

Swarthmore College

Works

Religion Faculty Works

Religion

8-1-2010

Review Of "Transnational Muslims In American Society" By A. McCloud

Tariq Al-Jamil

Swarthmore College, taljamil@swarthmore.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Tariq Al-Jamil. (2010). "Review Of "Transnational Muslims In American Society" By A. McCloud". *International Journal Of Middle East Studies*. Volume 42, Issue 3. 504-507. DOI: 10.1017/S0020743810000577
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-religion/1>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Religion Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact myworks@swarthmore.edu.

Chapter 3 provides demographic information about Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans based on census and other survey data that the authors admit are imperfect, partly because of how the U.S. government classifies (and does not classify) its citizens. For example, because Middle Eastern Americans are classified as white by the Office of Management and Budget, and the U.S. constitution prevents government agencies from collecting data on religious affiliation, the decennial census, typically the main source for demographic information on minorities, is difficult to use. This chapter includes useful charts summarizing demographic trends (pp. 84–93). The authors indicate that although Middle Eastern identities have become racialized since 9/11, community leaders reported that many Middle Easterners residing in the United States applied for naturalization after 9/11 because of government policies targeting noncitizen Middle Easterners (p. 89).

Chapter 4 presents sociological scholarship on community-based organizations and the characteristics of the fifty organizations studied by the authors. Chapter 5 describes post-9/11 hate crimes and bias incidents suffered by Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans and Sikhs residing in the United States. In Chapter 6, the authors discuss the government initiatives that contributed to the backlash, which included detentions, deportations of individuals out of visa compliance, increased surveillance under the PATRIOT Act, so-called voluntary interviews with government agents, and the registration of Middle Easterners and foreign nationals. A timeline of the specific initiatives is provided in an appendix. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr point out that although deported individuals were out of compliance with the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Middle Easterners were disproportionately targeted.

In Chapter 7, the authors focus on how Muslim and Middle Eastern community organizations responded to the backlash. After 9/11, these organizations provided a public face for Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans, conducted educational outreach, advocated for the civil rights of Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans, and built coalitions with civil-liberties organizations. The discussion of coalition building continues in Chapter 8, where the authors describe interfaith activities between Muslims and non-Muslims as well as public recognition of community organizations by major philanthropic groups. Bakalian and Bozorgmehr conclude the chapter and book with a summary and restatement of their argument.

Backlash 9/11 is enormously useful for readers who want general information about Middle Eastern and Muslim populations in the United States and an overview of what happened to them after the 9/11 attacks. Readers will get a clear sense of the scope of the backlash and how community-based organizations responded. The authors' comparative perspective is particularly helpful for clarifying the magnitude of repressive state actions. Those who are interested in learning more about how sociologists have theorized ethnicity and mobilization (e.g., intergroup conflict, pan-ethnicity, claims making, and frame analysis) will also find that here. The book does not provide a detailed portrait of how any particular group was affected by or responded to 9/11 nor does it clarify the extent to which ordinary Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans engaged in the many activities that community-based organizations arranged after 9/11. Even so, *Backlash 9/11* is informative, clearly written, and timely.

AMINAH MCCLLOUD, *Transnational Muslims in American Society* (Gainesville, Fla.: University Press of Florida, 2006). Pp. 176. \$39.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY TARIQ AL-JAMIL, Department of Religion, Swarthmore College, Swarthmore, Pa.; e-mail: taljamil@swarthmore.edu

doi:10.1017/S0020743810000577

Transnational Muslims in American Society provides a sophisticated account of some of the complexities, social dilemmas, and multivalent expressions of Islam among various immigrant

and indigenous communities in the United States. Given the methodological and theoretical challenges of attempting to make sense of the diverse range of Muslim communities in the United States, Amina McCloud begins by arguing for the necessity of a shift in nomenclature. She draws on recent works in migration and diaspora studies to highlight the utility of terms such as “transnational” for describing “the formation of social, political, and economic relationships among migrants that span several societies” (p. 4). For McCloud, this definition stands in contrast to the notion of immigration as a transitional stage in the movement toward acculturation, particularly in terms of language acquisition and the narrowing of ties with one’s country of origin. McCloud’s reframed categories of analysis ultimately prove useful for demonstrating the multiple ways in which transnational networks among Muslim communities in the United States often function to preserve cultural and economic ties for mutual advantage and to mitigate some of the social and political challenges of life in new diaspora communities. In addition to drawing categories and vocabulary from sociology, anthropology, history, and religious studies, McCloud’s epistemological grounds for her arguments are largely based on empirical observations from interviews and conversations with transnational Muslims.

