

A Tale of Two Museums (Part 2)

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Yet if the American Jewish and Christian experiences are well documented in countless journals, research institutes, museum collections, in business, and in popular culture and entertainment, the American Muslim experience mostly appears to sit outside the broader narrative of stories Americans tell themselves about their history, according to religious scholars such as Lior Sternfeld, who specializes in Jewish Studies.

“Muslim-Americans were a much smaller and more marginalized community, but it’s changing,” said Sternfeld, who teaches at Penn State University.

Muhammad, of America’s Islamic Heritage Museum, wants to do something about this.

He spends his spare time traveling around the USA searching for Islam’s forgotten roots in a country where they were never fully remembered in the first place.

He has collected gravestones all over the South dating to the 1800s with Islamic names written on them in Arabic. He has two-hundred-year-old census records and wills and testaments from virtually every U.S. region that show vestiges of Islamic immigration.

We still need to know the number, and the dates (how many are from the 1800s?), of these gravestones “with Islamic names written on them,” that Amir Muhammad claims to have located. Did he find 500, or 50, or 5, such headstones in all of his

searches across the country? And how many – 200, or 20, or 2 – that dated from the 1800s? We also need to have photographs of these gravestones posted online, clearly showing what Amir Muhammad claims to be Arabic script. It is possible that what he takes to be such script are merely decorative elements, that could be misunderstood by non-Arabic speakers. And even in some cases where Arabic script on a gravestone can be identified as such, was the dead person a Muslim or, quite possibly, a Christian Arab? For there were hardly any Muslim Arabs who arrived in the 1800s, while Christian Arabs began coming in noticeable numbers the 1880s, fleeing Muslim persecution and their dhimmi status. Christian Arab immigrants continued to outnumber Muslim Arab immigrants until the late 1960s. So Arabic writing, where found on gravestones, does not necessarily implicate Islam.

He also has the robe of the first U.S. Muslim judge, the uniform of the first Muslim U.S. Army chaplain and a wall filled with photos of contemporary American Muslim newsmakers, and sports stars from Muhammad Ali to Sam Khalifa, the only Muslim player in the history of Major League Baseball.

From this description, Amir Muhammad's collection appears be an unsystematic amateurish olla-podrida, consisting of this and that: here the first U.S. Muslim judge's robes, over there a Muslim army chaplain's uniform, and apparently lots of photos of Muslim "newsmakers" and "sports stars." One photograph is of Sam Khalifa, the only Muslim player in Major League Baseball. But I suspect there is no mention of Sam Khalifa's father Rashad, a much more important figure in the history of Muslims in America. Rashad Khalifa worked at the mosque in Tucson, and claimed that he was a messenger of God but not a prophet, and that the archangel Gabriel "most assertively" told him that chapter 36, verse 3, of the Quran, "specifically" referred to him. Khalifa also claimed that the Quran contains a mathematical structure based on the number

19. Starting in 1968, Khalifa used computers to analyze the frequency of letters and words in the Quran, with his first book on the topic appearing in 1973. But while he was clearly bizarre, it was not his bizzareries, but his moderate interpretation of Islam that led to his being stabbed to death in 1990, at the mosque, by Muslim fundamentalists connected to Al-Qaeda. He was thus the first American citizen to be murdered by Al-Qaeda. The story of Rashad Khalifa – his life, works, and death – would make for a fascinating exhibit.

In all, his [Amir Muhammad's] collection consists of a few thousand examples of American Islamia.

“Not even American Muslims always know this stuff exists,” he said.

Hani Bawardi, a professor at the Center for Arab American Studies at the University of Michigan in Dearborn, outside Detroit, said the story of Islam in America “awaits excavation.” He said no good scholarship exists on the subject, partly because “no one traced sufficiently the archival evidence on enslaved Muslims. Every time we think we know the location of the oldest mosque an older one is discovered,” he said. “I can’t even point you to a good study there. But Muslims were represented in very remote areas.”

