

The DNA of American Islam —

The Impact of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Thought through the Woking Muslim Mission in Reforming Muslim Thought in the USA

Speech by Dr Patrick Bowen

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(*Note:* Dr Patrick Bowen is an academic scholar who specialises in the study of Islam and religious conversion. His Ph.D. thesis looked at the service of the Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement in propagating Islam in the USA.)



I would like to start my speech by offering my gratitude to your community, and to Mr Shahid Aziz in particular, for bringing me here today. Not only am I grateful for the opportunity to speak about an aspect of American Muslim history for which I took great pleasure in discovering, but I have also been very much looking forward to visiting Woking and seeing with my own eyes the city that played such an important role in the development of Islam in the West. And I have felt this way for two reasons.

First is that, when I was a young graduate student just beginning to learn about the early history of Islamic movements in the United States, the Woking Muslim Mission was actually one of the very first — if not the first — international communities that I read about. From my perspective at the time, Woking seemed to be at or near ground zero of the modern movement of Islamic conversions in the West, which burst onto the American religious landscape in the 1920s with the sudden wave of conversions of thousands of African Americans. Since it was my desire to write about this history, I immediately began including the Woking Mission in my research papers and articles. Despite — but really because of my young eagerness to join in the scholarly conversation, I did not at first notice that my American word processing programs did not recognize the word Woking and were frequently auto-“correcting” it to the word “Working.” After a series of patient but clearly irritated teachers and editors pointed this error out to me, I became so deeply embarrassed that the name, and spelling, of Woking became permanently etched in my mind. To this day, in fact, I cannot even write to word “WoRking” without double checking it. So, perhaps at a deep subconscious level, I have travelled over four thousand miles just to try to heal this old emotional trauma from my student days.

But there is another, much more serious and significant reason that I was happy to receive the invitation to this celebration. In some sense this also goes back to my early grad school days, but to a point just after the whole Woking-Working fiasco. At that time, as I continued reading about and doing new research on the development of the history of Islam in the US, Woking faded in importance for me. For the vast majority of scholars on Islam in America, the Woking Mission is at best — when it is mentioned at all — included merely as a piece of trivia and is quickly passed over, even in discussions of American Muslim converts. In my own research, where I of course started with the most cited and most easily accessible questions and source material, I initially found very little that would go against the tendency that had been displayed by previous scholars. And as I have learned over the years, there is some justification for that tendency. Woking was certainly not as central to the American Muslim movement as I had believed in my earliest, naive days. The British links to American conversions in the interwar period were indeed significant, but they were far more complex — in fact Woking’s own relationship with Americans was much more complex, as we will see shortly — than I could have originally comprehended. Nevertheless, although it took several years and a very winding road of research, on which I chased down hundreds of other questions and resources concerning the development of American conversion to Islam, I gained a new, much more profound appreciation for the Woking Mission’s role in the history of Islam in the West.

Although Woking itself was not directly responsible for many American conversions, the publications it produced played a key role in both the dissemination of the knowledge of Islam in America and in the community-building efforts of early American Muslim organizers. This role was subtle, and therefore was understandably missed by my predecessors who were not shining their intellectual flashlights in the same historical shadows as I have been. What I’ve learned, though, is that this role has left an indelible imprint on American Islamic thought. To use a different metaphor, **the Woking Mission is part of the American Muslim DNA.** Now, admittedly for some people this fact is not at all interesting. But for a historian, especially one whose research into the broader history of non-Christian religions in the West has demonstrated to him that such DNA-shaping phenomena are both rare and special, I am genuinely excited to visit the birthplace of this particular historical phenomenon, and to be able to share this little-known, but deeply important history with the very community that produced it.

Now, in discussing this history, I’d like to start by addressing a topic that even I failed to bring fully to light when I wrote my first two books on the history of conversion to Islam in the United States. This topic is Woking’s earliest direct connections with Americans. In January 1922, Woking’s international magazine, the *Islamic Review*, published a short list of recent converts to Islam, and included in it

were two Americans. A Christian reverend, one J.D.W. Ross, who had taken the Muslim name Saifur-Rahman, and one Sadr-ud-Din, whose Christian name was listed as Stewart A. Broad, Jr. The latter's last name may have been a typo, for just a few months later, the *Review* published a piece by an American convert named S.A. Board, with the 'R' as the fourth letter, rather than the second. Now Mr. Board's writing, which was notably included in Woking's important 1961 compilation of conversion narratives, *Islam Our Choice*, revealed that he was an African American who had first learned about Islam in 1920, and by 1921 he was a convert who was linked to the Woking community. This is very much a noteworthy event, for it was really only in 1920 and 1921 that African Americans had started embracing Islam in any significant numbers, and this is probably one of the earliest conversion narratives of such an individual, which places the Woking Mission at the beginning of this incredibly important religious transformation in the modern West. I think it is also worth pointing out that almost thirty years later, in 1949, Mr. Board had another letter published in the *Islamic Review* in which he affirms that after all those years, and despite the prejudice he received from other African Americans who were Christian, he was still a Muslim, and still linked with the Woking community.

