



## Integration of Muslim-American Youth: Preserving Islamic Identity Amidst Religious Diversity

### The Lighthouse Workshop I

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#### Bio:

**Kaleem Kamboj** is a seasoned entrepreneur and educator with over 25 years of experience in operations, marketing, and organizational development. He has a successful background in orchestrating start-ups and elevating organizational performance through skillful restructuring. As a Professor at Parsons School of Design, The New School, he teaches courses such as Global Professional Practices and Game Theory by Design, focusing on business design, entrepreneurship, management, and marketing.

Beyond academia, Kaleem contributes to the field through thought leadership, authoring articles that explore the intersections of design, design thinking, strategic management, and design management. His dedication to education is reflected in positive student feedback, with many praising his passion, responsiveness, and ability to make complex subjects **engaging**.

**Dr. Ali Yurtsever** is an academics with a background in Physics Education, Mathematics (MS and PhD), and Management. He has held notable roles at Georgetown University and Catholic University of America and played a pivotal role in revitalizing *American Islamic College* in 2010. Currently, he serves as the Dean of *Northwest Suburban College* and teaches Mathematics across various institutions. Additionally, Dr. Yurtsever is the Editor-in-Chief of the *International Journal of Islam* and the Religious Director at the *Islamic Society of Midwest (ISOM)*. Known for his commitment to education and community service, he also leads the Religious Curriculum team at *The Lighthouse Schools* in Clinton, Iowa. A devoted husband and a father of four, Dr. Yurtsever continues to inspire through his dedication to bridging faith and knowledge.

#### Abstract

The Muslim community in America faces a unique set of challenges and opportunities in navigating modernity while preserving Islamic values. This paper explores the multifaceted experiences of American Muslims, particularly the youth, in balancing religious identity with the demands of contemporary society. Drawing on insights from scholars worldwide, including Turkish, South Asian, and other Islamic thinkers, the paper examines the historical trajectory of Islamic thought in the context of modernity, the challenges posed by cultural integration, and the role of Islamic institutions in fostering a cohesive Muslim identity in America. Strategies for empowering the youth through education, mentorship, and civic engagement are discussed, aiming to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the American Muslim experience.



**Keywords:** American Muslims, youth, modernity, integration, assimilation, Muslim identity, Islamic institutions, Islamic education, spirituality, science.

## **Introduction**

The intersection of Islam and modernity has been a subject of extensive discourse among scholars and practitioners alike. In the American context, Muslims grapple with reconciling their religious identity with the cultural and societal norms of a predominantly non-Muslim country. The challenges are particularly pronounced for the youth, who must navigate issues related to identity, integration, and adherence to Islamic principles in a rapidly changing world (Esposito, 2010).

This paper seeks to explore the complexities faced by American Muslims, with a focus on the youth, by examining the definitions and implications of modernity, the challenges of cultural integration, and the role of Islamic institutions in addressing these challenges. The perspectives of renowned scholars such as Muhammad Iqbal, Said Nursi, and Yusuf al-Qaradawi will be incorporated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter.

## **Understanding Modernity in the Islamic Context**

Modernity, often associated with the departure from traditional values and the embrace of new societal norms, has a complex relationship with Islam. Historically, the onset of modernity in the Muslim world can be traced back to the decline of Islamic empires and the rise of European colonialism in the 17th century (Hodgson, 1974). Scholars like Muhammad Iqbal have argued for the reinterpretation of Islamic thought to align with contemporary realities while maintaining core principles (Iqbal, 1930).

Turkish scholar Said Nursi emphasized the compatibility of faith and reason, advocating for an approach that harmonizes Islamic teachings with scientific advancements (Vahide, 2005). Similarly, South Asian scholars have contributed to the discourse by addressing the need for contextualizing Islamic jurisprudence in modern times (Rahman, 1982).

## **Challenges Faced by Muslim Youth in America**

The youth represent a significant segment of the American Muslim population and face unique challenges that stem from cultural, social, and religious dynamics.

### ***Identity and Integration***

Identity formation is a critical aspect of youth development. American Muslim youth often struggle with dual identities—balancing their Islamic heritage with their American upbringing (Peek, 2005). This duality can lead to internal conflicts and a sense of not fully belonging to either culture.

