"Don't Let Us Lose This Memory": American Muslims, American Service

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Abstract

My reflective writing or public speaking often has an accompanying playlist. For this essay, the list features Canadian musician Nancy Reinhold's poignant song, "This Memory", and two songs about Muhammad Ali. Their lyrics underscore points I make as I reflect on the reality of American Muslim life and how Muslims have helped to make America the country that it is, including through service and the arts.

Keywords

memory, arts, song, Muhammad Ali, Muslims, poetry, America

As I made clear in my Presidential Address to the American Academy of Religion in November 2023, I love music. My reflective writing or public speaking often has an accompanying playlist. This essay's soundtrack features Canadian musician Nancy Reinhold's poignant song, "This Memory,"[1] as well as two songs about the Greatest of All Time, the blessed Muhammad Ali. It is also an honor to be included in this collection in tribute to Lucinda Mosher, who is as gifted a musician as she is a scholar.

I went to bed in Los Angeles the night of June 11, 2016, having watched a replay of the funeral of Muhammad Ali. I woke up the next morning to the news of the mass shooting in Orlando. These are the opposite poles of Muslim life in the United States. My latest book, *Muslims and the Making of America*, from where some of this essay is drawn, looks at the reality of American Muslim life and shows how Muslims have helped to make America the country that it is, including through service and the arts.[2] The book reflects not only my own academic work for the past twenty-five years, but my own life as an American Muslim during that time.

[1] About Reinhold's song, more will be said later in this essay.
[2] Amir Hussain, *Muslims and the Making of America* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016).

I was born in Pakistan and came to Canada in 1970 when I was four years old. At that time, there were fewer than 34,000 Muslims in Canada. I grew up in Toronto, educated there from kindergarten to Ph.D. My parents and their generation were not the pioneers of Islam in Canada. The first Canadian census in 1871 (the modern country came into existence in 1867) listed thirteen Muslims. But when my parents came to Toronto, there was only one mosque in the city, and only one small store near that mosque that sold halal meat. One of my mother's oldest friends told me that she met my mother around 1972 when my mother crossed a major city street because she heard this woman and her husband speaking Urdu. My mother was so excited to hear her native tongue from someone that wasn't in her family that she crossed a busy street to talk with strangers. Since then, the number of Muslims in Canada has grown tremendously: by 2001, it was 579,600, and the last Canadian Household Survey in 2011 counted over one million Muslims. Now, one hears Urdu everywhere and there is a Punjabi broadcast of Hockey Night in Canada, something I would have never imagined in 1970.

In those days, when overt racism was more common, I saw very few non-white people on television, and almost no Muslims. The only ones I remember were African American athletes, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, and the Greatest of All Time, Muhammad Ali. Those were my childhood Muslim heroes, and over fifty years later, they remain models for me of how to be a Muslim.

At the age of 32, I moved to Los Angeles where I have lived for almost thirty years. American Muslims, it should be pointed out, are very different from European or Canadian Muslim communities, other places where we are also minorities in a Western context. Canadian Muslims do not have the same history that American Muslims do. So, while there was a small Muslim population in Canada at the end of the 19th century, it was nothing like the number of enslaved Muslims that were present in America generations earlier. There is no comparable component in Canadian Muslim life that resembles African American Muslims, who represent at least one-quarter of American Muslims. African American Muslims, as Americans, have for centuries been part of the history of the United States.

In Europe, the situation is markedly different, both among the Muslim and non-Muslim populations, which each tend to be much more homogeneous than they are in the United States. For example, in Britain the majority of Muslims have their origins in South Asia. In France, Muslims are mostly from North Africa. In Germany, Muslims are usually Turkish or Kurdish. Contrast that with the American situation, where Muslims are equally African American, South Asian, or Middle Eastern (to take only the three largest groups). There are also narrower definitions of what it means to be French or English or German than what it means to be American, which incorporates all those European identities and many others.

