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Identity Matters: Culture and Religion as Key Factors in the Migration of Muslims

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Abstract

Using as a springboard the Islamic concept of الهجرة Hijrah (migration)—whereby migration is conceived as a way of saving the faithful from religious persecution—I analyze how culturally, economically, and socio-politically disenfranchised and marginalized Muslims decide or, better yet, have no other choice but to leave their homeland in search for a better life in non-Muslim lands. Adaptation, assimilation, and compromise vs. maintaining their cultural, linguistic, and religious identity while living in دار الأعداء *dār al-Ḥarb* (land of the enemy, i.e., non-Muslim territory) are oftentimes a barrier to fully enjoying the benefits of living free from danger in their adopted homeland. Finally, cultural, ethnic, racial, religious, and (trans)gender issues will be analyzed as these modern-day مهاجرون *muhājirūna* (migrant Muslims) negotiate their (new or reshaped) identities away from home, i.e., دار الإسلام *dār al-Islām*, the land under Muslim sovereignty.

Keywords: Adaptation; assimilation; compromise; culture; (trans)gender; identity; Islam; Islamic Law; (e)/(im)migration; Muslims; Qurʾān

الهجرة *al-Hijrah* (Migration) in the Qurʾān and the أحاديث *Aḥādīth* of the Prophet Muhammad

This [الهجرة *al-Hijrah*] is a story that addresses universal human themes of courage, duty, loss, companionship, persecution, migration, community, and freedom (Trevathan, cited in Harrigan, 2023: 9).

Leaving or, better yet, willfully abandoning one's homeland and seeking a (temporary) safe haven is the cornerstone of Islam when it comes to preserving life due to hostile religious and sociopolitical events that have become impossible to sustain, should one decide to remain and challenge them. In these cases, as per the Qurʾān, the best solution is to place physical distance

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from this evil source in order to preserve one's faith and eventually regroup, gain strength, and confidently one day perhaps even counterattack, should the occasion arise:

Those who believed **إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا**

And those who suffered exile **هَاجَرُوا وَجَاهَدُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ**

And fought (and strove and struggled) **أُولَئِكَ يَرْجُونَ رَحْمَتَ اللَّهِ**

In the name of God, — **اللَّهُ وَاللَّهُ غُفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ**

They have the hope

Of the Mercy of God:

And God is Oft-forgiving

Most Merciful (Qur'ān, 2:218; Ali, 1983: 83)

By doing so, the believers, **مُؤْمِنُونَ** *mu'minūn*, are also distancing themselves from the ethical dilemma of partaking the physical space with hostile individuals that are questioning the very core of their Inner Faith (**إِيمَانٌ** *īman*). Hence, the best solution is to (e)migrate, at least temporary, in order to forsake hate:

And all abomination shun! **وَالرُّجْزَ فَآمُجِرْ** (Qur'ān 74: 5; Ali, 1983: 1640)

Indeed, *īman* is the unwavering, rational, and peaceful acceptance of God's role in one's life. Thus, Inner Faith and Reason (**عَقْلٌ** *'aql*) in Islam are oftentimes inseparable; they are two undividable parts of a **مُؤْمِنٌ** *mu'min*, or rather, a (true and sincere) believer who lives Islam to the fullest, despite the consequences.

Īman is the drive that gives believers, *mu'minūn*, the urge to leave and seek better places. Should adversities occur, true *īman* perforce would guide the believer to choose **الهِجْرَةَ** *al-hijrah* (migration). In other words, leaving is not seen as a defeat, but rather, is God's way of opening a door for prosperity.

The 622 migration of Prophet Muhammad (c. 570-632) and his friend, father-in-law, and companion **أَبُو بَكْرٍ** Abū Bakr (573-634), from Mecca to Medina,² soon after joined by the first group of converts to Islam, is a perfect example of this determination to follow one's Inner Faith (*īman*). These early Muslim migrants, known as **مُهَاجِرِينَ** *Muhājirīn*, were a very small, yet very committed, community of believers composed of family members and friends.

Eight years later, in 630, Prophet Muhammad returned to Mecca; yet, this time he had the political and religious authority to subdue his enemies. In 639, under the leadership of the second caliph **عُمَرُ** 'Umar I (r. 634-644), the *Hijrah* was chosen to mark the beginning of the Islamic calendar, known in English as Hegira, *Hijrah*, or *Hijra*, and internationally abbreviated as A.H., Latin for *Anno Hegirae* (Year of the *Hijrah*).

² Most likely, September 22, 622. Yet, according to other calculations, July 15 or July 16, 622 are also possible dates. (Ali, 1983: 1078).



During these eight years of self-imposed exile (622-630), the *Muhājirīn* were assisted by the *الأنصار al-Anṣār* (helpers), or rather, the inhabitants of Medina who converted to Islam when Prophet Muhammad was persecuted in Mecca. Indeed, their generosity and steadfast assistance to the (e)migrants will not go unnoticed by God:

لِلْفُقَرَاءِ الْمُهَاجِرِينَ الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِنْ

To the indigent *Muhājirīs*, وَأَمْوَالِهِمْ يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِنَ اللَّهِ

Those who were expelled وَرِضْوَانًا وَيَنْصُرُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ

From their homes and their property, هُمْ الصَّادِقُونَ، وَرَسُولُهُ أَوْلِيَاكَ

While seeking Grace from God

And (His) Good Pleasure,

And aiding God and His Apostle:

Such are indeed

The sincere ones: — (Qur’ān 59:8; Ali, 1983: 1523).

In the *أحاديث Ahādīth* of the Prophet Muhammad,³ it is recorded that he regarded the *al-Anṣār* as *أَنْتُمْ أَحَبُّ النَّاسِ إِلَيَّ* “the most beloved people” (Khân, 1994: 725), since they gave the *علي علي* preference over themselves even though they were in need of that” (Khân, 1994: 728).

As for these Muslims who migrated to Medina, the Qur’ān advises that, whenever possible, they join the *أُمَّة ummah* (heterogeneous community of believers):

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَوَفَّيْتُمْ الْمَلَائِكَةُ ظَالِمِي

أنفُسِهِمْ قَالُوا فِيمَ كُنْتُمْ قَالُوا كُنَّا

مُسْتَضْعَفِينَ فِي الْأَرْضِ قَالُوا أَلَمْ تَكُنْ

تَكُنْ أَرْضُ اللَّهِ وَسِعَةً فَتُهَاجِرُوا فِيهَا فَأَوْلِيَاكَ

They say: “In what (plight) فَتُهَاجِرُوا فِيهَا فَأَوْلِيَاكَ مَأْوَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمَ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا

Were ye?” They reply:

“Weak and oppressed.”

