

MUSLIMS AND MORMONS IN THE US

Kadir AYDIN

Adıyaman Üniversitesi, İİBF, Kamu Yönetim Bölümü

ABSTRACT

Every religious or social group has their own leadership structure and different media image in the U.S. This paper focuses on the differences and similarities between the Muslim and the Mormon religious community in the U.S. based on their religious perspective, by comparing their social issues, media images, and leadership structures. Firstly, this paper will give brief information on what Muslims and Mormons believe. Secondly, it will discuss the leadership structure of Muslim and Mormon in America. Thirdly, the discussion in this paper will be about the Social Issue and Media Image of Mormon and Muslim in the United States.

Keywords: Religion, Muslim, Mormons.

INTRODUCTION

A Muslim is someone who believes oneness of Allah and who believes Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) as his messenger, and who practices five pillars of Islam and believes in six articles of *Aqeedah*. In the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)(Well-known as *JibrilHadith*); "*Islam* is being witness that there is no god except Allah and that Muhammad is His Messenger, that you should perform salah (ritual prayer), pay the almsgiving, fasting, and performing pilgrimage. *Iman* is that you believe in Allah and His angels and His Books and His Messengers and in the Last Day, and in predestination, both in its good and in its evil aspects."¹These are fundamental requirements to be a Muslim.

The Mormon is one who believes that Jesus Christ (Heavenly Father) is the son of God, and he came and died for them so they all can be forgiven. They also believe Joseph Smith who found the book of Mormon is a founder of the faith and the first Prophet he established the Mormonism in "upstate New York in 1820. The Mormons followed Brigham Young after Joseph Smith's pass away in 1844; Territory Utah was the new land of Mormons. Today Mormons are members of "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS)."²Some theories of Mormons vary from actual Christians; nevertheless the Mormons identify themselves as Christians. They believe in the Book of Mormon and other books like the Bible, and they believe all people are the children

²Richard Lyman Bushman, *Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction*, 1st ed.(Published by Oxford University Press 2008), New York, NY, P. 1

of God. “Mormons believe that returning to God requires following the example of Jesus Christ. They believe that Christ's church was restored through Joseph Smith and is guided by living prophets and apostles. Central to the Mormon faith is the belief that God speaks to his children and answers their prayers.”³

Leadership structure of Muslims and Mormons in America

All belief traditions and religions have their own holy Scripture or custom-based leadership structure. As Khaled Abou El Fadl said, “All religions, like all sociological and political movements, have a process or method for generating and defining authority.”⁴ In this perspective, Muslim and Mormon structures have significant differences despite some commonalities. Muslims believe choosing a leader among a group is strongly recommended in Islamic resources, and the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) encourages Muslims to create leadership by saying, “When three are on a journey, they should appoint one of them as their leader.”⁵ And “Behold! Each of you is a shepherd, and each of you will be asked about his flock. The leader of the people is a guardian and is responsible for his subjects...”⁶ The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) determines leadership in family, which is the smallest group of society. This shows that leadership should be in every part of one’s life. For example; a father is the leader of a house, an imam is the leader of a mosque and its neighborhood, and everyone in this perspective has responsibility for his flock.

Islamic leadership is described from the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and the Qur’an. Rafik I. Beekun and Jamal Badawi try to demonstrate “Islamic leadership perspective with four layers of Islamic moral character (*Iman, Islam, Taqwa, and Ihsan*) and five key parameters of Islamic behavior (*‘Adl, Amanah, Birr, Mujahada, and ‘Ahd*).”⁷ These key parameters should be considered by the leaders in conjunction with these moral characters. Brief descriptions for these five moral characters can be given as follows; Adl means justice for all; Amanah implies complete trust which is full conformity of one’s behavior with his/her words; Birr means righteousness capaciously embrace sing justice, iman, Islam and patience; Mujahada mostly indicates inner struggle for self-improvement; ‘Ahd, connotes keeping a promise. As the Qur’an mentions,

³Bushman, 3

⁴Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From The Extremists*, 1st ed. (HarperCollins Publishers 2007), New York, NY, P. 26

⁵ Reported by Sbu Said al Khudri in Abu Davud, 2:721, Chapter 933, Hadith 2602.

