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“Muslims in America: Some Observations”
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The professed goal of President Trump's controversial ban on Muslim immigration is to keep America safe by keeping “all” Muslims out of the country, for some approximation of “all.” This is in contrast to using the nation's intelligence agencies to identify dangerous people and simply denying them entry.

This is rather too little, too late. The USA already counts many Muslims among its citizens, with Islam coming up on Judaism for the honor of being the nation's second largest religion. While this sounds sizeable, in percentage terms it is not. Judaism stands at roughly 4 percent of Americans, while Islam is about 3 percent. Compared to the percentage of self-professed Christians, which a 2014 Pew survey puts at over 70 percent, this is rather small. But, like Judaism, Islam is here to stay.

Muslims have been in America since Muslim slaves came with the Spanish in the 16th century. During America's Civil War in the mid-19th century, Muslims served in the North's army; one became a captain in the Illinois Infantry while another, Hajji Ali, was in charge of its Camel Military Corps in what is now Arizona. And, their numbers have increased gradually over the decades, with the biggest increase since World War II.

This last observation is significant, for it means that Muslims did not enter during the largest period of immigration in USA history, from the 1880s to the late 1920s. Millions of immigrants entered America during this time, most from Europe. Until that time, America had been largely Protestant, but now large numbers of Catholics and Jews came to the country. Indeed, this is when Judaism became the nation's second largest religion.

Judaism's adjustment to American society can be instructive for understanding the changes American Islam is presently undergoing. In the early 20th century, newly arrived Jews found the USA quite different from Europe. And, this required changes to the practices they had followed.

Religions give (at least) two kinds of instructions to their adherents: how to worship and relate to the divine, and how to relate to the people and society in which their adherents live.

While worship rules are internal to the religion and tend to remain fairly stable, rules

about relating to society change as that society changes. If a religion moves from a totalitarian society to a democratic society, for example, or from a tolerant to an intolerant one, it will, by necessity, change the way it relates to the new society.

But, how does a religion know when the changes are OK? Do they fit with the centuries and/or millennia of religious tradition? Those decisions are made by trained religious leaders.

In Judaism, rabbis are the leaders authorized to make such decisions. At first, rabbis came from Europe along with their congregants. They were used to European ways of doing things rather than American ways. Change, therefore, was slow.

But, the pace of adjustment picked up when Judaism created seminaries -- graduate-level educational schools to transform young Americans into American rabbis to lead the American Jewish community. Within a generation, American Judaism was led by rabbis who understood America because they were American, not transplanted Europeans. These rabbis reshaped the character of Judaism's social relations to help the religion and its members fit into American society.

Islam in America is at a similar stage right now. Immigration has increased the American Muslim population and the number of mosques. And, some trained Islamic leaders, “imams,” have arrived. Many mosques are led by devoted and dedicated lay people.

In the past few years, the Islamic community has begun to organize seminaries for training young American Muslims as religious leaders. But, it is a slow process. Nationally, about half a dozen seminaries have programs, but none are yet fully accredited by the USA's higher education accrediting bodies. Hartford Seminary -- a multifaith institution -- has an accredited Muslim chaplaincy degree, but even that falls short of a complete training for Muslim religious leadership.

In the end, while American Muslims have lived here for generations, Islam, as a religious organization, is still in its early stages. The foundation of seminaries is a solid start and, within a few years, they will begin graduating American native imams. That will be a milestone in the advancement of our country's religious liberty.