They say: “Was not

³ The *Ḥadīth* حَدِيثٌ plural *أحاديث Ahādīth*, of the prophet Muhammad, also known as *الأخبار al-Akbbār* and *الأثر al-Athar*, or rather, the traditions. *الأخبار Al-Akbbār* and *الأثر al-Athar* are often used as synonyms for the *أحاديث Ahādīth*. The term *الأخبار Al-Akbbār*—singular *الخبر al-Khabar*—usually carries the meaning of 'tradition' as it refers to only one person, often with a historical connotation. The *حديث ḥadīth*, Arabic for story, is the 'tradition,' i.e., the written record of the saying and doings, *سنة Sunnah*, of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions. Together with the Qur’ān, the *ḥadīth* forms the basis for Islamic Jurisprudence (*أصول الفقه usūl al-fiqh*, principles of Islamic Law). Obviously, this traditional literature was first transmitted orally, through memorization, and then—for fear of permanent loss—it was written down for posterity. (Levi, 2021: 10).

The earth of God
 Spacious enough for you
 To move yourselves away
 (From evil)?” Such men
 Will find their abode
 In Hell,—What an evil
 Refuge!— (Qur’ān 4:97; Ali, 1983: 211).

Hence, it is clear that, whenever possible, Muslims living in *dār al-Ḥarb*,⁴ or rather, non-Muslim lands, should leave (i.e., migrate) and join their fellow believers, the greater *ummah*, and enter, or perhaps, at a later date, reenter, *dār al-Islām*, i.e., the lands under Muslim sovereignty.

As time went by, roughly during the first centuries after the death of Prophet Muhammad, Muslim scholars and “jurists debated whether the obligation to emigrate only applied to Muslims during the lifetime of the Prophet” (Naqvi, 2013: 1; Masud, 1990).

The 615 migration of a group of Muslims (eleven men and four women) from Mecca to Abyssinia, then part of the Kingdom of Aksum (1st century-c. 960; present-day northern Ethiopia and Djibouti, eastern Sudan, and present-day Eritrea), is indeed the first *hijrah* undertaken by some members of the early Islamic community hailing from the Arabian Peninsula. Their seven-year resettlement in Abyssinia (615-622)—then under the rule of ኢርሞህ Armah (أصْحَمَةُ بْنُ أَبِجَرٍ Aṣḥamah bin Abjar in Arabic) (Asad, 2013: 179), commonly recognized as النَجَاشِي al-Najāshī (the Negus; r. 614-630)—is known in Arabic as الهِجْرَةُ إِلَى الْحَبَشَةِ al-Hijra ‘ilā al-Habaṣa, i.e., the migration to Abyssinia; yet, since it occurred prior to the 622 Mecca-Medina migration, it is commonly referred to as الهِجْرَةُ الْأُولَى al-Hijra al-‘Uwlaa, or rather, the *First Hijrah*.

A second migration of Muslims from Mecca to Abyssinia departed in 616 comprising 83 men and 18 women (Montgomery Watt, 1961: 66; Power, 2012: 87). Their leader was جَعْفَرُ بْنُ أَبِي طَالِبٍ Ja‘far ibn Abī Ṭālib (c. 590-629) (Sa‘d, 1977: 196) who was also Prophet Muhammad’s cousin and ‘Alī’s older brother.⁵ Ja‘far, his family, and a few others remained in Abyssinia longer than the other migrants, almost thirteen years, most likely leaving during summer 628.

These early Muslim migrants were part of the first converts to Islam, collectively known as الصَّحَابَةُ al-ṣaḥāba, namely, the Companions [of Prophet Muhammad]. Unlike the 622 Mecca-Medina migration—which was “obligatory and involved almost the entire Muslim community” living in Mecca—the 615 Mecca-Abyssinia migration was “voluntary and limited

⁴ A synonym for *dār al-Ḥarb* is دَارُ الْكُفْرِ *dār al-Kufr*, i.e., the land of the disbelief.

⁵ ‘Alī ibn ‘Abī Ṭālib علي بن أبي طالب (601-661), was Prophet Muhammad’s cousin, son-in-law, and fourth and last Rightly-Guided Caliph (r. 656-661). The *Khulafā al-Rāshidūn* الخُلَفَاءُ الرَّاشِدُونَ (the Rightly Guided Caliphs) were the first four caliphs of Islam following Muhammad’s death in 632. The first three Rightly Guided Caliphs were: Abū Bakr أَبُو بَكْرٍ (r. 632-632), Umar عُمَرُ (r. 634-644) and Uthmām عُثْمَانُ (r. 644-656). The leadership of the first four Rightly Guided Caliphs (632-661) was followed by the Umayyad Caliphate (661-750), the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), and the Ottoman Empire (1299-1922); yet, at times there were innumerable concurrent and adversary kingdoms dispersed throughout the then vast Islamic world arching across three continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia). (Levi, 2022: 98-99).



in scope” (Masud, 1990: 30). In the wake of the difficulties that the early Muslim community was facing in Mecca, Prophet Muhammad suggested that they migrate to a safer and more welcoming place:

When the apostle saw the affliction of his companions and that though he escaped it because of his standing with Allāh and his uncle **أَبُو طَالِبِ بْنِ عَبْدِ الْمُطَّلِبِ** Abū Ṭālib ibn ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib, he could not protect them, he said to them: "If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you), for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allāh shall relieve you from your distress." Thereupon his companions went to Abyssinia, being afraid of apostasy and fleeing to God with their religion. This was the first *hijra* in Islam (Hishām, 1955: 146).

In 622, after their seven-year settlement in Abyssinia, these migrants “were received by Muhammad with happiness and gratitude for the way they had been treated” (Levi, 2021: 8) by the Negus Armah. Imām **مُحَمَّدُ بْنُ إِسْمَاعِيلَ الْبُخَارِيُّ** Muhammad ibn Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī (810-870), acclaimed by many scholars as the leading Sunni scholar when it comes to *Aḥādīth* studies, thus reports the incident in his *Sabīh*, by far the most authoritative *Ḥadīth* collection in Sunni Islam:

1585. Narrated Umm Khâlid bint Khâlid: When I came from Ethiopia (to Al-Medīna), I was a young girl. Allāh’s Messenger made me wear a sheet having marks on it. Allāh’s Messenger was rubbing those marks with his hands saying: “*Sanāh!* *Sanāh!*” (i.e. good, good.) [5:214-O.B.] (Khân, 1994: 736).

