

BOOK REVIEW

THE PRACTICE OF ISLAM IN AMERICA AN INTRODUCTION

Curtis, E. E. (2017). *The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction*. New York, NY: New York University Press. ISBN: 9781479804887.

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This title is an edited volume by 12 experts on various aspects of Islam in the US with the goal “to provide clear answers to essential, but basic questions about how observant Muslim Americans practice Islam” (Curtis, 2017, p. 2). An emphasis throughout is the tremendous variegation of American Islam both religiously and ethnically: Muslim Americans are the most racially diverse faith group in America. The book is composed of three sections: (1) prayer and pilgrimage; (2) holidays; and (3) life cycle rituals; and is replete with testimony from American Muslims about the various topics.

The first section begins with a chapter on the most frequently performed Islamic ritual, *salah* – the five daily prayers. An important preparation for *salah* is *wudu* (ritual ablutions) to “wash away the impurities of daily life” (p. 17). Ablutions can be difficult to perform outside of one’s home and innovations such as Wudu Gear brand’s socks enable Muslims to avoid washing their feet in sinks. Deeper concerns about public prayer, namely safety and discrimination, lead some Muslims to make-up *salah* at home if they are not able to find a secluded space in public. These concerns dovetail with issues of religious liberty and the first amendment. Also, Muslim Americans have developed “third spaces,” neither Mosques nor secular spaces, which are used for gatherings and prayer. The creation of new locations and manners of association is an excellent example of the generative capacity of

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philanthropy and civil society. At its best, philanthropy is an innovative and constructive force in the face of social change or marginalization.

Chapter two focuses on *dhikr* (remembering the divine) conducted primarily by Sufi Muslims; and it does so by comparing three different versions of collective *dhikr*. This first, in Spring Valley, NY, is the most traditional of those profiled and is composed primarily of Turkish immigrants. The second, in Manhattan's financial district, is led by an American woman and has a more open tone (it is not unusual for Jews or Christians to attend). The last, also in Manhattan, is catered to appeal to second-generation Muslim-Americans. Unlike the former two, this group's *dhikrs* have no music, dance or invocation and have little in the way of religious relics. Their understated gatherings reflect both the difference in generations and post-911 fears. Though each has its own unique character, through *dhikr*, they share the goal of taking "steps to become a more Godly human being, and to eventually enter the state of constant *dhikr*, continually mindful of God's closeness" (p. 37).

The third chapter describes the meaning and practice of Hajj in American Islam. The chapter helpfully walks through decisions to go (including immigration issues), preparation (both spiritual and physical), activities of the Hajj itself, and return home. It also includes insights from a dozen American Muslims in order to explain what the Hajj means in the context of American Islam.

The second section of the book, focusing on Islamic holidays, begins with a discussion of the two most important holidays of the Islamic calendar: Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha. The chapter discusses practical matters like determining the month of Ramadan (per lunar calendar), decorations, and hydration, while also discussing its spiritual and cultural meaning. Eid al-Fitr is likened by some to Christmas.

Chapter 5 discusses Ashura, which commemorates Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who died on the battlefield of Karbala in 680 C.E. While everyone observes it in their own way, the retelling of the Karbala story is an important component. Husayn, who died at the hands of fellow Muslims, is remembered as a martyr standing against unjust power—particularly by Shi'a Muslims. The Ashura narrative functions in part as a "liberation mythology" used by the likes of Gandhi and Malcolm X in the fight against injustice (p. 113-114).

The final chapter on Islamic holidays discusses *milad*, celebrations of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Celebrations are particularly common in Sufi communities and at times have an inter-Muslim or even interfaith character. Significant variety exists both in the ceremony itself and in the way in which the Prophet is viewed. For some,

Muhammad is simply a prophet through whom the divine word of God was revealed; but for more mystical Muslims, he is “coeternal with creation itself” (p. 125-126). This latter position is condemned by some Muslims as shirk, or “attributing to any person or object, powers or reverence that should rightly only be the purview of God” (p. 126).

