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## Putting a Different Face on Islam in America

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR  
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In a class on Islamic history at the Hartford Seminary some years back, the students were discussing a saying ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad that translates roughly as, "Whenever God wants the destruction of a people, he makes a woman their leader."

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James Estrin/The New York Times  
Ingrid Mattson, right, has been elected president of the Islamic Society of North America.

The professor, Ingrid Mattson, suggested that the phrase should be analyzed in its historical context when Islamic societies consisted largely of tribal raiding parties. A male Saudi student contended that all such sayings were sacred and not to be challenged, the argument growing so heated that he stormed out of the classroom. Professor Mattson stood her ground, as was her style.

Now she is challenging convention again. This month, Professor Mattson, a 43-year-old convert, was elected president of the Islamic Society of North America, the largest umbrella organization for Muslim groups in the United States and Canada, making her a prominent voice for a faith ever more under assault by critics who paint it as the main font of terrorism. She is both the first woman and, as a Canadian, the first nonimmigrant to hold the post.

To her supporters, Professor Mattson's selection comes as a significant breakthrough, a chance for North American Muslims to show that they are a diverse, enlightened community with real roots here — and not alien, sexist extremists bent on the destruction of Western civilization. Some naysayers grumble that a woman should not head any Muslim organization because the faith bars women from leading men in congregational prayers, but they are a distinct minority.

"The more Americans see Muslims who speak English with a North American accent, Muslims who were born and raised here, who understand this culture, the more it will cease to be a foreign phenomenon but something local and indigenous," said Mahan Mirza, a [Yale](#) doctoral candidate in Islamic studies who recalled the classroom scene above from the master's program at the Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

At the annual Islamic Society conference in Chicago where her election was officially announced to the thousands of Muslims in attendance, women rushed to have snapshots taken at her side.

"When I see her, I just feel that there is this beam of light on her," said Reem Hassaballa, 30, of Chicago, a teacher and a mother of three. "She is a very good role model. If it can

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happen in a little convention like this, hopefully it could happen in the whole Muslim world. She could be the start of something bigger.” Ms. Mattson sees both pluses and minuses in the fact that her election is being viewed as a watershed. The Islamic Society of North America is a 20,000-member group representing all manner of organizations, from student clubs to professional associations for doctors and lawyers to mosque boards to political activists. Her immediate predecessor was a religious scholar who often wore the flowing white robes and stacked turban of his native Sudan.

“Somehow there is the feeling that someone who is white is safer and less scary,” Professor Mattson said. “But I am who I am. So if there is some social capital that I can use to counteract some of the negative perception and open ears to what we have to say as a community, then that is a benefit.”

A short, trim woman with a quiet manner that belies her authority, Ms. Mattson grew up, by her own description, as a good, middle-class Roman Catholic school girl in Kitchener, Canada, a suburban community about 60 miles southwest of Toronto. She attended a Catholic girls high school and took piano lessons at the convent, spending hours in church praying or contemplating the art. It was a peaceful asylum removed from the raucous household where she was the sixth of seven children.

At 16, though, she stopped attending Mass. “I believe I made a very serious attempt to understand my faith,” she said, repeatedly sitting with her religion teacher to ask questions about Catholicism and spirituality. She found the answers wanting, she said, less and less relevant to her teenage life.

Ms. Mattson enrolled in the nearby University of Waterloo to study philosophy and fine arts, a determined agnostic. In 1986, while studying in Paris, she met her first Muslims, mostly West African students, and was struck by their warmth, dignity and generosity.

Back home, she started to read more books about Islam and took classes in Arabic, which she now speaks fluently. When first delving into the Koran, its explanations of the presence of the creator in the natural world struck a chord. That echoed her own spiritual sentiments developed during summers spent at the family’s 200-year-old cottage on an island in a Canadian lake without running water or a telephone.

In 1987, as a college senior, she converted. “This religious community was giving me the framework for my spiritual experience, and so I entered into it,” she said in an interview.

At first she told only her mother, whom Ms. Mattson describes as a strong, flexible, understanding woman. Her father, a criminal lawyer, had died when she was 12 and her mother had worked in a factory to support the family.

“My mother was confused at first and did not understand it,” she said. The change was eased somewhat by the fact that her oldest sister, Peggy Smith, had converted to Judaism before her marriage.

But her brothers and sisters only found out months later, when she wrote them a letter from overseas. They were mostly concerned, she said, that she had not joined some cult, and vaguely dismayed that her bar-hopping days with them had ended because Islam demands temperance.

Now, Ms. Mattson and Ms. Smith share certain common concerns —like keeping pork off the table at family gatherings.

“Sometimes it’s only the Muslim and the Jew who are eating Christmas dinner with my mother,” Professor Mattson said with a laugh, explaining that her siblings are off with their spouses. Conversation tends to run around family issues rather than comparative religion, she said.

Ms. Mattson’s first exposure to the larger Muslim world came after she graduated from college, when childhood lessons about missionary work inspired her to volunteer to teach Afghan women in a sprawling refugee camp of about 100,000 people in Peshawar,

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Pakistan. There, in what might be called the wild Muslim east, the group later known as the [Taliban](#) barred their women from attending her classes.

“I remember clearly someone pointing a man out to me and saying ‘That’s the brother of the man who killed Anwar Sadat.’” she recalled. “That was freaky. I was thinking, what is going on here, and who are these people?”

But the most important person she met was Amer Aatek, an Egyptian engineer working to install a water system in the camp and playing uncle to numerous orphans. Not long afterward, they were quietly married in her house in Peshawar. When the destitute refugee women learned that there had been neither trousseau nor a banquet, they gave her a party and presented her with a wedding outfit: a red velveteen top and billowing blue silk pants dotted with multicolored pompoms. It was not exactly her style. She is given to headscarves in dark blue or brown with long matching skirts and long-sleeved jackets.

In 1989, she enrolled in the [University of Chicago](#) as a Ph.D. student in early Islamic history. Her husband played the main role in raising their daughter and son during much of the 10 years it took to complete her dissertation, which was based on a line from the Koran that translates as, “A believing slave is better than a nonbelieving free man.”

The idea behind the revelation is that the faithful should ignore social status. Ms. Mattson said she wanted to know why slavery continued although the holy texts discouraged it, ultimately deciding that it was because religious scholars ignored political issues.

“She is one of those people who constantly strives for social justice,” said Wadad Kadi, one of her University of Chicago professors. “She recognized the importance of fundamentally understanding Islamic law and making it relevant to people’s lives.”

In addition to being a professor of Islamic studies at the Hartford Seminary, she directs the program that trains Muslim chaplains for hospitals, universities or the military.

Since her time as a student in Chicago, Professor Mattson has worked with the Islamic Society, which was founded in 1963. She had served as vice president for the past five years, so her election was both anticipated and unopposed. (Not only is the post unpaid, but she also is expected to donate 1 percent of the salary from her paid job to the organization.)

American Muslims generally put their numbers around 6 million but some demographers suggest it might be as little as half that.

Ms. Mattson hopes to focus on Muslim women’s rights and on how the current negative image of Islam will affect the young generation. She is also concerned that the “terrorist” label is being abused — extended too widely against Muslim groups doing charitable work among the Palestinians and elsewhere.

Like other mainstream Muslims, she struggles with how best to convince people that the faith does not condone terrorist violence. She detects what she calls “Muslim fatigue” among North Americans weary both of the extremists who use the religion to justify their attacks and of the moderates who seem powerless to influence them.

“The sense I have from Americans is that they don’t want to hear Muslims talking about Islam anymore,” she said. “They just want us to do something to stop causing all these problems in their lives.”

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