⁶ Sahih Bukhari, hadith 6719, Sahih Muslim 1829

⁷Rafik I Beekun & Jamal Badawi, *Leadership an Islamic Perspective*, 3rd ed. (Amana Publications, 2009), Belstville, MI, P. 19-20

“Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but (true) righteousness is (in) one who believes in Allah, the Last day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the travelers, those who ask (for help), and for freeing slaves; (and who) establishes prayer and gives zakah; (those who) fulfill their promise; and (those who) are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous.” (Al-Bakara, 2:177)

In another verse of the Qur’an, parameters of Islamic behavior have been emphasized “And we made them leaders guiding by our command. And we inspired to them doing of good deeds, establishment of prayer, and giving of zakah; and they were worshippers of Us.”(Anbiyaa, 21:73),

These sources point out the importance of leadership in Islam. As it was outlined above leadership has a significant role in Islam.

In the present day, the Muslim world and Muslims in the U.S. lack leadership in the sense explained above. This problem is not rooted in Islam, yet it is the outcome of Muslims who have problems mainly in not being well educated and who have economic problems. When we look closely at the Muslim leadership in the US, we can see multiple institutions formed to represent Muslim communities such as Islamic Society of North America, Islamic Circle of North America, Council on America – Islamic Relations, Muslim American Society, Muslim Public Affairs Council, Islamic Shura Council of Southern California, etc. Recently, major Muslim groups had an initiative to launch a new council at DC called the U.S. Council of Muslim Organizations. These organizations represent portions of the Muslim communities and they do have power to lead Muslims in the US to some extent. “There are numerous Islamic organizations who present to speak on God’s behalf but too few who are willing to listen”.⁸ That is to say Muslims don’t have institutional leadership like Catholics and Latter Day Saints.

Muslim Leadership Structure in the U.S.

Muslim communities in the US consist of multiple nationalities, racial, and cultural background. These significant differences create numerous obstacles for unification of Muslims in the US; therefore there is not a consolidated leadership to represent all Muslims in The US. This fact generates some setbacks as well. Some Muslim communities in the US tend to isolate themselves from the *ummah*(Muslim world) in order to protect from different side effects. This

⁸Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From The Extremists*, 1st ed. (HarperCollins Publishers 2007), New York, NY, P. 26

understanding creates disconnection among Muslim organizations as well. Maybe it is the outcome of some of those organizations' political connections. Almost all Muslim communities are divided-based on nationalities and cultural heritage. They have their community and organization based leaders who are generally the most educated and active members of the society. They form their own governing structure and have their local voice and opinions. One of the major reasons is that many of those communities use their original languages in their centers and mosques. Language blocks integration to the local cultures and divides Muslim communities among themselves as well. "In the modern era, Muslims have suffered a chaos of authority that has deteriorated to the point of full-fledged chaos."⁹

Muslims need an institutional structure as in their own past or in like some Christian denominations. There are samples of these institutions in Islamic history like the caliphates. According to *Said Nursi* (Muslim scholar) Muslims need to find a solution to three major obstacles amongst themselves in order to institutionalize the structure. These obstacles are poverty, ignorance and disunity. "To cure these diseases, he offered hope, truthfulness, mutual love, consultation, solidarity, and freedom in accordance with Islam"¹⁰

To the contrary, Mormons have strong standardized organizational and leadership structure in the US. Their structure is based on the religious ritual infused in the traditions, but over time it has become, a hierarchy of Mormon Church.