Prophet Muhammad had written correspondence with the Negus Armah, who was an Ethiopian Orthodox Christian, and solemnly vowed to protect the Muslim migrant community residing in his lands even after a delegation of the Quraysh from Mecca wrongly accused the Muslims of disrespecting the Virgin Mary and denying the divine nature of Jesus.⁶ Furthermore, they were to be apprehended and handed over to the Quraysh representatives because they had escaped justice (sic):

[Amir bin al-‘Āṣ] [...] said that the Muslims in Abyssinia were not refugees from persecution but were fugitives from justice and law, and requested him to extradite them to Makkah (Razwy, 1999).

Indeed, upon hearing the leader of the migrants, Ja‘far, reciting excerpts of what later would be *Sūrah* 19, namely **سُورَةُ مَرْيَمَ** *Sūrah Maryam*, verses 16-40,⁷ the Negus Armah realized that the Qur’ān and the Bible were both sacred books: “Verily, this [Qur’ān] and what Isa [Jesus] brought [i.e., the New Testament] has come from the same source of light!” (Guillaume, 2004: 150-153).

The Negus Armah showed great signs of respect for Islam, considering it a religion that did not contradict either Jewish or Christian teachings. In fact, he also refused to hand over a

⁶ In a sense, the Quraysh delegates were depicting the early Muslim community as heterodox Christians, notably Arians who, even though they believed in Jesus as the Son of God, they postulated that he was not coeternal with God the Father, but rather, that he was begotten and made by God. Hence, Jesus was not *de facto* God. (Berndt & Steinacher, 2014; Davis, 1990).

⁷ *Sūrah Maryam* “was revealed before the first resort of the batch of Muslims to Abyssinia, say seven years before the *Hijrat*.” (Alī, 1983: 766).

Muslim messenger to the Quraysh⁸ general عمرو بن العاص Amir bin al-‘Āṣ (c. 573-664) who—before his own conversion to Islam in 629, inspired by the words of the Negus—wanted to kill him (Levi, 2021: 9):

Would you ask me to give you the messenger of a man to whom the great Namus comes as he used to come to Moses, so that you might kill him! [...] Woe to you, ‘Amr, obey me and follow him [i.e., Muhammad], for by Allāh he is right and will triumph over his adversaries as Moses triumphed over Pharaoh and his armies (Hishām, 1955: 484).

Hence, both migration episodes indicate that, when Muslims are persecuted, Islamic Law (فقه *fiqh*) advises or even mandates that the believers migrate and “seek a land ruled by a just leader” regardless of his religious affiliation. Furthermore, “Muslims have the responsibility for learning how to interact efficiently in clarifying and enlightening others about Islam” (Safieddine, 2011) as in the case of the Negus Armah who, upon talking with the Muslim community living in his midst, eventually converted to Islam. In 632, in the wake of his Farewell Pilgrimage to Mecca (حجة الوداع *Hijj al-Wada’*), Prophet Muhammad sent messengers to various kingdoms, “of the Arabs and the non-Arabs” (Levi, 2021: 9) and invited their leaders to accept Islam. Upon receiving Prophet Muhammad’s messenger, the Negus Armah thus responded:

From the Negus al-Aṣḥām b. Abjar, Peace be upon you, O prophet of Allāh, and mercy and blessing from Allāh beside Whom there is no God, who has guided me to Islam. I have received your letter in which you mention the matter of Jesus and by the Lord of heaven and earth he is not one scrap more than what you say. We know that with which you were sent to us and we have entertained your nephew and your companions. I testify that you are God’s apostle, true and confirming (those before you). I have given my fealty to you and to your nephew and I have surrendered myself through him to the Lord of the worlds. I have sent to you my son Arha. I have control only over myself and if you wish me to come to you, O apostle of God, I will do so. I bear witness that what you say is true (Lings, 1983: 316).

الهجرة *Al-Hijrah* (Migration) of Culturally, Economically, and Socio-politically Disfranchised and Marginalized Muslims in دار الحزب *dār al-Ḥarb* (non-Muslim lands)

The *Hijrah* was a journey that “represents an isthmus separating two historical worlds” (Ashraf Faqih, in Harrigan, 2023: 11).

When Muslims are culturally and religiously ostracized, censored, and persecuted, no matter where, the Qur’ān advises them to leave physically “evil,” or rather, to (e)migrate and possibly join other Muslims in their fight against evil. Indeed, should Muslims decide to stay with these evildoers, eventually their souls will perish in hell because they have died while sinning. Hence, a *hijrah* is necessary, since God’s Earth is big enough to accommodate these migrants

⁸ The Quraysh were a cluster of clans that controlled Mecca and, in particular, all the activities centered on the الكعبة *Ka’aba* (cube). In pre-Islamic times, the Ka’aba was a holy place, made of stone, where Bedouins would make their pilgrimage to worship many gods and goddess as they exchanged goods with other pilgrims. The Ka’aba was a very lucrative place; hence, when Muhammad began preaching monotheism and the abandoning of idol worship, the Quraysh feared for their financial security. It is no surprise, then, that the Quraysh were Prophet Muhammad’s worst enemies and the least prone to embrace Islam.



as they regroup and devise the next step in their fight against evil. The *hijrah* should then be considered as a bridge, or better yet, a springboard for better opportunities:

When angels take
 The souls of those
 Who die in sin
 Against their souls,
 They say: “In what (plight)
 Were ye?” They reply:
 “Weak and oppressed
 Were we in the earth.”
 They say: “Was no
 The Earth of God
 Spacious enough for you
 To move yourselves away
 (From evil)? Such men
 Will find their abode
 In Hell,—What an evil
 Refuge! (Qur’ān 4:97; Ali, 1983: 211).