Having outlined her thesis and methodology in the introduction, McCloud provides elucidation over nine short chapters. Chapter 2 begins by taking up the question of the degree to which immigrants understand and participate in the American system of democratic citizenship. McCloud follows this discussion with a brief historical sketch of debates over citizenship rights, the demands of citizenship, and the subcategories of noncitizens in American legal discourse. The chapter ends with a survey of stereotypes of immigrants in films, literature, and other media from the early 20th century to the present. McCloud provides a straightforward and simple rearticulation of the historical problems associated with American orientalist images, misrepresentations, and tropes.

Chapter 3 provides a short introduction to Islam, focusing on what the author identifies as the core elements of Muslim belief and practice. The discussion is organized chronologically and thematically according to the development of the Islamic textual tradition: a definition of Islam is followed by a brief description of the role and function of the Qur’an in Muslim social and devotional life and the importance of the Prophet Muhammad’s life in Muslim praxis and textual discourses. The author then turns her attention to an explanation of the Qur’anic concept of *tawhīd* and its centrality for understanding Muslim conceptions of prophetic history, revelation, and cosmology more generally. This portion of the book is perhaps guilty of obscuring critical contested areas of theology and history for the sake of brevity. For example, the author argues that following the death of ‘Uthman, “The horrific murders of ‘Ali and, later, one of his sons, Husayn, consolidated his supporters as formal Shi‘at ‘Ali (the party of ‘Ali, Shi‘i Muslims)” (p. 33). Here McCloud’s description moves beyond the general problematic tendency in the book to posit an “authoritative center of Islam” (p. 8) that happens to be organized along the lines of what has become Sunni Islam, to implicitly accepting the contested historical view that proto-Shi‘i communities emerged following the death of Muhammad (and were not consolidated until after the death of Husayn). McCloud’s characterization of the Shi‘at ‘Ali as “one of the ‘new’ Muslim communities that emerged after the death of the Prophet (pbuh)” (p. 33) and repeated contrasts between this group and the ideas of consensus held by “the majority of Muslims” (p. 33) appears to ignore a range of scholarly work in Islamic studies calling such anachronistic notions of the existence of 1st-century “Sunni” normativity into question, including Patricia Crone’s *God’s Caliph*, Wilferd Madelung’s *Succession to Muhammad*, and Maria Dakake’s *The Charismatic Community: Shi‘ite Identity in Early Islam*, just to name a few. Greater nuance would have been appreciated throughout Chapter 3, though particularly in the sections providing historical descriptions of the role and development of Islamic law, the influence of Sufism, and the tensions raised by the very assumption of the existence of a transcultural Islamic “orthopraxy.” More historical and anthropological evidence is certainly required to substantiate her claim

that “Hindu religion and culture provides much of the basis of tradition in South Asian Muslim life, and it is what is transported as South Asian values to the United States” (p. 53). Moreover, many of her arguments in this chapter are undermined by a lack of statistical information about the occupations and educational backgrounds of South Asian Muslims or transnationals in the United States. Nevertheless, the chapter succeeds in raising critical issues that merit further study and dialogue.

Chapter 4 consists of an overview of South Asian history with particular attention to the development of what the author identifies as three distinct Shi‘i Muslim communities: Ithna-‘Ashari, Isma‘ili, and Daudi Bohra Isma‘ili. Chapter 5 provides discussion of South Asian culture focusing on social and economic class distinctions and the role of the family among Muslim immigrants or transnationals. Further attention is given to examining the cultural liminality and ambivalence associated with negotiating the distinctions between their ethnic and adopted cultures. McCloud asserts, “Many transnational South Asian Muslims are a blend of Hindu cultural artifacts, Islamic knowledge, and British etiquette with American tastes” (p. 57). Although this chapter touches on the challenges Muslim South Asian transnationals face as they attempt to balance the inherited traditions of their root cultures and the complexities of new hybrid identities, it would have been strengthened by closer examination of the forms of ambivalence posed by asymmetries of power between the country of origin and the host country.

Chapters 6 and 7 present a short overview of images of Arabs and Arab Muslims in the United States as represented in scholarship and the media, followed by a brief discussion of distinctions between “American culture” and “Arabic culture” (largely focused on the family, engagement, and marriage). The section concludes with short historical sketches of immigrant Arabic-speaking Muslims: Palestinians, Egyptians, and Sudanese (while acknowledging the tenuous basis for including Sudanese in a category of Arab Americans).

