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## Understanding an American Paradox: An Overview of The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom

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# Understanding an American Paradox:

## An Overview of *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom*

BY SPEARIT\*

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#### **I. Prologue to a Paradox: Religious Liberty in America**

In *The Racial Muslim: When Racism Quashes Religious Freedom*, Sahar Aziz unveils a mechanism that perpetuates the persecution of religion. While the book's title suggests a problem that engulfs Muslims, it is not a new problem, but instead a recurring theme in American history. Aziz constructs a model that demonstrates how racialization of a religious group imposes racial characteristics on that group, imbuing it with racial stereotypes that effectively treat the group as a racial rather than religious group deserving of religious liberty.

In identifying a racialization process that effectively veils religious discrimination, Aziz's book points to several important findings. One such finding underscores the current paradox where people of a country so committed to religious liberty are simultaneously depriving others of that very liberty. Another illustrates that this process is repetitive, rearing its head at various eras and collectively shaping American history in profound ways. Thus, while Muslims currently bear the brunt of religious discrimination in the United States, they are simply the latest target of a process that first began centuries before. Aziz's book also keenly demonstrates that previously

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persecuted religious groups can sometimes turn into oppressors. Accordingly, historical patterns suggest that, in time, Muslims could lose their disfavored status and occupy a higher social position and perhaps assimilate to the point of perpetuating religious repression on other groups. As such, Aziz concludes by considering prospects for eradicating the process of racialization, and with it, the prospects of Muslims repeating history.

The author of the book, Sahar Aziz, is my colleague, and I have been following her scholarship since she first entered the academy. I have collaborated with her on various projects, some of which continue to this day. Hence, my summary and commentary are not striving for some critical exposé, but instead, aim to convey *The Racial Muslim's* central insights and contributions to critical scholarship. As an academic who dwells on race, religion, and law, this is truly the kind of book that I pick up with high expectations. In the pages that follow, I explain why this book did not let me down.

## II. The Text and Central Argument

The initial work of the text is to give an overview of the project. The book identifies four factors that converge to racialize Muslims and construct the racial Muslim. These factors are White Protestant supremacy, xenophobia arising from coercive assimilation into Western-European cultural norms, Orientalism, and the American empire in Muslim-majority countries. With the conceptual ingredients in place, the work explores “how each of these factors interacts politically, socially, and discursively to define the characteristics attributed to Racial Muslims that in turn legitimize their systematic subordination.”<sup>1</sup>

The construction of the “Racial Muslim” is not unidimensional. Rather, the interplay of these four factors creates various typologies that feature predominating characteristics, which provide bases for unfavorable attitudes, suspicion, and mistrust by the government and society. The types of “Racial Muslim” are described as: (1) the Religious Dissident, (2) the Religious, Secular Dissident, (3) the Secular, and (4) the Former Muslim. First, the Religious Dissident Racial Muslim is characterized by vociferous challenge of American empire abroad and racism at home. Muslims who fall within this rubric experience the most harm from Islamophobia and government repression. The Religious Racial Muslim identifies those Muslims who are devout, practicing Muslims who follow the basic tenets of Islam. Simply living a religious life triggers government and social suspicion, and from this perspective, is one step away from the Religious Dissident. Second, closely

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1. SAHAR AZIZ, *THE RACIAL MUSLIM: WHEN RACISM QUASHES RELIGIOUS LIBERTY* 4-5 (2021).

related is the Secular Dissident, who lives a secular lifestyle but holds dissident political views. Such individuals may be Muslim by birth or culturally Muslim but are not practicing Muslims. Still, they are nonetheless viewed as “nefarious Muslims who strategically hide their orthodox religious views as part of an anti-American conspiracy.”<sup>2</sup> Third, Secular Racial Muslims are not practicing Muslims, and they are considered a model minority that works hard and doesn’t complain. They are well-adapted to Anglo-Protestant norms and are the least religious of the previous two types. Finally, the Former Racial Muslim is characterized as the ideal type of Muslim who, although descending from Islamic ancestry, has formally departed from the faith. Such persons disavow Islam and use their energies to vilify and condemn the religion.

These types of “Racial Muslim” are not merely distinct from one another. Rather, the characteristics that give rise to the distinctions order the types according to a hierarchy of threat. That is, from the perspective of White Judeo-Christian normativity, the Religious Dissident Racial Muslim type is the most threatening type, fit for surveillance, prosecution, deportation, denaturalization, and private discrimination. At the other end of the spectrum is the Former Muslim, an individual who converts out of Islam and occupies a tokenized status as a native informant—an insider that validates Islamophobic attitudes about Islam—the least threatening of anyone formally connected to Islam. The Racial Muslim thus embodies these Muslim typologies that are ranked according to the level of danger and threat they are perceived to pose to national security.