Hani Bawardi wishes us to believe that because there is scant evidence for Islam’s presence in America before the 20th century, that this must mean that the real “story” still “awaits excavation.” But Muslims have been engaged in a full-court press, trying to push back the dates of the Muslim presence in America, and to find evidence of the “Islamic influence” in American life. The alternative and obvious conclusion is that there is not much of a story to excavate. As for the slim archival evidence “on enslaved Muslims,” we have seen a mini-industry grow up in the last two decades of “scholars” making wild claims about the the number of Muslims

among the slaves, from those who claim that between one-third and one-fourth of slaves were Muslims – a figure plucked from the air – to “Dr.” Mroueh, who asserts, without any evidence, that Muslims formed the largest group of slaves in the Americas.

Muhammad Fraser-Rahim, a historian of Islam who spent more than a decade as a counter-terrorism advisor, including at the Department for Homeland Security, said that at a time when Trump appears to be questioning whether Islam is compatible with American life, there is an appetite for more awareness of its place in the American story.

“Quite frankly, a lot of American Muslims are not that conversant in their own history. We’re a pretty diverse group: Economics, class, resources, access. There are so many things that divide American Muslims rather than necessarily uniting them. And I can give you plenty of examples of Muslims in corporate America with the name ‘Mohammad’ who have gone by the name ‘Mo’ because they haven’t been all that comfortable with being Muslim in a public space,” he said. “Now, people are thinking that they might need to be a bit more vocal in this current (political) context.”

American Muslims are raising their profiles and speaking out in different ways.

Former Michigan state lawmaker Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, Minnesota’s first Somali-American legislator, become the first Muslim women elected to Congress in the midterm elections this month. (Rep. Keith Ellison, D-Minn, became, in 2006, the first Muslim to be elected to the lawmaking body.)

Many articles about the “two Muslim women elected to Congress” have treated this election as a major event in American political history. But is it? There are still no Muslims in the Senate. And in the House, out of 435 members, now three are Muslims while before there were two – a gain of

exactly one at the national level. And since Muslims make up 1% of the American population, one might have expected there to have been, out of 535 members of Congress (100 Senators, 435 Representatives) at least five Muslims at the national level. But there are only three. As for statewide offices, Keith Ellison was elected Attorney General of Minnesota, the first statewide office won by a Muslim. Almost all of the other posts won by Muslims around the country were for very local positions, on City Councils and Boards of Education. It would certainly be an exaggeration to claim, as many excited Muslims have been doing, that there is now a Muslim "wave."

And at least 145 American Muslims, virtually all of them Democrats, ran for state or national public office this year, according to Jetpac, a Boston-based organization that works to increase American Muslim education and civic engagement.

Of these, 110 were first-time candidates who represent an unprecedented rise for a diverse Muslim community that is typically underrepresented in American politics.

Anyone can run for office; Muslims have clearly made a big push to do so. But what counts is who gets elected. Muslims outnumber Hindus in this country by 50%, yet there are three Hindu members of the House, and a fourth, Tulsi Gabbard, has a Hindu mother. In the Senate, Kamala Harris also has a Hindu mother. The former governor of Louisiana,, Bobby Jindal, was born and raised as a Hindu, but converted to Catholicism in his senior year of high school. Nikki Haley was born of Sikh parents, but is now a Christian. Three members of Congress are Buddhists, equaling the number of Muslims. But we have no excited stories about a "Hindu" or a "Buddhist" wave in American politics.

Away from politics, Moses the Comic – real name Musa Sulaiman, 33, from Philadelphia – has embarked on a "Super Muslim Comedy Tour" to break down negative barriers and

narratives surrounding Muslims in the USA.

“It’s about going into public places and subverting the stereotypes by making people laugh,” he said. “Art and entertainment can combat ideologies of racism and bigotry. Not all black men only become Muslim in prison, something we are constantly told,” he said.