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَوَلَّوْا أَلْمَلِكَةَ ظَالِمِي أَنفُسِهِمْ قَالُوا فِيمَ كُنْتُمْ قَالُوا كُنَّا مُسْتَضْعَفِينَ فِي الْأَرْضِ قَالُوا أَلَمْ تَكُنْ أَرْضَ
 اللَّهِ وَسِعَةً فَتُهَاجِرُوا فِيهَا قَالُوا لَيْسَ لَنَا مَا نُوَلِّهِمْ جَهَنَّمَ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا

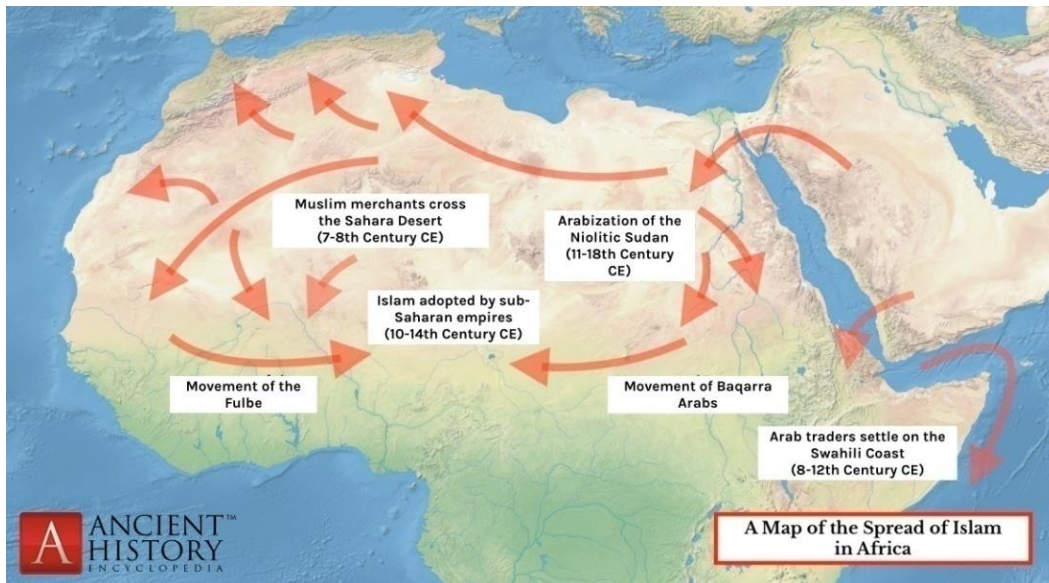
Undeniably, since the dawn of time identity, religion, and mores of a given ethnic and/or racial group have always been part and parcel of the human experience during the migration process across continents and oceans. Indeed, as human beings traversed lands searching for better places upon which to build or rebuild anew their societies, they also created a system whereby their group identity was maintained in their new, adopted homeland, lest the disintegration of the very essence of their being.

In other words, in order to be fully integrated into their new environment human beings need to connect with the new place of residence in order to transplant their ancestral cultural and religious roots. This process is relatively easy when the new land is uninhabited. Yet, what happens when there are already other inhabitants in the chosen place? How do human beings negotiate their new role within this new society? And, better yet, how will these (im)migrants be accepted by the autochthonous population or those who have been living there for quite some time?

Human history is a testament to this new process of adaptation to and adoption of the new cultures and mores found by the recently arrived “other.” This is when the migration is willful. But what happens when the migration is forced? Will there be resistance from both sides, or rather, the newcomers as well as the receiving community? In both cases the encounter can be peaceful or turbulent. Matters complicate even further when religion plays a major role in the migrants’ way of life.

Indeed, world history has taught us that religious persecutions can force human beings to undertake unwilling migrations (diasporas and/or self-imposed exiles), thus necessitating the religiously oppressed to migrate and quickly adapt to the new environment, most of the times more welcoming than the society from which the *diasporic* group escaped.

Map 1. The Spread of Islam in Africa from the 7th to the 18th century CE⁹



In the case of Islam, as we have seen from the section above, the Muslim communities of the early years of Islam also faced a *hijrah* (migration), mandatory as well as recommended.

As Islam spread geographically from its birthplace (Arabian Peninsula) to most areas of the then-known world—from Egypt, the Maghreb, and the Iberia Peninsula (711-1492) to West and East Africa, Iran, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia—Muslims also migrated into these newly conquered territories. These lands became *dar al-Islam* (areas where the majority of the inhabitants are Muslims and where Islam is their *raison d’être*).

Peaceful and/or warlike, the occupation of these lands by Muslims was the result of religious conquests or a sincere desire to convert the local population to Islam.

Indeed, the third aspect of this occupation was the peaceful *hijrah* (migration) of Muslim men into areas of the then-known world for trade. In other words, business was the common denominator that brought together the (male) Muslim migrant and the new land/its occupants. The presence of these Muslim migrant men was usually well received by the host

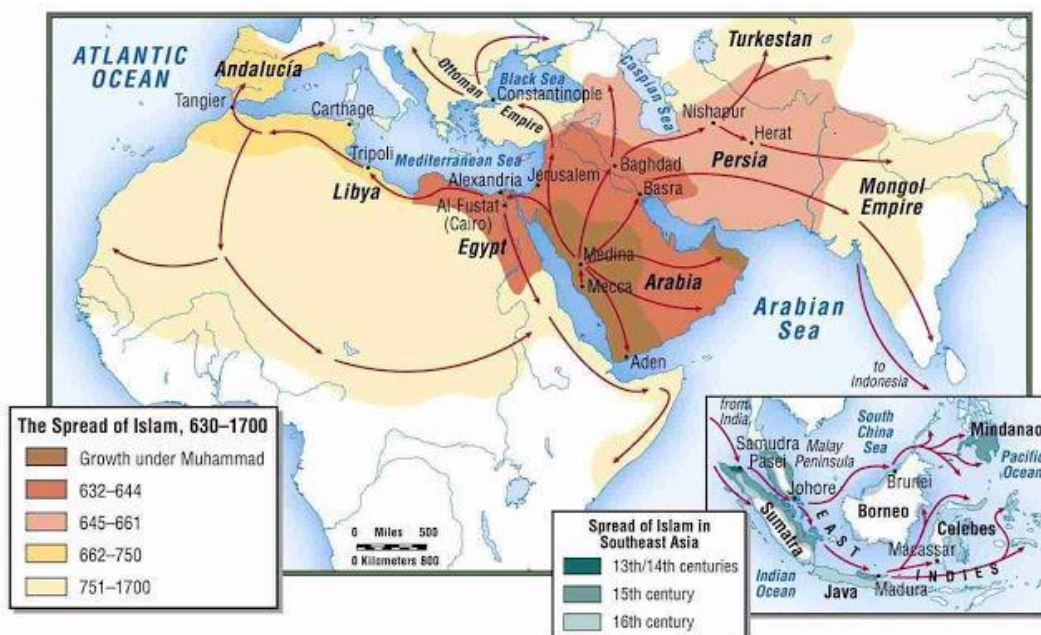
⁹ (Cartwright, 2019). [permission to publish image granted].



country/nation/area since the financial benefits were mutual. Short- and long-term trade agreements, locally as well as connected to newly formed or well-established national and transnational trade routes were thus (re)established (see map above).

