

A History of Islam in America

*From the New World to the
New World Order*

For

Kamala and Daryush

KAMBIZ GHANEABASSIRI

Reed College, Oregon



RACE, RELIGION, AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP

One of the most documented and best-known forms of discrimination against Muslim or “Oriental” immigrants in general is found in naturalization procedures. The Naturalization Act of 1790 granted citizenship only “to aliens being free white persons.” Congress amended this law in 1870 to allow citizenship “to aliens of African nativity and to persons of African descent.” The ambiguities surrounding the racial status of Turks, Indians, and Syrians resulted in challenges to their eligibility for citizenship. Since naturalization at this time was administered by local officials, not all Muslims or persons from the “Orient” were equally affected by these challenges. Different courts applied different standards of eligibility.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, all persons of questionable eligibility were gravely concerned about the consequences that challenges to their citizenship

⁶² Richard Brent Turner, “Islam in the United States in the 1920’s: The Quest for a New Vision in Afro-American Religion” (Ph.D. dissertation: Princeton University, 1986), 142.

⁶³ Mohammed Sadiq, “No Polygamy,” *Moslem Sunrise* 1, no. 1 (July 1921), 9.

⁶⁴ A 1911 report by the Immigration Commission, for example, stated that “many courts have refused to naturalize East Indians, but there are others which admit them to citizenship.” U.S. Senate Immigration Commission, “Part 25: Japanese and Other Immigrant Races in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain States,” vol. I: Japanese and East Indians, in *Immigrants in Industries* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1911), 348.

would have on their social status in the United States. Syrian Americans and Indian Americans put aside religious and caste differences among themselves to unite and mobilize a national response to governmental challenges to their right to citizenship. The pervasiveness of the conflation of race, religion, and progress in the United States is evident in their responses. Immigrants from regions with significant Muslim populations did not question the axiological assumption that participation in American modernity and progress was related to America’s national character as a white, Christian nation.

This is ironic because, as we shall see in the following chapter, Muslim immigrants managed to do relatively well for themselves in the United States despite the xenophobia and institutional prejudices they faced. It was presumably because of the prosperity that these Indian and Syrian immigrants realized in the United States that they fought to maintain their right to American citizenship. Yet, despite the prosperity these immigrants realized as non-whites and non-Protestants in the United States, they defended their eligibility to citizenship, not on the basis of their accomplishments and contributions to American society, but by arguing that they should be considered white, and, in the case of Syrians who were predominantly Christian, they appealed to the nation’s Christian sensibilities to be considered eligible for U.S. citizenship. In other words, they did not challenge the racism and bigotry involved in the conflation of whiteness, Protestantism, and progress; rather, they argued for their inclusion within this matrix. They not only argued that they were “white” but they also believed it.

In response to legal challenges to their eligibility for American citizenship, both Syrians and Indians relied on contemporary ethnological classifications of race to define themselves as white. Costa George Najour, a Christian from Mount Lebanon, became the first person to litigate his way to “free white person” status in this way in 1909.⁶⁵ The government had argued that based on the color of his skin and the fact that he was a subject of the Ottoman Empire, he did not meet the racial prerequisite for naturalization. District Judge Newman of Georgia rejected the government’s argument by making a distinction between race and skin color. Although he commented on Najour’s appearance – “He is not particularly dark, and has none of the characteristics of appearance of the Mongolian race” – Newman interpreted “free white person” as a reference to racial

⁶⁵ Ian López, *White by Law 10th Anniversary Edition: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: NYU Press, 2006), 48.

classification rather than skin complexion. He cited Dr. A. H. Keane's *The World's People: A Popular Account of Their Bodily and Mental Characters, Beliefs, Traditions, Political and Social Institutions* (1908), which "classifies, without question or qualification in any way, Syrians as a part of the Caucasian and white race." Newman further denied any significance to "the fact that the applicant was born within the dominions of Turkey, and was heretofore a subject of the Sultan of Turkey. I do not think this should cut any figure in the matter. If it did, the extension of the Turkish Empire over people unquestionably of the white race would deprive them of the privilege of naturalization."⁶⁶

The establishment clause of the First Amendment made any religious litmus test for naturalization illegal. Nonetheless, one of the significant consequences of the conflation of race, religion, and progress in this period was that religion played a significant role in the way in which "whiteness" was judged both in the public square and in the courts. Syrian Christians, who had closer ties with American Protestant missionaries, were particularly mindful of the role religion could play in their argument for inclusion into America. For example, in reaction to the contestation of Syrians' eligibility for citizenship, Kalil A. Bishara, the editor of the popular Maronite Arabic newspaper *al-Huda*, researched the racial and ethnic origins of Syrians and wrote a formative book on the topic titled *Origin of the Modern Syrian* (1914). Bishara claimed in this book to familiarize Syrian Americans with their ethnic history, but in actuality, his project contributed to the making of a Syrian American identity that highlighted the Semitic origins of Christianity to argue for the inclusion of Syrians in the category of "white Americans."

