

BOOK REVIEW

SUBURBAN ISLAM

Howe, J. (2018). *Suburban Islam*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 9780190258870.

Reviewed by Rafeel Wasif
University of Washington

In *Suburban Islam*, Justine Howe provides a rich ethnographic account of the Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb Foundation in Chicago. The foundation was founded by middle-class, highly educated, second-generation Muslims who feel they do not fit in the mainstream American and Muslim American mosque culture. As a result, they are using the Webb community as an attempt to re-envision an “indigenous” American Islam that cuts across ethnic identities and is characterized by gender equality, tolerance, and pluralism. Through these practices, Webb participants imagine creating an identity that merges their Muslim faith with an idealized vision of suburban middle-class America by bridging the gap between religion and everyday middle-class American practices like watching football, picnics, and family gatherings. However, despite its lofty aims of a tolerant and inclusive community, the foundation also can be limiting by excluding people who disagree with its vision of what Muslims and Islam should be. The foundation is also defined by class, as its members come primarily from middle-class America, and thus it excludes many Muslim Americans from less affluent backgrounds. Also, despite its openness to discussions about LGBT issues in Muslim communities, the foundation primarily espouses heteronormative traditional Muslim familial values.

Howe considers the Webb Foundation as a “third space,” a social surrounding that is neither home nor a place of worship. She argues that the study of these third spaces offers a window into how American

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Muslims are re-defining what Islam means to them in their everyday lives as Muslim Americans. These spaces also provide Muslims the context to challenge their exclusion from the American mainstream as well as the “ethnic” Islam that they experience in mosques. Webb members use the community to contest what they see as the two dominant orientations in American mosques: “cultural Islam,” or ethnic particularism, and “Wahhabism,” or Salafi practices and theologies. They argue that these influences have prevented American Islam from achieving its vibrant potential.

Howe approaches religion and culture as interlinked, which individuals and communities negotiate in particular times and places. Thus there is often a blurring between cultural and religious practices in Webb Foundation as members use personal experiences to interpret religious practices in addition to religious texts. This practice often leads to multiple interpretations and debates about religious practices, and it demonstrates the highly contextual ways that Muslim Americans go about moral deliberation in their everyday lives in the US.

The first half of the book focuses on the construction of American Islam at Webb. Chapter 1 provides the history of Webb and its position within the broader global debates on Muslim communities across the world from Morocco to the US. Chapter 2 explores Webb members’ critiques of American Muslim institutions as it tries to create a society that is above gender and racial issues. Chapter 3 focuses on the performance of Islam in everyday activities like skiing and football, among others. Chapter 4 focuses on the ritualized performance of American Muslim culture by examining the Webb Foundation’s annual mawlid event which celebrates the birthday of the Prophet Muhammad.

The second half of the book employs “ethnographic reading” to explore the multiple contexts of Webb debates about Islam. Chapter 5 focuses on the Webb adult Sunday School programs. In their study of the Qur’an, Webb students creatively employ various exegetical strategies and personal experiences to understand what Islam means to them. Chapter 6 demonstrates how social norms and lived religious practices often come into a conversation with religious teachings to develop norms about what is considered right and wrong as a Muslim American, including the issues that Muslims feel as they try to apply Islam in their everyday life in a way that is complementary to their social and personal values. Chapter 7 uses the Webb women’s book club to explore how participants negotiate and claim feminist identities within the Webb community and beyond.

Suburban Islam is an excellent book for anyone who wants to study the localization of Islam in America. In the current post-9/11 political

climate, it assesses Muslim American anxieties about what it means to be Muslim and American and demonstrates how Muslim communities are trying to merge these two identities. The book focuses less on the mosque as the place of Muslim identity construction and instead on the construction of Muslim American identity through everyday mundane practices outside their place of worship. While it stays away from the dichotomy of “good” and “bad” Muslims and depicts the heterogeneity of Islamic beliefs even within one community, it also demonstrates how Muslims have themselves internalized these labels by branding Salafi and cultural Islam “bad.” In a way, the Webb Foundation members are using the foundation platforms to demonstrate to outside observers that they are “good” Muslims. The book demonstrates that there are no monolithic definitions of gender practices in Islam and that these issues are being contested in Muslims’ everyday lives. It is an excellent addition to studies of Muslim communities across the world, where Muslims across the board are trying to localize their practices of Islam.

Despite these positive aspects of the text, the conclusions presented by Howe regarding the role of gender and social norms in the molding of Muslim identities across the globe are quite similar to those by Saba Mahmood, Cabeiri Robinson, and Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, among others. While, arguably, this is reflective of the similarities among Muslim societies across the globe, the book leaves us wanting to know what differentiates American Muslim societies from their counterparts across the world. Another issue that Howe does not address is the generalizability of these patterns across Muslim societies in the US. It seems that the Webb Foundation is an outlier, but how much can we learn about other Muslim communities in the US by focusing on studying this one institution?

Overall, this book is a great insight on Muslims in the US and their anxieties about being American after 9/11. It is a noteworthy contribution in the study of American Muslims, and it will be an invaluable book for students interested in study of Islam in a western setting, as well as scholars and policy practitioners who are interested in studying Muslim Americans.

Rafeel Wasif is a PhD Candidate in political science at the University of Washington. His research focuses on a comparative analysis of Islamic NGOs in the US and Pakistan, donor motivation to donate the nonprofit sector, and media portrayal of the nonprofit sector.