an authentic Islamic self-definition, which was at once authentically Muslim but open to the Chinese ethos around them. Chinese Muslim culture did not develop by chance but enlisted some of the most creative of Chinese Muslim minds. It took the rich traditions of Ancient China fully into account, defining Muslims and articulating Islam in a manner intelligible and respectable to those around them.

Chinese civilization cultivated calligraphy, and Chinese Muslims took care to preserve that legacy, while developing their own brush-painted and reed-written Arabic calligraphic styles, often using Chinese on the same inscription to translate the Arabic. Upon entering a Chinese mosque, for example, one may encounter a prominent inscription with the ideograms *kāi tiān gù jiào* (the primordial religion from the world's beginning). Instead of calling their faith *yisilan jiào* (the religion of Islam)—a foreign sounding and essentially meaningless construction to native Chinese ears—Chinese Muslim culture chose to name Islam in a manner both intelligible and intriguing for other Chinese: *qīng zhēn jiào* (the religion of the pure and real). The words implied that Islam was not alien to their people's legacy but belonged to the very ethos of Ancient China, representing the best of its religious and philosophical traditions. *Qīng* (pure) implied that Islam was lucid and pure, predicated upon outward purity and inward purification, self-discipline, and the removal of selfish delusion and desire. *Zhēn* (real) asserted that Islamic teachings embodied eternal, unchanging truths—the timeless universals that had preoccupied the Chinese tradition for millennia—and that Muslims cultivated the natural self and sought to live by such truths in a manner that was genuine and unfeigned.

Unlike China, Muslims along the East African coast did not encounter an ancient civilization with an established literary tradition but tribes and peoples wedded to the beauty of their native Bantu tongue, which East African Muslims adopted as their own and worked into a powerful cultural vehicle for Islam, creating the Swahili language (*al-sawāḥīliyya*: "the language of the coastal areas"). Over the centuries, Swahili-speaking Muslims produced a voluminous and stunning literature, ranking as one of the world's richest, which to this day has not yet been fully catalogued.

Like others, Swahili-speaking Muslims took pride in classical Arabic, cultivated it fully, and gave it deserved prominence, especially in the teaching and recitation of the Qur'an. But they carefully employed Swahili for all religious knowledge and other cultural purposes, creating a Swahili intelligentsia throughout the coastal rim, which caught Ibn Baṭūṭa's attention during his visit. To be a Muslim in East Africa meant to master the Swahili tongue, take on Swahili Muslim culture, and enter into "Swahilidom" (*Uswāhīlī*). Facility in Swahili—especially at the literary level—became central to full social integration and the quintessence of being "civilized." Muslims from abroad who had not mastered Swahili—like Ibn Baṭūṭa—were welcomed as honored guests but were not *wenyējī* (among those who belong), although they could quickly earn that distinction upon mastery of the Bantu tongue. Swahilidom integrated certain modes of behavior into local Muslim identity, especially personal dignity expressed in politeness and good comportment. Swahilidom enshrined qualities like patience, kindness, and understanding. Impatience, quickness to anger, and greed—qualities that the Swahili Muslims readily identified in Portuguese sailors upon their first sixteenth-century colonialist encroachments—were identified as juvenile, "uncivilized," and "un-Swahili," tolerable in children but odious in adults.

Intelligent use of indigenous language has been an aspect of Muslim culture wherever it flourished. One finds the pattern repeatedly in West Africa, where Islamic culture, in its earliest stages, formed around the resilient cultural institution and agrarian-based corporate entity of the Mandingo (Mande-Dyula) trading

village. Like the Muslims of the Swahili Rim, those of West Africa cultivated classical Arabic but drew confidently upon the rich treasury of regional tongues like Mandingo, Fulbe, and Hausa, transforming them into powerful socio-cultural mediums.