### III. Unveiling Mechanics of Oppression

*The Racial Muslim* unveils a paradox that has arisen at different intervals in American history. Ever since colonial times, dominant religious groups that place a premium on religious freedom have successfully managed to disenfranchise other groups of religious freedoms. At present, there is perhaps no other religious group that is as widely and severely disfavored as Muslims. Muslims are the exception to the rule when it comes to those who disavow religious persecution. The situation raises crucial questions that guide the book’s core inquires:

Why, for a critical mass of Americans, are Muslims’ rights to be safe in their mosques, wear their religious garb without fear of discrimination, and live as first-class citizens not subject to religious freedom protections? And why do the same people who defend religious

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2. AZIZ, *supra* at 9.

freedom for Christians simultaneously support violating the civil rights of Muslims?<sup>3</sup>

These questions put the plight of Muslims in clear relief because Americans, who are ideologically invested in religious freedom, fall into hypocrisy by curtailing the freedoms of others. Conservative Christians and evangelicals are known as fierce advocates of religious liberty for both themselves and others, yet they draw a line when it comes to Muslims. While they might be outwardly committed to freedom of religion, they see no contradiction in their willingness to repress Muslims. It is through the construction of the “Racial Muslim” that this paradox persists.

To illustrate the mechanism at play in constructing the “Racial Muslim,” Aziz’s book takes the reader on a trip through American religious history. It begins with the colonists who fled England to be free from religious persecution and in turn, constructed Native Americans as racially inferior, viewing native religion as evil, superstitious, or worse, as not a religion at all. The colonial views of racial superiority mooted any claim a native might have made in the name of religious liberty. The same was true during the times of slavery. The author documents in dramatic fashion how African religion, like native religion, was viewed as primitive, backwards heathenism. Enslaved Africans were forced to convert to Christianity and abandon their faith, including a sizable number of Muslim slaves. Thus, from the earliest times in this country’s history, the process of racialization laid a blueprint for future generations; it provided a path to religious repression in an ideologically acceptable way.

The author offers further evidence of this thesis at play and provides a remarkable account of how Jews, Catholics, and Mormons were treated in the twenty-first century. Here, *The Racial Muslim* masterfully demonstrates how in each case, a racialization process paved a way for religious subordination. More perplexing, however, is that merely decades later, these same groups were accepted into the broader White establishment. Yet, as the data indicate, in the early years of immigration, these groups experienced religious persecution and were vilified, albeit not to the degree of Natives and Africans. For example, during these early years, Protestants depicted Jews as having animal features, including a snout to replace a nose, which implied that being Jewish was bound to racial and physical traits. Catholics also were subject to repression, which was predicated on a set of racial formulas. Of all Catholics, Irish-Catholics bore the brunt of racialization because they were cast as Celts, who were deemed to be incompatible and inferior to the Anglo-Saxon race. Viewing Catholics through a prism of Irish racism sanctioned mob violence against Catholics, the burning of Catholic churches, and

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3. *Id.* at 25-26.

hostility by the Ku Klux Klan. Like these groups, Mormons suffered religious repression that was authorized by racial constructions. Called “American Mohamets,” Mormons were condemned for the practice of polygamy and were understood to be physically distinct from mainstream Americans. Pseudo-science on race employed phrenologists and physiognomists to frame Mormons as a race and validate racial differences, including that Mormons had small brains and physical degeneracy that were distinguishable by physical appearance.

As these and other examples demonstrate, *The Racial Muslim* is merely the modern-day iteration of a problem that has plagued this country and its colonial ancestry. Aziz’s book is true to form, not simply for showing how racialization and religious oppression have a long history, but also for showing how, once some groups are able to assimilate into the White establishment, it does not take long before they become oppressors themselves and stand as a barrier to the very liberty they enjoy. The contributions of this book are remarkable, not simply for illustrating how these processes have occurred throughout history, but also for showing the direct connection between these once-oppressed groups and the “Racial Muslim.” After all, these formerly oppressed groups have been core supporters of various laws and policies that discriminate against Muslims, most vitally in the post-9/11 era. Aziz carefully connects these dots for the reader, which makes for a convincing argument about how religious repression occurs. The lesson is important because it remains unlearned and keeps repeating itself.

