

## DR. AMIR HUSSAIN: MUSLIMS AND THE MAKING OF AMERICA

**JOSHUA HOLO:** Welcome to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast, Torah with a Point of View, produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish Institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, your host and Dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles.

I'm really excited and pleased to be joined by my friend and colleague Amir Hussain. Amir is Professor of Theological Studies at Loyola Marymount University here in Los Angeles and I've had the pleasure of already speaking with him here on a number of occasions. So I look forward to the conversation. Thank you for joining us.

**AMIR HUSSAIN:** Thank you Dean Holo. It's a pleasure to be here at the HUC.

**HOLO:** I've already heard about some of the press you're getting here for your new book *Muslims and the Making of America*. The word in the title that clearly seems to be intending to capture our intention is "Making of America". There's a story here about the place of Muslims in the American story that's clearly counter-intuitive; so unexpected. What's going on with Muslims in the making of America?

**HUSSAIN:** So there's a couple of things there. You know, many people think that Islam is a new religion in America. And there's some truth to that. You know, most Muslims in America, people like me, are immigrants post-1965, you know, with civil rights, with changes to immigration law. But what we forget is that at least 30 maybe 40 percent of American Muslims are African-Americans.

**HOLO:** So allow me to interrupt you there. I think of the word Orthodox Muslims versus Nation of Islam Muslims. So can you break that number down for me?

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely. So almost all of the African American Muslims in this country are what we call traditional Orthodox Sunni Muslims, not members of the Nation of Islam. Many of them may have come through the Nation of Islam, although many didn't. The Nation of Islam still exists under the leadership of Louis Farrakhan. My own sense is maybe 20,000, maybe 30,000, you know, members of the Nation of Islam who follow Farrakhan as compared to a million and a half, at least, African American Sunni Muslims. So the majority of African American Muslims are people who would be, you know, Sunni Muslims. There are some Shi'a Muslims. There is some conversion. It's an interesting phenomenon there of African American Shi'a Muslims. But for the most part, these are people who are Sunni Muslims who may at one time had been associated with the Nation of Islam but left that. And certainly after Elijah Mohammad dies, his son Warith Deen Mohammad sort of changes

the Nation of Islam, brings in the Sunni Orthodoxy which is why Louis Farrakhan kind of starts it up again saying, "Look, you're not doing the teaching of your father."

**HOLO:** Right. Right. It becomes a big issue. I know. That's a huge percentage of Americans. And so that already, simply by virtue of being African American that retrodicts you back to the beginning of the nation.

**HUSSAIN:** And that's really the key here that we think of the slaves that were brought here from Africa to literally help build this country. And we forget that, you know, 10 percent of the West African slaves were Muslim because at that point in time, if you're coming from Mali, if you're coming from Ghana, you've got Muslim empires, Muslim kingdoms in that part of West Africa.

**HOLO:** So we've been speaking about the role of Quran and Quranic learning in Islam. We were just talking about that briefly. Does the fact that there was a significant minority of African slaves coming to this country that were Muslim, does that correlate in any way to literacy?

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely because some of those slaves were literate and so we have stories. For example, one of the earliest narratives that was published in England in 1734, so two years before George Washington is born we have a story written about a Muslim slave, Job bin Solomon, who is freed by his owner in the colonies because he recognizes that this person is literate, can read Arabic. And so it's a wonderful, wonderful kind of story. And of course, there's a suspicion there of slaves who can read and write. So...

**HOLO:** It was quelled in many...

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely. And so you have the sort of oppression of Islam, not just simply because it's a religion other than Christianity, you want your slaves to have the religion of your household, but you also want to have your slaves to be uneducated because if they can start to read they can talk to each other. They can communicate ideas. If they can do it in a language that you can't speak that's even more dangerous.

**HOLO:** Now is there any cohesion that Islam afforded the slaves that non-Muslim slaves didn't have?

**HUSSAIN:** I think so. There's a little bit of, you know, mutual recognition that you find someone who's a Muslim even if it in the simple kinds of things, dietary acts. And you and I spoke about this before. That's one of the reasons I love, as a Muslim, coming to Jewish events, especially here at HUC. Never have to ask about the food. Never have to ask, "Is that a ham sandwich?" I'm going to assume it's a turkey sandwich. You know, that kind of shared connection, the food that you're literally eating, you know, is acceptable, ritually acceptable to you. Certainly some of the language that you may speak, Wolof or another language. You may speak Swahili. You may speak Arabic, but you have some words in common. And there's a sense of connection there.

