

Muslims in North America: Both Feared and Hated

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Abstract: This contribution to the special *JCREOR* issue on “Analyzing the Discourse of Religious Phobia” reflects on the political, professional, and personal dimensions of the theoretical discussions involved, by foregrounding my lived experience as a scholar who has been engaged with these questions for many years in North America. Distrust and discrimination based on religion have a complex history in North America, intertwined with the politics of race, culture and class. This paper builds on my own academic and personal experiences in interfaith cooperation, reconciliation, and healing in both Canada and the United States. I address two central themes: First, is there an opportunity to make peace and resolve the conflict? And second, can we use shared trauma as a bridge in ways that are mutually beneficial across communities?

Keywords: Islamophobia, misoislamia, African American Islam, anti-Muslim racism, American politics

If you stick a knife in my back nine inches and pull it out six inches, there’s no progress. If you pull it all the way out that’s not progress. Progress is healing the wound that the blow made. And they haven’t even begun to pull the knife out, much less try and heal the wound. They won’t even admit the knife is there.

– Malcolm X

The remarks that would become this paper were first presented at a conference at McGill University in Montreal on October 26, 2023. That was a few weeks after the Hamas attack on Israel, and the corresponding Israeli response. When this paper was revised for publication in August of 2025, the situation was even more tragic, with hostages still in captivity, well over 60,000 Palestinians killed (including over 17,000 children), most of the people of Gaza displaced, widespread famine and starvation in Gaza, the war extended to Lebanon and Iran, and warnings from genocide scholars about the extremity of what was being done.¹ I begin this article as I began the conference presentation in 2023 with the words of Rabbi Sharon Brous, the senior rabbi at IKAR (Hebrew for *essence*), which is the Jewish community in Los Angeles that I try to attend when I can. In an email to her congregation on October 9, 2023, Rabbi Brous wrote: “What I am asking is for us to dare to hold the humanity, the heartache, and the need for security of the Jewish people while also holding the humanity, the dignity, and the need for justice of the Palestinian people. For too long, these two have been set up as a false binary. In fact, the only liberation will be a shared liberation. The only justice is a justice for all.”

1. See, for example, Omer Bartov, “I’m a Genocide Scholar. I Know It When I See It,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/15/opinion/israel-gaza-holocaust-genocide-palestinians.html>, or “How Casualty Counters Measure Deaths in Gaza,” *The Walrus*, March 25, 2025, <https://thewalrus.ca/gaza-casualties/>, which discusses the issues and implications of the death count in Gaza.

The following contribution to this special *JCREOR* issue on “Analyzing the Discourse of Religious Phobia” reflects on the political, professional, and personal dimensions of the theoretical discussions involved, by foregrounding my lived experience as a scholar who has been engaged with these questions for many years. I write these words as someone who is a dual citizen of Canada and the United States. I became a US citizen in 2013, so when I speak about America, I speak as a citizen who loves his adopted country. As someone who grew up in Canada, I recognize that there are issues there as well. In Canada, we have been working towards Truth and Reconciliation with First Nations. I am reminded of an installation in May 2021 by Haida artist Tamara Bell, who placed 215 pairs of children’s shoes on the steps of the Vancouver Art Gallery to highlight the discovery of the graves of 215 children at the site of the former Kamloops Indian Residential School. I think here, too, of the image of Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau placing flowers at the memorial for the Afzaal family in London, Ontario. On June 6, 2021, the Afzaal family was out for a walk, when Salman Afzaal, his wife, Madiha Salman, the grandmother Talat, and the couple’s daughter Yumnah were all deliberately run over, murdered by a white nationalist terrorist in a truck.

This paper builds on my own academic and personal experiences in interfaith cooperation, reconciliation, and healing in both Canada and the United States. I address two central themes: First, is there an opportunity to make peace and resolve the conflict? And second, can we use shared trauma as a bridge, in ways that are mutually beneficial across communities? The intersection of race, class, and national identity means that views vary on issues such as policing, protests, and discrimination. The terminology of “Islamophobia” does not capture the way anti-Muslim sentiments and policies are intertwined with longstanding patterns of structural and systemic racism, or with socio-economic, class, and gender-based inequalities. For these reasons, I prefer the reframing of Islamophobia as “anti-Muslim racism.”² This is why in order to understand and address Islamophobia in the United States (and I limit my discussion to the local and not the global phenomenon), we must understand the struggles of African American Muslims against discrimination, the ways in which electoral politics have weaponized Muslims, and the legacy of Jewish Americans fighting forms of hate originating in the West in the context of World War II and the Holocaust.