There is also a socio-economic difference. In general, American Muslims are an American success story, solidly middle class and mostly professional. There are thousands of American Muslim physicians, for example, perhaps as many as 20,000 if one looks at information from the Islamic Medical Association of North America. European Muslims by contrast are more marginalized, often in a much lower socio-economic class with much higher rates of unemployment. Sometimes, as is often the case in Germany, they are in the status of migrants or guest workers, not citizens.

Finally, there is a difference between American-style secularism, which seeks, not to abolish religion, but rather to give all religions an equal seat at the table, and various kinds of European disestablishment of religion, which seek to make the public space non-religious. In the United States, America's seven million Muslims are free to live out their Islam in the public space. While there are so many American Muslims who do this, none did it better than my childhood hero, the Greatest of All Time.

Muhammad Ali was born Cassius Clay in Louisville and gained national fame when he won a gold medal at the Rome Olympics in 1960 as a light heavyweight boxer. That same year, Clay turned professional, and became known as much for his verbal as well as his boxing skills. The poetry, both literal poetry and athletic prowess, that he and his cornerman Drew Bundini Brown created has had lasting significance in American culture.

In 1964, the 22-year-old Clay, by his own admission, "shook up the world" in his six-round defeat of Sonny Liston, becoming the world heavyweight boxing champion. A few years earlier, Clay had gone to Nation of Islam meetings. There, he met Malcolm X, who as a friend and advisor was part of Clay's entourage for the Liston fight. Clay made his conversion public after the fight and was renamed by Nation of Islam leader Elijah Muhammad as Muhammad Ali. When Malcolm X left the Nation of Islam because of his issues with Elijah Muhammad, Ali broke with his old friend. The relationship between Ali and Malcolm X is explored in the 2020 film by Regina King, *One Night in Miami*. The film presents a fictional account of the real-life conversations that took place between the two men the night that Ali won the title, as well as the conversations that Ali had with Jim Brown and music legend Sam Cooke.

Ali was no saint. He could be cruel, with an arrogance to match his unmatchable skill. He prolonged a fight with Floyd Patterson and, when Ernie Terrell would not call Ali by his new name, kept punishing him for the full fifteen rounds of a fight he could have ended much sooner, repeatedly asking Terrell "what's my name?". However, Ali also had a conscience. When he was reclassified as eligible for induction into the draft for the Vietnam War, Ali refused on the grounds of his new Muslim religious beliefs. Famously, he said that "war is against the teachings of the Holy Koran. I'm not trying to dodge the draft. We are not supposed to take part in no wars unless declared by Allah or the Messenger [Elijah Muhammad]. We don't take part in Christian wars or wars of any unbelievers". Even more famously, reflecting on the racism he had experienced in America, Ali said, "I ain't got no quarrel with them Viet Cong—no Viet Cong ever called me Ni**er." This conscientious objector status *was* rooted in the teachings of the Nation of Islam, and Elijah Muhammad had been jailed for his refusal to enter the draft in WWII.

On April 28, 1967, Ali refused induction into the draft. He was arrested, and his boxing titles were stripped from him. Ali never went to prison, but he couldn't box for over three years. Think about that for a minute. There was Ali, at age 25 and the height of his athletic prowess, three years into his undefeated reign as world heavyweight champion. Ali also might not have faced danger in Vietnam, so it wasn't about any kind of cowardice. Almost a decade earlier, Elvis Presley had been inducted into the United States Army. Elvis refused any kind of privileges with special services, but with no war being waged at that time, he also didn't have to serve on the front line. Elvis was instead assigned to a US Army base in West Germany. The Champ most likely wouldn't have been put on the front lines. He might have been a celebrity, giving

exhibitions for the troops to boost morale. But for him, as a Muslim, as a Black Muslim, the Vietnam War was wrong. In 1967, that was not the popular stance that it is today, and Ali paid dearly, unable to make a living at the trade for which he was eminently qualified, at the peak of his talents.