The coming together of these Muslim migrant men and local women gave birth to new Islamic or Islamized communities that in time had a life of their own. Islam in West and East Africa are good examples of this coexistence of originally migrant Muslim (Islamic and/or Islamized) communities becoming sedentary and contributing to the social and economic well-being of their newly adopted lands. For instance, the Swahili culture is the result of this coming together of Muslim migrant men and local Bantu women along the East African Coast, from Mogadishu to Sofala, in present-day Mozambique (including the Comoros).

Map 2. Islamic Diffusion Timeline¹⁰



The migration (*hijrah*) of Muslims is therefore seen in Islam as a duty when things become unbearable in *dār al-Ḥarb*, the latter also encompassing a land that technically has Muslims living in its midst but where the government does not follow the word of God and, in its stead, abuses its own citizens, despite the fact of belonging to the same religion (Sunni or Shi'i Islam). Hence, in this case the migration (*hijrah*) becomes mandatory because it is dictated by Inner Faith (إيمان *īman*).

In other words, regardless of their place of residence and/or their geographical provenience, Muslims are urged to migrate in order to live a life in accordance with their faith. Hence, the migration of culturally, economically, and socio-politically disfranchised and marginalized Muslims in *dār al-Ḥarb* (non-Muslim lands) has to be placed within the greater blueprint of

¹⁰ (Islamic Diffusion Timeline).

how oppressed Muslim communities seek immediate refuge in Muslim and non-Muslim lands as a way of addressing and possibly solving insurmountable economic and social obstacles.

Indeed, these barriers at home trigger innumerable diasporas that propel uncontrollable migrations inside and outside the Muslim world, particularly toward neighboring Muslim countries and, desirably (for economic reasons), toward the West where Islam is a minority.

In the wake of Prophet Muhammad's death (632), which saw the expansion of Islam outside the Arabian Peninsula, Europe was for the first time confronted with the presence of Muslims in its territory:

The presence of Muslims in the West is, of course, nothing new. Centuries-long Muslim presence on the European continent goes back to the eighth century in the case of the Iberian Peninsula [711-1492], eleventh-century Sicily [827-1091], and the fourteenth century in the case of the Balkans [c. 14th century-1912] (Duderija, 2018).

Indeed, besides the areas mentioned above, Islam was once present in many parts of Europe, namely¹¹:

Iberian Peninsula (711-1492): Portugal: 711-1249; Spain: 711-1492

Sardinia: 748-1027

Corsica: 810-850; 930-1020

Sicily: 827-1091 (called the Emirate of Sicily between 965-1072)

Emirates of Taranto: 840-880; and Bari: 847-871

Malta: 965-1091

Albania: c. 14th century-1912

Greece: 1458-1821

Serbia: 1459-1804

Bosnia and Herzegovina: 1493-1878

Hungary: 1541-1699

Alas, despite this long-lasting presence in Europe (totaling 1201 years), whereby Europeans benefitted from the presence of Islamic (and Jewish, mainly Sephardic) (Levi, 2020; Levi, 2003) scholars that contributed to the scientific advancements and discoveries hitherto unmatched (Levi, 2020; Levi, 2013; Levi, 2005; Levi, 2003), Muslims have always been considered as the undesired/willfully unaccepted and distrusted “other” in their midst. In other words, there was no appreciation for all the contributions that Islam had made to a then scientifically and technologically dormant, stagnant, and backward Europe—Middle Ages (late 5th century-late 15th century) and the first two centuries of the Early Modern Period (1500-1800).

¹¹ (Levi, 2011: 5).



If we look at history then, Muslims in Europe have always been the marginalized “other,” despite their unrivaled contributions to local, national, and world economy, knowledge, and science. In light of this, why would Muslims want to migrate to the West then?

According to the 2022, Global Trends Report,¹² “by the end of 2022, there were over 108.4 million forcibly displaced people across the world.”¹³

Migrations from the Syrian Arab Republic (6,5 million), Afghanistan (5,7 million), Bangladesh (3,083.630), Pakistan (2,298.002), South Sudan (2,295 million), Saudi Arabia (1,210.788), The Democratic Republic of the Congo (931,900), Sudan (836,800), Somalia (790,500), and the Central African Republic (748,300) to neighboring countries and the West (the United States, Canada, Colombia, Peru, and Europe) are most of the time driven by economic, political, and religious reasons.¹⁴

By far, conflicts stemming from political disagreements are the source of “the 60 million displaced people worldwide,” and “close to 40 percent” of these migrants “originate from the Arab region, mainly Syria and Palestine” (Yahya & Muasher, 2018). This means that at least 24 million migrants hailing from these countries are seeking refuge either in the neighboring countries or elsewhere in the world, preferably in the West. That would also mean that of these 24 million migrants, most are Muslims (Sunni and Shi‘i).

Hence, socio-politically disfranchised and marginalized Muslims choose migration as their only solution vis-à-vis death in their homeland despite being perfectly aware of not being welcome in the host country.

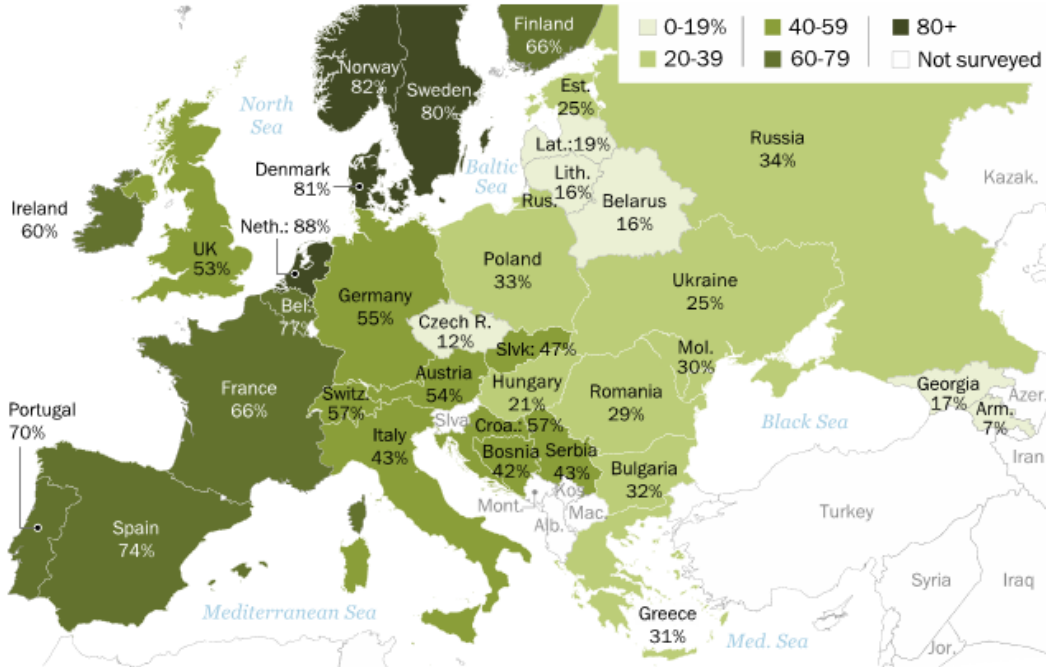
¹² “Global Trends Report 2022.” 2023. *The UN Refugee Agency*. <<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>>.