Finally, in terms of introduction and full disclosure, I note that I was honoured to be invited to the conference at McGill University entitled “Who is my Neighbour? Discussing and Analyzing the Discourse of Religious Phobia: Engaging Hinduphobia, Islamophobia, and Anti-Semitism in the Public Square.” My academic supervisor and mentor was the blessed Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000), who began his career at McGill University, where he later founded the Institute for Islamic Studies. With the Canadian chapter of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, I was privileged to be able to work as a graduate student with John Peters Humphrey (1905–1995), the McGill law professor who drafted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for the United Nations. Montreal is my favourite city in North America, home to my beloved Montreal Canadiens. I hadn’t been back to the city since 2019, though, when Québec enacted Bill 21, “An Act Respecting the Laicity of the State.” As is well known in Canada, Bill 21 prohibits certain persons from wearing religious symbols while exercising official functions. It thus allows for legal religious discrimination against Muslims and other religious minorities in Québec, by amending the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. So we see discrimination against Muslims in Canada as well.

As I write these words, my adopted country is in the first year of the second Trump administration. I think back to almost a decade ago, and the weekend after the 2016 presidential election, when American Muslim comedian Dave Chappelle hosted *Saturday Night Live*. During his monologue, four days after the

2. See here the Islamophobia is Racism Syllabus project, which has some marvelous resources: <https://islamophobiaistracism.wordpress.com/>.

election and three days after the concession by Hillary Clinton, Chappelle said, “You know, I didn’t know that Donald Trump was going to win the election. I did suspect it. It seemed like Hillary was doing well in the polls and yet – I know the Whites. You guys aren’t as full of surprises as you used to be.” Chappelle continued, “But America’s done it. We’ve actually elected an Internet troll as our president.” He ended by describing an event he attended at the White House during the last few weeks of the Obama administration, with a largely African American crowd in attendance, where he “saw how happy everybody was. These people, who had been historically disenfranchised. It made me feel hopeful, and it made me feel proud to be an American, and it made me very happy about the prospects of our country. So, in that spirit, I’m wishing Donald Trump luck. And I’m going to give him a chance, and we, the historically disenfranchised, demand that he give us one too.”³

The 2016 election was my first chance to vote in a presidential election. Like Chappelle, I also did not predict the winner of the election, but I suspected it would go to a Republican. America has a forced binary choice of parties: Democrat or Republican. This is not to discount independents or parties like the Green Party or the Libertarian Party, but they have no hope of winning a presidential election. In full disclosure, when I first registered to vote on that day in 2013 when I became a citizen, I declared no party preference. I do not mean to disparage one party or elevate another. I moved to the United States from Canada in the second term of the Clinton administration. Eight years of Clinton were followed by eight years of Bush, and then eight years of Obama. The pattern I had lived through, Democrat, Republican, Democrat, meant that a Republican would be the next president.

Muslims, both within America and around the world, were the religious community that was most affected by the presidency of Donald Trump. These difficulties, to be sure, were not new or unique to that administration. And like Dave Chappelle, I was willing to give the 45th president the benefit of the doubt at the beginning of his term. But I was also mindful that no other presidential candidate had publicly declared his hostility to the second largest religious tradition in the world, saying very famously on *CNN* on March 9, 2016, that “I think Islam hates us.”⁴ So I was not surprised by the effects of his administration on Muslims.

We saw such open intolerance toward Islam in opposition to new mosques proposed throughout the country. We saw seven states (Alabama, Arizona, Kansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, South Dakota and Tennessee) passing anti-sharia laws when not a single Muslim group in America had asked for the implementation of sharia laws. Oklahoma also voted for such a law, but it was struck down in 2012 and never implemented. We saw Lt. General Michael Flynn, who became President Trump’s National Security Advisor, tweet that “fear of Muslims is RATIONAL,” and heard him claim that Islam is a political ideology (and not a religion, and therefore not protected under the Constitution) which has become a “malignant cancer.”⁵ He resigned on February 13, 2017, not for his comments about Islam and Muslims, but for misleading Vice President Mike Pence about his telephone calls with the Russian ambassador. It is important to remember that on Election Day, Lt. General Flynn penned an op-ed in *The Hill* supporting Turkish President Erdogan against one of his critics, American resident Fethullah Gülen. Flynn described Gülen as “a shady Islamic

3. To view Chappelle’s monologue, see “Dave Chappelle Stand-Up Monologue – SNL,” YouTube video, 11:36, November 13, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IS0XiNdpk>.