How many laughs does Moses the Comic get as a result of exposing the “ideologies of racism and bigotry” of those who for some reason are anxious about Islam? Is it a zany laff-riot to mock those who happen to know what is in the Qur’an about waging Jihad, killing the Infidels, striking terror in their hearts? Do those who have read Qur’an 2:191-193, 3:151, 4:89, 8:12, 8:60, 9:5, 9:29, 47:4 and as a consequence are now alarmed about the texts and teachings of Islam deserve to be made fun of? In what way are they “racists” or “bigots”? Should we make light of the fears of those who know that Muhammad said “war is deceit” and “I have been made victorious through terror”? What is funny about the reactions of ordinary people to more than 30,000 terrorist attacks by Muslims since 9/11/2001? What kind of jokes does Moses the Comic make about those “racists and bigots” who have been alarmed about terrorist attacks that in this country have taken place in New York (many times), Washington, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Seattle, Minneapolis, Fort Hood, San Bernardino, Little Rock, Orlando, Chattanooga, and many other places? Is it “racism” and “bigotry” that explains that alarm or merely well-justified fear and horror?

No decent person could find anything funny, either, in the natural reactions of many of us to the attacks by Muslim terrorists in Madrid, Barcelona, Paris (many times), Nice, Toulouse, Magnanville, Brussels, Amsterdam, London, Manchester, Berlin, Munich, Hamburg, Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm, Malmö, Turku, Helsinki, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Beslan. The humor of the Super Muslim Comedy Tour surely

involves mocking overreactions by “racists” and “bigots” – you know, the kind who supposedly start to tremble at the mere sight of a peace-loving woman wearing a peace-loving hijab which only the “bigoted” could object to – such as the “bigoted” governments of Denmark, Belgium, France, Switzerland, and a half-dozen African countries where Islam is the dominant religion, including Chad, Cameroon, Niger, Congo-Brazzaville.

This Super Muslim Comedy Tour leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Perhaps along with the self-pity – Muslims having to endure “racism” and “bigotry” – Moses the Comic might actually come up with something funny to say about Muslims and Islam. But as of this writing, he still seems not to have done so. Perhaps the task of making the ideology of Islam or Muslim behavior funny is impossible. After all, the Ayatollah Khomeini himself famously insisted that “there are no jokes in Islam. There is no humor in Islam. There is no fun in Islam. There can be no fun and joy in whatever is serious.” I’m inclined to believe that Khomeini knows Islam a bit better than Moses the Comic.

Normalizing Islam is something Muhammad, of the museum, also strives for.

When USA TODAY visited with him [Amir Muhammad] in early September he kept getting interrupted every few minutes by a group of school kids, ranging in age from 6-16, loudly knocking on the museum’s front entrance. Because there was no one else in the building, Muhammad had locked the front entrance to conduct his tour, but these kids were here to collect snacks as part of an after school program the museum runs for neighborhood children.

Muhammad said that while a few of the kids from time to time might express interest in the museum and its exhibits, which he was grateful for because there was “nobody else, literally nobody else” to share this history with them, they mostly

came for the snacks.

These two tiny museums, dedicated as they are to making large and novel claims about the duration, scope, and achievements of the Muslim presence in America, leave much to be desired. Figures and “facts” are plucked out of the air. The exhibits “prove” that Muslims arrived in America in 1700, or in 1600, or even before that, in 1492, when – we are told – a Muslim was a member of Columbus’ s own crew, as a “navigator” or, in an alternative version, that the Pinzón brothers, who were the captains of the other two caravels, the Niña and the Pinta, are suddenly being described as Muslims, though neither they, nor anyone who knew them, ever before considered them as such.

There are the outlandish claims, too, that Chinese Muslims arrived in what is present-day California in the 9th century, for which the only source is the vaguest of references by the Muslim historian and geographer Al-Masudi (871-957 CE). In his work, *Meadows of Gold*, Al-Masudi tells of the expedition of a Muslim navigator (Khashkhash Ibn Saeed Ibn Aswad) from Córdoba, who sailed from Delba (Palos) in 889 CE, crossed the Atlantic, reached an “unknown territory,” and returned to Córdoba with fabulous treasures. That “unknown territory” remains entirely undescribed. Nothing about its topography, size, vegetation, or fauna. Nor is there any mention of the indigenous people from whom, presumably, the “treasures” would have been seized. And why does Al-Masudi offer no description of those “fabulous treasures” themselves?

