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Brothers at Odds: Rival Islamic Movements in Late Nineteenth Century New York City

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Abstract

In late 1893, the nascent Indian-backed American Islamic Propaganda movement, led by Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, fell into discord. Emin L. Nabakoff and John A. Lant left the movement and formed their own Muslim group, the First Society for the Study of Islam in America. For the next two years the leaders of the bitter rival organizations continued to conduct business. However, they also fought a very public war of words in the newspapers, leveling charges and countercharges against each other's character, integrity, and Islamic legitimacy. The quarrel spread abroad to India and Britain where each side tried to gain supporters and financial patronage. In the end, the constant fighting and suspicions it raised turned most willing financial backers away from both groups. When progress among American Muslims depended on unity, only fractious disarray was present. This essay explores the history of the rivalry and ultimate demise of late nineteenth century Islamic movements in the United States and examines the profound implications of the whole affair for the budding American Muslim community.

Introduction

Research concerning late nineteenth century American Muslim history has been dominated by the study of one central figure, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb. His Indian-backed Islamic mission to America is regarded as the first, and consequently the most significant movement of its time. However, in late 1893, a previously unstudied splinter group arose from Webb's organization to not only defy him, but also cast doubt on his legitimacy in the United States and the greater Muslim world. Led by Emin L. Nabakoff and his assistant, John A. Lant, the First Society for the Study of Islam in America offered an alternative voice for American Muslims. Although Webb undoubtedly held the limelight in the American press, it can be argued that his rivals were more successful in their endeavor to bring Islamic practices to America. This essay will delve into the intertwined history of these two Muslim groups in New York City during the late nineteenth century, specifically addressing the groups' development, leaders, foreign relations, press reaction, and their ultimate failure.

Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb's Islamic mission to America originated in Manila with a signed contract during the spring of 1892, while he was serving as the American consul to the Philippine Islands. The scheme, led by businessmen Hajee Abdulla Arab and Budruddin Abdulla Kur, had support and financial backing in Bombay. The

contract formally named Webb as leader of the “American Islamic Propaganda” and guaranteed him a monthly salary as well as payment for travel and operating expenses. Within six months, Webb resigned his consulship and commenced a five-month journey that would take him on a tour of India, parts of the Middle East, and Liverpool, England. In February 1893, Webb returned to the United States after a five-year absence and set up shop in New York City. The American Islamic Propaganda had several parts, including the Moslem World Publishing Company and American Moslem Brotherhood. The publishing company produced books, pamphlets, and the *Moslem World* newspaper to support the mission. The newspaper was a high-quality 16-page monthly which presented news, editorials, and articles from across the Muslim world. The American Moslem Brotherhood was a loose confederation of study-circles in various cities, such as New York, Brooklyn, Washington, DC, and Baltimore, formed to spur discussions on Islam.

John A. Lant began working for the Moslem World Publishing Company in July 1893, editing articles for the *Moslem World*.¹ Prior to joining Webb, Lant had spent decades as a printer and proprietor of several newspapers, which espoused his radical socialist and Freethought views. At various times he edited the *Toledo Sun*, *The Impending Crisis*, *Labor*, *The Liberator*, and *Record of the Times*. Lant joined with Lewis Masquerier and the Land Reform movement as well as the Knights of Labor. He was also a Comrade in the Grand Army of the Republic, a Civil War veterans' organization, having served honorably with the 23rd Infantry Regiment of Pennsylvania.² Lant and Webb seemed to have developed a genuine respect for one another's work, and both men's families interacted socially. Early in the relationship, Lant wrote to Webb, “If all your friends and inquirers would say a word you would have a great deal more than you could read...I hope you will not give way under the pressure, and will ever be inspired by the importance and benefits to come from your mission. Your task seems audacious and Herculean, but it is a task I am free to admit has its merits even in enlightened America.”³

Emin L. Nabakoff came to New York in August 1893 from Liverpool, England, and quickly joined the ranks of the American Moslem Brotherhood. Russian-born, he was an American citizen by virtue of his residency in Alaska during that territory's transfer to the United States in 1867.⁴ However, prior to coming to New York, he had spent the previous several years in England as an active member within the Liverpool Moslem Institute. In Liverpool, he frequently gave lectures on various Muslim themes and chaired meetings of the Institute. He also served for two years on the Institute's operating committee.⁵

Dissension in the Ranks

The innocuous intersection of these three men in New York in September 1893 belied the rift that would quickly erupt between them. According to Webb, the seeds of dissension took root while he was lecturing away from New York. He accused Nabakoff of stirring up controversy concerning how he ran the American Islamic Propaganda. As well, Webb charged Nabakoff with acting offensively toward the office staff of the *Moslem World*.⁶ Having been entrenched within the Liverpool Moslem Institute for many years, Nabakoff likely saw the conduct of Webb's group as quasi-Islamic at best and vied for change. Up to this point, Webb had introduced hardly any of the formal practices of Islam into his movement. Nabakoff's disgust at the lack of basic Islamic rituals was undoubtedly the controversy to which Webb referred. Nabakoff gained the confidence of Lant during this period, and the fissure within the American Islamic Propaganda widened swiftly thereafter. In October, both Lant and Nabakoff participated in the official opening of a lecture room at the headquarters of the Moslem World Publishing Company.⁷ A month earlier, Nabakoff had been described as a

“good Mussulman” in the *Moslem World*.⁸ Even as late as November, Webb was preparing to send Lant to India as a representative of the Moslem World Publishing Company, stating, “I have full confidence in Mr. Lant and believe him to be reliable and trustworthy in every respect.”⁹ Nonetheless, by early December, Lant and Nabakoff had broken away and established their own rival organization.