**HOLO:** Do we have any sense that existing African American Muslims today are actual descendants of Muslims from the slave period?

**HUSSAIN:** We do. And so many of them, of course, had to convert. Many of them had to take on the religion of the household of the master that literally owned them. But some were able to, in secret, preserve their identity. So, again, very similar parallels to let's say medieval Spain with the Conversos where you had to be converted but in secret you could preserve your traditions. The issue becomes, can you preserve those traditions in secret and pass them onto the next generation, or is that lost? And so you see wonderful examples – I was talking about this with Professor Firestone in New Mexico, where you have these families of Jews who – it's been so long since they were (inaudible) ancestry that they don't remember they're Jews anymore, but they do these interesting rituals around Friday night and Saturday and things like that.

So you do see Muslims and there are some Muslim families, particularly in the Carolinas that can trace their lineage back literally back to the slaves that were brought. But that, to be fair, that's a minority. The majority of these slaves were converted. They had to not practice their Islam. And so that's what leads to when Muslims start to immigrate to this country not as slaves but coming in from let's say the Ottoman Empire at the turn of the last century, that's when you start seeing some of these kinds of tensions, you know, between Muslims who were brought in and African Americans who may not know their own traditions and history and sort of give authority to immigrant communities. Where I'm going with this is fascinating in contemporary America that other than a few examples, like what we have here at USC, Sherman Jackson. You know, Professor Jackson is one of the great scholars of Islam, one of the most important Muslim leaders, not just in America, but in the world who happens to be African American. But often times what you have the leadership in mosques, for example, tends to be immigrant Muslims not African American Muslims simply because of that sort of history and tension. Now part of that, and I write about this in the book, is that even though Muslims have been here for centuries since the slave trade, the first mosque that we see like a structure that was built as a mosque and used only as a mosque is only about 100 years old, about 1915. You know, because that goes back to your point, you couldn't in the slave days build a mosque on the plantation. I don't mean to laugh about that but, you know, you could imagine the slave going to the master saying, "Hi Master. We're Muslims. Can we build a mosque on your plantation?"

**HOLO:** Right.

**HUSSAIN:** A couple of centuries later, we have Muslims that go back to the slave trade but we have organizational structures that are just a little over 100 years old.

**HOLO:** Does Islam have some kind of regulation with respect to Muslims trading in Muslim slaves?

**HUSSAIN:** No. And, unfortunately, that was one of the tragedies there that you had some of the people who sold these slaves were Muslims. And they had to do, I think, more with ethnic identities. You know, these were foreigners in their land. Often times African American Muslims when they converted to Islam would talk about the racism in white Christianity and

slave history that kind of thing. Unfortunately, you know, Muslims, particularly some Arab Muslims, particularly some African Muslims were involved in slave trade, who made slaves of fellow Muslims.

**HOLO:** We've spoken about the very, very early strata of non-Native American populations and Muslims are right there. Let's talk about the birth of the republic. In America Jews are passionate – passionate about America for many reasons, for great reasons. Really good reasons that Jews love this country. One of the items of our adoration, if you will, is the letter of George Washington to the Jews of Rhode Island. Now I think in one of the versions of that letter, I'm not an Americanist but I think he cites Jews and maybe he calls them Mohammadans. I'm not sure about that. We should look. Is that the case?

**HUSSAIN:** I don't know. And I don't know that letter. But certainly that was the terms for Muslims then, Mohammadans. That you have, you know, Thomas Jefferson, for example, you know, before this country is this country owning a copy of the Quran, you know, and reading that. Teaching himself Arabic. And Jefferson was pretty good at it, you know, given that he had no tutors. Now, you want to be very clear that Jefferson was no fan of Islam. He had no use for Islam. Didn't like Islam. Don't think he liked Christianity either.