The seventh chapter, which explores birth customs, commences the penultimate section of the book focusing on life-cycle rituals. Preparation for pregnancy, managing the birth, reciting the *adhan* and *iqamah* (call to prayer), charitable giving, male circumcision, naming, and breast-feeding are some of the central issues described. A theme throughout is that American Muslims seek a wide variety of input, both Islamic and not (e.g. Dr. Spock’s *What to Expect When You’re Expecting*), through birth and early infant care—one mother referenced the Prophet’s saying, “seek knowledge even in China” (p. 155).

Chapter eight covers the *nikah* or marriage ceremony via recounting three actual Muslim-American weddings in which the same two Qur’anic verses were read—both verses reference mates as the creation of God, the latter speaking of the love and mercy that God puts between spouses (4:1 and 30:21). Like many Islamic customs in the US, wedding ceremonies differ greatly, but consensus exists on the need for consent, a bridal gift, and witnesses. In addition, the chapter discusses Islamic law related to weddings and the norms regarding sexual access and gender, as well as the interplay between the “Muslimness” and “Americanness” of American Muslims.

The concluding chapter in the section focuses on death and funerals. In addition to detailing items such as bodily resurrection and funeral prayer, chapter nine discusses efforts to comply with both Islamic ritual requirements and US law. For example, Islamic customs stipulate that burials take place within 24 hours of death and without a coffin, which proves to be challenging in many US contexts.

The fourth and final section covers Islamic ethics and religious culture. It begins with a chapter on philanthropy and “social giving.” *Zakat*, one of the five pillars of Islam, and *sadaqa* are important elements of Muslim philanthropy. *Zakat* is often referred to as a “‘payment’ rather than a gift,” and evokes duty and love blurring together (p. 210-211). This emphasis on duty is important. In discussions about the philanthropic sector, the notion of giving based solely on donor goodwill is insufficient. First, it underemphasizes social bonds and solidarity—a particularly potent challenge in individualistic societies such as the US. Second, a focus on good-will alone occludes the structural elements of poverty and marginalization. A recognition that societal order helps create poverty and marginalization, as well as wealth

and power, goes hand-in-hand with a view of philanthropy as obligatory—seeking justice or ensuring the rights of all members of society. Additionally, Islamic-American philanthropy includes the desire “‘to offset stigmatizing effects’ of popular discourse” in post 9/11 America, while simultaneously meeting contemporary expectations of accountability and transparency (p. 212).

Food practices constitute the penultimate chapter. In a non-Muslim majority country such as the US, determining what is and is not *halal* can be complicated. General consensus exists over what is *haram* (e.g. alcohol and pork). Yet, significant variation exists on other issues, such as whether permissible meats need to also be *zabiha*. Some hold that only animals butchered by Muslims are permitted, while others believe that the meat of animals slaughtered by People of the Book (Jews and Christians) are as well. The chapter also discusses livestock more broadly. Factory-style farming comes under religious scrutiny by some Muslims, particularly on the issue of whether or not the meat of animals raised in such conditions can even be considered *halal*, regardless of their manner of slaughter.

The book ends with an essay on the *Qur'an*. In a post-9/11 America, significant attention is given to questions (from skeptics and young Muslims) on its content. Reference is also made to early historical (e.g. Jansen Van Salee), contemporary (e.g. Keith Ellison swearing on Thomas Jefferson's *Qur'an*) and artistic uses of the *Qur'an* in America. These American uses of Islam's most sacred text are a reminder of the freedom, pluralism and diversity at the heart of the American aspiration (in its best expressions). US philanthropy and civil society has a key role and a self-interested stake in recognizing and protecting that heritage.

This volume would be good for scholars and students with an interest in Islam in America, and who are relatively new to the subject. It would also be valuable to scholars in other disciplines impacted by religious practice. For example, researchers in political science or philanthropic studies could use this book to better understand a sub-segment of American society in regard to public policy and non-profit praxis.

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References

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