Women and Religious Diversity in the South: Encounters with Muslim Women in the Carolinas

Heather E. Barclay

Presented at the Pluralism Project AAR Pre-conference:
Religious Pluralism in North America: The Southern United States
Atlanta, Georgia
November 21-22, 2003

One of the photographs taken in the course of our research with the Pluralism Project is a group shot of me with some of the students we interviewed at the Islamic Society of Greater Charlotte mosque. I am dressed in the bright red and tan salwar chemise borrowed from a Muslim friend who insisted that I must wear it to go to jumah, or Friday prayers. Wearing a traditional salwar from India, I am the one in the photograph whose clothing does not fit in amidst the casual urban clothing of the youth.

These students told us about the challenges they face growing up in the Southern United States as Muslims. Like many Muslim youth throughout America, they want to fit in to the dominant popular culture while still showing an appreciation for their identity as second and third generation Muslim women. But how do they do this in Charlotte, North Carolina- the hometown of Billy Graham and the Bible Broadcasting Network, a city saturated in patriarchy and evangelicalism? How do they follow Islamic food traditions in the land of pork? And how can they relate to other Southern women who do not always understand their food traditions or wearing of the hijab?

Seema Azad, a Pakistani member of the Islamic Society and the mother of two of the students in this photograph, tells us that her daughters respond to these difficult challenges by engaging actively in both cultures. Instead of the traditional Pakistani clothing which Seema often wishes they would wear, they dress in jeans and t-shirts. Yet they continue to cover their heads with the hijab. Though they often resist learning to

cook the Pakistani foods of their mother, they cook halal tacos and pizza for the family and sprinkle them with hot red peppers to mimic the spiciness of their mother's Pakistani recipes. They attend the mosque and educational classes on Sundays, and they refer to it as "Sunday school"—often adapting the vocabulary of evangelical southern traditions in their descriptions of Islamic practices. Like many other second and third generation Muslim women in the South, Seema's children simultaneously represent two very different cultures. Nonetheless, they do not seem to find too much discontinuity in embodying the multiplicity of symbols surrounding them in both Islamic and Southern culture.

Seema pointed out to us that many of the women in the Charlotte Muslim community recognize the similarities between their religious traditions and those dominant in the South. Comparing living in the South to her previous experience living in the North, she said that when she first moved to Charlotte, Southerners seemed very conservative and close-minded. However, eventually she developed great respect for Southerners. Seema comments that "Once Southerners open the doors for you, they open them wholeheartedly."

Other women in the Muslim community in Charlotte whom we have interviewed both echo Seema Azad's comments on the common ground between Islam and Southern Christianity and express concern with the conservatism and ignorance they often encounter. Africa Abdul-Haleem, an African American Muslim woman who attends Masjid Ash-Shaheed, points out that "After all, our beliefs are really not that different from what my Christian friends believe." But Africa also expressed the deep hurt she felt when she was ostracized by her family and many of her close friends after converting to

Islam from the Southern Baptist tradition. She points out that the people who were most critical of her decision were other Southern women who still do not comprehend why she converted. This is surprising to Africa since Muslim women would share many of the same values as conservative Christian women: child rearing and family for example. Likewise, they might share similar tensions between submission and power in their household roles. Yet Africa points out that many conservative Christian Southern women have expressed that Muslim women are treated as subordinate to their husbands and treated as inferior in their religion because they wear a veil.

This sentiment is not just a little ironic in a region of the US in which the word "feminism" is taboo and the majority of cultural symbols and rituals hold up some form of patriarchy as the *sine qua non* of Southern identity. Women are often both the bearers and the victims of Southern androcentrism. Thus, it is probably not a coincidence that the Southern women who most identify with the conservative patriarchal ideology of the South are often the ones who are the most vehemently critical of Muslim women.
As Dr. Norman and I explore in our recent article on women and religion in the South, Southern women are still "haunted" by the saints and symbols of the Lost Cause, which continue to shape their notions of self-identity. But Southern women also transform these paradigms even as they work within dominant the social structures. Other women do not place themselves within the context of Southern myth at all. Immigrant Muslim women often do not identify with the myths under girding Southern ideology because the South's nostalgia for origins in the civil war has nothing to do with the paradigmatic models of the immigrant Muslim community. African American Muslim women also often reject Southern dominant culture because many recognize the racism and oppression inherent as

signifiers in the symbols of Southern identity. But it is a paradox- many African-American women also embrace Southern symbolism while redefining them to have meaning in the Islamic religious context as well.