Webb gave varying accounts of his falling-out with Lant, none of which were flattering to the latter. Initially, he reported that Lant desired to run the *Moslem World* for a \$25 per week salary, and when Webb refused this request, “Mr. Lant’s interest in Islam began to wane.”¹⁰ In a later report, Webb claimed that the row developed when Lant was caught “prying” into Webb’s desk and reading his personal documents.¹¹ Lant countered, “I used the desk everyday, and carried the keys. The only private papers in it were my own, and these consisted of Webb IOUs to me.”¹² Webb also insinuated that Lant only became interested in Islam after errant newspaper articles reported that Webb had up to one million dollars at his disposal to spread the faith. Defending himself against these charges, Lant published one of the aforementioned IOUs purportedly written by Webb on November 11, 1893, which stated, “I hereby certify that Mr. John A. Lant of Tarrytown, N.Y., has assisted in the editorial and business work of this office since July, 1893, without compensation, and has besides, helped the work with his personal funds to the amount of \$472.74 as per my note to him, and an additional amount of \$30.75 to this date.”¹³ Lant said he was on the verge of giving Webb an additional \$700 for the cause when he left the American Islamic Propaganda.¹⁴ J.H. Livingston, former manager of the advertising department of the *Moslem World*, supported Lant’s claim. Livingstone wrote, “I knew that Mr. Lant advanced money cheerfully to Mr. Webb in his reported necessities and thanks at least were due him for that and for his valuable services for nearly five months, instead of unjust and untrue representations...During the past year Mr. Lant has proven the better Mohammedan of the two.”¹⁵ Initially, it seemed that Lant and Nabakoff were intent to ignore Webb’s movement altogether and simply speak about their new organization, at least until an indignant Webb came forth with his allegations. Webb drew first blood in the press.

Lant was resentful of Webb's charges against him, since he apparently gave much more to the cause than he ever received in return. He later blasted Webb as a “propagandist for pay” who received a salary for his duties and who had squandered the mission’s funds from India.¹⁶ This line of argument spoke to Qur’anic injunctions against receiving one’s livelihood completely from religious work. Later, when Sheik Abdullah Quilliam of Liverpool was reluctantly brought in to the imbroglio, he stated:

I regret to hear of the unfortunate misunderstandings between those in America who have accepted the faith. Personally I consider this way of slandering the brethren which seems to be used as a weapon by some persons to be most improper and un-Islamic and I am also opposed to persons simply preaching on behalf of the cause simply and solely for the purpose of gain, it then becomes simply and solely a matter of profession in order to make a living which was never intended to be part of the Islamic propagation, in fact, over and over again in the Koran you will find the passage ‘I take no reward for this my preaching.’¹⁷

Lant added, “No one receives either pay or glory for such work; he has simply the satisfaction of having done his duty.”¹⁸

Lant never publicly expounded on the exact reasons why he left the group. It likely came about as a result of lingering financial concerns and philosophical differences on how to conduct the missionary efforts. Lant became aware that the American Islamic Propaganda

was rapidly floundering; both he and Webb received letters from India detailing the need to curtail spending.¹⁹ For this reason, the *Moslem World* ceased publication in November 1893. From later statements, it is clear that Webb seemed intent on cutting his ties to Nabakoff rather early in their relationship, but losing Lant appeared unintentional. Lant began to associate with Nabakoff and acted as his assistant when the break occurred. Afterwards, Webb treated both defectors with disdain and held particularly harsh feelings toward Lant. Webb's ever-changing account of the circumstances surrounding Lant's departure appeared to be an offensive strategy to deflect attention from Nabakoff's charges of unorthodoxy within Webb's movement. The splinter group wasted little time before engaging in its own activities that it deemed truly representative of Islam.

The First Society for the Study of Islam in America

At 10 AM on Sunday, December 10, 1893, Emin Nabakoff took an east-facing position at a third-floor window on Union Square; wearing a red fez and sporting an ample beard, he raised both hands to his ears and broke the relative solitude of the square below with bellows of the *adhan* (Muslim call to prayer) in Arabic and English. One reporter described the scene: "So solemnly and with such fervor did he intone the call that all who heard it were deeply impressed with the ceremony."²⁰ Newspapers from across the nation proclaimed this act the first public pronouncement of the *adhan*, outside of exhibition purposes, in the history of America. The *New York Times* wrote, "For the first time in New York's history, cosmopolitan as the city is, the melodious call of the Muezzin, celebrated by every traveler in Mohammedan countries, was heard yesterday morning."²¹ Performance of this simple act, a commonplace event in every Muslim city in the world, represented a major philosophical break with Webb and signified a shot across the bow of the American Islamic Propaganda.

The new organization was named the First Society for the Study of Islam in America, an unsubtle jab at the American Islamic Propaganda's legitimacy. Lant and Nabakoff further distinguished the First Society from the American Islamic Propaganda by claiming it to be "more orthodox."²² They criticized Webb for his failure to integrate the hallmark practices of Islam, such as the *adhan* and prayers, into his movement. However, Webb responded by stating that he had delayed such acts until he was able to formally establish a mosque, and then he ridiculed the First Society's claim of orthodoxy. Webb quipped that the lack of ablutions before the *adhan* and its timing were hardly orthodox, stating, "A call for prayer, made at 10 o'clock in the morning would be considered blasphemous by a true Mussulman."²³ After performance of the *adhan*, visiting foreign Muslims in America for the World's Fair, friends, associates, and the curious alike streamed into the lecture hall to hear Nabakoff's address on "Islam in America," followed by Lant's defense against the charge that Islam is a religion of the sword.²⁴

The following Sunday, the group's second meeting proceeded in line with the first. The two lectures given were "Pecuniary prayer, or alms giving" and "Cleanliness is next to godliness."²⁵ However, near the end of the meeting, an Armenian Christian born in Turkey, Gamaliel K. Davidyan, rose and challenged Nabakoff, who had just answered a question regarding women and Islam. Nabakoff refused to engage him in debate, but this was the first of many confrontations between the two men and their respective followers.²⁶ In response to the question about women in Islam, Nabakoff dedicated the next week's lecture solely to this topic, speaking to a gathering of thirty people on Christmas Eve. He used Qur'anic verses to dispel such notions as Muslims believing that women had no souls and presented a mild defense of polygamy in Islam. Once again Davidyan tried to interject, but Nabakoff shouted

back, “No, sir, this is not a debating society.” Davidyan relented, and the meeting adjourned.²⁷