Another individual mentioned in these museum exhibits as a possible Muslim discoverer of America is, once again, the Chinese Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433). Zheng He, remember, was born into a Muslim family, but later became more eclectic in his religious beliefs. Muslims leave that part out. Zheng He made many sea journeys in the early 15th century. He sailed to eastern India, then to Ceylon (where he left a stele), then along the coast of western India, to Arabia, and all the way

to the Horn of Africa. While Zheng He was careful to record all of his travels, he makes no mention of a sea journey across the Pacific. A writer named Gavin Menzies, a retired banker and amateur historian, wrote a book ostensibly proving that Zheng He discovered America in the early 15th century.

His “research” was not well-received.

A group of scholars and navigators – Su Ming Yang of the United States, Jin Guo-Ping and Malhão Pereira of Portugal, Philip Rivers of Malaysia, Geoff Wade of Singapore – questioned Menzies’ methods and findings in a joint message:

His book 1421: The Year China Discovered the World, is a work of sheer fiction presented as revisionist history. Not a single document or artifact has been found to support his new claims on the supposed Ming naval expeditions beyond Africa...Menzies’ numerous claims and the hundreds of pieces of “evidence” he has assembled have been thoroughly and entirely discredited by historians, maritime experts and oceanographers from China, the U.S., Europe and elsewhere.

Menzies relied heavily on a map that had been bought for \$500 in a Shanghai shop by a Chinese lawyer and collector, which Menzies dated to 1417, and which appears to show, in remarkable detail – including mountain ranges and inland rivers – both North and South America. Unfortunately for Menzies, who has acquired quite a reputation for making preposterous claims for Zheng He, a real historian in Singapore, Geoff Wade, made the following points about the map:

It is a dual-hemisphere map, a cartographic tradition exclusively European. California is represented as an island, copied straight from European maps of the 17th century. China is placed at the centre of the map as it was in early Jesuit maps of the world produced in China. It is based on a rough copy of a Jesuit map of the world.

The eunuch Zheng He is referred to as Ma San-bao. No one would have dared to use his original name given that the emperor had assigned him the surname Zheng.

The amount of non-coastal detail (including riverine systems extending thousands of miles from the coast) indicate that these maps could not have been produced by maritime voyagers. The information in the maps was obviously amassed over time by cultures who had travelled widely. It fits perfectly within the history of European cartography, but is a complete anomaly in Chinese cartography.

The Himalayas are marked as the highest mountains in the world. This fact was only discovered in the 19th century.

It seems clear that this map was a fake, carefully aged, but dating, at the earliest, after the 19th century discovery of the height of the Himalayas.

The existing evidence fails to support the large claims made for the “Muslim discovery of America,” either by Chinese Muslims, whether in the 9th or in the 15th century, or through Muslim participation in Columbus’s voyages. The evidence suggests a handful of Muslims – perhaps as many as a hundred – were among the millions of slaves brought to America, but fewer than a dozen of these are known by name. The claims made that “from one-third to one-fourth” of the slaves were Muslims, which would have meant at least two million people, are fantastical, given that no slave-trader and no slaveowner ever seemed to have noticed these Muslim hordes, or their phantasmagoric mosques, that no one can ever find, or those Qur’ans that have disappeared without a trace, if in fact they ever existed.

To sum up: No evidence exists for Muslims taking part in the discovery of America, whether by Chinese Muslims in the 9th or 15th centuries, or by crew-members (Luis de Torres) or ship-captains (the Pinzón brothers) who took part in Columbus’s

voyages but were baselessly claimed (by Muslims) to have been Muslims. There has been no discernible influence of Islam on the art, literature, philosophy, or political thought of the United States. A few people, such as Sylviane Diouf, claim there is a connection between the muezzin's call to prayer and the birth of the American blues. I know so little about music that I cannot possibly comment. There is evidence that dozens, possibly hundreds, of Muslim slaves were brought to America from Africa, but not tens or hundreds of thousands. There is no evidence of any mosques being built in America in the 17th, 18th, or 19th centuries. The first mosque built in the United State for which we have convincing evidence is that one-room affair constructed in 1929 in Ross, North Dakota. The Muslim attempt at backdating their presence in America will continue, no matter how flimsy the evidence. That's to make sure that Islam is perceived not as an alien creed, but as always having been "part of America's story," as Barack Obama repeatedly insisted. And if you dare to differ, those off-the-rack epithets – "racist" and "islamophobe" – are all you should expect.

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