Despite the efforts of Muslim women in the South to engage in interreligous dialogue and embrace what they find to be the positive symbols of Southern culture, they are often the target of thoughtless stereotypes and, particularly after September 11, threats and violence. Government leaders often assist in perpetuating the stereotypes in the public sphere. Just this February “in remarks about domestic security threats, Rep. Sue Myrick of Charlotte said about Muslims, "look at who runs all the convenience stores across the country.” When her comments were criticized, she defended them by saying “My point is people (who) don't like us are all over the country, and we know that." [1] When Charlotte citizens were polled by the Charlotte Observer regarding whether Sue Myrick should apologize for her comments, 740 citizens, 35%, said that she should not.

Despite their many experiences of intolerance within the community, Muslim women generally feel that the South is making progress in its acceptance of diversity. Both Seema and Africa expressed this sentiment, embodied more than anything in their experiences raising their children in Southern culture. Both pointed out that the public school system in the last few years has been more responsive to their childrens’ Islamic

---

[1] Posted on Thu, Feb. 06, 2003
Coble, Myrick face heat for comments
JIM MORRILL
Staff Writer

POLL: Should Myrick, Coble apologize?

identity- particularly in their accommodation and efforts to understand the childrens' halal dietary restrictions. Women in other Charlotte mosques have commented to us about how receptive the community has been after September 11—women in the Jewish community of Charlotte, for example, offered to accompany Muslim women in their errands so that they wouldn't feel uncomfortable wearing their hijabs in public.

Another way that Muslim women confront discrimination and celebrate their Islamic identity is through larger gatherings of the Muslim community in which the women cook traditional foods. Muslim women throughout the South travel regularly, often driving for hours, to network between different mosques. There are also Muslim women's organizations that are active in the community. Because of the mobility of Muslim women throughout the South, these women also overcome the barriers of their own differing interpretations of their tradition. Since these women are from Islamic traditions all over the world and often worship together in the same mosques, different styles of dress, food preparation, and interpretation of their traditions all bring a multiplicity of ideas to the practice of Islam in the South. Through celebrations of Islamic holidays such as Eid, Islamic communities also have an opportunity to teach the larger community about their tradition. We have attended large dinner events in both Seema and Africa's communities. During these events we have been served Southern fried chicken and bean pies as well as a variety of traditional dishes from India, Malaysia, Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Romania, Bosnia, and other countries. The variety of these meals demonstrates the diversity and syncretism of Islamic and Southern cultures in the New South.

Yes, the South is changing even despite itself. Despite the conservatism and close-mindedness Muslim women often confront living in the Bible Belt, they find ways to celebrate their Islamic identity while joining in dialogue with other Southerners—often learning to speak with a Southern accent in the process. A good example of this is in the experiences of one of the Muslim women we recently interviewed in an Eid celebration in our hometown of Spartanburg, Naveen. Raised in a tradition and pious family in Pakistan, Naveen immigrated to the Northern United States, did well in school and commanded a successful career in business. But a bad marriage led her to leave her once successful life behind and come to the South, where other family members had immigrated. She came to the South sick, demoralized, and seeking the comfort of family.

But after a few months, she has rebounded as her "old self" and is renewing her identity as a Muslim woman. While she travels with her new job as a financial consultant, she wears the traditional hijab. Although her family has now moved back to Pakistan, she has made a home for herself in Spartanburg among a growing Muslim community. She is a single adult woman but is not alone in a culture of families. She has been embraced by the Muslim community-- and as a leader. She spends her weekends preparing her teaching of the Koran for the Spartanburg women's group. "It takes all weekend because I am more comfortable preparing first in English," she says. But then I have to translate everything into Urdu because some of our elderly women do not have facility in English. I love it." Watching Naveen, surrounded by her new community of Muslim women-- old, young, mothers, widows, wives, doctors, teachers, and business women-- leads a lively discussion of what matters most to them. One is reminded of how other southern women

have found empowerment and meaning in a culture where male leadership is acknowledged as primary: among women taking their religion into their own hands.