Ali's case went to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled unanimously on June 28, 1971, to overturn his conviction. The Court did this on a technicality, since the appeal court had never given a reason for why Ali was denied conscientious objector status. But Ali was free, and able to resume his work. For those who aren't familiar with Ali as a civil rights icon, the 2021 documentary by Ken Burns gives details about that part of his story, especially in the first two episodes.

His later boxing history is well-known to sports fans. The loss to Joe Frazier in 1971 (his first professional loss); the loss to Ken Norton in 1973 (fighting the full 12 rounds despite a jaw broken by Norton); the rematch win with Frazier in 1974; the regaining of his heavyweight title later that year against Foreman; the conclusion of the Holy Trinity (fights of the type between Frazier and Ali must be given their proper religious title, and not the more mundane sports title of "trilogy") with his second win against Frazier (what Ali famously called "the closest thing to dying that I know"); becoming the first three-time heavyweight champion in his rematch with Leon Spinks in 1978; and the brutal beat down at the hands of Larry Holmes in 1980 that effectively ended Ali's career as a boxer.

In 1996, Leon Gast did a documentary about the 1974 fight with George Foreman entitled *When We Were Kings*. The film presents both the events of the fight, known in those less enlightened times of the 1970s as "The Rumble in the Jungle," as well as the spectacle around it including an all-star concert headlined by James Brown. The title song for the film was recorded by Brian McKnight and Diana King, and written by Andrew Marvel, Amy Powers, and Arnold Roman.[3] The song speaks to the gifts that Ali brought in elevating those around him:

> …Now is the time, here is the mountain top
> When one man climbs, the rest are lifted up
> With every step we're closer yet
> To a higher destiny . . .[4]

Ali was an American Muslim who changed America. In 1975, he followed Warith Deen Mohammed, who took his father's Nation of Islam into Sunni orthodoxy. He became a proselytizer for Islam, giving out pamphlets inviting others to Islam, autographed so that he knew they would be kept by those who received them. And as people began to see what Ali had done in the 1960s, he became a hero not just for his athletic prowess, but for his work on civil rights. Who can forget in 1996, when the opening ceremonies were held for the Olympics in Atlanta? There was Janet Evans, one of the most decorated American swimmers, the last athlete to hold the torch, who we all thought would light the Olympic cauldron. And there she was, passing the torch to Ali, who held the torch aloft in his right hand, but whose left hand was shaking with

[3] https://www.allmusic.com/album/when-we-were-kings-mw0000085025 (accessed February 29, 2024).
[4] https://genius.com/Brian-mcknight-and-diana-king-when-we-were-kings-lyrics (accessed February 29, 2024).

Parkinson's Syndrome. In the hush of the crowd, it was Ali who would light the cauldron, something that he would repeat at the Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City in 2002.

Ali's funeral showed the outpouring of love and support for him. This was a beloved American hero returning home, a beloved American Muslim. The public funeral was held during the first week of Ramadan, on June 10, 2016, in his hometown of Louisville, Kentucky. The funeral was by Ali's own design an interfaith event, featuring remarks by religious leaders, family members, celebrities, and politicians, concluding with a eulogy from former president Bill Clinton. The service was arranged by my friend Timothy Gianotti, who was the religious advisor to Muhammad Ali and his family. I first met Timothy when we were both graduate students at the University of Toronto, and it was lovely to see the service that he had coordinated after years of working on it with Ali and his family. The service began with a procession through the streets of his hometown that ended with his Muslim burial in the Cave Hill Cemetery. However, the day before, Ali had also had a traditional Muslim funeral service, or *janazah*. At his passing, his body was washed and shrouded and prayed over in accordance with Islamic customs. Muslims across America and around the world were encouraged to hold *janazah* prayers for our deceased Muslim brother.