**HOLO:** He was a deist.

**HUSSAIN:** Exactly. But, you know, when you're trying to write something like the Declaration of Independence it helps having a comparative lens through which to do this. And so for him, of course, this is time, which the other great empire, if you will, in the 1700s is of course the Ottoman Empire of Islam.

**HOLO:** Right.

**HUSSAIN:** And so you know about this. So Jefferson gets a copy of the Quran which is in the Library of Congress now, which essentially comes out of Mr. Jefferson's personal library. So you have those kinds of things taking place where there's recognition here. In 1821, when Jefferson's writing his autobiography and he writes about the freedom of religion being extended precisely to the Mohammadan, to the Jew, to the Hindu, to the infidel. You know, this idea that when we're talking about freedom of religion are we talking about freedom of religion just for Christians? Is it the different kinds of Christians have freedom of religion? Jefferson is saying no, this is for everyone, whether you're a Jew, whether you're Muslim.

**HOLO:** That must be the citation then. It's probably not the letter to the Rhode – I'll check it out. But that's right because as enlightenment thinkers they had to test the boundaries of their theory and they were arguing for freedom of religion. Well okay, does that actually mean freedom of religion including the infidel and the – so they go down the list.

**HUSSAIN:** Or does it mean the Quakers and the Baptists and Episcopalians do what they want to do.

**HOLO:** Right, right, right, right. Okay, so regardless of the makeup of the population in the United States or the late colonial the whole idea of America encounters Islam as part of its testing these boundaries that define America.

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely. In good and bad ways too. So, in a negative way if you think, for example, of the modern American Navy, the founding of that navy really connects to the Barbary Coast pirates. You know, you learn at the Marine hymn, I play that sometimes for my students in my Islam class, from the Halls of Montezuma. We all know Halls of Montezuma because we're three hours from the Mexican border.

**HOLO:** Right. Right.

**HUSSAIN:** But the next bit, to the shores of Tripoli. Why is this Marine song talking about Libya? Well, because you had pirates sailing up and down the Barbary Coast. Now they're Somali pirates. We have a Navy to fight the British and the Revolutionary War. Once we defeat the British, we kind of don't need a Navy anymore, except we want to ship our goods. How do we turn a profit as a new country? And the British would essentially pay off the pirates to stop piracy going on. Well, after we defeat the British, the British aren't going to pay off the pirates. They have no interest in helping us. We don't have any money to pay off the pirates. So we have to reconstitute the Navy. And so you look at John Paul Jones, the father of the modern American Navy, made his name fighting in one of the ships against the Barbary Coast pirates. So at the oldest military monument we have in this country, which is now on the grounds of the Naval Academy, carved in 1804, is the monument to the Barbary Coast pirates. So you have that kind of history, that goes on which isn't a positive history. And you...

**HOLO:** Right. But it shapes the contours of the nation with Muslim world.

**HUSSAIN:** But then you have literally the making of America, going back to the first question you asked me, we don't think about the labor the slaves did. How was the South able to build itself? Well through slave labor. After the War of 1812 the White House gets destroyed and it's rebuilt. Who rebuilt it? Well slave labor. Ten percent of those West African slaves are Muslim. So you have Muslims who have been literally helping in the building of what it means to be a country.

**HOLO:** So what's the next, I don't know, major wave of patently recognizably Muslims in America?

**HUSSAIN:** And so what happens then is you have folks in the Ottoman Empire who come out here in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century who come as farmers. They settle in places like Cedar Rapids, Iowa or Ross, North Dakota because they're farmers there and given land.

**HOLO:** Land grants.

**HUSSAIN:** You have a land grant. You open up. You come here and you can open up these parts of America. And so you see mosques in those kinds of places. Like the first mosque that I spoke of, the first mosque that we have evidence for to be built and done as a mosque

is in a little town in Maine that was basically a mill town where there were two mills in the town. And one of the owners went to Albania because he wanted to get workers. Like who are you going to get to work in these factories when you start building these factories in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Who are the kinds of workers that will spend time working in those factories? Henry Ford, for example, in Dearborn. Now this is in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But the same kind of thing, you bring in. Why are there so many Arabs in Dearborn, Michigan? Well a lot of them are brought in to work the Ford plant.