Hausa-speaking Muslims cultivated their language at all levels from folklore and popular song to elegant poetry and refined academic language. Our indigenous tales of B'rer Rabbit and B'rer Fox, after having miraculously survived the Middle Passage of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, hearken back to the ubiquitous animal stories of West African folklore. These folktales were ancient, sometimes dating back to the Neolithic period, thousands of years before Christ. Consequently, they contained creation myths and cosmologies imbued with animistic values and beliefs. Instead of rejecting the tales, Muslims retold them by adopting *Auta* ("the baby of the family"), a primary character who, like the *Lion King*, is typically the object of envy but ultimately wins out over his enemies by virtue of basic goodness, blessing, and good fortune. They transformed "the baby of the family" into an Islamic cultural hero, who constituted a role model, represented Islamic norms, and helped pioneer the construction of an integrated vision of an indigenous West African Muslim culture. Popular stories and simple didactic poems like "The Song of Old Red Iron Legs" vividly portrayed the theological realities of the Resurrection, Judgment, the Fire, and the Garden. Hausa-speakers utilized other poetic genres to sing the praise of the Prophet Muḥammad. A lucid Hausa idiom was used for special legal texts, which were studied in addition to standard Arabic compendia and contained responses to fundamentally West African cultural concerns not treated in Arabic, while a more highly refined Hausa was developed to articulate the refined concepts of Islamic theology and theosophical mysticism.

Envisioning a Viable Muslim American Culture

As along Africa's Swahili Rim and elsewhere in the traditional Muslim world, Islam in America must become *wenyējī*, "something belonging here." It 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. Regardless of birthplace, Muslim Americans become indigenous once they truly belong. Islam in America becomes indigenous by fashioning an integrated cultural identity that is comfortable with itself and functions naturally in the world around it.

Building a successful indigenous Muslim culture cannot be left to occur haphazardly, unconsciously, or without direction. The process requires deep knowledge of Islam, history, the humanities, and social sciences and must be based on cognizance of how viable cultural traditions are formed. It must enlist the most gifted and resourceful men and women in our community and liberate our Islamic cultural imagination. Constructing a sound Muslim American culture requires taking into account what is already established, especially the community's successful initiatives. Promising directions must be identified and mistakes rectified. Managing the mosque sub-culture is the biggest challenge, since it has already become "second nature" for a vocal minority and difficult to reorient, despite the fact that it alienates a substantial part of the community.

We must be producers of culture, not passive consumers of it. A successful Muslim American culture must provide psychological space for all constituents of our highly heterogeneous community, taking on a cosmopolitan cast from the outset like a nationwide peacock's tail reflecting our rich internal diversity. One size does not fit all. Culturally speaking, what is right for the suburbs may not be right for the inner city. What suits African-American or Asian-American iden-

tity may not always suit others. 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. This overarching cultural template must allot generous sub-group space for each individual entity to foster its own self-image and unique cultural expression. It must facilitate dynamic internal diversity, while promoting mutual understanding among groups, cross-cultural communication, and interfaith cooperation with the larger American society. 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.

A successful Muslim American culture would produce mosques which—like those of the traditional Islamic world—express fully the universal idea of the mosque in consonance with Islamic transcendental norms while creating American sacred space in harmony with an indigenous ethos and normative aesthetic sense. We should establish special clinics and hospitals in the best tradition of the medical endowments of Islamic civilization and other institutions that meet our communal needs and reach out to American society through beneficial social and civic services. Counseling is central to the Islamic tradition, and we should become active participants in the search for solutions to substance abuse, psychological disorder, domestic violence, and similar endemic problems in modern society. We must develop a sophisticated culture of direct political involvement, especially at the grass roots level and working upward. Our growing educational institutions should foster sound cultural expression, while being designed to meet all our educational needs. We must progress beyond our often myopic focus on professional careers—generally scientific and medical—to

assure the production of authentic Islamic scholars and qualified religious leaders.