The *janazah* prayer for Ali was extraordinary, held on June 9, 2016, at the Kentucky Exposition Center in Louisville. This was next to Freedom Hall, where Ali had fought Tunney Hunsaker in his first professional fight on October 29, 1960. I watched the funeral service online from Los Angeles, on a YouTube feed from Fox 10 News, the Fox owned and operated television station in Phoenix, Arizona. The irony was rich. Here was a television station, Fox, not noted for its sympathetic coverage of Muslims, covering live the full Islamic prayer service for Muhammad Ali. On the drive home, I heard part of the Qur'an recitation from the funeral on CBS radio, the first time I ever heard coverage of a Muslim funeral on the recap of the daily news.

The service was led by Imam Zaid Shakir, a noted American imam from California and the co-founder of Zaytuna College, the first accredited Muslim liberal arts college in the United States. The coffin was brought in by pallbearers that included Shaikh Hamza Yusuf (another co-founder of Zaytuna College), and international recording star Yusuf Islam (the former Cat Stevens). Imam Zaid explained to the crowd what would happen, as the *janazah* prayer is unique in that there is no bowing or prostration, only four cycles of prayer where the congregation remains standing. The funeral prayer was performed, followed by a Qur'an recitation and a translation of the words recited by Shaikh Hamza. Then three people were invited to give short sermons to the crowd. They were Sherman Jackson, a professor at the University of Southern California and one of the most important Muslim scholars in the US; Dalia Mogahed, the former director of the Gallup Center for Muslim Studies; and Khadija Sharif-Drinkard, a lawyer who oversees business and legal affairs for the New York offices of Black Entertainment Television (BET). That two of the three were Muslim women (who were also successful businesswomen) was important to show the leadership roles that many American Muslim women have in American society.

Sherman Jackson is one of the most important American Muslim scholars, a mentor and friend for years. Professor Jackson's short sermon was brilliant, and a few lines from it captured the intertwining of American and Muslim identities in the body of Muhammad Ali:

> As a cultural icon, Ali made being Muslim cool. Ali made being Muslim dignified. Ali made being Muslim relevant. And all of this he did in a way that no one could challenge his belongingness to or in this country. Ali put the question of whether a person can be a Muslim and an American to rest. Indeed, he KO'd that question. With his passing, let us hope that that question will now be interred with his precious remains…Ali helped this country move closer to its own ideals. He helped America do and see some things that America was not quite ready to do or see on its own. And, because of Ali's heroic efforts, America is a better place today for all of us. In this regard, Ali belongs not just to the Muslims but to all. Whether you are black, white, Asian or Latino, Jewish, Christian, Muslim or atheist, if you are an American, Ali is part of your history, part of what makes you who you are. Thus, as an American, Ali belongs to you too, and you should be proud of this precious piece of your American heritage and never allow anyone to deny you or disabuse you of your rightful claim to Ali's legacy.[5]

At another funeral service more than fifty years earlier, on February 27, 1965, Ossie Davis gave the eulogy for Malcolm X. There, he famously said, "Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood! This was his meaning to his people. And in honoring him we honor the best in ourselves." Ali, as Professor Jackson pointed out, wasn't just for *his* people, but for all people. If Malcolm was our manhood, then Ali was our humanity, with a life lived for all the world to see. A life lived in complexity and contradiction, triumph and tragedy. A life of change and metamorphosis. A life which gave the lie to F. Scott Fitzgerald's line about there being no second acts in American lives by living out its successful second and third acts. A life which showed us, in the old cliché, that it's not about how many times you get knocked down, but if you get back up, and what you do when you get back up that truly matters. An iconic American life, lived by an iconic American Muslim.

Many people know the song "The Greatest Love of All," made famous by Whitney Houston. Some aren't aware that the song was written about Ali, and first recorded by George Benson for a 1977 film about Ali's life, *The Greatest*. But the lyrics, written by Linda Creed, are clearly about Ali and his impact upon America:

> …I decided long ago
> Never to walk in anyone's shadows
> If I fail, if I succeed
> At least I'll live as I believe
> No matter what they take from me
> They can't take away my dignity…[6]

One often hears talk of "Islam *and* the West" or "Islam *and* America." This brings up an image of two mutually exclusive realities. If we change one simple word, we get instead "Islam *in* the West" or "Islam *in* America." That simple change makes all the difference. Instead of posing two warring factions, "Islam" and "America," we see the reality of their interconnectedness.