What is also noteworthy about Mr. Board's 1922 letter is that he indicated that his interest in Islam was first piqued when he read, not the *Islamic Review*, but a different British publication, the *African Times and Orient Review*. That magazine was published by Duse Muhammad Ali, a prominent British Muslim of African descent, who himself was affiliated with the Woking Mission, and had a personal, if sometimes contentious relationship with Khwaja Kamal-ud-Din. Mr. Ali, interestingly, would soon have a more direct role in the spread of Islam among African Americans. In late 1921 he moved to the United States and by the next year he was an influential figure in the massively popular black nationalist movement led by Marcus Garvey. It was in fact largely because Garvey's influential movement, starting after Mr. Ali had joined it, began promoting Islamic themes that Islam was able to take stable hold in the African American community. Indeed, Muslim missionaries from other groups intentionally exploited this link between Garvey and Islam. And this link, at its core, was an Ahmadi message — one that had been transmitted to Mr. Ali, Mr. Garvey, and to the tens of thousands of black Americans who heard their message: That true Islam does not permit racism and that it has no sectarian divides. Racism and religious factionalism were both issues that had greatly disturbed and harmed African Americans, and for the thousands who embraced Islam in the 1920s — a number previously unparalleled in US history — those two concepts that were promoted by the Woking Mission were central to their choice to embrace Islam. Therefore, in the examples of Woking's subtle, behind-the-scenes part in the American Islamic DNA, this is one of its most important.

In any case, as I've said, the Woking Mission's efforts among African Americans were greatly overshadowed by those of other Muslim communities. And while the later work they did do is important, its outcomes would appear in only subtle ways over the next few decades, until the 1950s, when those outcomes became much more pronounced, as we will see shortly.

For now, though, I would like to focus on the Woking Mission's impact on the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. It was during this period that the Mission made an enormous effort to distribute the *Islamic Review* to American individuals, schools, and libraries. If one examines the magazine's letters to the editor from that period, it will become clear that Americans rich and poor, from college professors to unemployed library dwellers, were grateful to find and receive Woking's flagship publication. Missives poured in from readers who were eager to learn about Islam at a time when hardly a word — let alone an unprejudiced word — could be found about the religion in an accessible source. The timing of all this was fortuitous, for this was a period when American culture was going through a transition. The First World War had awoken Americans to the larger world beyond their country's borders, and the slow but steady growth of Asian-majority religions on US soil had begun eroding old ideas about the unquestioned supremacy of Christianity. Mirza Ghulam Ahmad himself had made small inroads in America years before, and the vestiges of those efforts were still transforming American minds, often in subtle ways, as we will come back to. But it needs to be clear that, in this period, which was before the time of portable audio recordings, Americans who were interested in Islam obtained their information largely through the written word. This was the era that saw the first widespread creation of religious — not just Christian — book clubs, wherein readers could obtain famous holy books, commentaries, and historical works from many non-Christian religions. Works dealing with Islam were still fairly limited, though, and it was largely Woking's publications that helped fill that void. Not only with its magazine, but also with its publication of Maulvi Muhammad Ali's translation of the Holy Quran, which contains the English next to the Arabic — an incredibly useful tool for those who sought to learn the text's language. In terms of quantity, quality, and consistency, no American Muslim organization produced anything like the publications that the Woking Mission had out at that time. If an average American in the 1930s and 1940s wandered into a library wanting to read a publication about Islam by a Muslim, it was more likely than not that he or she would be picking up something from Woking. It was in this way that the core teachings of Woking's message, especially those that would stand out to Americans, such as those around racism and sectarianism, received wide circulation in the country.

Beyond this more diffuse intellectual impact, however, was one of the most surprising, if little-known, developments in the history of American Islam. Since no

other Muslim magazine had as broad a reach and impact as the *Review*, its letters to the editor section became one of the most likely resources for American Muslims and potential converts to learn about Muslims in other parts of the country, which in turn helped bring together various American Muslim convert-focused organizations. The earliest example of this is the case of the white converts in Los Angeles, California, who read about each other in the magazine's 1931 and 1932 issues. By the summer of the latter year, white Muslims in the region who had met each other through the journal began to organize. Then, in the following year, a small, but nationally-focused Muslim organization named the American Islamic Association, which had both immigrants and converts as leaders, used the *Islamic Review* to recruit the West Coast converts into its East Coast-based network.

