

COMMENTARY / CULTURE

Come meet your Muslim neighbor!



By Terry Howard

First, a paper and pencil drill. Jot down the names of five famous American Muslims, living or dead. Now if you're scratching your head for names, Google "famous American Muslims" after you've read this narrative.

Okay, it's important at the outset to stress that Muslims have long made great contributions in every aspect of society. However, reports Reehana Shah in "The Origins of Vaccines – A Full Circle Story of Muslim Contributions", when it comes to medical discoveries and innovations, the Islamic origins are often ignored.

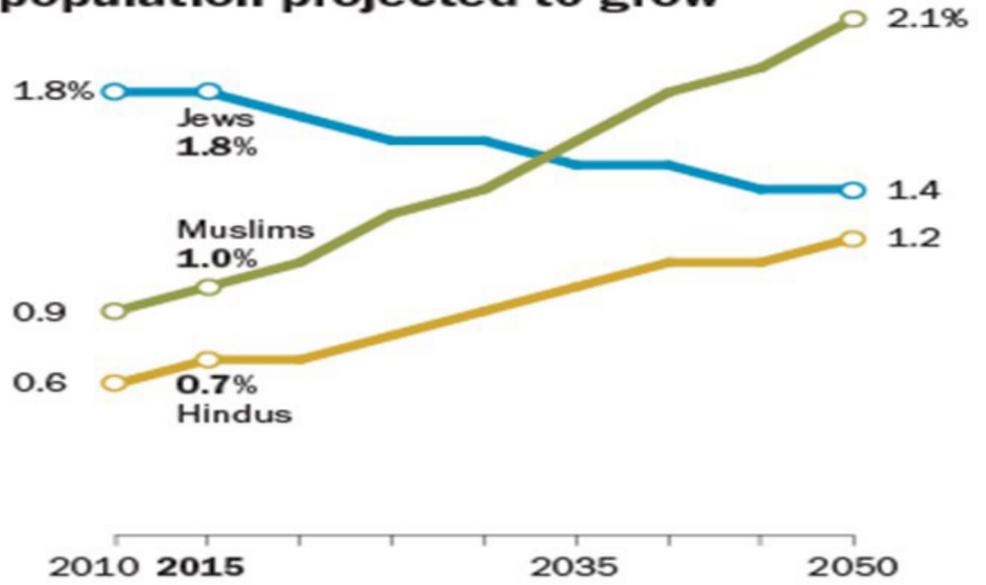
"The reality is that much of what we know about medicine, astronomy, physics, and many other fields have their roots in the work of Muslims. Dr. Ugur Sahin and Dr. Ozlem Tureci, Muslims, are a Turkish husband and wife team in Germany and co-founders of BioNTech, a small biotech firm that partnered with Pfizer to create the Covid-19 vaccine."

But despite those facts, myths and stereotypes linger about groups, Muslims being one. For example, as the myth goes, "if you are a Muslim, you are a terrorist." Yes, there are terrorists who happen to be Muslim, but does that make all Muslims terrorists? Of course not. Which brings me to the actual experiences of "Osama."

In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Osama, a US born engineer, told me of the constant stares and things he heard people say about him in airports or on planes. So he decided to curtail his business travel because his name – "Osama"- and Mid-Eastern appearance attracted negative attention. In two instances, he remembers passengers getting off the plane before takeoff when he boarded.

Shortly after our conversation, Osama invited me and several other non-Muslims to tour his mosque and encouraged us to pose any question to the hosts - including their reactions to the broken windows and other evidence of vandalism outside their mosque.

Although small, American Muslim population projected to grow



Note: Projections include both adults and children.

Source: The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Okay, moving along, just how many Muslims are there globally and in the US? Take a wild guess before we look at the facts.

Out of the 1.6 billion Muslims living worldwide, over 60% are from South and South East Asia, with Indonesia being the most populous Muslim country followed by Pakistan. There are about 3.45 million Muslims in the U.S., or about 1.1% of the U.S. population. Demographic projections estimate that Muslims will make up 2.1% of the U.S. population by the year 2050. In the US, the largest Muslim demographic is African American followed by South Asian. Islam is the religion Muslims follow. About eight-in-ten U.S. Muslims say they are either very or somewhat concerned about extremism committed in the name of Islam around the world, about the same as the share of the general public that feels this way.

Interestingly, Pew polling shows that Western Europeans who say they personally know a Muslim "are generally more likely than others to have positive opinions of Muslims and their religion." Fortunately, similar findings have been observed for Americans—those who have greater familiarity with Muslims tend to have warmer feelings towards them.

