

**Book Review of *A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World*
Order by Kambiz GhaneaBassiri**

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Kambiz GhaneaBassiri's *A History of Islam in America* is perhaps the most comprehensive take on the history of Islam in America. What makes this book unique is that it is the first of its kind to offer a *relational* understanding of how Muslims in America developed their religious practices and institutions. While much of prior scholarship has focused on analyzing 'Muslims in the West' and viewing them as outsiders in a new land, GhaneaBassiri situates how this evolution occurred, using the prevalent categories in American society: race, ethnicity, and religion to frame the discourse of Islam in America.

In the eight chapters that form the book, GhaneaBassiri offers a detailed and chronological perspective of Muslim life, institutions, and beliefs. While acknowledging Muslim self-representation as witnessed in popular culture, GhaneaBassiri offers a more scholarly and analytical perspective that goes beyond the first-impressions and anecdotal perspective often portrayed. He argues that focusing primarily on self-representation often leads to a situation where 'Islam and America [are] reified, mutually exclusive categories.'¹ Furthermore, he suggests that focusing only on American Muslim voices devalues Protestant, Jewish, and other voices that have helped shape the phenomenon of Islam in America. The organizing principle of this book is that American Muslim history is a history of Muslim and non-Muslim American encounters and exchanges. These encounters highlight how Islam and the "West," far from being mutually exclusive categories, are lived traditions that have been varyingly thought and re-thought in relation to one another and to their respective historical contexts.

Given the enormous diversity found within the American Muslim population, no single narrative can capture the varying experiences of American Muslims. As GhaneaBassiri writes, "Muslims who found themselves in this country whether as slaves, immigrants, or converts have had to define themselves and to interpret their varying religious undertakings and practices in relation to the dominant laws, conceptions of religion, and political and cultural structures that have shaped American society through the years."²

In Chapter 1, GhaneaBassiri argues that Native Americans, Moors, and Black African slaves played an important role in shaping this part of the world, and they did so not just as involuntary laborers or conquered peoples but also as independent actors, working within their means to survive in a rapidly globalizing world. They in some ways defined the confluences of forces that shaped American Islam.

In chapter 2, he points out that nearly all sources for early history of Islam in America came from white, American protestants who knew little about Islam or by Muslim converts to Christianity who were writing for a European or American Protestant audience. With one notable exception, none of these sources expressed interest in the practice of Islam in colonial or antebellum America.

¹ Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, *A History of Islam in America*, (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 7.

² Ibid, p.3.

Also in this chapter, GhaneaBassiri maps the evolution of Muslim practices, including *sadaqa*, *salat* and other key elements of Muslim faith that have survived to this day. GhaneaBassiri remarks that the local acts of worship that American Muslims performed, knowing fully well that others around the world were performing these acts, connected them to the global *Ummah*.

In Chapter 3, GhaneaBassiri talks about the challenges, such as racism, that foreign-born Muslims faced in the U.S. Even the Anglo-American convert, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, faced challenges propagating “his message to the predominantly Protestant masses.”³ As someone who studies Muslim institutions, I found chapter 2 and the chapter 3 particularly interesting.

The following chapter builds on this theme to show how Muslims in America overcame challenges to immigration. GhaneaBassiri suggests that in the early 20th century, ethnicity played a greater role than Islam “in shaping their sense of national belonging and their representation of themselves on the national stage.”⁴ In Chapter 5, GhaneaBassiri argues that the sojourner mentality of earlier Muslims – often from the Levant or Africa, who came here to earn money and eventually return to their origin countries – gradually changed into a ‘settler’ mentality. This was a significant shift, he argues, given that it marked a turning point in how Muslims would come to see themselves in their new home country.

Chapters 6 through 8 cover the more recent history of how Muslim institutions have adapted to the post-colonial world. In Chapter 6, GhaneaBassiri maps out the evolution of Muslim institutions post-World War II, a period of rapid growth and expansion of American influence. Also, in 1965, with the passage of the Hart-Cellar Act, there was increased migration from Asia and Africa. This led to the demographic composition of the country we see today. Muslims in the U.S. were also beginning to define themselves in the context of global movements, such as the tensions with Israel and Iran. Furthermore, the Civil Rights movement and the new immigration laws led to a greater recognition of distinct contributions to American society. This was also the era in which we see the emergence of “identity politics,” such as the Nation of Islam’s message of self-sufficiency that was seen as contributing to the community building processes.

As pointed out earlier, *A History of Islam in America* is a must read for anyone seeking a fuller understanding of the gradual evolution of Muslim communities and individual consciousness in the U.S. Kambiz GhaneaBassiri suggests that the polysemy of Islam in America needs further research and investigation. The primary sources he offers, however, and the rich archival work he brings to bear to address the central question in the book, i.e, how do we understand the presence and history of Muslims in the US, offers a comprehensive and nuanced view. I would recommend this book to all students and scholars of Islam (and religion in general) in America.

³ Ibid., p. 134

⁴ Ibid., p. 64