

Review Article

Literature About Islam in America: A Survey of Source of Information

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Information explosion is a modern phenomenon. This explosion can be seen in all areas of knowledge. In an attempt to keep track of this growth, secondary sources of information have also mushroomed. Each subject field has its own secondary sources of information. For instance, art has *Art Index*, education has *Education Index*, library science has *Library Literature*. Despite these developments in indexing, and despite the progress in interdisciplinary studies, internationally in general and American in particular, literature on Islam and Muslims rarely gets the place it deserves. Sources of secondary information should be scanned to determine how far they cover information on Islam and Muslims. This would help us to understand the importance given to Islam and Muslims by American writers.

A scholar looking for sources of information on Islam in the United States is bound to be disappointed. It is surprising that no exhaustive attempt has as yet been made to gather information on Islam in one place. This despite the fact that Islam has emerged as one of the important religions followed by a substantial number of Americans. In addition, the emergence of the Arab and Gulf nations as important centres of economic power in the world has led many Americans to take an interest in Islam and Muslims. As against the neglect by the Americans, the Europeans have come out with an index of Islamic literature in European languages entitled *Index Islamicus*. This comprehensive work finds no parallel anywhere in the world.

As no attempt has been made yet to bring together all the information about Islam available in the United States, it is necessary to look deep into every book, journal, newspaper, film, and tape, etc. It is both surprising and shocking to note a sordid treatment meted out to literature on Islamic Studies. The population of Muslims in the United States is not so negligible as to warrant such a stepmotherly treatment at the hands of those who are at the helm of

affairs. According to *World Almanac 1987* the Muslim inhabitants in the United States are no less than 2 million, and other estimates put the minimum at twice that.

It is sad to note that even the highly educated in the United States have a very vague idea of Islam and Muslims. They equate Islam with Khumaynī, petro-dollars, oil, and more often than not with Arabs and Arab culture, which may include Arab Christians and Arab Jews. This leads them to think of Islam only in relation to the Gulf war and Arab-Israel conflict. No attempt is made to understand Islamic theology or Islamic philosophy. Regretably, their area of interest is limited to politics alone. Surprisingly if any other aspect of Islam is published it is inadequate, insufficient, and based on fancies more than on facts. In short, the most astonishing misinformation or rather most callous misrepresentation of a religious group is given by these writers.

It is significant to note that a literature survey of ten years in *Humanities Index* and *Social Science Index* – major indexing sources of U.S. periodical literature – under the subject heading Muslims in the United States of America – revealed no articles, and only one book review. It will not be out of place to mention here the failure of authorities to include the information in any American source, viz., indexes, bibliographies, journals, etc., about the proceedings of the First Conference of Muslim Librarians and Information Scientists on “The Organisation and Control of Information for Islamic Research,” held at Purdue University in September, 1982.

Indexing and bibliographical agencies have totally neglected such information. If one cares to think seriously about the possible reasons for this unpardonable and deliberate neglect, one comes to conclude that the information agencies are either ill-informed, biased, or simply not interested in knowing at all. Yet another instance of this bias is visible in furnishing details about the famous, first native Muslim convert, Muḥammad Alexander Russell Webb (1846-1916).

Having failed to find information on Islam in a standard literature search, we will now examine some American reference sources in order to find out what information they furnish on a religion embraced by one-third of world's population.

American Reference Books Annual

This is an annual publication covering descriptive or evaluative reviews on various American reference books. This source fails to take note of the following reference books: 1) C. L. Geddes: *Guide to Reference Books for Islamic Studies*, 1985. 2) O. Khālidī: *Hayderabad State under the Nizams 1724-1948*, 1986. These two mentioned are only a sample. Many others have not been covered.

Sandeen's *American Religion and Philosophy: A Guide to Information Sources*, 1978.

This covers the historical development of religion in America. Of the total 1639 entries, 5 relate to Black Muslims and none to Islam or Muslims in general. It is surprising that neither the content page nor the subject index mentions anything on Islam or on Muslims.

Burr's *Religion in American Life*, 1971.

This source provides 5 general references on Islam and 5 references on Black Muslims, covering both literature in books and journals. This coverage is neither adequate nor proportionate compared to literature covered on other religions.

Ferm's *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1945.

This is a handy volume which gives a brief note on Islam, but strangely provides a "see reference" to the heading, Mohammedanism, for further details on Islam. Both these articles on Islam are written by Paul E. Johnson, who is a Professor of Psychology and History of Religion in Boston University. In this age of micro-specialisation of knowledge, there is no reason why services of generalists are taken for writing on Islam when there are many Islamists and scholars who can contribute more authoritatively on this subject. Such employment of generalists is common in many encyclopaedias where the author is assigned the job of commenting on specialised subjects like Islamic sociology, Islamic politics, and Islamic contribution to Science and Technology. Obviously such authors avoid reaching out to original sources and confine themselves to the works of Western authors whose writings are, more than not, biased.

Burr's *Critical Bibliography of Religion in America*, 1961, 2 v.

The first volume of this book provides a good review under the heading Mohammedanism, though it is short and spread over only three pages. This is one and probably the only bibliography that cites works of the first native convert, Muhammad Alexander Russell Webb. It needs updating.

Gale Research Company's *Encyclopaedia of Associations*, 1985

This is a valuable source of reference for various societies, their addresses, publications, objectives, names of the Chairman, Secretary, etc.

