

**Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims
and the Global Crisis of Authority**

Zareena Grewal

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Zareena Grewal's book traces the hopes, debates, accomplishments, and disappointments of American Muslim students who travel to the Middle East in pursuit of Islamic knowledge. As Grewal discovers through her interviews with over 100 students and teachers, the impetus behind many of their journeys is a desire to find a solution to the "crisis" of Islamic authority in the United States. But once they spend some time immersed in a predominantly Muslim society, many discover that this crisis extends to the Muslim world as well. More recently, some American Muslim scholars have shifted their at-

tention away from the Middle East and toward an “indigenization” of American Islam, which, the author points out, also faces many challenges.

In chapter 1 Grewal explains that her project is focused on student-travelers who view the Islamic East as an “Archive of Tradition” (p. 36) that they hope will provide a more authentic and authoritative form of Islamic knowledge than what they could learn in the United States. Her fieldwork took her to Amman, Damascus, and Cairo during the early 2000s, where she interviewed students of such figures as Shaykh Nuh Ha Mim Keller, Qubaysiya Ansa Tamara Gray, and Shaykh Ali Goma‘a, among others. The students she met came from diverse ethnic, geographic, and socio-economic backgrounds. Grewal does a good job of highlighting how these factors shaped their journeys.

Chapters 2 and 3 trace the historical context of American Muslims’ views regarding their rootedness in the United States and their relationship with the rest of the umma. Here Grewal introduces a particularly useful concept of “countercitizenship... [that] posit[s] the umma as an alternative imagined community to the nation” (p. 83). This idea encapsulates well how many American Muslim thinkers locate themselves within the context of a worldwide umma as a way to challenge their effective social exclusion from the American national narrative. This concept also offers new insight into the later thought of Malcolm X, who spent much of the last year of his life in the Muslim world and increasingly conceived of himself – and African Americans more broadly – as part of a global community.

Chapter 4 traces the various ways in which the Islamic tradition is retrieved in an attempt to address the contemporary crisis of authority. The focus here is on debates over pedagogy, or “how the tradition ought to be transmitted over time” (p. 209). Grewal offers three categories to help readers understand the differing approaches: (1) formalists, who view the tradition as an unbroken chain of legitimate authorities and seek to transmit it in the same manner as previous generations of scholars have done; (2) pragmatists, who seek to modernize the pedagogical approaches to the tradition in order to address contemporary students’ needs and abilities; and (3) reformists, who argue that since the transmission of tradition has been ruptured over time, Muslims need to seek knowledge outside of traditional disciplines. This schema is more nuanced than the rigid binaries of “liberal/conservative” and “salafi/madhhabi” that are often invoked to try to explain the complex and varied spectrum of Islamic thought. It is also quite useful in illustrating the salient fact that many of the debates within the Muslim community today are not just about the answers reached, but about how those answers were reached.

The focus of chapter 5 is on female student-travelers. Here Grewal shows how the crisis of Islamic authority is also a gendered one, insofar as female

students struggle between their desire to adhere to the norms of modesty and their wish to challenge the limitations on their studies imposed by religious authorities. As female student-travelers deny they are being excluded from the Islamic tradition, they simultaneously struggle to make that claim a reality while remaining within the accepted norms of *adab* expected of them. This chapter is a useful companion to the works of Lila Abu-Lughod and Saba Mahmood in that it further challenges the predominant Western feminist notion of “freedom” as being primarily about the freedom to rebel against societal norms. Grewal emphasizes that women find ways to both adhere to and challenge conservative societal norms in subtle ways that do not necessarily contradict one another.

Chapter 6 takes on the issue of whether students who gain Islamic knowledge abroad are in fact prepared to help their respective communities upon their return. Most of Grewal’s interlocutors stressed that their time abroad was a means to an end: The ultimate purpose of their mission was to “help the Muslims” back home. But, as Grewal points out, while studying abroad may have been personally edifying, overall these journeys failed to give student-travelers the skills they needed to translate their knowledge into ways that could address the unique challenges of their respective communities. She usefully points to this project’s internal contradictions and the challenges faced by student-travelers after they return.

Chapter 7 shifts our attention to the debates that have emerged in the United States since September 11, 2001, regarding the relationship between American Muslims and the global umma. It surveys some of the American Muslim institutions that have sought to “indigenize” American Islam, including Zaytuna College, the Progressive Muslim Union, and Al-Maghrib Institute. Grewal argues that these institutions and movements reflect a shift in American Muslims’ transnational moral geography from “Islamic East as Archive” to “American Medina as Home” (p. 305). This chapter also discusses the “mediatization” of American Muslim discourses, namely, how the American mainstream media’s search for “good Muslims” shapes American Muslim debates and sometimes leads to a bifurcation in American Muslim discourses between a good “American Islam” and a bad “immigrant Islam.” Grewal is critical of this binary, in part because it further marginalizes an already vulnerable group.

This chapter leaves the reader wondering about the relationship between this indigenization project on the one hand, and the knowledge (and authority) gained from studying in the Islamic East that continues to hold cache among scores of American Muslims on the other. What are we to make of the fact that the vast majority of “indigenizing” American Muslim authority figures of stature (and significant following), including Hamza Yusuf, Suhaib Webb, Yasir

Qadhi, and Sherman Jackson, were themselves student-travelers as young adults? The relationship between their respective indigenization projects and the authority they derive from having studied abroad is a bit uncertain here.

Overall, Grewal's book is beautifully written, with textured ethnographic vignettes and a clear theoretical analysis. She is also engaged in these debates herself, both as an anthropologist and as an American Muslim. Her familiarity with the Islamic tradition, coupled with her grounding in western social science theories, allow her to strike just the right balance between empathy and critique. The result is a fresh approach to the study of American Muslims – one that goes beyond the questions of immigration, assimilation, and identity that have dominated previous studies of this community.

Grewal's book also addresses timely and pertinent questions that continue to roil Muslim communities in the United States and throughout the Islamic world. As she explains, she thought her book was nearing completion in late 2010. But as the dignity revolutions began to unfold, first in Tunisia and then in Egypt and beyond, she found herself forced to rethink (and rewrite) significant portions of the book. The result is an up-to-the-minute analysis with somewhat tentative conclusions. While she points out that many of the questions that her interlocutors grappled with continue to be discussed and debated today, she does not offer much in the way of a roadmap regarding how this crisis of authority could actually be resolved.

Of course, one important reason for this tentativeness is that these debates are taking place on constantly shifting terrain. As Grewal points out, the revolutions that brought so much hope in 2011 have led to a great deal of uncertainty today, while American domestic policies, from immigration to surveillance, are also rapidly changing the environment in which American Muslims are discussing issues of authority, identity, and their relationship with the global umma. Thus it is understandable that she wrote her book as one of analysis rather than prognosis.

The book's clarity and insights make it a useful text for advanced undergraduate and graduate courses in anthropology, history, American studies, ethnic studies, and religious studies. It will especially benefit students and scholars interested in how believers address issues of religious authority (Islamic and otherwise), as well as how their moral geographies can shift in a transnational context. It will surely benefit anyone interested in thinking carefully about the present and future state of American Muslims in an increasingly globalized world.

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