#### **IV. Moving Beyond the Racial Muslim**

The final portion of the book discusses how to move beyond the trappings of racialization. There, two levels of analysis are considered. At the micro-level is the plight of Muslims in twenty-first century America. As occupants of the very outermost outsider position in American society, how might Muslims break chains that have sequestered their religious liberty? In some ways, this is a most critical question since repression of Muslims has occurred in multiple eras of the country’s existence, including during slavery, the prisoners’ rights movement, and now in the post-9/11 era. At the macro level is the problem of racialization in general, and how to break a cycle that makes religion bow to raw racism. The logic of *The Racial Muslim* is that the process depends on racialization, which itself depends on racism. Hence, eradication of racism is a means of breaking the cycle, a mission that Muslims must join whole-heartedly.

While the process of racialization may be one of social construction, it nonetheless leads to real harms that require real solutions to deliver Muslims from their present conditions. As the country’s most disfavored religious group, Muslims are subject to government surveillance, spying, and all sorts

of other treatment that superordinate Muslims as a unique threat. Even though right-wing Christian extremists pose the overwhelming danger to national security, empirically speaking, Muslims are viewed as the greatest existential threat.

But what can be done to change these perceptions? Aziz points to the possibility of Muslims escaping their least-favored status by embarking on a new racial project. The project is one of pure praxis, a conscious attempt to reframe American national identity as “Abrahamic.” This concept underscores the interconnectedness of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and their common spiritual ancestry known generally as the Abrahamic tradition. In the same way Jews worked to shift American anti-Semitism by propagating the “Judeo-Christian” concept, Muslims must forge ways to expand American identity by propagating an “Abrahamic” national identity that focuses on their common religious roots. Such a project would aim to move Muslims out of outsider status and closer to a state of greater social acceptance. One might imagine other commonalities that might emphasize the shared identity, including the notion that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are united as “People of the Book.”

While attempts to assimilate national identity may alleviate existential Islamophobia and animus directed at Muslims, they do nothing to prevent future repression of other religious groups. As such, the process of racialization threatens to continue. Because this process depends on racism, taking aim at racism is the first-order business for Muslims (and other minority religious groups). *The Racial Muslim* posits that Muslims have a potentially important role to play in anti-racist efforts. As this work makes clear, sometimes the victims of racialization turn around and perpetuate the same repression once they have sufficiently integrated to American identity. Thus, it is critical for Muslims to join forces with others in the mission of opposing racism because it is a means for Muslims not simply to counter their own religious persecution, but to counter the possibility of Muslims themselves becoming future oppressors. Aziz’s book serves as a warning to Muslims to remain vigilant to this possibility.

While *The Racial Muslim* makes important contributions to legal and religious studies, it also adds a solid piece of scholarship to the field of Critical Race Theory. It is an original endeavor that offers a compelling case for the vitality and importance of critical-race scholarship as a means of understanding the manners in which race influences our lives in unseen ways, and more crucially, how these influences can become a means of disenfranchising religious freedom.

Extending this point further, one might imagine that implementing an “Abrahamic” or “People of the Book” identity may partially depend on interest convergence. As Aziz’s efforts make clear, acceptance of the “Judeo-Christian” concept was not rooted in remorse for the treatment of Jews in the

century prior. Rather, it was influenced by American interests intimately tied to the Holocaust, including American guilt for the tardiness in recognizing the plight of Jews in Europe during World War II, not to mention the strategic interest in Israel as an ally in the Middle East. One might suspect that whether Muslims can “Abraham-ize” the country will depend on whether there is some benefit to the dominant class in doing so. Perhaps the same may be true for the acceptability of racism itself. Whether the process of racialization can be eradicated depends on whether racism itself can be eradicated. Hence, the possibility of racial equality would seem to depend in part on the interests of the dominant class. *The Racial Muslim* confirms interest-convergence theory, pointing to a similar need for Muslims in this racial project, along with the broader project of combating racism and the maladies of racialization.

Sahar Aziz’s *The Racial Muslim* abounds in lessons for the reader. Perhaps the most critical is in helping to resolve the puzzling paradox whereby those who demand religious freedom for themselves change course when it comes to others. As *The Racial Muslim* makes clear, this feat is possible only by subjecting Muslims to racial tropes and biological determinants, a tactic that effectively conceals religious animus in the cloak of racial discrimination. The insights of this work culminate in a powerful analytic for understanding religious discrimination. This book is destined to have a long shelf life and an increase in influence, particularly as its main tenets are deployed to analyze religious repression in contexts beyond the United States.