The leaders(Presidents) after Joseph Smith believed to receive revelations and they are named as the Prophets. Contemporarily "President Thomas S. Monson has served as the 16th president of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since 3 February 2008. He had served as a counselor in the First Presidency of the Church since 10 November 1985."¹¹ Under his leadership, there is Quorum of Twelve as the governing body of the Church. Under this body there is a group of 70 male councils called Presidency of the Seventy. This hierarchy continues with the bishops. They are also male bishops and until 1979 blacks were not allowed to serve as bishops. They believe that they receive a "call" from God to serve as bishops. All the leadership body members are called elders in the Church. Women of the Church are also organized to commit their service.

⁹Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From The Extremists*, 1st ed. (HarperCollins Publishers 2007), New York, NY, P. 26

¹⁰Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From The Extremists*, 1st ed. (HarperCollins Publishers 2007), New York, NY, P. 26

¹¹ Leader Biography, President Thomas S. Monson, accessed November 28, 2014, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/leader-biographies/president-thomas-s-monson>

They believe to have a leadership in Mormon family and the father is the leader of the family. Fathers of Mormon families may receive revelation messages for his family. LDS Church Structure is so well defined that even after the death of their Prophet, everyone in the church knows who is going to succeed from the Quorum of Twelve and that is done by the group consensus, one of the vice presidents of their Prophet. The Church has a solid consensus and succession plan. Therefore there is no risk of the Church's followers to be in disarray.

Social Issue and Media Image of Mormon and Muslim in the United States

Muslims have a lack of positive perception towards them in Western Countries and particularly in the US. Main sources of this negative image and misconception of Muslims may be listed as violence, extremism, mostly represented in Al-Qaida and ISIS, lack of understanding of Women's Rights in Islam, and hostile behavior of some the Muslim groups towards the western world and the US plus the US media's negative coverage of Muslim world. For sure the impact of 9/11 terrorist attack plays a huge role on this impression. It has been more common to see that Islam and terrorist attacks are being considered together with the help of heavy-handed media outlets. More than 1.5 billion Muslims around the globe are stereotyped as potential criminals due to the acts of a very small number of hateful minds some of them happened to be Muslim extremists. The lack of leadership in the Muslim world is also cases a weak Muslim voice and public appearance to denounce such terrorist acts. Many Muslim organizations and scholars all around the world condemned this terrorist attack right after it happened¹².

The media could not make clear distinctions between a terrorist activity and Islam itself. Whenever a terrorist attack takes place by the Muslim background terrorists, media takes the leading role to frame the Muslims as terrorists by presenting the criminals as "Muslim/Islamic terrorist" emphasizing the religious identity but not treacherous "terrorists". However if a terrorist activity takes place with different religious backgrounds, it is simply presented as "a terrorist" activity in the news. Actually, all terrorist activities should be condemned. There is not a good or bad terrorist but "terrorist". And there are several news take place in media/social media about negative impressions about Muslims and Islam where Islam itself condemns terrorism as a religion. The media must have made clear distinction between Islam as "religion" and Muslim as "people". Hateful propaganda of some media put Muslims in negative standpoint in the perceptions of the US public.

¹²Leader Biography, President Thomas S. Monson, accessed November 28, 2014, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/leader-biographies/president-thomas-s-monson>

Muslims have tried to establish some organization to raise the acceptance of Muslims in the US. But they are very weak. The Muslims need PR work to remove this negative image, how did Mormon do it before starting. Initially they have to find out negative image components and the acts feeding into these in US. They have to find solutions by taking their Muslim image into consideration and have organized methods to tackle with it. Works of some organizations that are not wide-spread and well-known mentioned above are not enough to change this image in the US yet. Humanitarian relief and support organizations founded or backed by Muslims in the U.S. tend to provide more help to their bleeding issues back in Muslim countries around the world, rather than local issues just around the corner. While helping others as human, unconsciously and unwittingly, Muslims are creating hypocrisy in the eyes of American society in many cases. At first it is understandable that they try to help poor people of their kin, because Islam encourages its followers to take care of their immediate relatives first. This approach can easily be justified by applying this rule to their immediate neighbors that are easy to reach. The Muslim community in US should have to integrate themselves into American society by being more active in building friendships, neighborly help, and open democratic institutions. “Funding of educational and cultural activities by secular or moderate Muslim organizations should be a priority. The U.S. may also have to assist in the development of democratic and civil society institutions where they do not currently exist.”¹³