Scholars have highlighted the importance of fostering a positive Muslim identity that is confident and adaptable (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011). The concept of being both fully American and fully Muslim is supported by the principles of Islam, which encourages integration and positive contributions to society (Ali, Liu, & Humedian, 2004).

### ***Cultural Conflicts and Social Challenges***

The prevalence of dating, substance abuse, and peer pressure presents moral and ethical dilemmas for Muslim youth (Haddad & Smith, 2002). The permissiveness of Western culture regarding relationships and sexuality contrasts with Islamic teachings on modesty and chastity.

Moreover, issues such as Islamophobia and discrimination exacerbate the challenges, leading to feelings of alienation and marginalization (Zaal, Salah, & Fine, 2007). The rise of social media and technology introduces additional complexities, as youth are exposed to a myriad of influences that may conflict with Islamic values.

### ***Educational and Institutional Challenges***

The lack of representation and understanding of Islam in educational institutions can contribute to misunderstandings and stereotypes (Ahmed, 2011). Muslim students may not see their experiences reflected in curricula, leading to a disconnect between their education and personal identity.

### ***Role of Islamic Institutions and Education***

Islamic institutions play a pivotal role in supporting the youth and addressing the challenges they face.

### ***Family and Community Support***

The family is the foundational unit in Islam, and strong family ties are essential for nurturing faith and identity (Al-Ahmadi, 2018). Communities that provide support networks can help youth navigate societal pressures.

### ***Islamic Education and Mentorship***

Educational programs that combine religious and secular studies can empower youth with knowledge and critical thinking skills (Douglass & Shaikh, 2004). Mentorship programs, where youth are guided by knowledgeable and relatable role models, can foster resilience and a strong sense of self (Husain & O'Brien, 2000).

### ***Civic Engagement and Leadership Development***



Encouraging participation in civic activities helps youth develop a sense of responsibility and belonging in society (Sirin & Fine, 2008). Leadership programs can cultivate skills that enable youth to contribute positively to their communities and the broader society.

### **Strategies for Empowerment**

Based on the challenges identified, several strategies can be implemented to empower Muslim youth in America.

#### ***Education Reform***

Developing curricula that incorporate Islamic perspectives within the context of American society can enhance relevance and engagement (Keyworth, 2011). Emphasizing critical thinking and intellectual development aligns with the Islamic tradition of scholarship.

#### ***Cultural Competency Training***

Providing cultural competency training for educators and community leaders can improve understanding and support for Muslim youth (Lassiter, 2015). This training can address biases and promote inclusivity.

#### ***Utilizing Technology and Media***

Leveraging technology to create platforms for education, dialogue, and expression can engage youth in meaningful ways (Eickelman & Anderson, 2003). Islamic content delivered through modern media can resonate with the tech-savvy generation.

#### ***Promoting Positive Role Models***

Highlighting successful Muslims in various fields can inspire youth and provide tangible examples of integrating faith with professional achievement (Karim, 2009).

### **The Concept of American Muslim Identity**

Defining an American Muslim identity involves embracing both Islamic values and American cultural elements. It requires recognizing the diversity within the Muslim community and promoting unity through shared beliefs and goals (Mohamed, 2014).

Scholars like Sherman Jackson advocate for an understanding of Islam that is rooted in the American context, emphasizing the principles of justice, equality, and community service (Jackson, 2005). This approach aligns with the Islamic concept of *maslaha* (public interest) and the pursuit of common good.



## Conclusion

The experiences of Muslim youth in America are shaped by a complex interplay of religious, cultural, and societal factors. Addressing the challenges requires a multifaceted approach that involves families, communities, educational institutions, and broader society. By drawing on the rich heritage of Islamic scholarship and embracing the opportunities presented by modernity, American Muslims can foster an environment where the youth thrive and contribute positively to society.

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## Appendix

### **Workshop Participants:**

Shazia Ilyas, Ali Yurtsever, Akif Aydin, Uzyain Uzbeh, Mohammed Deif, Muhammad Eissa, Abdul Hakeem Waheed, Lynne Muhammad, Asma Nizamuddin, John Ozbay, Azam Nizamuddin, Kaleem Kamboj, Mustafa Kurkala, Jafer Genghis.

### **Footnotes**

1. The term *modernity* in this context refers to societal changes that began in the late 16th century, impacting cultural, economic, and political structures globally.
2. *Maslaha* is an Islamic legal principle that considers the common good or public interest in legal decisions.

### **Author Note**

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