¹³ “Forced Displacement. Refugees, Internally Displaced, and Host Communities.” (July 5, 2023). *The World Bank*. <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/forced-displacement>>.

¹⁴ “World Migration Report 2022.” *UN Migration*. <<https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/wmr-2022-interactive/>>; “UNHCR Global Trends 2017.” *The UN Refugee Agency*. <<https://www.unhcr.org/media/unhcr-global-trends-2017>>.

Vast differences across Europe in public attitudes toward Muslims

% who say they would be willing to accept Muslims as members of their family



Note: This question was not asked of Muslims.

Source: Surveys conducted 2015-2017 in 34 countries. See Methodology for details.

"Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Source: Pew Research Center (2018), available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>¹⁵

But how would things be if the migrant Muslims happen to be part of the LGBTQIA+ community? Would they be accepted by the host country as well as the Muslim community (fellow Muslim travelers and/or the Muslim community residing in the host country)?

Cultural, Ethnic, Racial, Religious, and (Trans)gender Issues: Negotiating (New or Reshaped) Identities in دار الحَرْب *dār al-Ḥarb*, Away from Home (دار الإسلام *dār al-Islām*, lands under Muslim sovereignty)

Throughout the centuries, within the framework of national and, more so, transnational migration(s), issues related to culture, ethnicity, race, religion, and/or (trans)gender identity—oftentimes intertwined and interconnected—have been a constant in the discourse undertaken by the migrants as they negotiated their new or reshaped persona in the adopted land (in the case of Muslim, in the *dār al-ḥarb*, or rather, where most of the inhabitants are not Muslims).

¹⁵ Pew Research Center (2018). "Eastern and Western Europeans Differ on Importance of Religion, Views of Minorities, and Key Social Issues." *Pew Research Center*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/10/29/eastern-and-western-europeans-differ-on-importance-of-religion-views-of-minorities-and-key-social-issues/>.



This appears to be particularly true when migrants hail from a Muslim or predominantly Muslim country or area the world. The question then is how to live a new life in a new land while negotiating and finally being true to one's sexual orientation?

In 2015, the number of refugees (asylum-seeking migrants) hailing from the Muslim world exceeded one million. If we go by the convention that roughly 10% of the population identifies as being a member of the LGBTQIA+ community perhaps it is safe to say that:

[...] approximately eight percent of the world identifies as homosexual, bisexual, or pansexual. Approximately 80 percent of the world identifies as heterosexual, and the remaining 12 percent of the world will not report how they identify. This data is as recent as 2021. It is estimated that the younger generations are more likely to be open about their sexuality, with Generation Z being the most likely to be openly gay, bisexual, or asexual or pansexual. Millennials are the next most likely to be openly gay, and Baby Boomers are the least likely to report or identify as openly gay. The age groups of Millennials and Generation Z are the age group between the ages of 23 and 38 in the year 2021.¹⁶

This means that in all probability over 100 000 migrants identified (either covertly or overtly) with the LGBTQIA+ community. Integration into their respective adopted countries was perforce further hindered by the very fact of being the “other” among their own Muslim communities. This is particularly true if the LGBTQIA+ community relies/relied on their Muslim migrant brethrens to assist them in the integration process.

In other words, Muslim *diasporic* migrants are on the receiving end of two kinds of discrimination, namely, from conservative people of the host country and from conservative Muslims (either their fellow Muslim travelers or Muslims brethren, regardless of their origin, who are already residing in the new, *diasporic* land). Indeed, as Professors Antje Röder and Niels Spierings, hailing from Germany and Holland respectively, have keenly observed:

[...] the development of more liberal attitudes among European Muslims is held back by a combination of socialization in conservative religious communities and hostility from host-country populations (Röder & Spierings, 2022: 534).

As part of the cultural background brought over by the migrants, religion plays a crucial role in their daily lives since it is ultimately tied to the cultural and linguistic identity of the newcomers. This applies to all migrants, regardless of their race, ethnicity, language, national origin, gender, and/or sexual orientation. As a result of international migrations, religion in the host countries is perforce gaining new dimensions, since it reflects the peculiarities and the interpersonal dynamics of the religious affiliations of the migrants.¹⁷

Studies performed by scholars covering many areas of Europe where migrants who happen to be Muslims have settled and forged a new life highlight a common trend when it comes to acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community in their midst. Indeed, there appears to be a

¹⁶ “LGBTQ+ Population by Country 2023” (2023) *World Population Review*. <<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/lgbtq-population-by-country>>. See also: “LGBTQ+ Worldwide – Statistics & Facts” (March 23, 2023). *Statista*. <<https://www.statista.com/topics/8579/lgbtq-worldwide/#topicOverview>>.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center (2015). “The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010-2050. Why Muslims Are Rising Fastest and the Unaffiliated Are Shrinking as a Share of the World's Population.” *Pew Research Center*. <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/03/PF_15.04.02_ProjectionsFullReport.pdf>.

correlation between (strict) adherence to Islamic precepts, attending Mosque services, textualism,¹⁸ and education (or lack thereof) vis-à-vis accepting and embracing the lifestyles and choices of their fellow Muslim migrants who happen to belong to the LGBTQIA+ community. Rejection of the LGBTQIA+ community is thus higher when religiosity, textualism, regular attendance of religious services at the mosque, and limited access to education are the *raison d'être* of the Muslim, migrant community in the new, adopted land. As for the level of education, highly educated Muslims, particularly women, tend to be more open when it comes to questioning sex and gender roles imposed on humans by Islam (Glas, Spierings, and Scheepers, 2018) and—as Kate Millett (1934-2017) brightly stated in 1970—by Universal Patriarchy (Millett, 1970). Needless to say, this discourse is not unique to Europe; indeed, in other parts of the western world that host Muslim migrants, the trend appears to be the same (Fadel, 2018; Vaid, 2022; Yellin, 2023; Yussuf, 2020).