**HOLO:** And when did they come?

**HUSSAIN:** So that would have been at the beginning – literally the beginning of – well beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. So that's in 1915 when this mosque is built. You have a mosque in Ross, North Dakota. You have a mosque in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. And you think, you know, why is it in these places and not in New York? There is a mosque in Brooklyn, but you also have these places because Muslims start coming over as farmers, as itinerant workers doing that kind of thing.

**HOLO:** Is there any mutual aid societies or anything that binds the various Muslim waves of immigration?

**HUSSAIN:** Yes, and what typically happens, it happens more along ethnic lines rather than religious lines. It's not like the solidarity group for Muslims. It's the Albanians coming together saying, "Okay, we're Albanians. We like to eat this kind of food and listen to this kind of music, and speak in this kind of language. Let's get together and help people to do that." With the Ottoman Empire we think of that as Turkish, which it really isn't. You have folks who may be ethnically Kurdish, who may be ethnically Turkish, who may be Slavs, from Albania, from Kosovo. And so they're creating mutual aid societies for themselves. For example, when my parents came to Canada in 1970, very few Pakistanis were there. And so you have this organization of Pakistani Canadians before you have an organization of Muslim Canadians. It's really more about how do you do this kind of support for each other rather than a pan-Islamic thing. That comes a little bit later.

**HOLO:** That comes later. Right. With the Jews, it was both at the same time. It was a negotiation between the – because the Jewish identity is also a national identity of sorts. And it sometimes competes with, sometimes cooperates with the sub-identities, if you will. But it's a similar dynamic. We call them (inaudible). They're groups of origin, mutual aid and what have you. All right. So first of all, Ottoman Jews also came in the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. That's my parents as well. They came in the teens. To avoid conscription in the Ottoman Army which was a rough deal. We're now moving into the industrialization of America as a motivation to bring in workers. It seems like that has a lot to do with this and the Ottoman Empire. I suppose it's cheap labor to bring them over. There's a certain exploitative quality to this as well, even though we're no longer in slavery.

**HUSSAIN:** But it's also a better life, I think. If we look at one of our founding myths of America, it is that we are a nation of immigrants. We came here to make a better life for ourselves than the country of origin. My dad could have been a laborer in Pakistan, but he got a little bit of education going to England as part of the commonwealth to be a mechanic.

And was able to come to Canada and become a mechanic. He actually worked, it's funny enough, for Ford building trucks for 30 years. But it's that kind of life that you can spend your time working. It really is the ability to succeed here in America that, unfortunately, in parts of the Muslim world is cut off to people. In Egypt you can graduate from university and get a degree and be really skilled. But unless your father's an important person who knows people, or unless you have money to buy the officials you're not going to get anywhere in the system. I'm not saying bribery doesn't occur in America, of course it does. But what I'm saying is if you're a smart kid with a university degree, you can do well for yourself here in America in a way that countries of origin you may not be able to.

**HOLO:** Fundamentally there's truth to the myth. The myth that you can pull yourself up by your bootstraps and what have you.

**HUSSAIN:** I'm a professor and my sister's an engineer. Both my parents they have high school education. You know, they're laborers really. But that's this country.

**HOLO:** Right. It's not that uncommon a story. That's right.

**HUSSAIN:** For many Muslims that's the appeal of coming to America. It's not that Muslims hate America or hate democracy. They want this precisely because they may come from places where they don't have this. We talk about a certain presidential candidate who shall not be named saying the elections are rigged. Go to Egypt. That's a rigged election.

**HOLO:** I'll show you a rigged election.

**HUSSAIN:** Where the president wins with 97 percent of the vote. You know, that's clearly a rigged election. We don't have that here.

**HOLO:** No, we're very fortunate. And what's more accessible for us, or cheaper labor for us is still a step up for someone else. And that's an opportunity for America to attract gumption.

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely. And also the idea, and sometimes it's cast in negative terms, assimilation. I don't mean to use it in a negative way. I think it's really powerful kind of a thing because you can come here to America. And you can get into the best university. It's not based on where you came from or what your language is.

**HOLO:** Not anymore.

**HUSSAIN:** It used to be. Exactly. Who your father was, that kind of thing. No absolutely.

**HOLO:** It's a lot better.

**HUSSAIN:** But you have those kinds of opportunities. And I use the university as an example. Anyone's list of the top 10 universities in the world, maybe there's Oxford, maybe there's Cambridge, maybe there's the University of Tokyo, maybe the University of Paris. But at least six of those universities are American universities.