On the last day of 1893, Nabakoff gave his lecture “Jesus of Nazareth,” and Davidyan, backed by ten additional Armenians, tried to hold an impromptu press conference at the meeting’s conclusion. Nabakoff would have none of it and told him to leave the lecture hall if he wanted to speak.²⁸ Davidyan once again relented, but before the next meeting he procured a lease on the lecture hall starting one half-hour after the Muslims’ meetings ended. The proprietor of the hall stipulated that no disruptions of the Muslim meetings could occur. At the next meeting, Paul Behman, a Persian convert to Christianity, accompanied Davidyan. Although the two men remained relatively quiet during the proceedings, they did not fully restrain their displeasure at Nabakoff’s lecture. At the conclusion of the services, Davidyan caused an uproar when he announced his own meeting for later that afternoon.²⁹

The squabbling continued week after week. On January 21, Nabakoff delivered a lecture on “The progress of Islamism in the United States,” much of which the press dubbed as an attack on “Christian beliefs in unmeasured terms.”³⁰ At the lecture’s conclusion, a former Christian missionary to Persia began arguing with Persian Muslims in the audience, and Paul Behman commandeered the platform before being removed by the hall’s proprietor. Weeks earlier, Webb had commented on Nabakoff’s attacks on Christianity, stating that they were “most reprehensible,” did not represent the views of good Muslims, and were hurting the cause of Islam.³¹ Although Webb was rarely confrontational towards Christianity in general, he often berated Christians and their behavior in the *Moslem World* and in lectures. Lant saw Webb’s kowtowing to the press as the utmost hypocrisy and felt Webb must be in cahoots with Davidyan’s group. Reflecting on this time period, Lant wrote, “We refrained from dispute, from contention, from public scandal, and suddenly left them both [Webb and Davidyan] standing in a glare of light arrayed against the only honest effort yet made to spread the light of Islam in America...A society of earnest souls...have spies come among them secretly to plant confusion in the minds of inquirers assembled in obedience to the call to prayer; and these the emissaries of the paid propaganda misrepresenting their adopted faith in this unbrotherly manner.”³²

Although the meetings generally concluded in a frenzied circus of antagonistic discourse, the First Society for the Study of Islam had by now generated a core of Muslim members as well as people of other faiths interested in Islam. Men such as Mohamed Sadic (from Iran) and Khalil Ibrahim (from Egypt) were contributing constituents, the latter performing the *adhan* on occasion.³³ Early stalwart members included Lant’s associates, Theodore Price and Charles Edwards, as well as Anton Haddad, who later became a leader in the American Baha’i Faith community. Lant also began publishing the First Society’s newspaper the *American Moslem* in January 1894. The paper was published sporadically through most of the year and distributed all over the Muslim world.

Response to the Muslim Quarrel from Home and Abroad

When reports of the split between American Muslims reached abroad, the news discomfited most observers. Webb’s original backers never fully supported either party in the quarrel, hoping instead for reconciliation. Upon hearing the news of the split, Hajee Abdulla Arab wrote to Lant, “[I] am very glad to see that you have also made a firm resolution of propagating the Islam in America. If you and Mr. Webb would conduct this missionary work together, it would I suppose, bring forth a more happy and satisfactory result than what your single, and individual efforts would do.”³⁴ A few weeks later, Arab was displeased with insults that Webb leveled at Lant. He wrote:

As to Mr. Webb's strictures against you, you must not be dejected at heart—our brother Webb is a plain hearted gentleman, and having no sufficient funds at his command he some times loses the presence of mind—but you, through the favor of God, are not so. You are possessed of means and firmness of character. From such a man much can be expected—I trust therefore you will not go against Mr. Webb in matters of religion. In that respect you & him are one and the same, and must therefore work together. Otherwise the Christian missionaries will make capital of this split.³⁵

Budruddin Abdulla Kur, after effusive praise of Lant's missionary efforts and *The American Moslem* newspaper, said, "I would have been very glad to hear had you but continued to offer your valuable services to [the] 'Moslem World'...The funds of the Committee at Bombay under such strained circumstances, cannot pull on two movements at a time, when one of rather old standing has been very scantily fed."³⁶ Finally, even domestic sentiment favored unity. A.L. Rawson, an associate of both Lant and Webb, wrote, "Harmony ought to prevail in the ranks when so much depends on friends to push the good cause in its infancy."³⁷

Despite endless pleas for reconciliation or at least civility among the American Muslims, the war of words only increased in vitriol. The utter disdain for one another expressed by the partisans was apparent in the April/May/June issue of the *American Moslem*, which was almost entirely dedicated to countering Webb's attacks and leveling vicious counter attacks. For example, Lant wrote:

Now that Webb has completely ventilated himself by showing what a perfect Mussulman he is, in vilifying every worker in the cause, and at the same time perfectly his own depravity, let him be dismissed by the application of his own words to himself, that he is one of the most unworthy 'frauds and sycophants' that ever disgraced a good cause. It will cost less for a committee of Moslems to investigate the career and statements of this unfortunate man, than to be longer deceived by employing him to 'bring Islam in disgrace.' This he has already done, and the sooner the Moslems in the East drop him (for he has no following here), the better it will be for the work in America when they come to take it up properly.³⁸

Prior to this tirade, Webb had exposed to the press Lant's prison record on obscenity charges from two decades earlier and near imprisonment in 1892 in a similar case. Back in 1875, Lant had come under investigation by an agent of Anthony Comstock for violation of morality laws, which made it illegal to distribute "obscene" materials. Lant described his paper, the *Toledo Sun*, as "a radical, democratic, humanitarian newspaper, advocating land reform, labor reform and economy and integrity in government, and sincerity of practice in church."³⁹ He was charged and found guilty for selling the paper, which contained various articles found to be "obscene, lewd, lascivious, and wicked." Lant spent 15 months at hard labor in the penitentiary at Albany, New York.⁴⁰ Again in March 1892, Lant was arrested by Comstock in the offices of his paper, the *Record of the Times*, on similar charges. The case went to a hearing, but Lant walked away vindicated.⁴¹