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[5] Sherman Jackson, "Dr. Sherman A. Jackson: Muhammad Ali Was A Gift To His People, Religion, Country And Ultimately The World," *Patheos*, https://www.patheos.com/blogs/altmuslim/2016/06/dr-sherman-a-jackson-muhammad-ali-was-a-gift-to-his-people-religion-country-and-ultimately-the-world/ (accessed February 29, 2024).
[6] https://genius.com/Whitney-houston-greatest-love-of-all-lyrics (accessed February 29, 2024).

Islam is, of course, a "Western" religion, sharing deep roots with Judaism and Christianity. Muslims are much closer religiously to Jews and to Christians than we are to "Eastern" religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism. Muslims are also a strong presence in "the West." Islam is the second-largest religion in Canada, Britain, and France, and may well be the second-largest religion in the United States. "Islam in the West" recognizes the entwined heritage of Islam and the West. The West as we know it would not be what it is without the contribution of Muslims. Think quickly of our number system, for example, and ask yourself if it is easier to do multiplication and division with Arabic numbers or with Roman numerals. To be sure, the number system came from India, but it was the Arabs who named it. Yet we often don't see our connections, and people here in America often have a fear or hatred of Muslims.

American Muslims have served in the United States military since the Revolutionary War. There were some 300 Muslim soldiers who served during the American Civil War. That's not a large number, certainly, but it also gives the lie to the oft-repeated claim that Muslims are newcomers to the United States. At the end of 2015, ABC News reported figures from the US Department of Defence that some 5,896 Muslims were serving in the military. That number may be higher, since some 400,000 service members did not self-identify their faith. So almost 6,000 American Muslims serve in the armed forces, helping to defend the country.

In America, we still think of violence as something unique to Muslims, and don't seem to realize the violence around us. Charles Kurzman is a sociologist at the University of North Carolina who studies home grown Muslim terrorism. The numbers are, unfortunately, greater than zero, where they should be. But they are much lower than many people think. For example, in 2015, nineteen Americans were killed in mass shootings by Muslims in America (I will not glorify murderers by naming them): fourteen by the San Bernardino shooters; five by the shooter in Chattanooga. That's fewer than the number of American Veterans who commit suicide each *day* (approximately twenty-two), and about the equivalent of the number of Americans shot in any eight-hour period each day. Unfortunately, that changed in 2016.

On June 12, 2106, not even two days after the funeral of Muhammad Ali, an American Muslim killed 49 people and injured over 50 more in what was to that point the worst mass shooting in the United States. The shooter was known to law enforcement and had been questioned multiple times about ties to terrorism. His ex-wife told the *Washington Post* that he "wasn't a stable person" and that he had beaten her. A former co-worker described him to the *Los Angeles Times* as "angry at the world," as well as being "unhinged and unstable." However, he was still able to legally purchase guns in the week before the shooting.

In a horrific way, the shooter *also* represented America, taking on our worst characteristics as a society. He was homophobic and chose to attack an LGBTQ nightclub during Pride Month. Sadly, LGBTQ Americans are the most likely to be violently attacked in a hate crime. There were reports that the shooter had frequented the nightclub, as well as having a presence on gay dating sites. His ex-wife as well as a classmate thought he might have been gay. So, his homophobia may have emerged out of his own sexual identity, which he may have had to suppress.

He also attacked the nightclub on Latin night, and the majority of those killed or injured were LGBTQ Latinx. Thus, there was a deeper tragedy, of those marginalized for both their ethnicity and their sexuality being the targets that the shooter chose.