The mitigating factor vs. conservative views held by regular mosque goers when it comes to LGBTQIA+ issues is assimilating to and feeling part of the host country (the latter generally more open to broadening the fixed gender roles imposed by patriarchal societies). Indeed, Professors Antje Röder and Niels Spierings suggest that:

[...] socialization in relatively liberal and secular norms in the receiving countries might offer the opportunity to question and perhaps distance oneself from some religious teachings at an individual level without losing one's religion altogether. Put differently, among those who grew up in the host country, the linkage between individual religiosity and traditional attitudes toward homosexuality is expected to be weaker (Röder & Spierings, 2022: 540).

Nevertheless, it is also true that—as a reaction to the (constant) attacks against Islam whereby the emphasis is on the widely accepted belief of the closed-mindedness, brutality, and chauvinism of Islamic law (*fiqh*) when it comes to gender and sex roles—most Muslims living in the West opt for choosing and identifying with the more conservative values of Islam. Indeed, it appears that they turn the tables on everyone (the West and their fellow Muslim brethren) by embracing the traditional values of Islam. In other words, the “other,” or rather, the Muslim, is now united as a group/a community (the *أمة ummah*) who is morally superior to the debauched majority of the host country (*دار الحرب dār al-Ḥarb*). Alas, there is no room for the double minority, or rather, the LGBTQIA+ community:

[...] in a hostile environment, it is more likely that minority-group members emphasize a traditional position as morally superior. Conservative attitudes toward homosexuality, then, become a dimension of positive identification with the in-group, around which in-group homogeneity might be increased [...]. We, therefore, expect both the general hostility to migration at the country level and perceived group discrimination at the individual level to make retention of origin-country norms among Muslim migrants more likely (Röder & Spierings, 2022: 542).

Additionally, this correlation between the negative way the host country views Islam, from one side, and LGBTQIA+ rights, on the other, is specifically tied to how the Muslim migrant community feels threatened and ultimately discriminated against just for being the “other” in

¹⁸ Textualism is a formalist theory that only takes into consideration the interpretation of the text per se, without taking into account other external factors that might have contributed to its creation; hence, there is no room for abstract speculation.



its now adopted country.¹⁹ In other words, the sacrificial lamb is the weakest link in their midst, or rather, the LGBTIA+ community:

Muslim migrants and their descendants hold more negative attitudes toward homosexuality if the destination country is more hostile to migrants [...] and if they perceive their group to be discriminated against (Röder & Spierings, 2022: 542).

Alas, when faced with threats and discrimination, the Muslim community in the Diaspora does not seem to embrace the ethical principle of *مُواخَاة* *mu'akhāb* (brotherhood) whereby, whenever possible, Muslims have an obligation to assist others, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, by giving them *أَمْن* *amm* (safety), *ضِيَاة* *diyāfa* (hospitality), and *إِجَارَة* *ijāra* (“rent,” i.e., protection or support). Indeed, based on the Qur’ān and the *أَحَادِيث* *Abādīth* of Prophet Muhammad, the migrant or *مُجَار* *mujār* (the person who is being protected/helped)²⁰ has the right to be protected, regardless of his/her/their status within society and whether he/she/they is/are (a) Muslim or not.²¹

Chapter 4 of the 2014 *Pew Research Center’s* study on religion in the United States, namely, the “Social and Political Attitudes,” revealed that 42% of Muslims in America supported, 52% opposed, and 6% did not know what to think of same-sex marriage. Additionally, this poll also showed a change regarding the acceptance of homosexuality among Muslims living in the United States, or rather, it jumped from 38% (2007) to 45% (2014).²² Even though these figures are encouraging, the heart of the matter remains that, despite the increase of acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ “other” in their midst, Muslims living in the West (migrants and their offspring) still have difficulty in accepting members of the LGBTQIA+ in their communities because of the overall external pressure from the West. Hence, the condemnation of their Muslim brethren who happen to belong to the LGBTQIA+ community should be seen as a defense mechanism/survival tactic rather than a blatant attack on their fellow coreligionists and their personal choices when it comes to sexual orientation and identity (Fadel, 2018; Molina, 2022; Olsen, 2021).

But how is identity affected by (im)migration? Much has been written about identity issues in the Muslim Diaspora, particularly in Europe.²³ Perhaps the best definition of identity within the framework of (im)migration is what Fereshteh Ahmadi-Lewin, an Iranian-Swedish professor hailing from the University of Gävle, Sweden, suggests, namely, that “age, gender, and cultural background should be considered when trying to answer questions about the

¹⁹ For further information, see: Solivetti, 2023.

²⁰ *مُجَار* *mujār*, from the IV verb form *أَجَارَ* *ajārah*, to give protection and/or refuge to someone; to protect someone from something/someone. From the same trilateral root, we have: *مُجَاوَرَة* *mujāwarah*, neighborhood, *مُجَاوِر* *mujāwir*, neighbor, and *مُجِير* *mujir*, protector. (Traini, 1966-1973: 1:180).

²¹ Qur’ān 9:6 states: “وَإِنْ أَحَدٌ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ فَاجِرُهُ فَاسْتَجَارَكَ فَأَجِرْهُ حَتَّى يَسْمَعَ كَلِمَ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ ابْلِغْهُ أَمْنَهُ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ” “And if anyone from the polytheists asks for your protection O Prophet, grant it to them so they may hear the Word of Allah, then escort them to a place of safety, for they are a people who have no knowledge.” (Ali, 1983). For further information, see: al-Jawzi, 1992: 3: 257; Guillaume, 1955: 317. For further information on Islamic Ethics, see: Jureidini & Hassan, (2020), particularly Chapter 2, “Islamic Ethics, Human Rights, and Migration,” written by Khaled Abou El Fadl. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/10.1163/j.ctv2gix01g.6.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3Ad4e792de2596dac1d4e98db537b76543&ab_segments=&origin=&initiator=&acceptTC=1>.

²² “Chapter 4: Social and Political Attitudes.” *Pew Research* November 3, 2015. <<https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/11/03/chapter-4-social-and-political-attitudes/>>.

