

## Competing Visions of Islam in the United States: A Study of Los Angeles

*By Kambiz GhaneaBassiri: Westport, Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1997, 202 pp.*

Barring the initial works of a handful of scholars over the last 50 years, Muslim communities and their understanding of Islam in America have gone relatively unstudied in relation to other religious groups. The lacuna now, however, has been partially filled by the work of Kambiz GhaneaBassiri in a concise but complete in-way-of-issues-mentioned manner. Primarily a secondary source, it relies heavily on the initial works produced by scholars such as Yvonne Haddad, Adair T. Lummis, Earle Waugh, Aminah McCloud, and Atif Wasfi. The book is the first of a second generation of work on the subject. Using a purely sociological method and lens, the book analyzes the findings of the works that came before it, coupling a case study of the views, opinions, and attitudes of different constituents of the Muslim populace of Los Angeles with the more cross-sectional approach used by the aforementioned scholars. The work raises fundamental questions regarding the validity of studying sociologically the American Muslim condition; whether a truly American Muslim condition exists; and (if it does) its characteristic features. Nevertheless, Kambiz GhaneaBassiri's work indexes, in a cartographic manner, the competing visions of Islam in the United States.

Within the introduction of his work, the author outlines the purpose and methodology of his study. Departing from the writings and approach of Haddad, Lummis, Waugh, McCloud, and Wasfi, he makes his intention clear: to use surveys to examine the religious identity of Muslims in the United States by determining how they define their role as American citizens. His already enigmatic definition of a religious identity, however, being an amalgam of one's "desires," "needs," "cultural and ethnic background" and "level of religious understanding," missed certain key elements. The roles of intention and volitional acts—the main components of the textual definition of Muslim identity—outlined within the Qur'an and Sunnah, more than the categories used in the study, define Muslim identity. The lack of a clear definition of Muslim identity and the inability of the study to operationalize it are the work's two main weaknesses. Nowhere in the work is it scientifically illustrated or articulated that a case study

of Los Angeles is representative of competing visions of Islam in the United States. He exhibits true intellectual integrity when he cautions readers not to assume that his findings, based on the study of a particular city, represent the big picture, although the title that he chose for the book is appropriate by virtue of the fact that the Muslim community of Los Angeles belongs to the larger Muslim community of the United States and to the still larger ummah. In five chapters, he depicts the different currents and forces within the American Muslim community.

The second chapter diagrams the different Muslim organizations in the United States and outlines the general goals, missions, and particularities of each. Covering only the Federation of Islamic Associations, the Islamic Society of North America, the Muslim Students Association, the Muslim Students Association Persian Speaking Group, and the Nation of Islam and the Ministry of Warith Deen Mohammed, a major movement that did not fall under one of the aforementioned umbrellas was not covered, rendering the scope of the study myopic. Among the movements left out of the study were the ever growing and organic movements such as Jamaat al Tabligh and the Muslim Brotherhood, both of which have large followings within the American Muslim community. Perhaps the more organic movements did not lend themselves to the sociological nature of the study and, therefore, were ignored. Still, there should have been some mention of at least these two movements. However, the movements that the author did cover were handled in a balanced and scholarly manner. In two particularly strong sections of the chapter, the author renders plain the links between movements outside the United States and movements indigenous to America; for example, those of Seyyed Qutb and Maulana Maududi and the Muslim Students Association and the Islamic Society of North America. The position of the Muslim Students Association Persian Speaking Group, however, was greatly overstated since their influence was primarily limited to a very particular group.

Turning to the Muslim sense of belonging by association with a mosque, GhaneaBassiri correctly differentiates between mosques and Islamic centers. He suggests that in Muslim countries mosques are generally managed by government trusts, whereas in the United States, the survival of Islamic centers depend upon user donations. This means that those who attend Islamic centers do so because the vision of Islam that is presented in that particular Islamic center corresponds to their own vision of Islam and that communities are often horizontally stratified accordingly. The role of ethnicity in the formation and maintenance of these centers is overlooked. More importantly, this horizontal stratification reflects the level and type of integration within each particular American Muslim community.