4. Theodore Schleifer, “Donald Trump: ‘I Think Islam Hates Us,’” *CNN*, March 10, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/03/09/politics/donald-trump-islam-hates-us>.

5. Matthew Rosenberg and Maggie Haberman, “Michael Flynn, Anti-Islamist Ex-General, Offered Security Post, Trump Aide Says,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/us/politics/michael-flynn-national-security-adviser-donald-trump.html>.

mullah,” “a radical Islamist,” and the head of “a dangerous sleeper terrorist network.”⁶ Only later was it revealed that Flynn had been paid over half a million dollars by the Turkish government, and that he did not register as an agent working for a foreign government until March of 2017.⁷ Think about that one for a second. The man chosen as the National Security Advisor was secretly working for the interests of a foreign government. Fortunately for Flynn, he was pre-emptively pardoned by President Trump on November 25, 2020, while in the middle of a criminal trial. On December 8, the judge dismissed the case because of the president’s pardon.⁸

We saw Islam-haters such as Steve Bannon, Mike Pompeo, John Bolton, and Sebastian Gorka come and go in the administration, while Stephen Miller remained until the end. We saw the 45th president retweet anti-Muslim videos from a right-wing fringe British group on November 29, 2017, to the dismay of British Prime Minister Theresa May. We also heard the president’s press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, defend the president by saying that it didn’t matter if the videos were real or not, as “the threat is real”.

On Friday, January 27, 2017, a week after his inauguration, the president ordered that the United States ban travellers and refugees from seven Muslim-majority countries (Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen). He did this in the afternoon, after making comments that morning for International Holocaust Remembrance Day that made no mention either of Jews or of anti-Semitism. Thousands of people protested the ban at airports across the country in the following days. I flew back to Los Angeles from Washington DC on January 29, and those protests were quite powerful to see – people standing up for us, not just or only as refugees or immigrants, but as Muslims. That was extraordinary. What has also been amazing to see is the response from the American Jewish community. They have been at the forefront of the protests, both because they know that the commandment that is repeated more than any other commandment in the Torah is to not oppress the stranger, and because they know from the painful history of the Holocaust where the road of prejudice and intolerance ends. And with the rise of hate crimes against Muslims, over half of the hate crimes committed against a religious group in America were against Jews.

That first travel ban was rejected by the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit on February 9, 2017. The 45th president introduced two subsequent versions of the ban, and it was the third version that was upheld by the Supreme Court. President Joe Biden, on his first day in office, issued Presidential Proclamation 10141 revoking the travel bans.

To discuss the problems caused by President Trump during his first and second administrations would require more space than this entire journal. As with the 2016 election, I strongly suspected that Trump would regain the presidency in 2024. This was not just because of the formula of a Democrat replaced by a Republican, but because you had a White male candidate in opposition to a Biracial female candidate, and the intersections of racism and misogyny are strong in these United States. This article is not intended to even begin to catalogue all of the issues that affected American Muslims during the past decade.

But one has to address the issues of racial injustice. George Floyd was murdered by police on May 25, 2020, in front of Cup Foods, a store owned by an Arab American Muslim, whose teenage employee – also a Muslim – had earlier reported to police that Mr. Floyd tried to use a counterfeit \$20 bill to buy cigarettes.

6. Michael T. Flynn, “Our Ally Turkey is in Crisis and Needs Our Support,” *The Hill*, November 8, 2016, <https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/foreign-policy/305021-our-ally-turkey-is-in-crisis-and-needs-our-support>.

7. Rebecca Kheel, “Turkey and Michael Flynn: Five Things to Know,” *The Hill*, December 17, 2018, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/421780-turkey-and-michael-flynn-five-things-to-know>.

8. Rohini Khurup, “Judge Dismisses Michael Flynn’s Case After Trump’s Pardon,” *Lawfare*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/judge-dismisses-michael-flynnns-case-after-trumps-pardon>.

This puts stores in a precarious position – catering to the community while also being duty-bound to report crime to the police, sometimes under the threat of being closed down if they do not comply. The circumstances of Mr. Floyd’s death hint at the proximity and complex relationship that different sections of America’s Muslim community have with law enforcement and with the Black Lives Matter movement.

Since Mr. Floyd’s killing, Muslim Americans have mostly shown solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Mahmoud Abumayyaleh, the owner of Cup Foods, has said that the store will no longer call the police on customers. Nationally, there have been numerous statements from groups such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council, the Council on American Islamic Relations and the American Muslim Institution.

