

## REVIEW OF THE BOOK JANE I. SMITH *ISLAM IN AMERICA*<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This book review research is a richly textured and ethnographically diverse look on the history and specification of Islam in America. It is important to mention that for a variety of reasons, Islam and Muslims in American continents have been in the detailed public spotlight for the last 40 years, and this attention keeps growing. Even though there are more than 30 different books, essays, research and other academic studies focused on Islam, still Smith's "Islam in America" is a timely, valuable survey. It is different and has its own unique approach and "field material" presentation.

The author takes one of the most comprehensive steps into Islamic growth and rise through American history no matter how tough and complicated the conditions and different timeline's features American Muslims had been dealing with.

**Keywords:** Islam, America, book review, Jane I. Smith.

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**T**he main point of what makes this book Smith's *Islam in America* different and even unique is that it is the first research where the author tries to rationally understand and bring up the issue of how different Muslim groups of America (Black Americans, immigrants, newly converted to Islam etc.) developed their religious thoughts, beliefs, practices and institutions.

Smith's book provides three basic tools which help her to resolve numerous modern "Islam in America" topical issues. Methodological tools, previous most well-known studies and empirical content is the most valuable and effective source for the study.

Comparable with most authors which have been focused on studying Islam as an "outsider" for the "new American land", Smith talks about Muslim heritage and its' followers as an American phenomenon, as

something America has had for centuries. At this point Smith's book resembles other research by Kambiz GhaneaBassiri, "*A History of Islam in America: From the New World to the New World Order*" (2014). As well as Smith, GhaneaBassiri situates how Islam's evolution occurs by studying Islam using the relevant categories in American society such as race, ethnicity, and religion to frame the discourse of American Muslims.

The content of Smith's eighth-chapter in "*Islam in America*" helps other researchers not only to overlook through Islam' five-century American history but also to understand the point in how that history is actually supposed to be divided and recognized as an important and an integral part of all American history.

The first chapter of the book "*Muslim Faith and Practice*" gives readers a general idea of basic Muslim practices such as the

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<sup>1</sup> Jane I. Smith. *Islam In America* (Second Edition. Columbia University Press: 2017. 338 p. ISBN: 9780231147101).

testimony concerning the oneness of God and the prophethood of Muhammad, performance of the ritual prayer, almsgiving, Hajj, fasting during Ramadan, the main Muslim holidays, rituals and individual, specific features of Muslim culture, including the perception of the attitude in Islam to everything that is not Islamic.

At the same time Smith discusses marriage, death rites, and commemorative events. The author also provides the audience with a range of topics for exploration, understanding some important but less known Muslim practices including those which have been the source of disagreement amongst Muslims of different ideological streams. Through these Muslim culture practices, Smith explains some ways early America Muslims defined the confluences of forces that shaped American Islam.

Talking about pilgrimage, Smith brings her readers to some similar studies, for example, Michael Wolfe's book *"The Hadj: An American's Pilgrimage to Mecca"* (2017), who takes an audience through each stage and experience of the pilgrimage. Both, Smith and Wolfe are giving readers the same idea: "It is recommended for those planning on making the pilgrimage themselves, as well as those who as outsiders can never have the experience but can benefit from the candid perspectives of this American Muslim."

In chapter 2 the author examines the *"Contributors to the Development of Islam."* At this chapter Smith briefly overviews previous studies of Islam and Muslim in America. The author still focuses on a couple of main researchers, such as Edward Curtis, Richard Turner, Clyde-Ahmad Winters and others. In particular, Smith summarizes Richard B. Turner's essay which was published among others in *"The Cambridge Companion to American Islam."* In this essay Turner and coauthors provide readers with an overview of the historical trajectory of American Islam.

This theme overlaps with the motives of Edward Curtis' *"The Practice of Islam in America: An Introduction"* (2017). Amongst

other valuable features about this book, it is important to mention that as Smith states Curtis' research "provides to an audience with an array of ethnographic evidence to assist those who don't know well enough Islam in general in gaining a fuller understanding of Islam as a textual, historical and lived tradition."

Smith also focuses here on cultural influence of Muslim heritage on American culture in general. This topic resonates with the main idea of Amir Hussein's *"Muslims and the making of America"* (2016). Hussain chronicles the history of Islam in America to underscore the valuable cultural influence of Muslims on American life and then he concludes that America actually "would not exist as it does today without the essential contributions made by its Muslim citizens". This statement is similar with Smith's idea that "Muslim's huge influence on the American culture's existence the way it is nowadays."

In Chapter 3, the author introduces the approach in the study of Islam's appearance in American continent which is a very arguable discussion in today's American academic field. Smith describes two different ways to understanding and recognizing a timeline of the very first Muslims appearance in America. The first side includes those scientists who looked for the most part from the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century signaling the first real arrival of Muslims in the United States. Second squad of researchers includes those scholars who currently argue that Islam has been known to the Amerindian from nearly two centuries before the time of Christopher.