The modern Syrian is an Asiatic in the sense that he is a native of the near section of the primitive home of all white peoples. Syria has always been a part of the Caucasian world. 'Asiatics' in the 'Asiatic exclusion laws' was clearly meant to be a synonym of 'Mongolians' as applied to the Chinese and the Japanese and other peoples of the far East who have a peculiar type of civilization of their own so radically different from our Christian civilization as to make racial amalgamation and national assimilation with respect to all Mongolian immigrants almost impossible.... As a native of Asia, the Syrian is naturally to be classed with the Armenian, the Hebrew, the Greek (Asiatic), and the Persian. And to debar the Syrian alone from our American citizenship, would be as glaringly unjust and inconsistent as it would be imprudent to generalize the rule by excluding all Asiatics, White as well as Yellow, Christian and Heathen together. For, are not all American and European nations of Asiatic origin? ... The Syrian is pre-eminently the most popular man

⁶⁶ *In re Najour*, 174 F. 735.

in history. We can neither deny nor be blind to the significant role he has played (or, rather, earnestly worked out) in forming this wonderful civilization of which we are rightfully proud. Not to say anything of the actual human life of Jesus of Nazareth, (Syria), nor of the intrinsic value of the Holy Scriptures revealed to, proclaimed and penned by Syrians.... As a Semite myself, and as an American proud alike of his racial origin and his American citizenship, I most emphatically declare that our [i.e., American] national character, needs the Semitic element in it. That "pliability combined with iron fixity of purpose," which has developed a Moses, an Elijah, a Hannibal, an Amos, a Paul, a Peter, a John, not to begin to enumerate that large host of Fathers, Prophets, and Apostles.⁶⁷

For the most part, Bishara's attempt to tie Syrians to white Christians' civilizational coattail speaks for itself. It is interesting, however, that Prophet Muhammad (not to mention other Arabic-speaking non-Christians) is missing from this list of religious luminaries. The omission of Muhammad, as Michael Suleiman has observed, "was no mere memory lapse, since the Arabic text of the same book includes Muhammad's name."⁶⁸ By including Muhammad in the Arabic text, Bishara, who was otherwise triumphantly Christian, nodded toward a broad, multireligious Syrian American identity. He and presumably his Syrian readers, both Christian and Muslim, must have been aware that for Americans, who would have read the English version of the text, the inclusion of Muhammad (and other Arabic-speaking Muslims) would have estranged Syrians from America rather than make the case for their inclusion.

In a 1914 hearing on the eligibility of George Dow of Charleston, South Carolina for American citizenship, the newly founded Syrian American Association also appealed to Americans' religious sentiments and argued that "the history and position of the Syrians, their connection through all times with the people to whom the Jewish and Christian peoples owe their religion, make it inconceivable that the statute could have intended to exclude them."⁶⁹ They further contended that if the statute was understood otherwise, it would mean that Jesus himself would not have been qualified for American citizenship on account of his birthplace. District Judge Smith dismissed this as an emotive argument: "The apostrophic argument that He cannot be supposed to have clothed His Divinity in

⁶⁷ Kalil A. Bishara, *The Origin of the Modern Syrian* (New York: Al-Hoda Publishing House, 1914), 40-44 in the English text, 62-70 in the Arabic.

⁶⁸ Michael Suleiman, "Early Arab-Americans: The Search for Identity," in *Crossing the Waters: Arabic-Speaking Immigrants to the United States before 1940*, ed. Eric J. Hooglund (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987), 45.