A joint announcement by over thirty-five national Muslim civil rights and religious groups and more than sixty regional groups noted that Black people were “often marginalized” within the broader Muslim community. It continued: “And when they fall victim to police violence, non-Black Muslims are too often silent, which leads to complicity.”⁹ It’s also important to note that the man who prosecuted the murderer of George Floyd was also an American Muslim: Minnesota Attorney General Keith Ellison. Keith Ellison, an African American convert to Islam, was the first Muslim elected to Congress in 2006, and continued his decades of public service by being elected Minnesota’s attorney general in 2018 and re-elected in 2022.

There have been Muslims of African descent, like Keith Ellison, in America for almost 500 years. Estevanico the Moor was brought as a slave to what is now Florida in 1528 and is memorialized on the Texas African American history monument at the state capitol in Austin as the first African to enter Texas. At least 10% of the slaves brought from West Africa were Muslim, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture tells some of their stories as part of its collection.¹⁰

In the last century, many African Americans came to Islam through the Nation of Islam, which wove a Black nationalist element into their religion. Black Muslims played a crucial role in the Civil Rights movement. Even today, quotes and images of civil rights activist Malcolm X, who converted to Sunni Islam in 1964 after leaving the Nation of Islam, remain potent in the current protests. I chose a phrase associated with Malcolm X as the epigraph to this article. In describing the murder of President John F. Kennedy, Malcolm talked about the hate in America, and how this was an incidence of “chickens coming home to roost.” There is violence in America, and we have for decades ignored the dangers of White supremacy. Non-White Americans were not surprised at the violence that took place on January 6, 2021, at the U.S. Capitol. The chickens, once more, came home to roost. Organized groups of dangerous White people are called militias, not gangs. We do not rewrite our laws for them, do not punish them the way we do with gangs, and do not create specialized teams or units of law enforcement to deal with them. And they have been a danger for decades. Think back to the first attempt by a White Christian supremacist group (The Covenant, the Sword, and the Arm of the Lord) to attack the Alfred P. Murrah Federal building in Oklahoma City, which took place in 1983. Then think of the attack that succeeded in 1995, where the attacker had with him a copy of *The Turner Diaries*, a Christian White supremacist novel that talked about an attack on the US Capitol and a race war that led to the extermination of Jews, non-Whites, liberals, and politicians. We need to remember these things. They are not only part of our past, but also part of our present reality. We ignore them at our

9. Muslim Advocates, “Joint Statement Against Anti-Black Police Violence,” n.d., <https://muslimadvocates.org/joint-statement-against-anti-black-police-violence/>.

10. Ayla Amon, “African Muslims in Early America: Religion, Literacy, and Liberty,” National Museum of African American History and Culture, last updated January 11, 2019, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/stories/collection/african-muslims-early-america>.

peril. So it was heartening to see during the inauguration of President Joe Biden, no reference to Muslim violence, but an emphasis on domestic terrorism.

Muhammad Ali, who at one time was perhaps the most recognizable Muslim in the world, gained fame as much for his political stances as his boxing prowess. Ali led the way for other Muslim American athletes who have pushed for social change, including NBA great Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, who was involved in discussions of the Olympic Project for Human Rights for Black athletes to boycott the 1968 games. And twenty years before Colin Kaepernick, NBA player Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf refused to stand for the national anthem while playing for the Denver Nuggets because of his “Muslim conscience.” Polling showed that many of these protests were greeted with disdain by the majority of White Americans.¹¹

Today, at least 20% of Muslims in the U.S. are African Americans. But beginning with the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, there has been a growth in the number of Muslim immigrants coming to America. While increasing the overall number of Muslims in the U.S., such immigration has created a dividing line in the American Muslim community – between Muslims with an American heritage that stretched back generations and newer arrivals. Immigrant Muslims were often assumed by American Muslims to know more about Islam as they came from Muslim majority countries, and so they were given more authority in Muslim organizations and as Islamic leaders.

New arrivals also built mosques that served their own ethnic communities, with immigrant Muslim communities often worshiping separately from African American Muslims. There is also a split in the economic status of American Muslims. According to the Pew Forum, 24% of American Muslims have an annual income above US\$100,000, while 40% have an income below \$30,000.¹² Many of those who are wealthy – like billionaire Shahid Khan, an immigrant from Pakistan who now owns the NFL’s Jacksonville Jaguars – are from immigrant Muslim communities.