Webb's attempt to discredit Lant aroused the ire of the latter's longtime associates, who saw the Comstock affair as a politically motivated witch-hunt. Webb knew that Lant had more or less been wronged in the case, and he himself despised Comstock's tactics, calling his efforts "blind bigotry." Yet he still tried to use the episode to discredit Lant in the press as a former criminal.⁴² Lant's associate, William Mac Nair expounded on Webb in a letter to

Lant, "I have seen the name of the great prophet before his name, but he is not in my opinion worthy to bear it. You whose I know—gave him the right-hand of Brotherhood has been rewarded with insult and slander. All honor to you and shame upon your unfaithful slanderers."⁴³ Hamid Snow, an Indian confederate, wrote, "The Moslem world now knows that the attempt to equivocate in calling you an 'ex-convict' was a dastardly outrage, for the word, in your case should be synonymous with 'patriot' or 'martyr.'"⁴⁴ Webb's sidelined movement increasingly straddled insolvency and irrelevance. This new reality appeared to have amplified Webb's bitterness toward the leaders of the First Society as well as his desperation, which consequently, emboldened his adversaries both in America and abroad.

The First Society's most fervent support abroad came from Hamid Snow in India and Sheik Abdullah Quilliam in Liverpool. Snow edited a newspaper and acted as minister for the "Church of Islam," an organization comprised mostly of converts to Islam and westernized Muslims based in Secunderabad, India. Quilliam presided over the Liverpool Moslem Institute and had worked with Nabakoff for several years. Snow and Webb had encountered one another in India and neither came away from the meeting impressed. During Webb's tour of India, he became increasingly frustrated with his hosts and Indian customs in general. More than once, he publicly seethed when events were not to his liking. His resultant impatience and often impudent behavior alarmed some of the Indians. However, as he was the only American in a position at the time to bring a mission to the America, they accepted him. Now an alternative appeared in the First Society, and several Indians openly backed them.

Explaining the situation in India, Snow wrote, "The Committee here seems tied to Webb & altho' they distrust him are afraid to now own that they have been deceived or our people here will hold him responsible & they fear political complications. Quilliam writes me clearly that Webb is not to be trusted & gives good reasons...I have suggested to Hajee Abdulla Arab...that if he and Webb effect a reconciliation it should be on the condition that duties should be separated & you have charge of funds." He further wrote, "M'd Webb has also written to Hajee Riazudin Ahmed repenting his conversion, saying that he has lost a lucrative post & is now about [to] starve, Lie! This does not show any delicacy of feeling let alone Islamic spirit."⁴⁵ Hajee Riazudin Ahmed and his colleague Mirza Birjis Kader were influential Indian supporters of Islamic missionary activities in the West. Kader wrote to Lant, "my religionists are forming various opinions regarding the dissension that has taken place between you and Mr. Mahamad Webb. All of the Mohamadans of India feel discontented with the procedure of propagating Islam in America but as for me I pray sincerely daily that God may help you and prosper you in your hard undertaking."⁴⁶ However, Riazudin Ahmed later confided in Snow, "in this dispute between Mr. Lant and Mr. Webb we should not side with either unless we can get a thorough knowledge of the whole affair."⁴⁷ However, Indians did begin taking sides in the quarrel, a concerned Ahmed wrote, "The dissension raging in America should not spread over India as this will give capital for the Church Christians to rejoice."⁴⁸

Beginning of the End

In America, the First Society continued meeting, but by April 1894, attendance was falling. They were forced to end the Sunday meetings due to the disruptions by Davidyan's group, and according to the proprietor of the lecture hall, they had fallen behind in paying rent.⁴⁹ At about this time, Hamid Snow sent a letter to the editor of the *New York World* trying to expose Webb as a fraud. However, he unintentionally drew negative attention upon himself and the First Society. The letter emboldened the *World* to investigate the state of both Islamic

movements. Although Snow thoroughly castigated Webb, Webb in turn excoriated Snow and his American associates in an interview with the *World*. Webb said, "I know this man Hamid Snow, and he is not of the least consequence. He is a half-breed Mussulman, and is running a sort of independent church at Agra Fort. He is out for all the money in sight." He further reminded readers of Lant's run-ins with Comstock and reprised his version of the story of Lant's departure from the American Islamic Propaganda. Webb said of Nabakoff, "He used to be an ice-cream peddler at Brighton, England, and knows no more about the religion of Islam than any other street *fakir*." Furthermore, he related, "When I turned Lant and Nabakoff out of my place they tried to establish a mission in Union Square. They made a failure of that, and now they are trying to injure me in India by writing to persons whose names Lant obtained from my personal papers." He went on to chide them as "leeches," "frauds," and "sycophants." Webb then focused his rage on Sheik Abdullah Quilliam, calling him "a charletan [*sic*] of the worst possible character."⁵⁰ Snow's scheme to expose Webb miserably backfired, giving Webb a voice he had not had in months and leaving him in a sympathetic light.