The last topic correlates the ideas described in the research of well-known scholar Clyde-Ahmad Winters. In two of his main studies, *"Islam in Early North and South America"* (1977) and *"Afro-American Muslims — From Slavery To Freedom"* (1978) Winters argues that "the evidence leading to the presence of Muslims in ancient America comes from a passel of sculptures, oral traditions, eyewitness reports, artifacts, and inscriptions... []."

From evidence available, it seems that the Muslim navigators arrived in the New World from Africa and Spain...before Columbus."

Even though Smith ignores this opinion, she still gives to the audience a number of different authors' look on the American Islam timeline. For example, Smith mentions Allan D. Austin and his "*African Muslims in Antebellum America*" (2012), where the author states that "... while we do not know exactly when and how many African Muslims were enslaved and transported to the New World, there are clues in legal doctrines, slaveholders' documents, and existing cultural and religious traditions. African Muslims were caught in the middle of complicated social and legal attitudes from the very moment they landed on Eastern shores of the modern United States..."

It seems like Smith agrees with Austin's opinion but admits that the controversial issue of the first appearance of Islam in America has the right to the most contradictory positions, since there are currently no primary sources and strong evidence that one or another circle of researchers is right or wrong for objective reasons. In this regard, it is fair to note Smith's extreme adherence to objectivity and transparency of the presented material and attempts to separate her own thoughts from the positions established in academic science. Such scientific tactics help the author obey to the principles of impartiality and openness to discussion.

In the Chapter 4 of "*Islam in the African American Community*" the author points and touches upon an extremely important and interesting topic: the problem of the emergence and spread of Islam among the Black population, which among other things, is the source of the "import" of Islam from the African continent. Smith in this case follows the prevailing academic environment that it is estimated that as many as 30% of the African slaves brought to the U.S. centuries ago, from West and Central African countries were Muslims.

Among the difficulties they faced were also those related to their faith.

According to Smith's positions, we can summarize that she belongs to that group of researchers who believe that the first African Muslim slaves, from where the "Islamic history of America" begins, were transported to the continent from West Africa: Gambia, Mali, Senegal, and the Gulf of Guinea region. These authors also include Sylviane Diouf (2013), Richard B. Turner (1997), Sally Howell, Zain Abdullah (2013) and a few others.

Using slave narratives and other evidence of Islam presence in Black slavery, Smith shows how Black American Muslims who have been under slavery for centuries successfully self-identify themselves as Muslims through a variety of strategies and other faith options. This part of Smith's study looks similar with R. Turner's ideas in "*Islam in the African-American experience*" (1997). Studying how Black Americans were trying to find the faith which would give them the answers to their questions not only illuminates the issue of Blacks inner struggle against dehumanization of trade slavery and pressure from Christianity but also clarifies processes of Islamic signification in more recent history.

Chapter 5 "*Women and the Muslim American Family*" is basically a historical survey of Muslim Women's rights to be represented as a part of American Islam, no matter how strict and tough Muslim rules to woman are in general. Smith claims that "some observers of Islam in the international arena have predicted that issues involving Muslim women's roles and identities will be near the top of the concerns to which contemporary Muslims must pay serious attention in the coming decades." Smith argues that as movements for women's rights and for reform of traditional family laws are taking place all over the United States, America may well prove to be a place both of experimentation and affirmation of many traditional values. The topic of

"Woman in Islam" is very popular and highly noticed in American Islamic Studies and it is important to mention that Smith's book continues this discourse and gives a new look at the issue of women's rights in Islam in the American context. The author takes into account modern socio-political processes and the role of religion in it.

Some of the Smith's statements in this chapter correlates with Shabana Mir's book *"Muslim American Women on Campus"* (2014). In her research Mir illuminates "the processes by which a group of ethnically diverse American women, all identifying as Muslim and all raised in the United States, construct their identities during one of the most formative times in their lives." Smith also claims that the treatment and role of women is one of the most discussed and controversial aspects of Islam, especially in American diversity discussions. This chapter is based on Smith and her previous colleagues from University of Ohio's book *"Muslim Women in America: The Challenge of Islamic Identity Today"* (2013). This book, among other topical issues, helps the audience understand the ways in which American Muslim women have tried to create new paradigms of Islamic womanhood and are reinterpreting the traditions apart from the males who control the mosque institutions.

Chapters 6–7 *"Living a Muslim Life in American After 9/11 Society"* is devoted to the modern images of Islam-American society after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, which undoubtedly caused invaluable damage to Islam and Muslims but not so much to Islam as an ideology that is "weakly compatible" with the democratic values of America, but to Muslims as part of the American community. This community started to see Islam as an ideological platform for extremists and terrorists. As such, Islam (with mass media propagandistic power) has been related with dangerous, aggressive and intolerant religious belief. Another thing

that should be noted is the high level of responsibility and academic accuracy of Smith, as a scientist she keeps herself away from the emotional side of the issue. The author tries critically rethink about public perception of Muslims and the Islamophobic mass media discourse, which began to be perceived as new "normality", that is, a new face of Islam.