**HOLO:** Because we're attracting talent who want to be able to leverage their talent.

**HUSSAIN:** We're the best in the world at higher education.

**HOLO:** Right. I've adopted an arbitrary idiom to distinguish between negative and positive assimilation. I refer to – because Jews, of course, are very concerned about this as well. I use assimilation as the negative language to mean blending into the point of losing one's particular identity. And acculturation as the positive mode in which one strikes the balance of preserving one's cultural identity and becoming fully integrated into society. The mere fact that acculturation, as I define it, can even take place, the phenomenon itself is at the very least a New World phenomenon I would argue, but certainly an American phenomenon. And that's the balance we're always trying to strike that America allows us to. Other places do too. Canada does in a different way. But other New World countries. I think the Old World's tougher.

**HUSSAIN:** Yeah, absolutely. Where you're still tied into patriarchal terms who your father was, both as the guild you kind of work in this thing because that's what your family does. Or your father's not an important person so you're not going to have any chance of moving up in society. Here – and you're right to point out though that it is historically, within our lifetime, that we see that.

**HOLO:** Yeah, my dad – that's right. That's right.

**HUSSAIN:** Exclusions of Jews not being allowed to this university, or Jews not being allowed to own land in this particular place.

**HOLO:** Exactly. Or buying property in certain neighborhoods. But even in the worst of times it was so much better than the Old World, at least for the religious minorities. I'm not sure about African American. I think it depends on the period.

**HUSSAIN:** No, absolutely. And that's one of the things we don't think about when we think about who are American Muslims we tend to think, perhaps of people like me who come from South Asia or people who are Arab. We forget that at least a quarter of American Muslims are African American. That number may be as high as 40 percent. Let's go with a quarter at least a quarter of us are African American, people who have no doubt about their Americanness who haven't been in another country for 300 years.

**HOLO:** There's no – there's no, right, there's no other language there. So when you go to mosque is it something of a rainbow?

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely. And so one of the things that's really fascinating about going to a mosque is the ethnic diversity. I go to a particular mosque in Culver City. You walk in you'll see African American folks. You'll see South Asian folks. You'll see Arab folks, meaning Middle Eastern, Iranian, kinds of. You'll see white folks there which is really interesting in a way that so many Christian denominations are still very much either racially or ethnically segregated. Where you walk in and you'll see oh this is a Latino congregation. Or this is the sort of, you know, white Methodist group. And the Korean Methodists comes an hour earlier.

And part of that is, again, acculturation assimilation. Do you want to do it in Korean or do you want to do it in English? But part of it becomes why aren't the Korean Methodists hanging out with the American Methodists?

**HOLO:** Right. Is it right to assume that part of Islam's capacity to integrate across the Muslim nationalities, perhaps a bit better than Christianity? Is it right to assume that's because of the fact that it's still a small minority in America? And that there is a certain simultaneity of immigration that a lot of these Muslims, African American notwithstanding, have come within a generation of one another so that everyone is new together?

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely. So I think there's a couple of things going on there. You know, one is just the waves of immigration happening around a particular time. So after '65, after changes to immigration. And that brings in two sort of qualified immigrants. What I mean by that is that if you came in legally you're to meet certain criteria about education and wealth and those kinds of things. So American Muslims in that sense are an American success story. Most of us tend to be doctors, lawyers, engineers, business owners. My family wasn't in the sense of my family being essentially factory...

**HOLO:** Blue collar.

**HUSSAIN:** Exactly. My Muslim friends, their fathers were doctors. Their fathers were business owners, you know, that kind of thing there. And so you have that going on which gives you certain privileges, you know, that you don't have if you're uneducated, if you're not wealthy. But you also see interesting things happening within the last 20, 30 years with refugees. Where you may come in because of let's say civil wars in Somalia or Kosovo. How do you acculturate in a setting that may be very different from yours? So we saw some issues in the last little bit in Minnesota where you've got a fairly large Somali community. The Somalis look different from the white Lutheran folks in Minnesota. And so sometimes that leads to issues that when you see a black face in New York City, you don't think twice. You see a black face in St. Paul, there may be some issues there.

