

## *Book Reviews*

### **Finding Mecca in America: How Islam is Becoming an American Religion**

*Mucahit Bilici*

*Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012. 257 pages.*

The notion that Islam is “Becoming an American Religion” may be unnerving to those who see America’s roots in its Christian, and more recently Judeo-Christian, heritage. Yet, given the rate of growth and development of American Muslim institutions and social networks, it may be more apt to speak of Islam as part of an American multireligious heritage. In *Finding Mecca in America: How Islam is Becoming an American Religion*, Muchit Bilici explores the rapid increase of American Muslim educational, cultural, religious, and civic institutions, as well as how September 11, the so-called war on terror, and most recently media coverage of the Arab Spring have given American Muslims a unique visibility in the American public sphere.

Bilici demonstrates how multifarious individuals and coalitions have banded together to counter negative public sentiments toward Islam and Muslims, to advocate for legal protections against discrimination, and to help fashion a cultural and religious niche for the community’s faith, practices, and presence. Even as public narratives about Muslims tend to emphasize “elements of chaos, instability, and danger,” sympathetic representations of American Muslims as “next-door neighbors” or “decent Americans struggling for their civil rights and in need of empathy, understanding and respect” are becoming more prevalent in major media venues from National Public Radio to the *New York Times* (p. 3). In turn, Muslims are demonstrating their collective abilities to define authentically American identities through social and political activism, forms of strategic public outreach, even ethnic comedy.

The volume’s first part, “Cultural Settlement,” lays the foundations of Muslim history in the country and focuses on homeland, language, and diaspora as they pertain to the American Muslim habitus in its various formative stages. In particular, the author depicts how indigenous converts and immigrant Muslims “engage in cultural fine-tuning” in order to forge a common

understanding of orthopraxy. Here, he features the example of the *qiblah* controversy, wherein American Muslims from differing ethnic backgrounds and generations moved to a consensus over the “correct” prayer direction. Other such negotiations, including in the sphere of religious law, are also discussed in the context of immigrant Muslims’ naturalization efforts. While Bilici focuses on the Detroit area, his examples span North America.

The volume’s second half, “Citizenship Practices,” which also explores comedy and interfaith relations, is especially attuned to contemporary Muslim identities in post-9/11 North America. While a great deal of literature exists on this topic, Bilici provides provocative accounts of how various Muslim communities and institutions have adapted to their newly visible roles in American society. He explores the critical behind-the-scenes intra-Muslim negotiations and compromises that have been a part of institution building processes. In this regard, the narrative could have been enriched with attention to the roles and contributions of the sizeable communities of American Muslims following the Aga Khan as well as the roles of various Sufi orders in staking out a distinctly American Islam.

Bilici’s compelling overview of Muslim interfaith and intrafaith engagements melds individual vignettes into the larger picture of how Islam in the United States is being molded and depicted as an authentically American and “kindred” religion “with an emphasis on diversity, moral universalism, and toleration” (p. 170). Here, the author makes a key observation about the move to cast Islam as a “generic American religion” through speaking in the civic language of “faith,” which mitigates the “aura of otherness” that has tended to surround Islam (p. 202). Such linguistic moves are part and parcel of the “domestication of Islam” that Bilici describes throughout.

The final chapter, “Funny Jihad: Muslim Comedy Takes Flight,” demonstrates how Muslim comedians work with ethnic and religious prejudices and stereotypes as the butt of their routines, which ultimately seek to have a humanizing effect. For instance, Bilici highlights the work of Zarqa Nawaz, who produced the widely popular Canadian sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and named her production company *FUNDamentalist Films*, as a way to “put the fun back in fundamentalism” (p. 176). Other Muslim comedians, including Dean Obeidallah and Aron Kader of the Axis of Evil comedy tour, have rediscovered their ethnic identities post-9/11. In this context, the author explores how airport and airplane jokes in particular have a universal appeal, “represent[ing] the comic surface where Muslim and American experiences intersect” (p. 182). Meanwhile, the airport itself continues to be a liminal space where American Muslims find themselves “exiting the state” and its legal protections “at a time when they are already excluded from the nation” (p. 182).

This play on inclusions and exclusions from the American communal and cultural fabric is a central concern of the book. For instance in the penultimate chapter, "Seeking Kinship though Abraham," Bilici juxtaposes an ecumenical award ceremony with examples of anti-Muslim libel by various prominent public figures, including evangelical Christian leader Pat Robertson and former deputy undersecretary of defense (Ret.) Lieutenant General William Boykin. Other vignettes included here are Zayed Yasin, the student who in 2006 delivered his Harvard University commencement address – "Of Faith and Citizenship: My American Jihad" – amidst widespread anti-Muslim backlash, and Representative Keith Ellison (DFL-MN), the first Muslim elected to Congress and who used a translation of the Qur'an that once belonged to Thomas Jefferson in the ceremonial photo-op of his swearing-in ceremony.

Bilici's anthropological and sociological approach provides a fresh and inviting portrait of American Muslim life. The volume would not only be an excellent addition to college, university, and public library collections, but also a critical teaching text in college and university courses on Muslims in the United States from anthropological, sociological, or religious studies perspectives. It is also of interest for community activists and those engaged in interreligious dialogue.

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