Throughout this period, Webb continued lecturing in various parts of the country, generating scant coverage in the local press of the towns he visited.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Webb regained his stride by the summer of 1894. He moved into a new headquarters at 30 East 23rd Street and began publishing a four-page newspaper called the *Voice of Islam* in June. This period of rebirth was short-lived. His reconstituted paper and organization suffered a major set back in July when one of the paper's editor, Nafeesa M.T. Keep, locked herself into the group's offices and refused to allow other staff entry. She accused Webb of ruining the American Islamic Propaganda through mismanagement and possible embezzlement of funds. Keep would relinquish the office only if Webb promised to give her control over the *Voice of Islam*. She said, "I want to be rid of him and his begging ways and publish the *Voice of Islam* properly."⁵² Further showing her indignation, she rebuked Webb, asserting, "I was connected with the Prison-Reform Association, and I have been imposed upon by criminals, but for slickness Mahomet Alexander Russell Webb beats all of them."⁵³

According to Keep, Webb owed money to several people, including her. Her friend Eliza A. Arnold had been paying rent on the office spaces since January, even though Webb's name was on the lease. The situation all came to a head when Webb sent out a circular to Muslim countries pleading for more funds. Keep believed Webb's pleas for financial support were dreadful since he had recently purchased a farmhouse in Ulster Park, New York. She was convinced that Webb had used funds from overseas in this transaction, although a later investigation confirmed that his wife used her own funds to purchase the ramshackle farm. Reports that the farm was an opulent resort spread in the press and strengthened Keep's fortitude in her cause. Finally, Keep received warnings from supposed investigators of the Post-Office Department, Comstock Society, and Charities Organization Society that she could be prosecuted for her role in a conspiracy to obtain money under false pretenses in conjunction with Webb's fundraising circular.⁵⁴ When it all became too much for her, she barricaded herself in the offices.

After more than a week, Webb finally broke into the offices and seized the property belonging to the Moslem World Publishing Company. Webb accused Keep of stealing property from the concern, and Keep retaliated by seeking a court order for his arrest on conspiracy charges. Then Keep went to the postal inspectors and tried to get Webb brought up on charges of mail fraud. The authorities never acted on the charges of either party, and Webb removed himself and the Moslem World Publishing Company to his home in Ulster Park. After a brief eviction, Keep returned to the former offices of the Moslem World Publishing Company, Eliza A. Arnold having continued to pay the rent, but this time in Keep's name. Arnold expounded on Webb and Keep, "Mohammed Webb found that the little

lady had come to know too much of the workings of himself and his colleagues, and he was determined to get rid of her.” She then called Keep “the true representative of the Moslem faith on the Western Continent.”⁵⁵ In the end, only the New York newspapers profited from the quarrel, having made capital of the whole affair for several weeks.⁵⁶ Within a few months after Webb removed the offices of the Moslem World Publishing Company to Ulster Park, Lant began renting office space with Keep at the former Moslem World headquarters on East 23rd Street.⁵⁷

In September 1894, Abdullah Quilliam suggested that Lant, Keep, and Nabakoff reorganize and formally request affiliation with the Liverpool Moslem Institute. Quilliam would then correspond with the Indian syndicate that originally funded Webb and ask them to support the newly aligned group instead.⁵⁸ However, differences of opinion about the proposed group arose between Lant and Nabakoff, and no progress toward reorganization occurred for several months. The dispute, described by A.L. Rawson as “trifling differences,” led to the formation of two separate organizations, each headed by a party to the quarrel.⁵⁹ Nabakoff maintained the reigns of the original group, which became the International Moslem Union (American branch) and First Society for the Study of Islam.⁶⁰ Lant teamed up with Rawson to lead the American Moslem Institute. In winter 1895, three separate Muslim organizations conducted business in New York City.

At various times, Quilliam's newspaper the *Crescent* noted both Lant and Nabakoff's groups as being affiliated with the Liverpool Moslem Institute.⁶¹ The American Moslem Institute did not have the infrastructure and membership of the International Moslem Union. Lant and Rawson were the only players in the organization and were never able to muster much support. Beyond announcements that the organization had formed, no notices of events or other news of substance emerged from the group. On the other hand, the International Moslem Union set up shop on the fourth floor at 835 Broadway, including an office, library, and mosque. They held lectures on Sunday at 10 am, 2 pm, and 7:30 pm.⁶²

On January 22, 1895, Nabakoff was nearly killed when a fire broke out in his apartment. He escaped with singed hair but lost nearly all of his possessions, including a Qur'an given to him by the Sultan of Turkey as well as his ubiquitous red fez.⁶³ Undeterred, the International Moslem Union still held a meeting on February 4th, with a reporter from the *New York Times* in attendance. The reporter decried the lack of the usual accoutrements and customs of eastern mosques, such as a *qiblah* (niche indicating direction of Mecca), removing of shoes, sitting on the floor, and Muslim robes.⁶⁴ Still, Nabakoff generated press coverage for his meetings more than a year after breaking away from Webb's group. In February 1895, Quilliam wrote to Lant, “I was sorry to hear of the little breeze with Bro N, which I trust will soon pass over & peace again reign supreme.”⁶⁵ This is precisely what occurred. By April, Lant and Nabakoff had reconciled, and Lant once again appeared in news briefs about the International Moslem Union.⁶⁶ The American Moslem Institute ceased to be mentioned in the *Crescent*. However, after the reconciliation, Rawson noted in a letter to Lant that a British Muslim would be visiting to “open the way” for building a mosque for the American Moslem Institute in New York City.⁶⁷ Nothing ever came of that plan.

Earlier that year, Nafeesa Keep traveled to England and became involved with the Liverpool Moslem Institute. The *Crescent* introduced her alternately as the Secretary of the American Islamic Propaganda and Secretary of the American Muslim Society, likely due to confusion over her past associations and the nebulous state of the two new organizations in New York.⁶⁸ She apparently wanted little to do with Nabakoff and Lant after their differences arose. Quilliam said of her, “She has been so be-fooled by Webb, that she became I feel convinced, suspicious of everyone in American Islamic circles...In New York she would only be the ‘woman who spoiled Webb,’ here she is a representative of American Islam.”⁶⁹ During her stay in Liverpool, she delivered several lectures on Islam and earned an

appointment as assistant superintendent of the Muslim Sunday school.⁷⁰ She never returned to the American Muslim movements.

