

The Early Legacies of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement in America

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(Editor's note: A paper delivered at the Annual Conference of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Lahore, in Lahore, Pakistan, via Skype, December 22, 2016)

One of the reasons I am so pleased to be here this morning is that as a scholar who specializes in the history of conversion to Islam in America, I have come to see that there are few figures and movements as significant in American Muslim history as Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and the Ahmadiyya Movement. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad appears to have personally played a crucial role in the creation of some of America's first Muslim convert and Sufi communities and the later Lahore Ahmadi movement influenced several other important Islamic currents in the United States as well. So, to be able to be with you here and speak with members of a movement that has had such a prominent place in American Islamic history is indeed a privilege.

This morning I would like to outline the early impacts of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and the Ahmadiyya Anjuman of Lahore in the United States by looking at these impacts as having occurred over the course of five distinct periods. I am going to be focusing on a ninety-year time frame, 1886 to 1975, not only because this is the area of my specialization but also because this time frame encapsulates a history that has shaped the direction of American Islam ever since. In each of these five periods, influential figures and Islamic organizations emerged with important ties to either Mirza Ghulam Ahmad himself or to the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement. These figures and organizations would go on to shape important early contours of the American Muslim community in both relatively well-known ways and lesser-known, but still significant, ways. Each of these periods, then, offer key insights into the role of the Ahmadiyya movement in the development of the Muslim community in the United States and how Islam in America — especially that of American converts to Islam — was uniquely shaped by the Ahmadiyya movement.

The first period of Ahmadi influence on the American community encompasses the years during which Mirza Ghulam Ahmad himself was in direct contact with Americans. Most scholars of both Islam in America and Ahmadi history are aware that the first prominent white American Muslim convert, a man named Alexander Russell Webb, initially began taking a serious interest in Islam after starting a correspondence with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in late 1886. In this correspondence, which lasted several

months, Webb showed enthusiasm for spreading Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's ideas and was invited to Qadian to study under the teacher. Having no means to provide for his family in his absence, Webb was forced to decline the offer, yet it seems to have been this very invitation that motivated Webb to obtain later that year a job that would permit him to move his entire family to Southeast Asia, which he hoped would eventually allow him to visit India. During his five-year stay in Asia, although Webb lost contact with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, he retained his passion for Islam and had embraced the religion by the summer of 1889. Soon after this, he met with various Muslim funders who helped Webb develop a mission to spread Islam in the United States, and between 1893 and 1897, Webb led the first major Islamic movement in America. Because of infighting and possibly, as Webb argued, a widespread fear of the potential repercussions if Americans converted to Islam, Webb's Islamic movement never gained mass popularity. Webb, therefore, retired to a quiet life in America, although he maintained his connections with Muslims throughout the world, including the Ahmadiyya, for whom, in 1910, he helped with the revision of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's book *The Teachings of Islam*.

As I have stated, Webb's connections with the Ahmadi community are fairly well known to scholars, but there are also a few less well-known ties between Americans and Mirza Ghulam Ahmad during this same period. One of the most fascinating possible connections appeared during the same time and at nearly the same location that Webb first took an interest in Islam. It seems that Mirza Ghulam Ahmad's first exposure to Americans came by way of an article published in 1886 in a journal for members of the Theosophical Society, a liberal spiritual organization that was devoted to studying the various religions of the world. Webb was a member of this organization at the time, and it seems to have served as the intellectual and organizational model for his later Islamic movement. Interestingly, though, an acquaintance of Webb who was also in the Theosophical Society — a man named Thomas Johnson — may have similarly been inspired by the article about Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, for in early 1887 he established his own organization devoted to studying Sufism, or Islamic mysticism — which had been precisely one of the key elements of Islam Mirza Ghulam Ahmad was promoting at the time. Johnson's group, known as the Sufic Circle, was the first Sufi organization in the United States, and it may have influenced later Sufi movements that were to spread in America and throughout Europe.

A small number of other Americans seem to have been linked with the Ahmadiyya movement during these early years as well. According to

Ahmadi sources, a physician and follower of Webb, Dr. Anthony George Baker, embraced Islam directly through correspondence with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad. In addition, a man from New York named F.L. Andersen, who began corresponding with Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in 1901, was soon being promoted as the first true Ahmadi convert in America. Andersen remained committed to the Ahmadiyya cause for the next thirty years; however he became devoted to the Qadian faction, which made a strong effort to promote Islam to Americans during the 1920s.