Chapters 8 and 9 focus on Iranian, Chinese, and Somali Muslim immigrants. The cursory historical overview of religion in Persia and Shi‘i beliefs and practices in Chapter 8 elaborate on the standard academic oversimplifications of Shi‘i views on the Qur’an and the use of hadith literature before proceeding to a brief discussion of the Iranian revolution and the emergence of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The chapter concludes with a few short anecdotes that the author treats under the category of “community of exiles,” presumably in order to provide insight into aspects of the lives of Muslim Iranian transnationals (focusing on their views of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian food in diaspora, and Iranian artistic expression). Ultimately, the short descriptions are lacking in substance and perhaps obscure more than they illuminate. Chapter 9 provides what is essentially a short summary of the dearth of material published on Chinese Muslims followed by a three-and-a-half-page discussion of Somali American Muslims.

The final chapter of the book, “Global Islam in America: The Mix and Challenges,” examines issues related to the struggle for self-definition and legitimacy among transnational Muslims in America in speaking on behalf of Islam. McCloud offers useful commentary for beginning to reevaluate some of the static assumptions of current Islamic discourses in order to provide new ways of addressing social and political dilemmas across ethnicities. The author argues that transnational Muslim Americans must engage in forms of democratic participation such as volunteerism as an alternative to ethnocentric modes of organizing. As she puts it, “Volunteerism, as a staple of community life, builds necessary networks across racial boundaries” (p. 131). McCloud later goes on to describe what she identifies as the relegation of African Americans by Muslim transnationals to the status of “new and uncultured *mawali*.” She states: “In an effort to prevent African Americans from defining Islam, immigrants have declared much of African American culture inappropriate for inclusion in any definition of Islam” (p. 132). However, beyond the obvious political critiques of such a project, much of the vilifying rhetoric directed toward Muslim transnationals in the book and the significant

lack of detail and nuance paid to the particularity of their experiences can be used to call into question the potential effectiveness of these multi-ethnic coalitions.

A. DENİZ BALGAMIŞ AND KEMAL H. KARPAT, EDS., *Turkish Migration to the United States: From Ottoman Times to the Present*, Publications of the Center for Turkish Studies, Vol. V. (Madison, Wisc.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008). Pp. 242. \$39.95 paper.

REVIEWED BY AHMET SERDAR AKTURK, Department of History, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Ark., e-mail: aakturk@uark.edu

doi:10.1017/S0020743810000589

Turkish Migration to the United States is the first attempt to produce a full account of past and present migration from the multiethnic and multiconfessional Ottoman Empire and the predominantly Turkish and Muslim Turkish Republic to the United States. Contributors attempt to explain the movement of people in terms of either their origin or destination based on Turkish and American official documents and lively personal accounts of immigrants. The first part of the book is an overview of sources and approaches to Ottoman/Turkish Migration to the United States. Rudolph J. Vecoli informs readers of the major issues in and changing approaches to the history of American migrations over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. John J. Grabowski's piece deals specifically with the two archival sources of early Turkish migration in the first two decades of the 20th century: the manifests of ships arriving in the United States and the U.S. federal-census schedules. According to Grabowski, both sources are important for understanding immigration and settlement patterns and intergroup relations of Turks and other Ottoman immigrants, including Armenians, Greeks, and Christian Arabs, in the United States.

The second part of the book deals with immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Two major themes are the motives for emigration from Ottoman domains and relations among the different Ottoman communities (*millet*s) in the United States. Rifat Balis' chapter deals with immigration of Sephardic Jews, Armenians, Greeks, and Muslim Turks from Anatolia to the United States. He explains the motives for each group's emigration, their interaction with each other in both Anatolia and the United States, and how their respective adaptations to their new settings differed. Balis also explains the changing nature of Turkish immigration to America since World War II. Nedim İpek and K. Tuncer Çağlayan place emigration from the Ottoman Empire to the United States and South America into the context of 19th- and early 20th-century internal and external population movements of Ottoman subjects. They explain motives for emigration and question the earlier American works on the topic, which, they think, puts too much emphasis on religious intolerance toward non-Muslims in the Ottoman domain as a motive for emigration. As counter evidence they mention intercommunal influences on emigration and the closeness of different Ottoman communities in the United States. Mehmet Uğur Ekinci explains Ottoman reactions to the first major wave of Muslim immigrants to America based on Ottoman official consulate documents. He points out that the majority of the first Muslim immigrants in the late 1880s and the 1890s concentrated in Worcester, Massachusetts, where Armenians had already formed an important community. Ekinci also indicates that the Ottoman government became interested in its Muslim subjects in the United States partly because of their close interaction there with Armenian revolutionaries. Işıl Acehan reads the Turkish and American sources critically and argues that although tensions in the Ottoman Empire at the time arising from the Balkan Wars, World War I, and the deportation of the Armenians created conflicts among the different Ottoman ethnic groups in the United States, Ottoman communities in Peabody, Massachusetts in general were interdependent, lived