At the beginning of 1895, Webb restructured his organization once again. He had left New York and set up the headquarters of the Moslem World Publishing Company at his home in Ulster Park, New York. In January, he published the first issue of the consolidated *Moslem World and Voice of Islam* newspaper. He did not use this paper to attack his rivals. Ironically, during the brief squabble between Lant and Nabakoff, Webb mentioned the newly formed groups in his paper, and he remained agreeable toward their prospects. He did, however, refrain from noting the groups' affiliation with either gentlemen. Perhaps he struck a conciliatory tone for the benefit of Islam in America, or maybe his departure from New York City eased tensions enough to mollify the abject bitterness between the men. Regarding the International Moslem Union, he stated, "The fact that organizations, taking Moslem names, are being formed quite numerously in New York, and elsewhere, speaks volumes in favor of our Islamic Propaganda...if its real purpose is to promulgate the truths of Islam we are disposed to give it a cordial welcome to the American Moslem Brotherhood."⁷¹

Webb published his supportive statements, despite a letter from Nabakoff castigating Webb that appeared in the January 1895 issue of the *Crescent*. Nabakoff defended Quilliam's reputation against Webb's accusations of financial improprieties in Liverpool. Nabakoff wrote, "Mr. Webb is the successful author of so many astonishing lies, that it is beyond the capacity of man to hunt them all up. I make it a rule to treat his stories with contempt, but I can't afford a slanderer and backbiter to make mischief between friends."⁷² Webb chose not to respond in kind and spent the remainder of the year publishing his paper, lecturing, and holding occasional meetings of the New York branch of the American Moslem Brotherhood. Increasingly, Webb devoted his limited column space to defending Turkey against charges of ill treatment of the Armenians and other negative characterizations of the Sultan.

As 1895 progressed, few details emerged from the reconstituted International Moslem Union. Precisely this lack of information regarding the group gives evidence of its slow demise. Most significantly, no notices of the group's meetings appeared in New York newspapers or the *Crescent*, although Nabakoff had a letter describing the Muslim concept of the soul published in the *New York Sunday Advertiser* in August.⁷³ As well, Lant lamented the slow progress of introducing Islam in America while referring to the Muslims in Liverpool. He wrote, "May like Moslem bands be found in due time everywhere, even in this great land of ours."⁷⁴ Then, in October, a report emerged that Nabakoff was considering relocating to Atlanta.⁷⁵ The final meeting of the International Moslem Union occurred on December 10, 1895, the second anniversary of the *adhan* given in Union Square. Thirty people attended the meeting, which Nabakoff described as "a happy reunion of old friends. Pledges were given freely to support Islam as a true faith against the world."⁷⁶ Nabakoff's wording indicates that the members had largely dispersed before regrouping for the anniversary meeting.

On December 1, 1895, the *New York Times* published an exposé aptly titled "Fall of Islam in America," detailing the Nawab of Basoda's halfhearted attempt to investigate the use of funds Webb had received from India.⁷⁷ Although the reporter was inaccurate in several of his claims, sensationalized the story, and demeaned the movements at times, he generally summed up the condition of the American Islamic enterprises at the end of 1895. The Nawab never interviewed Webb, and Lant often accompanied him during his stay in New York, which did not speak well for an unbiased investigation of the matter. However, by the end of the article, it was clear that Webb had gained the reporter's sympathy, as had happened when Hamid Snow prodded the *New York World* into investigating Webb in May 1894. Lant refused to make comments about Webb for the story, and the reporter painted him as

something of a beggar. His answers to the reporter's make clear that the First Society was all but defunct.

Webb, on the other hand, was busily publishing his newspaper in the barn of his Ulster Park farm, and the reporter's description of the dilapidated home and grim landscape buried the notion that Webb was living at a resort. The last known issue of the *Moslem World and Voice of Islam* was published two months later in February 1896, exactly three years after Webb commenced his Islamic mission to America. Webb spent two more years in Ulster Park before moving his family to Rutherford, New Jersey. He gave up his mission, but continued to defend Turkey and the Sultan, which in 1901 garnered his appointment as honorary Turkish Consul to New York. Prior to this appointment, Webb assisted with the American celebration of the 25th anniversary of the Sultan Abdul Hamid II's coronation in 1900. He gave the *adhan* at the event and led a prayer for the Sultan's continued health.⁷⁸ In reporting this news, the *Crescent* used a further Islamicized form of his name, Mohammed Iskander Webb, the first time he had been mentioned in the paper in five years. After years of bitterness and distrust, Webb's association with Turkish diplomats re-legitimized Webb in Quilliam's eyes. Webb was mentioned a month later as having arrived in Constantinople on his way to Mecca for a pilgrimage.⁷⁹ Webb continued giving sporadic lectures on Islam and Turkey, but he never embarked on missionary activities again.

After the First Society for the Study of Islam ceased, Nabakoff and Lant continued to defend and promote Islam in America and corresponded with the Liverpool Muslims, albeit with ever-decreasing frequency. In January 1896, the *Crescent* announced that Lant supported forming branches of the International Moslem Union in the major cities of India, which would be affiliated with the Liverpool Moslem Institute.⁸⁰ The following month, the same publication printed a letter from him scolding the American press' reporting on the Armenian crisis in Turkey.⁸¹ As with Webb, Lant went unmentioned in the *Crescent* for many years, until 1900, when Hamid Snow sent a letter to the paper announcing "J. Muhammed Lant" as the first pastor of the American branch of the Church of Islam, Snow's India-based mission.⁸²

The *Crescent* mentioned Nabakoff more than Lant, and despite his continued residence in New York the paper referred to him as a member of the Liverpool Moslem Institute. Nabakoff continued to lecture and debate for the cause of Islam. In April 1897, he debated at the Manhattan Liberal Club in favor of Turkey's position concerning the Greco-Turkish war of the time.⁸³ Later that year, he appeared on the roster of speakers at the Tennessee Centennial Exposition's conference of comparative religions.⁸⁴ The final mention of Nabakoff in the *Crescent* came in January 1898, when it was announced that he was appointed as a Notary Public for the state of New York.⁸⁵

Conclusion

The existence of three Islamic organizations in New York City did not bode well for the cause of American Muslims on the cusp of a new century. Far from indicating a multifaceted, growing community, the development of hostile rival Islamic organizations represented a major setback in creating a sustainable indigenous Muslim presence in the United States. When strength through unity was most needed for the fledgling movement, schisms ruled the day. Charges of unorthodoxy and financial mismanagement notwithstanding, Webb saw the American Islamic Propaganda as his organization, and he intended to run it on his terms no matter the cost. Conversely, Nabakoff and Lant also held to their strong convictions that the movement must be overtly Islamic and that a break with Webb was the only means of establishing "true" Islam in America.