The Mormon too, has a negative image in society of America because “A contrasting set of associations begins with the extravagant stories of the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith. Smith claimed that an angel directed him to gold plates, which he translated as the Book of Mormon and based on this revelation he instituted plural marriage among his followers”,¹⁴ feeding the negative image which is against cultural norms the U.S. and known Christianity.

Just like Muslims, Mormons in America feels that they are misunderstood, discriminated against and not accepted by other Americans as part of mainstream society. Though, a majority of Mormons think that acceptance of Mormonism is rising.¹⁵ The LDS Church relentlessly works to remove negative perception of Mormon in society by constantly declaring that they absolutely Christian, not a ‘cult’. On the other hand, Mormons keep in dark some of their theological beliefs from public like; they believe ‘God the Father’ (Heavenly Father) and also ‘God the Mother’ “Heavenly Mother an embodied perfect goddess, the wife of Heavenly Father and mother to all

¹³Angel Rabasa, The Muslim World After 9/11, (published by Rand 2004), Santa Monica, CA, P.64

¹⁴Richard Lyman Bushman, Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction, 1st ed. (Published by Oxford University Press 2008), New York, NY, P. 2

¹⁵ Pew....P. 9

the spirits who are eventually born into bodies on earth.”¹⁶“Substance is infinity and everyone will go to their own planet when they pass away”¹⁷.

There is a general misperception and denouncement in public, even among some intellectuals that the miracles and superstitious happenings of Mormon discredit them. Following sentence is just an example to the fact by Richard L Bushman. “They wholeheartedly believe the stories of Joseph Smith and the gold plates. The visit of the angel and the translation of the Book of Mormon, far from being fabulous fairy tales, constitute Mormonism’s founding miracles.”¹⁸Mormons have faith in Joseph Smith and his miracles just like any other prophets and their prophecies throughout the history of the mankind and expect equal treatment from the public towards their holy beliefs.

Mormons started to reject polygamy in nineteenth century, as the new revelation ordered the believers. They see this development as the recurrence of a religious practice as seen in early times by saying that “God commanded Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to practice polygamy at the foundation of Israel; plural marriage served the same purpose when the Mormon people were coming into existence. Now the church is entirely monogamous and emphasizes fidelity between husband and wife as strongly as any religion in the world.”¹⁹Majority of the Mormons reject some fundamentalist trends within the LDS Church that do not accept to reject polygamy by revelation. Mainstream Mormons always denounce these small numbers of fundamentalists from the LDS Church as non-Mormons.

In addition to distressed issue of polygamy, Mormons acquiesce to another recent revelation in nineteen century allowing African-Americans to become bishops. Prophecy and revelations are continuous in Mormonism. This is giving them the chance to adopt contemporary world and the changes come along with the life style it brings. “Mormon creates a milieu where, in certain contexts, self-interest is denied and individuals are made less relevant as a social actor. Mormons make a civil society which is not based on private individual, but rather on a moral system of community interaction.”²⁰

¹⁶ Caroline Kline, *Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century*, 1st ed., (Published by Routledge 2014), New York, NY, P. 34

¹⁷ Bill Mckeever & Eric Johnson, *Mormonism 101: Examining the Religion or the Latter Day Saints*, 1st ed. (Published by Baker Books 2000) Grand Rapids, MI, P.66

¹⁸Richard Lyman Bushman, *Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction*, 1st ed. (Published by Oxford University Press 2008), New York, NY, P. 2

¹⁹Richard Lyman Bushman, *Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction*, 1st ed. (Published by Oxford University Press 2008), New York, NY, P. 3