The Lahore-based Ahmadiyya Movement, however, does not seem to have made clear inroads in the United States until the early 1930s, and this represents the second period of links between the Americans and Ahmadis. Like in the previous era, this period's Ahmadi influence came not from Ahmadiyya representatives who were physically present in the country, but rather from overseas missionaries. At the time, the Muslim mission in Woking, England was being significantly influenced by the Ahmadiyya Movement of Lahore, and it was that community that was publishing one of the first widely popular English-language Islamic journals to be read in the United States. In fact, the editors of the *Islamic Review* appear to have made a strong push to promote both their magazine and Islam itself during the early 1930s. Letters published in the journal reveal that it was being sent to libraries and schools across the country and, in the process, was stimulating American interest in the religion.

Perhaps one of the most surprising, if little-known, outcomes of this particular Ahmadi effort is that the magazine's tendency to publish letters from Americans made other Americans aware of their presence, which in turn helped bring together various American Muslim convert-focused organizations. The earliest example of this is the case of the white converts in Los Angeles, California, who read about each other in the magazine's 1931 and 1932 issues. By the summer of the latter year, white Muslims in the region who had met each other through the journal began to organize. Then, in the following year, a small, but nationally-focused Muslim organization named the American Islamic Association used the *Islamic Review* to recruit the West Coast converts into its East Coast-based network. The American Islamic Association had been indirectly linked to the Woking mosque since the former's founding in 1930, and its members even had their own articles appear in Woking's journal; but were it not for the Woking mission connecting the Americans who were scattered across the country, the American Islamic Association probably would never have become the first truly national convert-based Muslim organization in the

United States. And as we will now see, this accomplishment helped lay a foundation for future generations of American Muslims.

It was in the third period that the Lahore Ahmadiyya connections finally became direct in America, and in the process they helped establish a strong multiracial, convert-focused Muslim community in the United States. Members of the American Islamic Association, first of all, appear to have come into contact with the Lahore movement's leaders in India; Lahore's joint secretary K.S. Chaudhri Manzur Ilahi announced in 1936 that he had been in communication with the group's leaders. However, what was perhaps more important for Mr. Ilahi was the actual Ahmadi mission in America that was founded in 1935. Although the extant evidence is somewhat unclear about the issue, it appears that the person responsible for starting the American mission was an African American convert named Saeed Ahmad. Mr. Ahmad seems to have been from the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania region and more than likely had previously been involved in one of the several different Islamic sects that had been popular in the region over the previous ten years. According to various accounts, in 1934 the region's Muslim community, which had recently unified under the Qadiani movement, underwent a major schism, and, due to the efforts of Mr. Ahmad and others, the Lahore Ahmadiyya movement gained a significant following in the region. As a result, over the next dozen years the Lahore-influenced region became one of the main centers of mainstream Islam among African Americans, with its influence spreading across the country.

Meanwhile, white and immigrant Muslims who were associated with the old American Islamic Association continued to maintain ties with Lahore, and new white converts with Lahore links began appearing. The most notable of the latter type was a woman from New York, Nadira Osman, who embraced Islam after reading the works of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and learning of his connections with Alexander Russell Webb. By the 1940s, Miss Osman and other white converts and immigrants were connecting with each other and organizing new Islamic institutions and interacting with Lahore-influenced African Americans in several regions of the country. In fact, during the war, African Americans with Lahori connections attempted to create the first truly multiracial and national mainstream Islamic organization, the Uniting Islamic Societies of America. Although the institution had dissolved before 1950, it solidified connections and left an important model and organizational legacies for American Muslims in the ensuing years.

There is some overlap between the third and fourth period of American contacts with the Ahmadiyya movement of Lahore. In 1943, as Ahmadi-

influenced Americans were developing their own institutions, leading Ahmadi figures in India decided that the time was ripe to establish a full-fledged mission in America led by learned Indian Muslim teachers. The mission was officially launched in 1947 when the Lahore representative, Bashir Ahmad Minto, arrived in San Francisco, California and incorporated the Moslem Society of the USA. Mr. Minto quickly went to work, sending out hundreds of advertisements and letters to local and national periodicals, giving dozens of lectures across the state, distributing Islamic publications to all who were interested, raising money to purchase a building, and corresponding and meeting with hundreds of Muslims and potential converts. With these efforts, he had established the first robust Lahore Ahmadi mission in America, and as a result he had begun winning over to Islam a new class of Americans: college-educated whites. In previous periods, the vast majority of American converts to Islam had not attended college. In most cases, although these people tended to be interested in intellectual subjects like history and philosophy, they had not formally attended a post-secondary institution. But Mr. Minto's approach to promoting Islam was able to bring in the college-trained, and at one school, the well-respected University of Chicago, one of Mr. Minto's converts established a college Islamic association, one of the first of its kind in the country. Despite these new development, however, the earlier Lahore connections with Americans were not forgotten, and after Mr. Minto left in the mid-1950s, a former member of the American Islamic Association, Muharrem Nadji, was appointed to be the new official representative of the Lahore movement in America.