Webb's Indian backers were cognizant that the arrival of the First Society, if not manifestly destructive to the American Islamic Propaganda, was certainly a public relations disaster for the cause both in India and America. The continuous bashing of each side in the Indian and American newspapers so thoroughly undermined confidence in all parties to the quarrel that sources of funding from abroad quickly evaporated. Although Muslims from Eastern Europe and the Middle East were immigrating to America during and after these Islamic organizations were in operation, it would be three decades before other similar indigenous Muslim movements arose. Previous studies of Webb's Propaganda movement have noted financial problems as the main cause of the downfall of his early attempt to bring Islam to America. However, it is clear that enmity, jealousy, and arrogance were just as destructive to the indigenous American Muslims' cause.

NOTES

¹ John A. Lant to Mohammed A.R. Webb, 25 July 1893, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

² From various documents in the John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

³ John A. Lant to Mohammed A.R. Webb, 1 August 1893, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

⁴ "Personals," *Moslem World*, September 1893, p. 9.

⁵ Information concerning Nabakoff's activities within the Liverpool Moslem Institute came from browsing issues of the *Crescent* for 1893 as well as "Nailing Down a Slander," *Crescent*, January 2, 1895, p. 2.

⁶ "Islam in Union Square," *Evening Sun*, December 11, 1893, p. 1.

⁷ "For the Faith of Islam," *New York Times*, October 8, 1893, p. 21.

⁸ "Personals," *Moslem World*, September 1893, p. 9.

⁹ Mohammed A.R. Webb to Messrs. Strong & Trowbridge, 21 October 1893, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

¹⁰ "Islam in Union Square," *Evening Sun*, December 11, 1893, p. 1.

¹¹ "Far India Wants to Know," *New York World*, May 17, 1894, p. 8.

¹² "Who Will Help Him to Deceive, Slander and Falsify, Now," *American Moslem*, April, May, June 1894, p. 4. *The American Moslem*, Vol. 1, No. 4 is available from the Ottoman Archives, Istanbul (Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi, Maruzati. Yildiz Arşivi Sadaret Hususi 309/80).

¹³ "Some Personal Matters that May Prove Interesting," *American Moslem*, April, May, June 1894, p. 1.

¹⁴ "Who Will Help Him to Deceive, Slander and Falsify, Now," *American Moslem*, April, May, June 1894, p. 4.

¹⁵ J.H. Livingston to John A. Lant, 3 December 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

¹⁶ "News Notes," *American Moslem*, April, May, June 1894, p. 2.

¹⁷ Abdullah W.H. Quilliam to John A. Lant, 26 September 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

¹⁸ "Preaching Islam Here," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 11, 1893, p. 8.

¹⁹ Budruddin Abdulla Kur to John A. Lant, 17 December 1893, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. This letter actually arrived after Lant's departure from the American Islamic Propaganda.

²⁰ "Preaching Islam Here," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 11, 1893, p. 8.

²¹ "New York's First Muezzin Call," *New York Times*, December 11, 1893, p. 1.

²² "Moslems Attack Christianity," *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 1893, p. 2.

²³ "Islam in Union Square," *Evening Sun*, December 11, 1893, p. 1.

²⁴ "New York's First Muezzin Call," *New York Times*, December 11, 1893, p. 1; "Preaching Islam Here," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 11, 1893, p. 8.

²⁵ "The Muezzin's Call Not Silenced," *New York Times*, December 18, 1893, p. 1.

²⁶ "Mahometanism and Woman," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 18, 1893, p. 5.

²⁷ "Women in Mahometan Lands," *New York Daily Tribune*, December 25, 1893, p. 3; "The Utility of Polygamy," *Evening Sun*, December 25, 1893, p. 3.

²⁸ "Davidyan Against Nabokoff," *Evening Sun*, January 1, 1894, p. 5. That same week it was announced that a new branch, or Second Society of the Study of Islam, would begin conducting meetings in Brooklyn. It is unclear if the new branch ever met.

²⁹ "Conflict of Two Religious Sects," *Chicago Tribune*, January 8, 1894, p. 1.