The Islamic legal tradition must not be seen as a program of detailed prohibitions and inhibitions but made relevant to the day-to-day imperatives of our lives with an eye to fostering positive identity and dynamic integration into American society. We cannot remain true to the sacred law, if we are unable to see the forest for the trees. While cultivating sophisticated knowledge of the Arabic tongue, we—like other non-Arab Muslim cultures before us—must embrace our indigenous tongue, the English language, and make it the primary vehicle of our culture. We must continue to develop humor and various literary and musical forms but also cultivate film—especially historical fiction—theater, and art, including interior decorating and fashion design. Muslim Americans have already made a name for themselves in sports and should continue to provide excellent role models for ourselves and others. The full breadth of our religion, history, and intellectual tradition must be made accessible in skilled English translations with commentaries and carefully researched secondary studies. Muslims already contribute to American academic life, which must continue in all fields but especially Islamic studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, the humanities, and other disciplines that provide the wherewithal for the creative development of indigenous culture.

Cultural development must be intentional and proactive, focused on clear and valid goals with a concrete vision of how to attain them. We are inundated by language, symbols, ideas, and technology, none of which is neutral. We must define where we stand with regard to them and adopt appropriate intellectual and behavioral responses, if we are to be champions and not victims. Beyond the building of more mosques and institutions, our primary object must be the constitution of a unified self, congenial and self-assured, culturally and Islamically literate, capable not just of being a produc-

tive citizen and contributor to society but a leader of the cultural vanguard in America. Culture is integrated behavior, and a viable Muslim American culture must produce fully integrated patterns of thought and behavior that permit a unified cultural persona, able to negotiate modernity and tradition freely and move effectively among the complexities of today's society. A successful culture "goes to bat" for its participants by imparting social skills and a powerful capacity to respond to new situations. (A person reared in a culture valuing generosity, for example, knows how to receive guests even if they arrive at the middle of the night.) By enabling us to advance beyond day-to-day problems and issues of identity, a successful Muslim American culture would generate generous psychological space, freeing us to focus on the most important concerns of existence and civilized development.

Culture enables us to be comfortable with who, where, and what we are. Muslim Americans who are comfortable with being themselves have taken the first major step in becoming role models for their children and others and radiate a sense of direction and credibility. Identities that are rooted in deep cultural contradiction are easily thrown into states of confusion and doubt. True religiosity and deep spirituality require inner consistency and stability, which are only possible within a sound cultural nexus. When adults are confused about themselves and live contradictory lifestyles—one persona at work, another at home—they can have little of value to impart to their children, who are likely to be even more confused about who they are, a perilous state of affairs in today's youth culture.

Beyond identity formation, a successful Muslim American culture would serve as the basis of social development and communal self-determination. But this requires not only taking interpretive control of our religion, ourselves, and our community but developing a healthy social-psychology that provides authority without authoritarianism, continuity and tradition

without blind conformity. A successful Muslim American social-psychology must be at the center of our culture just as it is at the core of the most successful social classes around us. Our social-psychology must allow for the full and dynamic participation of both genders on an equal footing. It must be genuinely transparent, identify problems honestly, facilitate discourse, and seek real solutions on the basis of mutual respect, cooperation, and collective thinking, healthily rooted in the past with an intelligent vision of the future.

Conclusion

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" (a deeply ingratiated Islamist neologism). Culture, for them, is a toxic pollutant that must necessarily be purged, since Islam and culture are mutually exclusive in their minds. Some foolishly or ahistorically regard Islamic culture—legacies like the Taj Mahal, for example—to have been chief causes of Muslim decline and fall in history. Their mindset reflects the general malaise of the modern period and the breakdown of traditional Muslim cultures, leaving chronic existential alienation and cultural dysfunction in its wake. 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.

We must insist upon the traditional wisdom of Islamic law and deconstruct the counter-cultural paranoia among us. But, if the counter-cultural identity religion unconsciously developing around many of our mosques, schools, homes, and college campuses is not brought under control and redirected, it will imperil the growth of Islam in America. As for those immersed in this counter-cultural paradigm, explication

of Islam's culturally friendly jurisprudence and talk of creating a Muslim American culture often awakens deep anxieties, subconscious fears, and implacable misgivings. Assurance that Islamic law sets down parameters for indigenous cultural growth rarely allays their apprehensions, because they are rooted not in rationality but a substratum of the subconscious that has been trained—often since childhood—in the defective ideas and false universals of an alien ideology.