The final period of American contact with the Lahore Ahmadiyya movement, like the fourth period, had some overlap with the previous period as well as connections with Lahori-influenced developments from earlier in the century. The main figure of this era was a Pakistani named Muhammad Abdullah, a well-educated representative of the Lahore movement who first traveled to the United States in the mid-1950s. During this initial seventeen-month stay, while Mr. Minto was focusing his conversion efforts on white Americans, Mr. Abdullah became interested in African American Muslims who belonged to the famous non-orthodox sect, the Nation of Islam. Soon, Mr. Abdullah began exchanging letters with the head of the Nation, Elijah Muhammad, with the hope of eventually bringing him and his organization to mainstream Islam. After a brief time working in the Fiji Islands, Mr. Abdullah returned to the United States and became a leading Muslim figure in both California and, after affiliating himself with African Americans who had been influenced by the Lahore movement back in the 1930s, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Although one of Mr. Abdullah's key contributions during his American career was helping enable the Lahore movement better recruit African Americans in California, it was in the latter city, Philadelphia, that he was able to leave his greatest legacy. It remains somewhat unclear how exactly it occurred, but in the year 1960 Mr. Abdullah came into personal contact with Wallace Muhammad, the son of Elijah, and heir-apparent of the Nation of Islam. At the time, Wallace was working in Philadelphia as a minister for the Nation, but despite being regarded by many in his group as the future national leader of their community, he had come to question several of the Nation's non-orthodox teachings and was beginning to take an interest in orthodox Islam. Mr. Abdullah therefore offered to educate Wallace on many things about Islam, including teaching him some Urdu and Quran commentary. Wallace regarded this education as a turning point in his religious life. He soon would break from his father and align himself with the famous Malcolm X when the latter embraced orthodox Islam. In fact, Malcolm's orthodox Muslim organization even formally met with Mr. Abdullah's Philadelphia group in late 1964. However, after Malcolm's assassination the following February, Wallace, fearing for his life, spent the next ten years publicly wavering between a commitment to his father's organization and orthodox Islam. It seems, though, that in private he was committed to orthodoxy and had begun making plans to convert the Nation of Islam - which was by far the largest and most influential Islamic organization in the United States at the time - into an orthodox movement. Then, when Elijah Muhammad died in February 1975, Wallace, as predicted, took charge of the organization and almost immediately began to implement the massive religious transition of the group's doctrines to align with orthodox Islam. Mr. Abdullah himself was even praised in the community as an important religious teacher and was frequently featured in the movement's newspaper. Wallace Muhammad's conversion of the Nation of Islam brought tens of thousands of African Americans to orthodox Islam, and this community, which is now entering its third generation as an orthodox movement, remains the largest African American orthodox Muslim community in the United States. Because few groups have been able to quickly convert so many people to a single new religion without the use of force, this transition was an event that has few equals in world history, let alone in the history of religion in America. Were it not for the work of Mr. Abdullah, then, this significant event may have never come to pass.

To conclude my speech this morning, I would like to not only summarize my main points, but also point out a few larger themes that I think we can take away from this history. To state my main point once again: there were

five distinct periods during which either Mirza Ghulam Ahmad himself or the Ahmadiyya movement of Lahore played important roles in shaping American Islamic life. During these periods, the impact of the Ahmadiyya movement was felt through not only its teachings being spread, but, perhaps more significantly, in the actual organizations that developed with its influence. Dozens of Islamic movements have attempted to shape and influence Islam in America over the past 130 years, but relatively few have affected the creation of numerous real institutions. The Ahmadiyya movement of Lahore not only did that repeatedly, but played a role in the emergence of some of the most important and groundbreaking institutions and transformations in the history of American religion. There are traces of Ahmadi influence in the very first organized American Islamic orthodox and Sufi movements; the first truly national movement for converts; the first large national *multiracial* orthodox Islamic organization; at least one of the first Muslim organizations at an American college; and the largest African American orthodox Muslim community in the United States. The efforts of the Ahmadiyya movement must therefore be looked at as having played a vital role in the shaping of Islam in America.

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