**HOLO:** Or Dearborn.

**HUSSAIN:** But on the other hand, you also have the first Muslim elected to Congress, Keith Ellison, African American from Minnesota.

**HOLO:** I think Jews think two things. I think by and large Jews view ourselves as offering something, as having a lens on the American experience that is worth hearing and knowing and engaging with because we too have a success story in the Jewish American story. We relish it. And we enjoy it. And we want to share it. And that's the best of us and the best of America in our eyes. The second thing we think is that we assume every other minority also has something of its own to offer, to share, to enrich in this tapestry that is America. What should we be looking for from American Islam to be that contribution, that perspective, that gift to the American story?

**HUSSAIN:** I think there are interesting connections between American Jews and American Muslims. And so let me say, not just for me personally, but I think also for Muslims as a

whole, that's one of the things we admire about the Jewish community. Well, the learning. I'm sitting here in your office. Now clearly you're a dean at HUC, but there's lots of books here. What do you associate with the Jewish community? The first thing that comes to my mind is intelligence, knowledge, and creation of knowledge of those kinds of things. That to me is one of the hallmarks of Islamic society. And so you come here precisely because you've got six and eight of the best 10 universities in the world, are here in the United States. So you have someone like an Ahmed Zewail who comes from Egypt to go to Cal Tech and work there, and then eventually wins a Nobel Prize in Chemistry there because Cal Tech's chemistry and physics department is a little better than the physics and chemistry department in Cairo.

I think one of the things you can look to in the same way that we look at the intellectual contribution – by that I don't mean just simply like intellectuals, university folks, but I mean doctors, lawyers, politicians, that kind of thing in the Jewish community. You're starting to see those things happening in the Muslim community in a really interesting way – and this may surprise Jewish listeners looking to the Jewish community as role models. How do you do this because you've had a much longer history, you who are Jewish, of surviving, not just surviving but thriving, as a minority in a country that was often incredibly openly hostile to you as Jews. And so I say this to my students about Islamophobia. I mean sure that's real. Sure that's persecution of Muslims but it's nothing like the anti-Semitism in this country. It's not like the anti-Semitism in this country right now, forget about historically.

And so I think that sense of how do you survive that? How do you build these institutions like an HUC? How do you create opportunities for students to develop and become religious leaders? The Muslim community is just starting to do that now with places like Bayan Claremont or Zaytuna in Hayward but clearly modeled on the Jewish experience here. So I think the sense of this is what it was like for you when you came to this country where you had to prove your Americanness in interesting ways. Joining the Armed Forces, you've got 6,000 Muslims who are in the Armed Forces. A smaller percentage than the Jews but it's starting to increase. How do you show the love of the country? You start peeling back the layers and it's the same kind of thing for the Jewish community. Oh, I didn't know he was Jewish. Well, oh I didn't know he was Muslim. Like I go to my cardiologist. He's a great cardiologist. I had no idea he was a Muslim from Iran until I started talking to him about that kind of thing. American Muslims really are an American success story just as American Jews are at the top levels of education and of income, of being the kind of white collar professionals, the doctors, the lawyers, the engineers, the business owners.

**HOLO:** And though a much newer population in its majority, it comes with a leg up because the Jews came as impoverished peasants basically. We were more literate perhaps than the average peasant in the Old World. But picking up on what you're saying that a lot of the Muslims in America came already wanting to leverage their gifts that they were already able to develop a little bit.

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely.

**HOLO:** So there's real promise here. So I want to close with the following question. I see the potential. I see the promise that you're able to articulate. I think a lot of American non-

Muslims are really, really concerned on the negative side, and hopeful on the positive side that American Islam can shape Islam at large. Because just as we feel Jews and other minorities have something to offer America we feel that the American vision has something to offer the world. Not in a jingoistic way or a colonial way but in a civilizational way, a conversation. American Jews are able to shape Judaism worldwide because we are half of the population, and because we're a success story. Even in the most successful scenario, I don't think Muslims in America are going to approach half of world Islam ever. So that's going to be a harder scenario. But surely there's a way in which American Islam will be able to inflect worldwide Islam, I would argue, probably for the better. How is that going to happen? What's it going to look like?

