Prince among Slaves: The True Story of an African Prince Sold into Slavery in the American South

Scholars estimate that there were tens of thousands of African Muslims who came to antebellum America through the transatlantic slave trade. The stories of only a few of them, however, have been preserved.

- What features of Abd al-Rahman Ibrahima's life do you think enabled his remarkable story to be preserved for future generations of Americans?
- What aspects of Ibrahima's story particularly attracted the attention of white Americans? What do you think that tells us about attitudes toward race and religion in antebellum America?

In the overview essay for the “American Stories” series, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri argues that Ibrahima engaged in an act of translation when he wrote down the first chapter of the Qur’an, al-Fatiha, upon being asked to write the Lord's Prayer in Arabic. That is, he, as a Muslim, was writing his version of the Lord's Prayer for a Christian audience and in the process finding common ground between Islam and Christianity. Others have argued that Ibrahima was being subversive and resisting racial and religious hierarchy. How do you understand Ibrahima’s act?

While Muslims were present in colonial and antebellum America, their lives have for the most part been erased from popular narratives of early American history. This is largely the result of a lack of distinction made between the different backgrounds of black Africans. It is often argued that their skin color and the institution of slavery erased their earlier cultural and religious heritage in America. How does including the life stories of African Muslims such as Ibrahima change the way we understand early American history?
**The Columbia Sourcebook of Muslims in the United States**

Scholar’s note: The suggested selections from this book address different aspects of the history of Islam in America during the first half of the twentieth century. While there are interesting points of discussion in each of the sections, readers may find it more fruitful to discuss certain themes that run through the selections as a whole.

What did America mean for Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, Mary Juma, Mike Abdallah, Inayat Khan, Noble Drew Ali, and Elijah Muhammad?

What do you think accounts for the differences and similarities in the ways in which these individuals experienced and understood America?

These selections were written at a time when there was much enthusiasm, particularly in the United States, about the idea that human history was on a trajectory toward modernity and progress. The authors, however, all present Islam as a solution to some sort of deficit in their personal lives or in the sociopolitical life of America.

- Specify the problems the authors identify for which they see Islam as a solution.
- Discuss why you think there is a disparity between their approach to the modern world and the general celebration of modernity in the first decades of the twentieth century.
- Certainly, racial inequality was a problem with which these authors grappled, but their experiences of race allowed them to identify problem beyond racism. Be sure to push your discussion beyond the problem of racial prejudice.

How do the readings by Malcolm X and W. D. Mohammad mark a new trajectory in the history of Islam in America? How did they interpret the earlier presence of Islam in black America in relation to the future of African-American Islam, which they wished to incarnate?

- Discuss why you think there is a disparity between their approach to the modern world and the general celebration of modernity in the first decades of the twentieth century.
- Certainly, racial inequality was a problem with which these authors grappled, but their experiences of race allowed them to identify problem beyond racism. Be sure to push your discussion beyond the problem of racial prejudice.
**Acts of Faith: The Story of an American Muslim, the Struggle for the Soul of a Generation**

In Acts of Faith, Eboo Patel writes about the personal struggles associated with reconciling multiple identities. What are some of the discoveries in Patel's life journey that allow him to reconcile his Indian Muslim heritage with his life in America?

Much of Patel's life is shaped by experiences with people of diverse religious backgrounds. He seems to have learned as much from Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., and Abraham Heschel as he did from Muslim thinkers and scriptures. What roles do you think Islam and his upbringing played in shaping Patel's spiritual activism?

While in South Africa, Patel learned the principle of *ubuntu*, which he translates as “people are people through other people.”

- How is this principle related to the notion of community in Patel's thought?
- How does Patel define community in the midst of diversity?

Patel acknowledges some popular criticism of interfaith activity: It's boring. It strips religions of their distinctive faith commitments and reduces them to what they minimally hold in common.

After reading Acts of Faith, how do you understand interfaith activity?

- Why does Patel find interfaith activity to be a powerful tool for addressing the spiritual concerns of young people today?
A Quiet Revolution: The Veil’s Resurgence, from the Middle East to America

In A Quiet Revolution, Leila Ahmed complicates politicized understandings of “the veil.” Based on your reading of her book, what do you think hijab means for American Muslim women today?

Some nations have gone so far as to enact laws either restricting or mandating the use of hijab in public settings. Why has women’s attire become such a powerful symbol of Islam or national identity in the modern era?

Ahmed indicates that her research led her to a conclusion that was a “complete reversal” of her expectation that she would find that the resurgence of the veil represented a step backward in Muslim women’s pursuit of gender equity. Instead, she found that Islamist activism on behalf of social justice was paving the way for their integration into American democratic systems and traditions of activism.

- What does Ahmed’s conclusion portend about the future of Islam in America?
- Do you think Muslim political activism will help American Muslims integrate more effectively into American society, or will it lead to political tensions that will result in the vilifying of Islam in American public life?
The Butterfly Mosque: A Young American Woman’s Journey to Love and Islam

Based on your reading of G. Willow Wilson’s memoir, what do you think are some of the key difficulties in cross-cultural understanding?

Based on your personal experiences with cultural differences, how do you assess Wilson’s attitude and her strategies for overcoming cultural barriers?

What role, if any, did Islam play in mediating cultural differences between Wilson and her Egyptian family members or neighbors?

When the families of Wilson and her fiancé “agree to love one another,” she expresses relief and describes their acceptance of one another as “fragile and brave.”

- Do you agree with Wilson’s characterization of the two families’ newly formed relationship?
- What does her assessment of their relationship reveal about how current international conflicts affect American Muslims’ identities and personal relations?

Wilson describes a team-building exercise at the language school where she taught, in which Egyptian and Western employees were divided along cultural lines. She concluded from the exercise that in defining social responsibility, “westerners” tend to emphasize “literal responsibility” while Egyptians focus on “moral responsibility.”

- What do you think of her conclusion?
- Are there ways in which people of diverse backgrounds in America also define social responsibility differently?