The author pays attention to immigration problems, how 9/11 affected those immigrant families who were faced with hate, intolerance, violence, horrific attacks and islamophobia in different social spheres. Smith examines micro-processes in which the community of Muslim immigrants of various origins is involved and how the multiplicity of their identities is manifested in these processes. At the same time, Smith raises an extremely important question of how Muslim identity allows immigrants to become part of the American community, where the values and the concepts often do not match with the ideology and tenets of Islam. In this part, Smith's book carries in tough conclusions that largely coincide with the positions of Yuting Wang stated in her book *"Between Islam and the American Dream: An Immigrant Muslim Community in Post-9/11 America"* (2013).

Y. Wang studies ideological clashes, open conflicts and confrontations within the Muslim community in order to debunk the prevailing myths and objectively look at the US Muslim immigrant's everyday life. It is pleasantly surprising that both, Y. Wang and Smith, are moving away from the practice of studying Muslims as "others" or as "foreign" from American "elements". For example, Y. Wang in her book speaks of the American followers of Islam as versatile individuals whose identity is determined by a number of basic social attributes, including gender, race, social class and religiosity. The scholar makes it clear to readers that Muslim immigrants who have chosen America as their new homeland is the same person with their own individual set of characteristics like

any other everyday American. We must pay tribute to Y. Wang (as Smith in her book does), which not only adheres to academic ethics, but also completely rejects criticism of purely religious issues that are not connected in any way with the modern picture of Islamophobia, or with the problem of assimilation and identification of Muslim immigrants as part of American society, as Americans.

The final chapter focuses on the future of American Islam and includes brief biographical sketches of twelve men and women not detailed in any previous chapters. Those people are Muslims immigrants mostly with African roots. Smith describes twelve Muslims' different lives in modern day America, their habits, families, jobs, achievements, hobbies and religious activities. Smith uses very interesting method describing each of these heroes, Smith is trying to predict the future of Muslims in America. Together with her readers she is trying to reproduce possible scenarios for the spread of Islam in the United States and its place on the religious map of the country.

In this chapter Smith also claims that Islam will continue to grow and gain ideological strength in America, but still at a slower pace than is sometimes predicted. Of course, this growth will be influenced by many factor such as migration, resilience and urban Muslim communities' willingness to maintain ties with their fellow believers. Among other factors are developing chains of Muslim schools (madrasahs) and the building new mosques, which are in fact, the Muslim community's core in each of the American states.

At the same time, Smith rightly adds, the demonization of Islam is likely to continue. This tool of social intimidation will be used by the media and political actors. While the American community is trying to identify itself as polyconfessional, Muslims will still try to become a part of it and at the same time American Muslims will be keep trying not to deviate from the canons of their religion. Overall, it is

important to mention that Smith's book "*Islam In America*" is very well-organized, its structure is historically consistent with the periods over which Islamic thought and culture developed in the modern United States of America.

As pointed out earlier, "*Islam In America*" is a must read for those who are trying to understand Muslim culture, Muslim heritage in modern America, without the political influence or author's personal interest or subjectivity. An addition that Smith shares is her own ideas about American Islam, which are based not only on the author's intuition, but backed up by many years of empirical research and previously published books and articles. It seems that America itself has become a breeding ground for certain kinds of violent expressions of Islam which is a development that should not be ignored. Smith claims that it is not the media and their presentations that she worry about as much as the thoughtless talking and blogging on the part of ill-informed people, as well as the anti-Islamic literature being generated by some members of the Christian right.

Theoretically Smith's research is based on extensive bibliographic sources, including both modern studies of American Islam and papers published 30–40 years ago. There are more than 300 primary and secondary sources mentioned in book's bibliography. Smith's book also includes four pages of a glossary that includes both special academic terminology and basic Islamic concepts and phenomena important for understanding the processes described in this study.

Still there are two omissions that should be mentioned here. While discussing about hate speech against Muslims, media Islamophobia and public "fear" of Islam in general, Smith does not give to her audience enough valid examples. The author avoids such an important element for this kind of critical study as empirically evidence-based. Offering the reader a blitz-interview with 12 Muslim immigrants about their life in America



and difficulties with practicing Islam in American society, Smith in her research for some reason does not provide a platform for the non-Muslims "opinion". She does not try to confirm (or disprove) the prevailing stereotypes about hatred of Muslims by voices who are accused of such Islamophobia. The second omission of the author is the absence in the introduction of a specific purpose, that is, the main aim of such an important study. The author neither indicates ideological or methodological assumptions. Even despite the fact that Smith's book is extremely well-organized and structured in accordance with academic requirements, the author's ignorance of explaining the methodology and basic academic tools of her research

leaves an unpleasant impression on the book's introduction.

This criticism aside, Smith's second edition of "*Islam in America*" is an important contribution to the research on the heritage, culture and life experience of American Muslim communities. Smith does not talk with her audience just about Islam in America in general, but boldly brings up modern day issues and topical American Muslim problems. This book has full potential to become an extremely valuable resource about Islam in the American continent, especially for those who are still at an "undergraduate" level in this field but looking forward to learn, explore and understand the specification of American Islam.

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