**HUSSAIN:** Absolutely change things for the better. And of course, that's one of the fundamental differences. If God forbid, all the Jews in America were wiped out there'd only be six million Jews left in the world. If God forbid, all the Muslims in America were wiped out, there'd still be over a billion Muslims left in the world. We're talking about order of magnitude difference there. But you do have, first of all, Muslim thinkers. So, for example, someone like Sherman Jackson here, at UCLA, someone like Khaled Abou El Fadl, people who are recognized around the world. Every so often you get these lists of the 100 most influential Muslims, or the 500 most influential Muslims. And they're American Muslims who are on that list. You have these amazing, creative thinkers about Islam. I think for me the key way in which we as American Muslims can influence the worldwide community is with our experience of being in the minority. And that's a connection with the Jewish tradition that unlike the Jewish experience, the majority of the world's Muslims live in places where they're majorities. It's a Muslim majority place. You can dictate the discourse. But a significant number of us live in places where we're minorities. In India, for example, Muslims make up maybe 12 percent of the population in India, so there's a minority. Except that 12 percent is 130 million because there are so many.

**HOLO:** You have a billion people in the country.

**HUSSAIN:** Exactly. Exactly. You have that kind of thing going on. But what I'm trying to say here is that my experience as a Muslim both in Canada and the U.S. is being a member of a minority where you have to negotiate. You have to have a sense of respect for the religious other because that's who you are. And so I think how do you help the majority Muslim world sort of see from that perspective of being a minority...

**HOLO:** And how to be edified by that experience.

**HUSSAIN:** Exactly. But...

**HOLO:** And minorities see it as an intrinsically edifying experience, a difficult one, by the way, not always easy.

**HUSSAIN:** No, no. But also in the connections so that, you know, I have Jewish teachers, I have Jewish friends, I have Christian teachers and friends. You know, you have a different relationship to Christianity and Judaism than someone in, let's say Pakistan, where you may not know someone who's a Christian. You may not know someone that's Jewish. It's very

easy to be taken in by anti-Semitic kinds of things if you've got – wait a minute, my friend Josh, my friend Reuven, my friend Joanne, you know, I know those folks. They're not like that. Let me talk with them about this. And so I think those kinds of things can help us out. The other part, and we saw this in the beginning of the Iraq war with unfortunate violence intra-Muslim between Sunnis and Shi'as in Iraq. You had some of the most important Muslim leaders from America who happened to be Sunni and Shi'a saying, "No, no, no. We can't do this. You know, there's nothing in Islam that says we have to murder each other."

**HOLO:** In fact, it's not a good...

**HUSSAIN:** The example of America where in the beginning of American Muslim experience, you didn't have the separate Shi'a and Sunni center because you didn't have enough people to do that kind of thing. It's only when you have enough people that you can start breaking off and doing those things. I grew up in Toronto going to a mosque that was built by Albanian Muslims, basically Bosnian Muslims who ran it. And the most qualified person to lead the prayer was a Shi'a guy from Pakistan. And so here I am as a Sunni, praying in a mosque that's built by people who are completely other than my ethnicity, being led in prayer by someone who's a Shi'a and I'm a Sunni.

**HOLO:** And yet you're both Pakistani.

**HUSSAIN:** And you're both Pakistani. Exactly that kind of thing going on. Where I'm going with this is that's where the positive contribution that you can say how can worldwide Islam have these kinds of tensions between, let's say, Sunnis and Shi'a. Forget about tensions, I'm talking about violence that takes place or violence that takes place between Muslims and Christians, as it is unfortunately in Pakistan, or violence unfortunately between Muslims and Jews. How can we as American Muslims help to create understanding of Islam that challenges those kinds of things?

**HOLO:** Well here's to that future then.

**HUSSAIN:** Thank you.

**HOLO:** And the work that we have to do to get there. Thanks a lot for joining me. It was really a pleasure, as always.

**HUSSAIN:** Pleasure to be here. Thank you.

**HOLO:** Take care.

**HOLO:** "You've been listening to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast, produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion. We hope you enjoyed this podcast. And please join us again at [collegetcommons.huc.edu](http://collegetcommons.huc.edu)."

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