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### **Book Review**

## **Islamic Values in the United States: A Comparative Study**

*By Yvonne Yazbek Haddad and Adair T. Lummis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, 196 pp.*

In this book, Haddad and Lummis present a scientific analysis of the social and religious values of the Muslim community in North America. The book probes into this community's psyche in an effort to determine

how its members, as a religious minority, cope or fail to cope with particular tenets of their religion while living in a non-Islamic environment. A number of problems and issues are encountered by this minority: marriage, divorce, interest, diet, pets, American holidays, and the roles of the mosque and the imam. The authors attempt to determine the existence of correlations between such variables as length of time in the United States, the extent of dining with non-Muslims, gender, country of origin, and the subject's response to different values. The data was collected from numerous interviews and over three hundred questionnaires at Islamic centers on the east coast, upstate New York, and the midwest.

Despite acknowledging the controversy surrounding the term "American Islam," the authors conclude that this phenomenon does exist in more than one form, depending on nationality, ethnic affiliation, level of education, economic status, and other factors. The findings also show that there are two dynamic, but opposing, scenarios occurring among Muslims in the United States.

On the one hand, we find Muslims who have been in this country for some time. Many are first- and second-generation immigrants who have been more or less assimilated into American society. They try to maintain a relatively low profile about their Islamicity by playing down anything that would make them appear distinctly Muslim. These Muslims perceive Islam as compatible with the basic tenets of American civil religion. They celebrate Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Halloween. Some of them, particularly in the midwest, own bars and liquor stores and enjoy doing so. Many of the younger women wear miniskirts and shorts in hot weather, just like their American counterparts, while a clear majority think that a separate prayer area for women is unnecessary.

On the other hand, the book tells us of newly arrived immigrants who have been regenerated by the resurgence of the worldwide Islamic movement. They come to the United States and are shocked by some of the practices of the resident Muslims. They strongly object to the attempts of these resident Muslims to merge into American culture by changing their names and playing down those elements or customs that set them apart. They also frown upon what they feel is lax behavior in the area of attire.

The relationship and dynamics between these two groups is demonstrated throughout the book. In the midwest, resident Muslims feel that the new immigrants will undo the gains in social acceptance they have achieved. While the new immigrants want the imams to interpret Islam more strictly, the first- and second-generation immigrants fear "foreign" imams who may impose an interpretation of Islam that is different than what they are used to or desire.

Perhaps one of the greatest problems of the ummah as a whole, and particularly for the Muslims in the United States since they come from

a variety of different backgrounds and practices, is the lack of knowledgeable leaders. The authors note this problem by stating that the Muslims of the United States are not producing Islamically educated imams. While outside imams funded by various organizations or governments are normally well-trained in the Qur'an, hadith, Islamic law, and Arabic, they run the risk of not having a neutral base of trust in the mosque. Conversely, imams who rise up from within the local community's membership often lack the Islamic qualifications of their foreign counterparts. As a result, most mosques do not have an Islamically educated imam or, if they have one, they enjoy his services only on a part-time basis.

While many Muslims view the Qur'an and Sunnah as the criterion of truth, the lack of a knowledgeable leadership among Muslims in the United States has caused an individualistic interpretation of Islamic law. The authors state that Muslims in this country have "freedom of choice" in terms of which practices they will or will not follow. Since there are no authorities, anything goes. Imams who do not agree are simply fired.

Judging by the results of this study, it appears that the situation of Muslims in the United States is dismal. The authors note that Muslims have been so successful in assimilating that this process is now a source of concern to some who fear that it may have caused members of the community to lose touch with their knowledge of, and pride in, their Islamic background. This brings us to the larger question of what the future holds for Muslims in the United States. The authors argue that to a large extent, this will depend on the general trend of thought in Islam overseas and the flow of immigrants who will both challenge the current consensus on compromise and help to reformulate it.

*Islamic Values in the United States* is a solid, well-researched, and original piece of work. It is significant not only because it explores relatively virgin territory, but because it does so in an informative and academic manner while at the same time touching on a wide range of issues.

However, as with all research, the authors' work is not value-free. Some of their biases are reflected in their use of terminology. For example, "conservative" and "liberal" are used to distinguish between Muslims that are "more" or "less" committed or "practicing" and "not practicing." Naturally, being "liberal" is equated with being "Americanized," thereby getting the western stamp of approval. "Conservative," on the other hand, is equated with rigidity, fundamentalism, and other popular notions of fanatical Muslims. Other examples of "value-loaded" terminology are references to a) Muslim women cherishing the advances made by their mothers and grandmothers in abandoning the veil and traditional forms of Islamic dress; b) the extreme version of the concern about touching that causes some Muslims to avoid shaking hands with members of the opposite sex; and c) the claim that nationalist Muslims emigrating

to the United States brought a rational interpretation of Islam in which some elements, such as regular prayer and attendance at the mosque, are considered less important than living an ethically responsible life.

Perhaps the biggest problem with *Islamic Values in the United States*, which holds true for much of the research done on Muslims by non-Muslims, is that while their intentions may be pure, the norm (or basis of comparison) no longer is Islam (the Qur'an, hadith and sunnah of the Prophet), but western values. Those who adhere to the tenets of Islam become part of the radical fringe, while those who have become more assimilated are given approval. The result is that Muslims remain in a constant state of confusion as to what is right and what is wrong.

The entire concept of "American Islam" and the idea that there are "Islamic values" particular to the United States as indicated by the book's title should be questioned. If it is true that Islam is a religion for all times, all people, and all places, then how is it that in 1993 there is an Islam especially for Muslims living in the United States, one based on values similar to American values and supported and promoted by the United States as a more "moderate" Islam? Is it fair to argue that Islamic values have changed, or is it more accurate to state that the Muslims living in this country have different levels of knowledge about Islam, which determine their particular interpretation of its tenets?

On the whole, despite certain biases in the collection of data (due to lack of accessibility) and in the terminologies employed, *Islamic Values in the United States* is a very relevant and informative work for both non-Muslims and Muslims. Its importance to non-Muslims lies in the fact that it informs American policymakers that their assimilation policies are working just fine and that they should continue to do exactly as they have been doing to lure Muslims away from their religion. The book is of great value to Muslims because it sets off the alarm. While many Muslims may have suspected that their children were becoming assimilated into American society, this study proves it.

Finally, the book is of great importance to Muslim educators, since it demonstrates the tremendous need for more educational institutions and resource materials, particularly materials directed at first- and second-generation Muslims, in a language that they can comprehend. There is much *da'wah* work that needs to be undertaken among Muslims in the United States, for the authors have merely touched the tip of the iceberg.

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