²³ (Barou (2022: 63-79); Boland (2020); Kapinga, Hoven, Bock, and Hopkins (2023); Lohlker (2022)).

impact of immigration on identity.” Additionally, the “younger the immigrant, the higher the chance of taking on the new community norms and rules.”²⁴

Among the many aspects that contribute to the multi-composite human construct called culture, perhaps the most important elements are language and religion, since they are deeply connected to the very essence of a person. Also in this case, the younger the migrant is, the more he/she/they can assimilate to the new country, its language(s), and mores (not necessarily its religion, should there be a dominant religion). Indeed, studies have long proven that (im)migrants who arrive in the host country in their early teens (e.g., as 13- or 14-year old teenagers) have an almost 100% chance of assimilating to the new language and the local customs, thus 100% identifying with the host country. As for religion, though, it appears that, regardless of the degree of adherence to one’s ancestral faith, it nevertheless contributes to one’s sense of belonging (language, cultural mores, ethnicity, race, family, extended family, community, nation, country, and/or geographical area of provenance, though not all at the same level, time, and/or with the same intensity).

Conclusions

The latest survey conducted by the Pew Research Center on gender (including LGBTQIA+ issues) and Muslims in the United States was completed in 2017. Indeed, the *2017 Pew Research Center’s* study revealed that 52% of Muslims living in the United States stated that homosexuality should be accepted vs. 33% reported that homosexuality should be discouraged by society. Understandably, Millennials fared higher (60%) than the older generation of Muslims (migrants and their offspring) living in the United States (44%). This is important and encouraging since “Millennials make up 32% of all U.S. adults,” and more specifically, “they account for roughly half of American Muslim adults (52%)” (Diamant & Gecewicz, 2017).

Hence, it appears then that the winds of change have slowly but surely begun to blow, and this time in favor of the Muslim LGTBQIA+ community living in the West (*دار الحَرْبِ* *dār al-Harb*). It is just a matter of time when more and more Muslims living in the Diaspora, as they assimilate to their new environment, will accept their brethren who happen to belong to the LGBTQIA+ community without fear of being discriminated against and embrace their diversity in the name of tolerance since, as Qur’ān 4:16 states:

وَالَّذَانِ يَأْتِيَنِهَا مِنْكُمْ فَأَذَوْهُمَا^١ قَاتِلَا^٢ وَأَصْلَحَا^٣ فَأَعْرِضُوا عَنْهُمَا^٤ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ تَوَّابًا رَحِيمًا

If two men among you

Are guilty of lewdness,

Punish them both.

If they repent and amend,

Leave them alone; for God

Is Oft-returning, Most Merciful (Ali, 1983: 184).

²⁴ Quoted in: Hanny & Prokhovnik-Raphique, 2020. For further information, see: Ahmadi, 2002.



In many mosques in the United States and Canada, there is a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. Indeed, this is the first step to welcoming members of the LGBTQIA+ community in the local Muslim communities. Additionally, there are Muslim men and women who, based on rigorous hermeneutical studies, are facilitating exegeses of the Qur’ān and the **أَحَادِيث** *Abādīth* of Prophet Muhammad with a LGBTQIA+ friendly interpretation.²⁵

The Chicago-based **مَسْجِدُ الرَّابِعَةِ** Masjid al-Rābi‘a, named after the famous Sufi ascetic, mystic, and saint woman from Basra **رَابِعَةُ الْعَدَوِيَّةُ الْقَيْسِيَّةُ** Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya al-Qaysiyya (c. 716-801), is one of the few mosques in the United States that embraces diversity by accepting Muslims from all walks of life (Sunni and Shi‘ī), including members of the LGBTQIA+ community who feel ostracized by the local Muslim communities:

Places like Masjid al-Rabia are rare, but there are informal prayer circles in other American cities, a mosque with a similar mission in Toronto, Canada, that has been open since 2009 and an annual LGBTQ Muslim retreat put together by the Muslim Alliance for Sexual and Gender Diversity (Fadel, 2018).

As Janmohamed, founder of the Oakland-based group *Queer Crescent*, “a social justice organization focused on connecting to spiritual practice and power within the LGBTQ and Muslim community, in 2017,” keenly observed “[t]here are so many ways to be a Muslim. [...] I think Allah loves me as I am” (Yellin, 2023).

As we have thus far seen then, adaptation, assimilation, and compromise vs. maintaining their cultural, linguistic, and religious identity while living in **دَارُ الْحَرْبِ** *dār al-Ḥarb* (land of the enemy, i.e., non-Muslim territory) are oftentimes a barrier for migrants and their offspring to fully enjoying the benefits of living free from danger in their adopted homeland. Yet, time, education, and, most of all, feeling accepted by the host country do make a difference when it comes to welcoming the “other” in their midst, namely, the LGBTQIA+ community as the latter comes to terms with its own space within the Muslim as well as the host country.

The term intersectionality—created in 1989 (Crenshaw, 1989) by renowned civil rights advocate and scholar of race and gender matters, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Professor at the UCLA School of Law and Columbia Law School—perhaps better defines the predicament of culturally, economically, and socio-politically disenfranchised and marginalized Muslims (heterosexual and/or members of the LGBTQIA+ community) as they negotiate the reality of their multiple identities in their host countries. Indeed, as Professor Crenshaw suggests, “we all have multiple identities that intersect to make us who we are.” Hence, it is imperative that we reflect upon the “oppressions and privileges that overlap and reinforce each other” and analyze “identities beyond race and gender” (Bell, 2016).

Intersectionality “refers to the social, economic, and political ways in which identity-based systems of oppression and privilege connect, overlap, and influence one another” (Bell, 2016). Indeed, this is precisely what LGBTQIA+ Muslims, foreign-born as well as first- and second-generation Muslims born in the Diaspora are doing in order to create their own identity. Undeniably, it is an identity that goes beyond ethnicity, gender identity, nationality, and race.

²⁵ For a discussion on exegeses vs. eisegeses of Islamic holy texts and the LGBTQIA+ community, see: Levi, 2023.

While still not forsaking who they are and their origins, *diasporic* LGBTQIA+ Muslims now look at how to use religion (Islam) as a way of forging their own and unique space in society (the Muslim community to which they belong as well as the world outside).

As we have seen then, there has been some progress. Indeed, a number of LGBTQIA+ Muslims in the West (migrants and their offspring alike) are now negotiating their new role in society since “when LGBTQ people of faith find the resources, they’ll create those accepting spaces for themselves and for others” (Fadel, 2018).

This much-desired change then is better achieved when we use an intersectional lens since by adopting “an intersectional lens we will have a better opportunity to understand why and to change the institutions that help and harm us based on who we are.”²⁶

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