The American Islamic Association had been indirectly linked to the Woking mosque since the former's founding in 1930. The group had been initially organized as an American branch of the Western Islamic Association, which itself had been established by the British convert Dr. Khalid Sheldrake, an early member of the Woking Mission. In the 1930s, the American group's members had not just letters, but also full articles and advertisements for their writings appear in the *Islamic Review*. The magazine thus became the group's first and only reliable medium for regular communication with a geographically dispersed American audience. Importantly, some members of this audience, like the members of the American Islamic Association, had previously been exposed to a wide variety of Islamic and Sufi practices. The American group, via Sheldrake's (and thus Woking's) influence, had already committed itself to the principles of anti-racism and anti-sectarianism, but the *Review*'s own emphasis on these matters helped facilitate these various Muslims' interactions and eased potential sectarian tensions. In the end, were it not for the Woking mission connecting the Americans who were scattered across the country, the American Islamic Association probably would never have become the first truly national convert-based Muslim organization in the United States.

The emergence of this American Muslim network would become linked with another important organizational development in US Muslim history. Although the links with the Woking Mission were not as direct here, the broader Lahore movement did play a more involved part, and Woking could be said to have helped lay the foundation, so I think it is worth briefly recounting.

By the mid-1930s, the Lahore movement's headquarters not only were in communication with the leaders of the American Islamic Association — communication that presumably had been facilitated by the Woking Mission — but also had an active missionary for their community working in the United States. An African American convert, Saeed Ahmad, who had probably been involved with a number of different

Islamic groups prior to aligning with Lahore, had started convincing several Muslims in the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania region — which was a key hub of Islam in the African American community — to align with the Lahore movement and advocate for non-sectarianism. It is still unclear whether or not Woking's publications played a role in this project, but the results, nevertheless, were significant: The Lahore movement had established a strong foothold in one of America's largest communities of Muslim converts, and its message of non-racism and non-sectarianism began to radiate throughout that community's national network of influence. Meanwhile, although the formal American Islamic Association ceased functioning, its own network of white and immigrant Muslims stayed alive and continued to gain new members, often by way of the *Islamic Review*. The most notable of these was Nadira Osman from New York, a convert who embraced Islam after reading the works of Mirza Ghulam Ahmad and learning of his connections with Alexander Russell Webb, a prominent nineteenth-century white convert who also had communicated with the Ahmadi founder. Soon, Miss Osman was publishing writings in the *Review* and by the 1940s she and former members of the American Islamic Association were connecting with each other, organizing new Islamic institutions, and interacting with Lahore-influenced African Americans in several regions of the country. During the war, some members of the that community were also involved when African Americans with Lahori connections attempted to create the first truly multiracial and national mainstream Islamic organization, the Uniting Islamic Societies of America. Again, emphasis in this group reflected Lahore's — and Woking's — philosophy of non-racism and non-sectarianism. In fact, when certain members challenged this philosophy in the organization, the unifying Lahore view won out. Although the institution had dissolved before 1950, it solidified connections and left an important model and organizational legacies for American Muslims in the ensuing years.

In the late 1940s, the Lahore movement in America received yet another burst of energy when its Indian heads sent an official representative to America's West Coast. Mr Bashir Ahmad Minto soon arrived in San Francisco, California where he incorporated the Moslem Society of the USA and quickly went to work, sending out hundreds of advertisements and letters to local and national periodicals, giving dozens of lectures across the state, distributing Islamic publications to all who were interested, raising money to purchase a building, and corresponding and meeting with hundreds of Muslims and potential converts. With these efforts, he had established the first robust Lahore Ahmadi mission in America, and as a result he had begun winning over to Islam a new class of Americans: college-educated whites. In previous periods, the vast majority of American converts to Islam had not attended college. In most cases, although these people tended to be interested in intellectual subjects like history and philosophy, they had not formally attended a post-secondary institution. But Mr Minto's approach to promoting Islam was able to bring in the college-trained, and at

one school, the well-respected University of Chicago, one of Mr Minto's converts established a college Islamic association, one of the first of its kind in the country. Despite these new development, however, the earlier Lahore connections with Americans were not forgotten, and after Mr Minto left in the mid-1950s, a former member of the American Islamic Association, Muharrem Nadji, was appointed to be the new official representative of the Lahore movement in America.