⁶⁹ *In re Dow*, 214 F. 355.

the body of one of a race that an American Congress would not admit to citizenship is purely emotional and without logical sequence.”⁷⁰ Smith adopted skin color and “common knowledge” as the criteria for racial identification: “The pertinent statement rather is that a dark complexioned present inhabitant of what formerly was ancient Phoenicia is not entitled to the inference that he must be of the race commonly known as the white race in 1790.”⁷¹ Smith further rejected scientific definitions of race that classified Caucasians among the Aryan or Indo-European race by asserting that such definitions result in “the manifest absurdity of classing among whites the black Darvidian inhabitant of Ceylon or Southern India.”⁷² Smith denied Dow’s application for citizenship, but his decision was overturned in 1915 by the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. That court adopted a “scientific” definition of race rather than one based on common knowledge or skin color to declare Dow a “free white person”: “In the *Dictionary of Races*, contained in the *Reports of the Immigration Commission, 1911*, it is said: ‘Physically the modern Syrians are of mixed Syrian, Arabian, and even Jewish blood. They belong to the Semitic branch of the Caucasian race, thus widely differing from their rulers, the Turks, who are in origin Mongolian.’”⁷³ This decision in 1915 settled the legality of Syrians’ claims to American citizenship once and for all.

Until 1923 when the Supreme Court heard *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, Indian Americans had successfully managed to define themselves legally as “free white persons” based on ethnological classification of Indians as Caucasians. As Ian Harvey López has noted, Thind had many reasons to be hopeful about his case in 1923. Four lower courts had recognized Indians as whites based on “scientific” classifications of race. Two months before Thind’s hearing, the Supreme Court itself had relied on “scientific” classifications of race to deny naturalization to a Japanese emigrant, Takao Ozawa. The Indian American community had welcomed these decisions because of their implication for their own struggle for American citizenship. Thind must have also thought that his six months of service in the U.S. army should work to his advantage given Congress’ decision to provide citizenship to anyone who had served in the army for at least three years.⁷⁴ In court, Thind’s council argued that the people

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *Dow v. United States et al*, 226 F. 145.

⁷⁴ López, *White by Law*, 62–63.

of the Punjab, where Thind came from, “belong to the Aryan race.” The caste system prevented the people of the region from mixing with other races, thus maintaining the purity of the Aryan bloodline of the people of the region. “The high-class Hindu,” Thind’s defense contested, “regards the aboriginal Indian Mongoloit in the same manner as the American regards the negro, speaking from a matrimonial standpoint.”⁷⁵

The Supreme Court unanimously rejected Thind’s petition for naturalization. In light of the fact that the court had presented an ethnological racial argument for denying Ozawa’s petition for citizenship, its rejection of such an argument in Thind’s case speaks to the confusion that surrounded issues of race and American identity and to the conflation of race, religion, and progress in the construction of American identity. The court must have been aware of the general “anti-Hindu”⁷⁶ sentiment of the American public. The judges also knew that in all but one case in which “scientific” classifications of race were used to define “free white persons,” the courts had granted the right to naturalization to the petitioner. By reversing its own valuation of “scientific” classifications of race from *Ozawa* to *Thind* and adopting a “common knowledge” test for racial identification, the Supreme Court demonstrated it was not so much deliberating a jurisprudential point as it was legally affirming America’s self-image as an essentially white nation and reaffirming race as a legitimate basis for exclusion.

I have not come across any direct reference to Muslims’ religious identities in the federal appeals of naturalization cases prior to the 1940s. This does not mean, however, that Muslims from the Levant or India did not have their right to American citizenship challenged. They most likely did, but they did not appeal these decisions as Muslims. John Mohammad Ali’s struggle to keep his American citizenship, which he received on May 26, 1921, illuminates the precarious position Muslims found themselves in at this time. In 1921, when Ali was given his certificate of citizenship, his eligibility was determined based on the immigration officials’ belief that he was a “high-caste Hindu.” At that time, Indians who could demonstrate that they were “high-caste Hindus” were still considered eligible for citizenship as members of the Caucasian race, and since the “high-caste Hindu” label worked to Ali’s advantage, he did not deny it. However, after the Immigration Act of 1924 made “Asians” ineligible for

⁷⁵ *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 261 U.S. 204; 43 S. Ct. 338; 67 L. Ed. 616 (1923)

⁷⁶ “Hindu” at this time was a marker of ethnic rather than religious identity. It referred to a person from “Hindustan” or India and was synonymous with Indian.

