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◆ In March 2015, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio announced that the city would add two new official holiday observances to the school calendar: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. These two celebrations, perhaps unfamiliar to most non-Muslim Americans, are annual rituals for Muslims across the United States and in other parts of the world. New York City is home to a large, thriving, and highly visible population of Muslims. Some of the oldest Muslim communities in the country have roots there, and Mayor de Blasio’s announcement came on the heels of a significant amount of advocacy by Muslim groups that had encouraged the city to move in a policy direction that reflected its diversity.

The decision made by New York City is one of the first of its kind in the country — particularly for a major U.S. city (Philadelphia voted in similar fashion a year later, placing the two Muslim observances on the municipal calendar, thereby affecting all city workers in addition to public school students). It signals a trend toward visibility and accommodation of the broad spectrum of religious pluralism in the American population. In the same way that Christmas, Easter, and other mainstream holiday celebrations are facilitated by time off from work and school, local officials in parts of the country with significant Muslim populations have increasingly begun to consider — and in some cases approve — additional days off to provide the same opportunities for Muslim students, workers, and families.

Muslim religious practice in the United States and across the world is diverse, encompassing an array of racial, ethnic, cultural, national, regional, and internal religious variation — a fact that influences not only the specific occasions that are marked as holidays and times for celebration but also how these special times and occasions are celebrated. Although there are often commonalities across Muslim populations, there are also holy days, special occasions, and traditions that are unique to particular parts of the global Muslim community. Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha represent the two largest, most widely commemorated occasions common to most Muslims throughout the world.

Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha translate as “Festival of Fast-Breaking” and “Festival of Sacrifice,” respectively, and are observed at specific times on the Islamic lunar calendar every year. Eid al-Fitr is the celebration that immediately follows Ramadan, a month-long observance of a daylight fast from food, drink, and sexual activity that occurs during the ninth month on the Islamic calendar. It is considered a sacred time, during which those observing the fast also practice extra charity, participate in special prayers and other acts of worship, and gather regularly with friends and family for communal meals after sundown, when the day’s fasting ends. The end of Ramadan is marked by special communal prayers that mark the occasion, along with gift giving, family gatherings, celebratory foods, and other traditions that reflect the

particular social and cultural influences of the participating Muslims. Eid al-Adha is similarly connected with a special, sacred time of the Islamic year – in this case, the holiday falls on the tenth day of Dhu'l Hijjah (the eleventh month of the Islamic calendar) and coincides with the completion of the annual hajj, or pilgrimage, to Mecca that is undertaken by millions of Muslims from around the world. The rites of hajj are connected to the story of Ibrahim (Abraham), a central figure in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and his family's sacrifice. The holiday is also marked by the ritual sacrifice of certain types of animals (typically goats, sheep, or cattle) by those celebrating, with portions of the meat distributed to the needy and shared with family and community. The Islamic lunar calendar is roughly ten days shorter than the calendar used in Western countries; as a result, these occasions are not fixed on the Gregorian calendar and shift through the seasons.

In addition to these special occasions, there are a number of other holidays observed by Muslims that are less universal but are also important as expressions of Islamic culture and practice. Shi'a or Shiite Muslims, for example, who comprise roughly 10 percent of the global Muslim population and are the majority in countries like Iran, also observe Ashura, which falls in the first month of the Islamic year and commemorates the story of the persecution and death of the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad – a history that is central to Shi'a worship and practice. Additionally, some Muslims mark the beginning of the Islamic New Year with special celebrations, though these are often less elaborate than commemorations of the two Eids. Many Muslims also observe the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad, frequently with shared food and gatherings of poetry and songs that celebrate his life and religious mission. Some of the expressions of Islam unique to the United States have unique observances: The Nation of Islam, or NOI, the African American Islamic movement closely associated with well-known figures Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, for instance, celebrates Saviours' Day in February – an occasion that commemorates the birthday of the organization's founder, Fard Muhammad, and includes a national convention-like gathering and reunion attended by NOI members from around the country. Individual life-transition celebrations are another important feature of Muslim life, and here rich diversity is also displayed: Weddings, the birth of a child, rites of passage, graduations, and other milestones are marked by Muslims in various ways that reflect their religious and cultural backgrounds.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR Donna Auston is an anthropologist, writer, and public intellectual whose body of work focuses on race, ethnicity, gender, religion, protest and social movements, media representation, and Islam in America. When these essays were written in 2019, she was completing her dissertation, an ethnography of Black Muslim activism and spiritual protest in the Black Lives Matter era, at Rutgers University.