Creating a sound Muslim American identity is a difficult and hazardous undertaking and requires personal integrity as well as knowledge and understanding. But there can be no safe retreat from the task, and the dangers of failure are devastatingly great. Failure to foster a successful Muslim American culture would not only threaten our continued existence but constitute an inexcusable betrayal of the divine trust and unique historical opportunity we have to make Islam work in America. Our sacred law requires us to undertake the task. The work before us is a matter of true *ijtihād*, moral commitment, and dynamic creativity. In the spirit of the great jurists of the past, any failure on our part would constitute "iniquity and disobedience before God," except that, in our case, the "gross error" we commit pertains not to an isolated legal ruling and a few individual cases but the ruin of an entire community. A famous Mandingo adage states: "The world is old, but the future springs from the past." We must engender a Muslim American culture that gives us the freedom to be ourselves. And to be ourselves, we must have a proper sense of continuity with what has been, is, and is likely to be. Only in the context of a viable cultural presence can we hope for a bright Muslim American future to spring forward from the richness of our past.

NOTES

1. "Islamist" should not be confused with "Islamic" or "extremist." I use it to refer to various highly politicized twentieth-century revivalist movements with essentialist interpretations of Islam, generally advocating particular state and party ends as Islam's chief or virtually unique focus. Islamists tend toward literalism but selectively retrieve the texts they follow, often contravening well-established interpretations within Islam's scholarly tradition. As culturally predatory as they often are regarding traditional Islamic and modern humanistic culture, their general attitude toward culture entails the grave oversight of looking upon modern technology as "culturally" neutral without addressing its sociological underpinnings, especially the implications of the skills, assumptions, and expectations required to produce it.

2. The development of "sub-cultures" within the broad cultural matrix is natural, and mainstream cultures often produce viable sub-cultures. For some people and certain groups, a healthy cultural identity is only possible through belonging to an appropriate sub-culture or affiliating with a group of sub-cultures within the mainstream. In light of the great heterogeneity of our community, the overall picture of a functional Muslim American culture requires sound coordination between an overarching cultural matrix and a variety of integral sub-cultural modes.

3. "Counter-culture" is likely to bring to mind the 1960s' American counter-culture. The "counter-culture" I have in mind, however, is more like that of the medieval Iberian *hidalgo* (literally, "son of something")—lower Castilian nobility—which played an important role not only in the destruction of the Jews and Muslims of Iberia and Native Americans of the New World but in the development of Western racism and nationalism. *Hidalgo* identity was rooted in the negation of the Other, especially the Jewish and Muslim Other in Muslim Spain and Portugal. The *hidalgo* class defined itself not so much in terms of what it *was* as what it *was not*. A *hidalgo* was intrinsically noble because he was neither Jew nor Muslim and shunned occupations and crafts associated with them. America's 1960s' counter-culture was positive in that it asserted the humanity of the Other, for example, Blacks, Native Americans, and the Vietnamese. *Hidalgo* "counter-culture," on the other hand, was predicated upon the

denial of the Other's humanity and, consequently, was culturally predatory and potentially genocidal.

4. There is no universal agreement among anthropologists on the meaning of culture. Given "culture's" genesis in the context of Western colonialism, the term has had a checkered history and often dubious association with issues of power and disparity, cultural domination, race and racism. Traditionally, the anthropological enterprise went hand in hand with colonial expansion at the expense of indigenous peoples, which was often facilitated by the study of their cultures, and this became a fundamental concern of the field during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, mainstream anthropologists are cautious about invoking culture in issues related to power, disparity, and similar matters.

5. Culture *per se* can be anything and has no specific content. A culture should be judged on its own terms and is successful in terms of what it wants to achieve. If, for example, our goal as Muslims in America is to function effectively in American society with a unified sense of identity, then the success of our culture will be measured in terms of how well we accomplish such purposes.