²⁰C. M. Hann&Elizabeth Dunn, *Civil Society: Challenging Western Models*. 1st ed. (Published by Routledge 1996), New York, NY, P. 28

Mormon Tabernacle Choir using the universal language of music worked out pretty well as a PR instrument for Mormons over the past two centuries transcending the boundaries of prejudice and uniting people. “In 1876, the growing Tabernacle Choir offered one of the earliest performances of Handel’s Messiah in western America. During the 1880 the Salt Lake City based volunteer choir continued to improve”²¹and reached to its recognizable trademark as “America’s Choir”. Such professional PR endeavors bear another fruit in 2002. Olympic Winter Games hosted by the enter of Mormons in Salt Lake City-Utah. The Mormons established the Mormon Helping Hands relief organization and aired in the news media by their efforts during Katrina Hurricane disaster. It is continuing to help communities across the US to carry out a positive image by the LDS church. Mitt Romney raised a score about Mormon power by running for presidency in 2012 was also one of the latest figures that made Mormons to news headlines positively showing their effectiveness reciprocally. These are just some examples proving that Mormons are on the right track working against the negative image trying to be put up against them in the US.

In conclusion; we must add the demographics of Muslim and Mormon existence in the US while considering solutions to their integration into the society and have a holistic understanding of the problem. It is a fact that the perception of Muslims and Mormons in the US is negative. An important aspect to it is the difference of proportionality in their negative images. The negative image and misconception of Muslims may be listed as violence, extremism, Women’s Rights in Islam, and hateful propaganda of media’s negative coverage of Muslim world. The Mormons negative image is coming from the extravagant stories Joseph Smith, gold plates, and accepting polygamy in the early Mormonism.

Mormons originated in the US as part of this culture and they speak the same language which acts as a common denominator. Whereas, Muslims coming from around the world with many culturally different backgrounds and speaking in a variety of languages creating huge barriers to demolish. Islam is the fastest growing and most diverse religion in the US with consideration of its small size yet. Fast growth also brings containment of leadership problem into account as another element. Even these agents come to one’s mind at first thought, proves that compatibility of these two different faith groups into the US society will have varying levels of compliance issues. Therefore, results cannot be compared in equal terms as they try to integrate to the life.

Regardless of the differences in their alienation, Muslims can learn a lot from Mormons. Muslims as a whole in the US should first look into organizational structure of leadership in Mormons to find ways to adapt into their community without sacrificing their pillars in faith.

²¹ Reid L. Neilson, Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, 1st (Published by Oxford University Press, 2011), New York, NY p. 108

Public relations efforts of Mormons are another key point to be taken as a model for Muslims. Meticulous planning and relentless efforts of Muslims on these two issues will help them to turn the things around and produce a positive image as it should be.

Reference

Abou El Fadl, Khaled. The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam From The Extremists, 1st ed. HarperCollins Publishers 2007, New York, NY

Beekun, Rafik I. & Badawi, Jamal. Leadership an Islamic Perspective, 3rd ed. (Amana Publications, 2009), Belstville, MI

Bushman, Richard Lyman. Mormonism: A Very Short Introduction, 1st ed. New York, NY, Published by Oxford University Press 2008

Hann, C. M. & Dunn, Elizabeth. Civil Society: Challenging Western Models. 1st ed. (Published by Routledge 1996), New York, NY,

Kline, Caroline. Feminism and Religion in the 21st Century, 1st ed., New York, NY, Published by Routledge 2014

Leader Biography, President Thomas S. Monson, accessed November 28, 2014, <http://www.mormonnewsroom.org/leader-biographies/president-thomas-s-monson>

McKeever, Bill. Johnson, Eric. Mormonism 101: Examining the Religion or the Latter Day Saints, 1st ed. () Grand Rapids, MI, Published by Baker Books 2000

Neilson, Reid L. Exhibiting Mormonism: The Latter-day Saints and the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, 1st, New York, NY: Published by Oxford University Press, 2011