These intersections of race, class and national identity shape views on issues such as policing, protests and discrimination. A 2019 Pew survey found that 92% of African American Muslims believe there is a lot of discrimination against Black people, compared with 66% of non-African American Muslims.¹³ Non-immigrant Muslims are more likely to have a lived connection with the history of the United States, including the horrific legacy of slavery. As Americans, they are also taught early on, and often, that the right to peaceful protest is protected under the Constitution.

Immigrant Muslims may have a very different experience of protesting if they come from a country where dissent can lead to imprisonment or death. They may also be more wary of being seen as “anti-American.” Immigrant Muslims expressed more pride in being American than U.S.-born African American Muslims, in a 2017 Pew poll.¹⁴

11. Carrie Dann, “NBC/WSJ Poll: Majority Say Kneeling During Anthem ‘Not Appropriate,’” *NBC News*, August 31, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/nbc-wsj-poll-majority-say-kneeling-during-anthem-not-appropriate-n904891>.

12. Pew Research Center, “Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans.” July 26, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>.

13. Pew Research Center, “Black Muslims Account For a Fifth of all U.S. Muslims, and About Half are Converts to Islam,” January 17, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/01/17/black-muslims-account-for-a-fifth-of-all-u-s-muslims-and-about-half-are-converts-to-islam/>.

14. Pew Research Center, “Identity, Assimilation and Community,” July 26, 2017, <https://www.pewforum.org/2017/07/26/identity-assimilation-and-community/>.

Both communities, however, share a complicated history with U.S. law enforcement. For African Americans, police violence dates back to slavery. Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, police in cities like Los Angeles and New York have tried to infiltrate and surveil American Muslims.¹⁵

In vowing to stop calling the police on its customers, the Muslim-owned Cup Foods in Minneapolis is standing in solidarity with the largely Black community it serves. In a similar fashion, the soul-searching that has followed Mr. Floyd's death provides an opportunity for Muslim Americans of all backgrounds to unite and side with the oppressed, many of whom share their religion.

While many around the world consider Islam to be a religion of violence, many Muslims consider Islam to be a religion of peace. Clearly, anyone teaching courses in the study of Islam has to deal with issues of both peace and violence. What makes the study of Islam unique among religious traditions is the negative valence associated with Muslims. Students naively think of Buddhism, for example, as a religion of peace. They are usually surprised when they pick up a copy of *Buddhist Warfare* (2010), both for its title and its provocative cover image of a young novice, in robes, holding a handgun. The case of Islam is quite different. To take only one insidious example, look at the cover of the April 9, 2010, issue of *Commonweal*, a progressive Catholic magazine. In illustrating an otherwise excellent cover story on religion and violence by noted scholar R. Scott Appleby, both of the photographs accompanying the article – including the cover photo of someone wiping up blood from the floor of a mosque – are specifically Islamic. The pictorial message is clear: only Islam is a religion of violence. And this comes from a progressive voice of Catholicism in America.¹⁶

In North America, one has seen a shift from the rise of Islamophobia post-9/11 to what is better described as anti-Muslim racism. Another useful term is “misoislamia,” a neologism that captures the move from a fear (*phobia*) to a hatred (*miso*) for Islam and Muslims. And of course, there are connections here with other peoples. So in one of my Islam classes, we were talking about the historical prejudices in America: the genocide of First Nations people, the enslavement of Africans, anti-Catholic prejudice, anti-Semitism, the Japanese internment, etc. I expressed surprise that this continued to happen with Islamophobia in the twenty-first century. One of my students looked at me and said, simply, “But you don’t understand. America’s a gang. You need to get jumped in.” I think there’s great wisdom in her statement. You don’t get to join a gang until you are “jumped in,” beaten by other gang members to show that you can both take the pain and are worthy of belonging to the group. Perhaps the current Islamophobia in the US and Canada is just that – our turn as North American Muslims to get “jumped in,” in the way that other religious and ethnic groups have already proved their belonging. Or perhaps not. Perhaps as North Americans, we need to begin the healing. We need to know the wounds that many of us carry. To this end, we can continue to encourage more Muslims to enter the media in order to properly and honestly tell our stories. We also need to be more involved in the political process, not just to vote, but to contact our elected officials about our concerns and, where possible, to run for office. We, too, as the blessed Langston Hughes reminded us, *are* part of the fabric of North America.

15. American Civil Liberties Union, “Factsheet: The NYPD Muslim Surveillance Program,” June 17, 2013, <https://www.aclu.org/other/factsheet-nypd-muslim-surveillance-program>.

16. I sent in a letter to the editor asking for more information about choice of photographs. That letter was never answered.

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