citizenship, Ali sought to reclaim his Muslim identity. He told the court that “he is not a ‘Hindu’ of full Indian blood, but...an Arabian of full Arabian blood. While admitting that he is a native of India, as his ancestors for several centuries had also been, he contends that originally his ancestors were Arabians, who invaded the territory now known as India, and settled and remained there, but have been careful not to intermarry with ‘the native stock of India,’ and have ‘kept their Arabian blood line clear and pure by intermarriage within the family.’” The “Arabian” invasion of India to which Ali referred was in actuality a Muslim invasion of northern India by the Turkish Saljuqs. Ali seems to have conflated his Muslim identity with an Arab identity because Arabic-speaking Syrians, as Semites who have lighter skin, had not had their citizenship status challenged in courts since *Dow v. United States* declared them legally “white” in 1915. Tellingly, Ali seems to have not told the court that he was Muslim and that his alleged connection with Arabs was established through Islam. District Judge Tuttle was consequently confused:

I am unable to follow the argument thus sought to be made. No reason has been suggested, and I can discover none, why the mere fact that the early ancestors of the defendant came to India from Arabia, where they had been called Arabians, renders the defendant a white person. His skin is certainly not white, but unmistakably dark, like that of the other members of his race. He is a native of the continent of Asia, specifically of the country of India, and more specifically of the province of Punjab, the place of the nativity of the alien held, in the case of *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, supra, not to be a white person.⁷⁷

One presumes that Ali did not divulge his religion because he felt that it would hurt rather than help his case, given the popular prejudices against Islam. His intuition was apparently correct. When in 1942 District Judge Tuttle, who had heard Ali’s case, received a petition from a Yemeni Muslim named Ahmed Hassan, he denied the petition. In that case, Tuttle argued that neither skin color nor religion could legally bar one from citizenship, given that there could be a dark-skinned Anglo-Saxon or light-skinned Chinese, but

when one seeking citizenship is in fact clearly not white of skin a strong burden of proof devolves upon him to establish that he is a white person within the meaning of the act....Apart from the dark skin of the Arabs, it is well known that they are a part of the Mohammedan world and that a wide gulf separates their culture from that of the predominantly Christian peoples of Europe. It cannot be

⁷⁷ *United States v. Ali*, 7 F.2d 728 (3 August 1925).

expected that as a class they would readily intermarry with our population and be assimilated into our civilization. The small amount of immigration of these peoples to the United States is in itself evidence of that fact.⁷⁸

Ultimately, Tuttle decided that Hassan was not eligible for citizenship because he “is an Arab and...Arabs are not white persons within the meaning of the act.” Regardless of what ethnological racial classification suggested, Tuttle argued, dark-skinned Muslims from Yemen were not among the people living in the United States whom Congress recognized as “white persons” when it first passed the citizenship act in 1790.

The courts’ and immigration officials’ estimation of Arab Muslims’ race, however, remained inconsistent well into the 1940s. Two years after Tuttle received Hassan’s petition in the East District Court of Michigan, Massachusetts District Court Judge Wyzanski permitted the naturalization of Mohamed Mohriez, “an Arab born in Sanhy, Badan, Arabia.” Wyzanski had been told by local immigration officials that it is their practice “to regard Arabs ... born outside of the barred zone, as white persons.” Wyzanski rejected Tuttle’s assertion that Arab Muslims are culturally distinct from Europeans and thus unassimilable.

As every schoolboy knows, the Arabs have at various time inhabited parts of Europe, lived along the Mediterranean, been contiguous to European nations and been assimilated culturally and otherwise, by them. For the Battle of Tours to the capitulation of Granada, history records the wars waged in Europe by the Arabs. The names of Avicenna and Averroes, the sciences of algebra and medicine, the population and the architecture of Spain and of Sicily, the very words of the English language, remind us as they would have reminded the Founding Fathers of the action and interaction of Arabic and non-Arabic element of our culture. Indeed to earlier centuries as to the twentieth century, the Arab people stand as one of the chief channels by which the traditions of white Europe, especially the ancient Greek traditions, have been carried into the present.

Wyzanski’s emphasis on the cultural and scientific achievements of non-Europeans reflects in part his own political beliefs. He found the “policies of rigid exclusion” “false to our profession of democratic liberalism” and “repugnant to our vital interests as a world power.”⁷⁹ However, as we shall see later in the book, the conflation of race, religion, and progress, itself, as a predominant means of making sense of racial and religious diversity in the United States, also became indefensible in American public discourse after the United States entered World War II in December

⁷⁸ *In re Ahmed Hassan*, 48 F. Supp. 843 (1942).