Of course, if you don't personally interact with Muslims, it's easy for your imagery of them to be shaped by the news media. And much of that coverage often revolves around terrorism and extremism.

Now there are certain social norms of which to be aware if you visit a Muslim in their home.

First, clothing must be modest. Avoid touching or otherwise shaking hands with someone of the opposite gender. Also, pointing feet (as when sitting with your legs crossed) is considered offensive. And keep in mind that passing food with the left hand is considered unclean. Since ritual cleanliness is of vital importance, washing hands often is considered important.

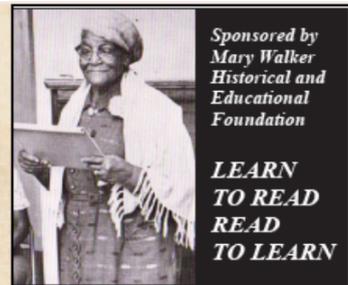
Further, placing a Qur'an or Bible on the floor is inappropriate in a Muslim home, as is placing any book higher than a Qur'an. Interestingly, a Bible that has been marked up or written in is seen as disrespectful.

In the end, chances are that you interact with Muslims more than you may realize. They serve in the military, are your physicians, politicians, athletes, teachers, business owners, construction workers, fashion designers....and vaccine developers!

And lo and behold....they're your neighbors!

© Terry Howard is an award-winning writer and storyteller, a contributing writer with the Chattanooga News Chronicle, The American Diversity Report, The Douglas County Sentinel, The BlackMarket.com, co-founder of the "26 Tiny Paint Brushes" writers' guild, and recipient of the Dr. Martin Luther King Leadership Award.

THIS WEEK IN AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY



From African Prince to Mississippi Slave: ABDUL RAHMAN IBRAHIMA

In the summer of 1829, Abdul Rahman Ibrahim returned to Africa after 40 years of enslavement in the United States. Having obtained his freedom via the agency of President John Quincy Adams, he set off on the voyage that was supposed to take him to his birthplace in Timbuktu, in what is now Mali. However, he made it only as far as the American colony in Monrovia, Liberia, where he died July 6, 1829, shortly after his arrival. This month, Documenting the American South remembers the remarkable story of a Muslim prince who became a slave in Mississippi.

Much of what is currently known about Abdul Rahman Ibrahim comes from a pamphlet titled "A Statement with Regard to the Moorish Prince, Abduhl Rahhahman," written by Thomas H. Gallaudet, one of the co-founders of the American School for the Deaf. According to this account, during Ibrahim's childhood in Africa, his father was sent to conquer the "Soosoos" (also spelled Susu or Soso) and founded a new capital of the kingdom of Futa Jallon in a town called Timbo. Ibrahim therefore moved from Timbuktu to Timbo at age five, returning to Timbuktu to attend school at age twelve. Around 1788, at the age of approximately



26, Ibrahim was taken captive after a raid against a rival tribe, the "Hebohs." Ibrahim's captors sold him into slavery, and after surviving the Middle Passage, he was auctioned to Colonel Thomas Foster, on whose Natchez, Mississippi, cotton plantation he became a field hand.

At least one failed attempt to procure his freedom—on the part of a Dr. John Coates Cox, who had met Ibrahim in Africa and who was familiar with his background—was made before the Adams administration intervened. The groundwork for Ibrahim's manumission, according to twentieth-century biographer Terry Alford, was laid by Andrew Marschalk, who became convinced of Ibrahim's claim to be the son of the ruler of an African kingdom. Erroneously believing that he was from Morocco, Marschalk informed the sultan of Morocco about Ibrahim's plight and forwarded a "letter" Ibrahim had written, which actually consisted only of Koranic verses that he had memorized. Despite Marschalk's error, the sultan, after reviewing the verses, promptly offered the American consul funds to finance Ibrahim's return. The Adams administration was also convinced of the truth of Ibrahim's story, and, in 1827 or 1828, it authorized Marschalk to procure his freedom. Shortly thereafter, Ibrahim embarked on his fateful voyage to Africa.

Gallaudet's pamphlet, published in 1828, does not complete the story of Abdul Rahman Ibrahim, but Alford's biography explains that the pamphlet—sold as an attempt to fund the release of Ibrahim's family and their subsequent return to Africa—did not raise sufficient funds to free his large family, so he was accompanied only by his wife, Isabella. After Ibrahim's death—caused by what Alford describes as "coast fever"—Isabella remained in Liberia and was later joined by two of her sons; at least three sons and four daughters remained enslaved in Mississippi.