Mr Minto's efforts may have contributed to another broader development taking place in American Islam in the 1950s, but this development's effects can actually be better observed in the pages of Woking's *Islamic Review*. Postwar America, which was now receiving thousands of Muslim students and immigrants, witnessed an unprecedented surge in Muslim conversion and organization-forming. And since, just as in previous periods, there was still no widely-popular American-based Islamic periodical, the *Review* became the closest alternative to that for American Muslims. Letters and occasionally articles from non-Muslim readers still had a very real presence in the magazine, but what was perhaps its most notable feature was the increase in letters from Muslims of a wide variety of ethnicities, for converts and immigrants alike. One can also observe in its pages that both prominent and small American Muslim communities from across the country were eager to communicate with Woking and with the other readers of the magazine. In addition, mentions of new American converts were becoming almost frequent, and one can see in the *Review*'s letters the strong belief that Islam would be an escape from the racism that had traumatized life for so many Americans.

The largest concentration of new converts seems to have come from the metropolitan area around eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey, on America's East Coast. These particular individuals, notably, were not like most of the other American converts in the *Review*, who were only occasionally communicating with the Woking Mission, while maintaining stronger commitments to American groups. On the contrary, if one reads from that period the Lahore publication *The Light*, there is strong evidence in it that these East Coast converts were often directly and primarily tied to Woking. In fact, it seems that during the 1950s, the Woking Mission was one of the first Muslim groups to make significant inroads among the African American prison population, all while preaching its anti-racist and anti-sectarian message.

This discussion of African American Muslims brings me to the last important piece of history in this story: Woking's connection with the non-orthodox African American group known as the Nation of Islam. In 1958, Woking's imam, Khan Ghulam Rabbani Khan, visited the United States and met with various Muslims, including members of the Nation of Islam. Impressed with the group's disciplined, business-oriented lifestyle and its condemnation of white racism, the imam wrote

several paragraphs praising the group in *The Light*. This led to receiving letters of thanks from multiple Nation Muslims, including its leader, Elijah Muhammad, whose missive appeared in the *Islamic Review* in early 1959. Subsequent to this, a prominent American orthodox Muslim wrote to the *Review* to point out the Nation's many severe divergences from orthodox Islam and, as a result, Woking's imam publicly rejected any affiliation with the group. Now, while it is true that the Nation of Islam's teachings were radically unorthodox, the group did revere the Quran, and had used since its early days Maulvi Muhammad Ali's translation. In fact, despite the reality that orthodox Islamic knowledge never dominated the unorthodox teachings in the movement, it was precisely in the late 1950s when the Nation was more consistently encouraging its members to study Arabic, the Quran, and orthodox Islam generally. It may have been for this reason that the imam believed the group was functioning under a more or less orthodox philosophy.

In any case, the 1960s soon came and everything changed. The Nation of Islam quickly emerged as a mass movement, totally altering and dominating the American Muslim convert landscape, and at the same time American and Saudi Muslim institutions became the dominant forces shaping orthodox Islam in the country — and all of these communities started producing magazines and newspapers that rapidly beat out the *Islamic Review* in the American Muslim market. The Woking Mission's American efforts, for their own part, also began to fade, and even some of its most active American affiliates, such as the former members of the American Islamic Association, were now dying off.

But as I stated at the beginning of this speech, the Woking Muslim Mission is indeed part of the American Muslim DNA. To understand this, we must keep looking at what came next, after the era of the decline and disappearance of the direct Woking influence. First and perhaps most well-known is the transformation of the Nation of Islam and some of its leaders, to align more with orthodox Islam. As I have implied, the Woking-published Quran translation used by Nation members served as the foundation for the movement's increased interest in orthodoxy. When its prominent spokesman Malcolm X famously embraced orthodox Islam in 1964, it was after years of exposure. When, eleven years later, the son of the Nation of Islam's leader, Warith Deen Muhammad, took the helm and began to steer the group towards orthodoxy, as many of you know he was under the influence of a Lahore Ahmadi, Mr Muhammad Abdullah, and again, the Maulvi Muhammad Ali Quran translation was a model for Quranic education. And, finally, when the non-orthodox teachings were later revived by Louis Farrakhan, the new Nation of Islam continued to use, and uses to this day, that same Quran translation.

The Woking Mission's legacy can also be seen in the organizations and philosophies of several other Muslim communities and movements that exist to this day. The rise of the Nation of Islam and new orthodox groups in the 1960s did not completely wipe away the older movements, even if it muted their influence for a time. And because those communities and individuals from the early days were able to survive and in some cases join up with the new organizations, they had considerable wisdom to share and therefore influenced new generations of Muslims. The anti-racist and anti-sectarian philosophy transmitted from Woking had thus been embedded in American Islam's DNA since its earliest surge in the 1920s, and can still be observed nearly a century later.

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