⁷⁹ *Ex parte Mohriez*, 54 F. Supp. 941 (1944).

1941 and more and more Americans became aware of the racist atrocities the Nazis had committed in the name of Aryan superiority.

As these later naturalization cases involving Muslims demonstrate, the absence of Muslim identity claims in legal appeals of naturalization cases prior to the 1940s does not mean that Muslims were not invested in the outcomes of these cases in the 1910s and 1920s. The Ottoman embassy in Washington, D.C., for example, helped Syrians organize and petition the Najour's case in 1909. Muslim Syrians also contributed to legal funds established to fight challenges to Syrians' eligibility for citizenship.⁸⁰ Indeed, these challenges helped unite Muslims and Christians from the Levant under the banner of a new Syrian American ethnic identity.

ISSUES OF NATIONAL BELONGING OUTSIDE OF THE COURTS

Outside of the courts, there were numerous other attempts at gaining inclusion into the matrix of American identity created by the conflation of whiteness, Christianity, and progress. Elizabeth Boosahda, for example, reports an oft-told story among Syrians in Worcester, Massachusetts about how Mitchell K. Maykel persuaded the Republican Senator Pehr G. Holmes (who served from 1931 until 1947) to help Syrians become legally classified as whites:

They were going to classify us, the Arab people, as Asian, but Mr. Maykel visited Congressman Pehr G. Holmes and asked him to fight this thing and make sure we are classified as white and not Asian. I'm as white as anybody who claims to be white is! Our people were going to be considered not of the white race but the senator made sure that we were classified *correctly* (emphasis added).⁸¹

Alix Naff mentions that some of her informants indicated that Syrians who were friendly with African Americans were disliked by others in the community at the turn of the twentieth century, presumably because of the consequences that such an association would have had for the public image of their community.⁸² An ethnographic study of Palestinian Muslims in the 1940s concluded that "they

⁸⁰ Naff, *Becoming American*, 255–257. "Turkey Protests," *The Independent... Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts* 67, no. 3180 (November 11, 1909), 1105.

⁸¹ Cited in Elizabeth Boosahda, *Arab-American Faces and Voices: The Origins of an Immigrant Community* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003), 135.

⁸² Naff, *Becoming American*, 250.

consider themselves much superior to the Negro although a few treat them kindly."⁸³ A study of Indian emigrants in the 1920s completed by an Indian emigrant Lecturer in Economics at New York University, Rajani Kanta Das, similarly concluded that Indians consciously avoided associating with African Americans, "partly due to their feeling of racial superiority and partly due to the fact that the negroes are socially ostracized by the Americans themselves and they do not like to be a party to the racial problem."⁸⁴

As the following witty exchange in a Syrian American newspaper in 1898 demonstrates, Syrian and other immigrants from regions with a significant Muslim population deliberately proceeded to argue for their inclusion into the matrix of race, religion, and progress that defined American identity, and they were well aware of its cost.

- Americanized Syrian: Are you still a villager (i.e., backward, not modern)? Haven't you become civilized?
- Syrian Nationalist: Do good manners allow you to insult me this way when you are pretending to be civilized?
- Americanized Syrian: We alone know what it is to be civilized and we regret that you are not one of us.
- Syrian Nationalist: And what are the benefits of joining your kind?
- Americanized Syrian: Don't you understand that we are all intelligent? For when we become Americanized, we are able to earn more without working hard and we help each other by gaining greater prestige.
- Syrian Nationalist: But, I am from the East and I prefer to preserve the honor of my forefathers.
- Americanized Syrian: After what I have just told you, are you provoked because I called you a villager? Haven't you heard of Darwin who denies that man evolved from man? We are what we are as a result of the evolutionary process. And, your preserving the honor of your ancestors is pure ignorance and lack of education.
- Syrian Nationalist: I have not read Darwin and I gladly leave that honor to you. But you can be what you want to be; I am going to remain an Easterner. My original ancestor was Adam and it is likely that his language was Arabic. Long live the East! Down with its enemies.⁸⁵

⁸³ Lawrence Oschinsky, "Islam in Chicago: Being a Study of the Acculturation of a Muslim Palestinian Community in That City" (Master's thesis: The University of Chicago, 1952), 25.

⁸⁴ Das, *Hindustani Workers*, 109–110.

⁸⁵ *al-Huda* (March 22, 1898), 16 (in Arabic), cited in Naff, *Becoming American*, 263–264.