He also, as noted above, used guns that he had purchased legally to commit his murders. America's gun deaths are a national disgrace and a national shame. In the ensuing debate over the murders, very few people mentioned that he used the guns that he had purchased for their intended purposes. Assault weapons, by definition, are designed to kill large numbers of people. You can use a rifle to hunt with, or a shotgun or handgun to protect yourself. But the only reason to have an assault weapon is to kill large numbers of people. And yet assault weapons are easily obtainable in the United States, even by a person who had been under the scrutiny of the FBI since 2013.

On a 911 call during the shooting, he pledged his allegiance to the Islamic State. He also posted extremist Islamic statements on Facebook. Clearly, his interpretation of Islam is important here, and this part of his background needs to be investigated. But people belonging to other religious traditions have also committed mass shootings, and homophobia is sadly not unique to Islam. Matthew Shepard, to take only one tragic American example, was not tortured and killed by Al-Qaeda.

American Muslim groups were quick to condemn the shootings (as they always do) and to remind people that their sympathies were with the murdered, not with the shooter. The shootings also caused many Muslims to think about homophobia in their communities, and perhaps to rethink their views on homosexuality.

The day after the murders, my thoughts were to a tragedy more than twenty-five years earlier that brought attention to violence against women in Canada. The Montréal Massacre occurred on December 6, 1989, at the École Polytechnique in Montréal, where another lone gunman killed 14 women and wounded fourteen other people before killing himself. The killer separated men from women, and killed the women because they were "all a bunch of feminists." His suicide note blamed feminists for ruining his life.

In Canada, the National Day of Remembrance and Action on Violence Against Women is commemorated on December 6, the anniversary of the Montréal Massacre. Another eloquent response to the Montréal Massacre comes from the Canadian folk music group, The Wyrd Sisters. In 1992, they released a song entitled "This Memory," written by Nancy Reinhold, one of the group's members.[7] It ended with these heart-wrenching lyrics:

> And it could have been me
> Just as easily…
> Could have been my lover
> Left there to bleed.
> Oh it could have been my father
> Or my brother done the deed.
> Oh no…don't let me lose this memory.

[7] This Memory | The Wyrd Sisters Lyrics, Meaning & Videos (sonichits.com) (accessed February 29, 2024).

And it could have been you
Just as easily…
Could have been your sister
Left there to bleed.
Oh it could have been your father
Or your brother done the deed.
Oh no…don't ever lose this memory.

Don't let us lose this memory…
Because it could've been you or me.

The women were shot because their killer thought they were "feminists," the people in the nightclub because their killer thought they were LGBTQ. Both groups of victims were in what they thought were "safe" spaces, an educational institution and an LGBTQ nightclub, which added to the terror caused by the killers. There is so much work ahead that we need to do, both in Muslim and non-Muslim communities, to make the connections between misogyny, homophobia, and other hate crimes.

Although there are very different degrees and types of observance among American Muslims, I cannot wrap my head around a Muslim who, during Ramadan, would commit mass murder against innocent civilians. But I can see the angry young man who gets a gun and kills people who have done nothing to him except provide convenient targets for his rage. The shooter had anti-social tendencies, like others who carry out "lone wolf" attacks. Joining a "cause" like ISIS may have given him some sort of connection—as twisted as it is—to others, making him feel less of a loner.

Horrific as the shootings were, the worst in American history to that point, they are all too often something that Americans do. It was the sixteenth time that President Obama had to do a public briefing about a mass shooting during his presidency. And he did it from a briefing room named in honour of James Brady, the White House Press Secretary who was shot in 1981 in the assassination attempt on President Ronald Regan.

Just as Muhammad Ali represents our best ideals as a country, the Orlando shooter represents the worst. American Muslims need to live the legacy of Muhammad Ali. We need to continue to stand, as he did, for justice. "Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth," Ali would often say, and we need to not only remember that saying, but to act on it. In this way, we can live out the best of our ideals, both as Americans and as Muslims. Let us not lose these memories.

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