There are in all 17,644 entries, of which only 19 are allotted to Islam, Mohammedanism, and Muslims, although most American cities would have more than this number.

New Schaff Herzog Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge, 1951, 13 v. and Twentieth Century Encyclopaedia of Religious Knowledge, Supplement, 1955, 2 v.

A condensed and modified American encyclopaedia based on German work entitled *Real Encyclopaedia*, is compiled on the lines of *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, 1924-27. 13 v.*

Herzog's source exploited the heading Mohammedanism and not "Islam" and the article spreads across seven pages. This is written by G. Em. Gilmore, formerly Professor of Biblical History and Comparative Religion, Theological Seminar. This encyclopaedia also contains a detailed article on mysticism but takes no note of Islamic sufism.

The supplement of the encyclopaedia provides information of Islam and Sufism. Under these headings, articles are contributed by E. E. Calverly, Professor of Oriental Studies, American University, Egypt, and W. Thomson, Professor of Arabic, Harvard University. This supplement is one of the sources indicating the change in usage of the term Mohammedanism or Muhammedanism to another term, Islam, and Mohammedans to Muslims.

In this supplement we find an article on Muslims in the United States. This article, though brief, covers many details like population count with no exact figures about Muslim societies of New York, Brooklyn, Cincinnati. It is surprising to note that the figures on Muslim population in the United States are vague. A counter check in the *U.S. Census Reports* of the year 1960 reveals that there is no mention of Muslims. It is quite interesting to note that the same source, *Census Report*, gives every detail on the various denominations and sects of Christians in the United States.

Another significant fact about this supplement is that this article is written by a Muslim, Mehmed A. Simsar, Information Specialist, U.S. Information Agency.

Fox's *Religion USA: An Inquiry into Religion and Culture*
by *Way of Time Magazine*, 1971.

This is an interesting study on the place of religion in a news magazine like *Time*. This book is another specimen of wholesale bias and neglect for whatever stands for Islam or Muslims. It gives no hint about Islam in the index. Scanning of pages, as a last resort, revealed only a reference to the angry Muslims at Baghdad against the Secretary of State, as "emissary of imperialism and Zionism."

Gaynor's *Dictionary of Mysticism*, 1953.

This dictionary covers the major religions of the world. As regards Islam, it covers in brief only mystic inclinations of Islam.

Books in Print, 1983-84; Subject guide, v. 2.

This is an annual publication indexing books available in the American market. It is an alphabetical index published in multi volumes, devoting separate volumes for authors, titles, and for subjects.

A survey of the heading "Islam" in one volume of the *subject guide* indicates the following:

Table 1: Writers on Islam (General)

MUSLIMS	OTHERS	TOTAL
64	108	172

Further analysis revealed that there are 235 titles on Islam, which suggests that few of these writers wrote more than one item. In this case study the "see" references to indirect headings for consulting more material are missing. In order to examine the entire coverage of the subject it is necessary to undertake a comprehensive study of the following material: 1) other headings referred to in the same volume, 2) previous volumes of the *Books in Print*, 3) other similar indexing tools, like *Cumulative Book Index*, *American Book Publishing Record*, etc., and 4) other religious literary sources.

Table II: Writers on Islam (Specific Subjects)

MUSLIMS	OTHERS	TOTAL
123	279	402

Table II gives yet another breakdown of writers under the heading Islam (in its details, or by specific subjects). Table I and II both indicate that authors on this subject are predominantly non-Muslims.

Table III: Year of Publication

YEAR	ISLAM (General)	ISLAM (Specific Subjects)
1980	15	33
1981	15	73
1982	17	21

(Contd.)

Table III: Year of Publication (Contd.)

YEAR	ISLAM (General)	ISLAM (Specific Subjects)
1983	1	—
Date Due	3	2
Reprints	12	10
Undated	28	102
	91	241

Table III is only a representative sample of the publications covered in the subject guide, reflecting an analysis of the subject coverage during a four year period. Of these four years, 1981 has the most titles. In this connection it is relevant to note the various types of publications that find place in *Books in Print*, viz in print, date due, and reprints.

Date due refers to titles announced to have been published but price and date of release are not indicated. Reprints include all the old books reprinted, irrespective of the date or time gap of the earlier printing. The variety of material therefore creates problems for acquisition and bibliographic control.

Further studies can be carried out in the above source to find out the following: 1) geographical coverage: i.e., which states in the United States have more publications and which have less and which have none, 2) periodicity: how many books of the same publisher or same author appear in a given time span, how often books are released on the subjects, and what is the time gap — from the date of publication to the indexing date; and 3) a comparison of coverage on the subject in *Books in Print* (BIP) vs. *Book Review Digest*, or BIP vs. *Cumulative Book Digest*, or BIP vs. *Library of Congress Union Catalogue*, etc.

Information on any subject is found scattered in sources relevant and irrelevant. For instance, information on Islam may be located directly in Islamic literature as well as in publications of other religions, and even in anti-religious sources.

Analysis of indexes and other reference sources reveals a lack of proper bibliographical control of literature on Islam. If a topic is not indicated in the content page and the index, the user is sure to miss it. Ignorance by an individual author is excusable. But where agencies and institutions are responsible for works, their negligence is deplorable.

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