6. I am indebted to my former colleagues and teachers Shaykh Abdallah ben Bayyah and Dr. Khaldūn al-Aḥdab; most classical references are taken from my friend, colleague, and former student, Dr. ʿĀdil ʿAbd al-Qādir Qūta, *Al-ʿUrf,* 2 vols., (Mecca: al-Maktaba al-Makkiyya, 1997). Most subsequent citations may be located in their primary sources by consulting the following references in Qūta: 1:58-77, 129, 138-141, 180-181, 208-211. I would also like to express my intellectual indebtedness and deep gratitude for the best ideas and expressions in this paper to Drs. Sherman Jackson, Timothy Winter, Ingrid Mattson, Sulayman Nyang, and others.

7. Qur'an, 7:199. Muhammad Asad translates the verse: "Make due allowance for man's nature, and enjoin the doing of what is right; and leave alone all those who choose to remain ignorant."

8. The story is related in *Bukhārī* and *Muslim,* Islam's most authoritative sources of the Prophetic Tradition; the concluding references is taken from *Musnad al-Ḥumaydī.*

9. Transmitted in *Muslim.*

10. The Ḥanafī and Mālikī schools gave culture greatest reign, and most of the citations in this paper are taken from jurists of those schools. In the Mālikī school, the authority of cultural norms may be invoked to specify or restrict the application of contrary, general legal precepts on grounds of judicial preference (*istiḥsān*). In Eastern Islamic lands during the classical period, a man's going about in public with an uncovered head indicated lack of probity, and his legal testimony was generally rejected in court. The cultural norm in the Muslim West (Andalusia), however, was that men customarily went about in public bare-headed. In view of that custom, Mālikī law in the Iberian Peninsula did not regard uncovering the head in public as impinging on one's integrity.

11. Blind acceptance of cultural norms is not only contrary to Islamic jurisprudence but averse to the cultural creation we must engage in. Both in Islamic law and modern anthropology, the acceptance of new cultural modes cannot be done without a critical analysis of them based on how we understand culture and the goals we intend to achieve through it.

12. The five maxims (*al-qawāʿid al-kulliyyāt al-khams*) were matters of consensus among all schools and are listed as follows:

   • "Matters shall be judged by their objectives" *(al-umūr bi-maqāsidihā)*.

   • "Certainty shall not be removed by doubt" *(al-yaqīn la yazūl bi-'l-shakk)*, often invoked with special reference to Islamic principles like things are deemed permissible until definitively shown otherwise, that innocence is assumed until proof of guilt, and so forth.

   • "Hardship shall bring alleviation" *(al-mashaqqa tajlib al-taysīr)*, meaning that the law shall not validly require anything which people are incapable of fulfilling without undue difficulty.

   • "Harm shall be removed" *(al-ḍarar yuzāl)*, which invalidates rulings that lead to harm, even if technically valid.

   • "Cultural usage shall have the weight of law" *(al-ʿāda muḥakkama)*. The maxim is also read as *"al-ʿāda muḥkama,"* "cultural usage is definitive," implying that customary usage has authority similar to fundamental textual precepts of the law.

13. Injunctions regarding being different from Jews and Christians fall under this category and had a particular historical context. Reference has already been made to the view of Ibn al-Mawāq. As presumptive proof that it is futile for Muslims to attempt rapprochement with Jews and Christians, one may often hear Muslims today citing the verse: "The Jews and Christians will never be content with you, [O Prophet,] until you follow their religious community" (Qur'an 2:120). The verse was addressed to the Prophet personally in the formative period of the revelation and references the feelings of the Arabian Jewish and Christian communities toward him and their insistence that he follow them and not establish a new universal dispensation. Generalizing about the verse to exclude all positive relations between the Abrahamic faiths in all possible contexts is mistaken and also belies the harmonious relations that often existed in Islamic civilization between the three faith communities.

14. Both quotations are from ʿĀdil Qūta, *Al-ʿUrf*, 1:64-65.