The third chapter focuses on the question of Muslim social integration within mainstream American society. The author's view that Muslims are ambivalent about the issues and concerns that face the wider American populace is ill-posed, again, more because of the particular notion of the sociological study of religion than due to scholarly oversight. Perhaps two generations ago it was true that Muslims understood, appreciated, and criticized America based primarily on what they viewed on television or read in mainstream magazines. Muslims now, more than ever, are seeking to participate, shape, and mold political and

social debates rather than react to the negative impact of the television set. Muslim intellectuals are working toward the formation of a new academy, wherein more whole answers to more complete questions will be sought. While the book mentions establishing Muslim primary and secondary schools, there is nothing said about the increasing Muslim role in higher education, where, more than anywhere else, dialogues take place on such complex topics as how Muslims integrate into mainstream America. Colleges and universities have become the sites of penetration into the intellectual mainstream of truly Islamic conceptions. The author seems totally to neglect this fact. In the subsection of the chapter titled "Attitudes Toward Islam and Islamic Traditions," Islam is defined as mere orthopraxy, and emphasis is put primarily on outlandish minority opinions, which, in certain instances derive from as little as a single interview. In the author's discussion regarding the issue of Sunni-Shi'i relations within America, the emphasis on discord between groups is grossly overstated. The American Muslim community is characterized by interfactional marriage, and distinctions are rarely made on the basis of ideological grounds; rather, when and if distinctions become pronounced, they do so by virtue of some accidental circumstance. That is, instead of emphasizing the more profound and vaster homogeneity within the Muslim community, relatively insignificant moments of true factionalism are misrepresented as norms. One wonders, for example, how Muslims managed to overcome their alleged internal enmities when confronted with the question of Bosnia?

The issue of how Muslims identify with and practice their religion was also dealt with. The author here pointed out correctly that the Muslim sense of identity and "religiosity" in the United States was expressed primarily in eating Halal foods and participating in fasting during Ramadan, and much less in adhering to the daily prayers. Issues such as the raising of Muslim families and the religious roles that Muslims see themselves as playing within the United States were dealt with in a similar manner. The following three salient points were brought out by the interview: Muslims recognize that the primary source of the problems facing their families in the United States is secular culture; they recognize that the threat posed by other religions is secondary; and the majority of Muslims are optimistic about their role in American religious life.

The most important contribution, however, is the author's treatment of gender issue in chapter 4. His approach in dealing with this controversial issue quite correctly focused upon the study of Hadith as a source of the societal norms regarding women in traditional Muslim societies. Furthermore, he distinguishes the Qur'anic conception of women from the conception of women normative within traditional Muslim societies. He argues that while the Qur'anic conception of gender issues is enlightened, the actualization of the Qur'anic ideal within Muslim societies is far from coming into full fruition. The discord between the Qur'an and the actual situation, He points out, is replayed in the new world in the myriad of emotions and visions of what womanhood means in the American Muslim context.

In conclusion, the oversights of the author notwithstanding, the incomplete character of the study has its foundation in the nature of his methodology and his reduction of the study of religion to the analysis of a few surveys, which cannot rightly make any claims to knowledge outside of the phenomenon of human

interaction within his particular sample. Sociology, despite its claims, cannot penetrate accurately, or without overstepping its own bounds and thus distorting its own frame of reference, into the depths of the human soul wherein, by definition, religious and particularly Islamic identities are found. Indeed, religion's primary claim is upon the soul. While maintaining the primary claim upon the soul, Islam extends the soul's sphere of governance into the world of volition and objects. This is one meaning of the well-known hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: "Actions are with intentions." The relationship is illustrated in the following: If an intention has its origin within a particular psychological organ called the "soul," as opposed to the "unconscious mind" or the "psyche" (psyche used in its technical sense and not as the general undifferentiated seat of volition that in common parlance means that which is the study of psychology), then an action based on that particular intention is said to bear the mark of its origin in the particular psychological organ called the "soul." Sociology, even at its most cognitive, fails to recognize the difference between the origins of the intentions which lead to actions. Therefore, within sociology and within this study, there is nothing to distinguish between an act based on an intent motivated by a sense of Islamic identity and an act based on an intent with an origin in some other motive. If seen in the light of the hadith of the Prophet related here, a perspective which is not articulated throughout the work, this study would have been more relevant to the aims it outlined. The work marks the need for continued research on the topic.

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