

Book Reviews

The Oxford Handbook of American Islam

Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I Smith, eds.
New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 560 pages.

Shortly after publishing Jocelyne Cesari's edited *Handbook of European Islam* (Oxford University Press: 2014), Oxford University Press more or less rounds off the topic of Muslims in the western world with this volume on the United States. The editors, Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I Smith, have made ample contributions on this topic during the last twenty years at least. This volume, to some extent, updates their previous works that have followed the evolution and changes seen by the country's Muslim communities (e.g., *Muslim Communities in North America* [Albany: SUNY Press, 1994], edited by both, and *The Muslims of America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991], edited by Haddad). This may not be the last step in this direction, but it is certainly the most comprehensive and ambitious one so far.

The titles of their previous works, and indeed of this volume, touch on a preliminary problem. As a matter of fact, the volume should have borne the title *Islam in the USA*, since Central and Latin America and even Canada are not mentioned. Many reasons, in any case, justify this circumscribed focus. As rightly pointed out in the "Introduction" (p. 4), American Islam is the most heterogeneous in the world and no doubt constitutes the main issue when dealing with Islam in North, Central, and South America. It is also the most heterogeneous and the most complex. As a matter of fact, these complex lines of evolution of the West's Islamic communities are exemplified by a simple comparison between the two handbooks. Whereas Cesari's edited *European Islam* was described with an extensive first part that introduced the history and evolution of Muslim communities in European countries plus some thematic chapters, in this book the approach is different.

The thirty chapters deal with a number of specific topics identified as significant, not to say fundamental, and are, furthermore, organized in three

sections that touch on foundation, institutionalization, and, finally, integration and assimilation. The names given to these parts, and above all the last one, are not mere descriptions of facts but also perspectives or even wishful thinking of yesterday, today, and even tomorrow. The pivotal point is, of course, 9/11 and the changes that those events brought for the Muslim community in the United States. The perception, identification, and display of Islam in the American public sphere were no doubt radically changed by 9/11, and the relation of Muslims and Islam to American identity, as well as the new strategies developed to respond to the American reactions, stand as implicit or explicit references behind many of the chapters.

This volume deals with a wealth of issues and topics. The exhaustiveness aimed at is well reflected in some cases, but not in all. However, this is not to depreciate the volume as a whole, for it is the subject itself and its complexity that determine that once an approach is chosen, some points stand out while others remain out of focus. The first section, for example, includes an analytical inquiry into early history, from slavery and immigrants, and goes on to deal with the organizations, above all the African American ones, before coming to a traditional portrait of Sunni, Shi'i, Sufi, and other Muslims in North America. The chapters describe the specific topics, the situation in the United States, and the respective capacity to engage with American society. One feature rightly emerges from this analysis: Although the histories and attitudes of the various expressions and communities are different, the growing process toward Islamic orthodoxy tends to diminish their capacity to interact with American styles (and not only in the reception of Sufism, as rightly maintained by M. Hermansen, cf. p. 125).

The problem in some of the other chapters is that defining certain Islamic concepts takes up some space, sometimes too much. For example, in M. H. Siddiqi's chapter on religious practices (pp. 159-73), the description of prayer and ritual takes up more room than that of the American specificity and related questions. Another problem raised by this approach is making sense of movements and associations that owe their role to American developments rather than to Islamic history. The role of the Ahmadiyya (pp. 145f.) and the definition of the Qur'anists (pp. 150f.) are two cases in point, for they are analyzed together with traditional sectarian movements, even though they owe their relevance more to a western environment than to Islamic history. Evidently, this does not contribute to clarity and runs the risk of producing a list of sects or associations without a clear capacity to confer upon the many actors in play their proper role and highlight the relations among these various elements in the differing situations.

But also because of this the volume as a whole, and particularly in the other two sections, lays out a comprehensive and exhaustive mapping of how Muslims interact with social, political, and economic conditions, as well as with institutions in various American environments, especially after 1965. So we have chapters on the Shari‘ah, women, marriage, mosques, Islamic education and youth organizations, *da‘wah*, prisons, and volunteerism in the second part. The topics dealt with and thus defined in the third and last part on integration and assimilation are also compelling: the political system, five Muslims scholars, Muslim-Christian relations, the media and Muslims, arts, architecture, fashion, health and medicine, filmmaking and Muslims in films, American Islam and global Islam, the effects of the “war on terror,” and, finally, a chapter on Islamophobia.

The mix between ways of life, consumer cultures prompted by the American lifestyle, and the dynamics of integration or rejection in American societies are all well represented. Indeed, this may be the main merit of this approach. In fact, the clarity aimed at in each chapter helps to set the pieces within a larger picture where American Islam’s many aspects interact with the variety of American societies in motion. In this picture, sharpening the focus on particular moments or themes enables one to convey which Muslims are in the United States today, how they conceive of themselves, and how Americans perceive them.

Some elements emerge from the composite picture. First of all is the tendency since 1965 toward orthodoxy and thus to homogenization, doubtless following the lines taken in all Muslim communities. However, in the United States this appears more closely connected with the new waves of immigrants and the distance taken by them, but also by the new African American organizations, from previous organizations and beliefs. The process is significant and promises further change that will connect American Muslims with global Islam. Moreover, at the same time this removal of old unorthodox styles leads to the loss of originality, which is a problem even for the perception of Islam in American societies. Notwithstanding, this volume offers a clear discussion on specific topics and, as a whole, conveys the idea of a complexity that is impossible to reduce to unity, as is the history of the Muslims and Islam in the United States.

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