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- ³⁰ “Mohammed a Bone of Contention,” *New York Times*, January 22, 1894, p. 5.
- ³¹ “Moslems Attack Christianity,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 1893, p. 2.
- ³² “To the Friends of Islam in the East,” *American Moslem*, April, May, June 1894, p. 1.
- ³³ “Men of Many Religions,” *Evening Sun*, January 15, 1894, p. 3.
- ³⁴ Haji Abdulla Arab to John A. Lant, 5 January 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ³⁵ Hajee Abdulla Arab to John A. Lant, 25 January 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ³⁶ Budruddin Abdulla Kur to John A. Lant, 31 January 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ³⁷ A.R. Rawson to John A. Lant, 15 January 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ³⁸ “Not a Good Word For Anybody,” *American Moslem*, April, May, June 1894, p. 4.
- ³⁹ John A. Lant to Governor Grover Cleveland, undated, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*; and D.R.M. Bennett, *Anthony Comstock: His Career of Cruelty and Crime*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1971, pp. 1023-24.
- ⁴¹ Memoranda of Arrest, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; Hearing Testimony, 14 July 1892, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁴² “Unjust Discrimination,” *Moslem World*, September 1893, p. 12.
- ⁴³ William Mac Nair to John A. Lant, 4 August 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis. Mac Nair was once the Secretary of the local chapter of the Knights of Labor.
- ⁴⁴ “Send us Eastern Teachers,” *American Moslem*, April, May, June 1894, p. 2.
- ⁴⁵ Hamid Snow to John A. Lant, 16 March 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁴⁶ Mirza Birjis Kader to John A. Lant, 16 March 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁴⁷ Riazuddin Ahmed to Hamid Snow, 20 March 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁴⁸ Riazuddin Ahmed to Hamid Snow, 24 November 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁴⁹ Theodore F. Price to John A. Lant, 10 April 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis; “Far India Wants to Know,” *New York World*, May 17, 1895, p. 8.
- ⁵⁰ “Far India Wants to Know,” *New York World*, May 17, 1895, p. 8.
- ⁵¹ “News notes,” *Daily Gazette and Bulletin* (Williams Port, PA), January 8, 1894, p. 5; “‘Mahommed’ Webb Defends Islam,” *Washington Post*, March 9, 1894, p. 6; “Brevities,” *Evening Democrat* (Warren, PA), April 16, 1894, p. 4; “News Notes,” *New York Times*, April 17, 1894, p. 5; “Prohibitionists in Session,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 4, 1894, p. 2.
- ⁵² “Nafeesa Held the Fort,” *New York World*, July 14, 1894, p. 11.
- ⁵³ “Shade of the Prophet!,” *New York World*, July 13, 1894, p. 9.
- ⁵⁴ “Nafeesa Held the Fort,” *New York World*, July 14, 1894, p. 11.
- ⁵⁵ “Mrs. Keep Laughs Best,” *New York World*, August 2, 1894, p. 9. Eliza A. Arnold later reconciled with Webb and served on the Advisory Board of the American Moslem Brotherhood in 1895. “Annual Election,” *Moslem World and Voice of Islam*, April 1895, p. 4.
- ⁵⁶ Accounts of Nafeesa M.T. Keep’s office barricade come from: “Mohammed Webb Buys a Retreat,” *New York Times*, May 29, 1894, p. 9; “Shade of the Prophet!,” *New York World*, July 13, 1894, p. 9; “Nafeesa Held the Fort,” *New York World*, July 14, 1894, p. 11; “Trouble in Islam,” *New York Tribune*, July 14, 1894, p. 12; “Muhammed Webb Locked Out,” *New York Times*, July 14, 1894, p. 5; “Nefeesa Keep Breakfasts,” *New York Times*, July 16, 1894, p. 1; “Mohammed is Now Ahead,” *New York World*, July 24, 1894, p. 3; “War of the Moslems Not Over,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1894, p. 8; “Nefeesa M.T. Keep Retaliates,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1894, p. 9; “Mrs. Keep Laughs Best,” *New York World*, August 2, 1894, p. 9.
- ⁵⁷ John A. Lant to Khalil Ibrahim, November 1894. John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁵⁸ Abdullah W.H. Quilliam to John A. Lant, 26 September 1894, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁵⁹ “The American Moslem Institute,” *Moslem World and Voice of Islam*, January 1895, p. 4.
- ⁶⁰ “Editorial Notes,” *Crescent*, February 6, 1895, p. 1.
- ⁶¹ The American Moslem Institute was referred to as the “Western Branch of the Liverpool Moslem Institute.” “Editorial Notes,” *Crescent*, March 20, 1895, p. 1. On another occasion Nabakoff’s group was mentioned as “our American branch”. “Public Meeting of Our American Branch,” *Crescent*, January 2, 1895, p. 5.
- ⁶² “Editorial Notes,” *Crescent*, February 6, 1895, p. 1.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*

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- ⁶⁴ “A Fourth-Floor Mosque,” *New York Times*, February 4, 1895, p. 8.
- ⁶⁵ Abdullah W.H. Quilliam to John A. Lant, 21 February 1895, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁶⁶ “News Notes,” *Crescent*, May 8, 1895, p. 146.
- ⁶⁷ A.L. Rawson to John A. Lant, 19 April 1895, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁶⁸ “Editorial Notes,” *Crescent*, February 13, 1894, and “Editorial Notes,” *Crescent*, February 20, 1894.
- ⁶⁹ Abdullah W.H. Quilliam to John A. Lant, 21 February 1895, John A. Lant Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.
- ⁷⁰ “Training Up the Rising Generation in Islam,” *Crescent*, May 22, 1895, p. 162.
- ⁷¹ “The American Moslem Institute,” *Moslem World and Voice of Islam*, January 1895, p. 4; “News Notes,” *Moslem World and Voice of Islam*, March 1895, p. 3.
- ⁷² “Nailing Down a Slander,” *Crescent*, January 2, 1895, p. 2.
- ⁷³ Reprinted in “Islam in America,” *Crescent*, August 7, 1895, pp. 86-87.
- ⁷⁴ “What Our Foreign Brothers Think of the Increased Size of Our Journal,” *Crescent*, July 31, 1895, p. 75.
- ⁷⁵ “Answers to Correspondents,” *Crescent*, October 9, 1895, p. 282.
- ⁷⁶ “News From America,” *Crescent*, January 1, 1896, p. 2.
- ⁷⁷ “Fall of Islam in America,” *New York Times*, December 1, 1895, p. 21.
- ⁷⁸ “Rejoicings in the New World in Honour of the Sultan,” *Crescent*, October 10, 1900, p. 229.
- ⁷⁹ “Editorial Notes,” *Crescent*, November 21, 1900, p. 329.
- ⁸⁰ “The International Moslem Union,” *Crescent*, January 22, 1896, p. 469.
- ⁸¹ “The Armenian Fizzle,” *Crescent*, February 19, 1896, p. 541.
- ⁸² “A Voice From India,” *Crescent*, December 26, 1900, p. 407. No other reports could be located concerning the Church of Islam in the United States.
- ⁸³ “A Liverpool Muslim Defends the Faith in New York,” *Crescent*, April 28, 1897, p. 268.
- ⁸⁴ “Henry H. Moore Elected,” *Brooklyn Eagle*, October 15, 1897, p. 7.
- ⁸⁵ “Editorial Notes,” *Crescent*, January 26, 1898, p. 57.