

# SCTIW Review

Journal of the Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World

ISSN: 2374-9288

August 2, 2016

Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam*, Oxford University Press, 2014, 576 pp., \$160.00 US (hbk), ISBN 9780199862634.

In the current hyper-irrational political landscape, political pundits, New Atheists, old atheists, liberals, conservatives, and moderates have provoked a serial conversation on the presence of immigrants—especially Muslim immigrants—within the United States. The conversation has made allies of seemingly intractable ideological enemies. Why? Surely this is not due to a lack of access to reliable, well-written literature on Islam and Muslims. Such materials are freely available everywhere. What is lacking, perhaps, is a competently curated set of offerings that answer pivotal questions while simultaneously organizing and synthesizing that wealth of existing information. Handbooks are notoriously helpful in teaching subjects where there is a need for a brief review and *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam* edited by Yvonne Y. Haddad and Jane I. Smith is such an indispensable aid. Both editors have stellar reputations on the subject of Islam in America and have made numerous significant contributions to its study for almost thirty years. During this time, Haddad and Smith have kept their fingers on the pulse of Muslim communities in North America. In addition to her own scholarly writings, for instance, Haddad has mentored countless activists, graduate students, and newly minted scholars, thereby helping to diversify thinking and writing on the subject. This mixture, fortunately, appears in *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam*.

This handbook endeavors for breadth of coverage. To accomplish this feat, the editors have compiled thirty entries, written by a wide array of authors, which they have organized under three subheadings, comprising 576 pages. Given the enormity of this topic as covered in this volume, the arrangement of the essays itself was no doubt a difficult challenge for the editors, not to mention the question of what entries to solicit in the first place. The resulting three sections of the handbook are: “Formation of the Muslim Community in North America”; “Institutionalization of Islam in North America”; and, “Integration and Assimilation of Muslims.” Reviewing such an extensive and wide-ranging set of entries is quite an arduous task, so the focus of my review will be to examine the coherences between the editors’ Introduction, the sections as they have been organized, and the entries themselves.

The Introduction presents a timeline of Islam in North America beginning with American transatlantic slavery. The editors also provide a comprehensive discussion of the branches and sub-branches of Islam that includes scholarly elaborations on several ethnic and ideological groups and their relations to sectarian movements. They conclude the

Introduction by delineating contemporary issues facing Islam in the North American context as well as the increasing number of contributions Muslims make to American society. In sum, the Introduction, I think, provides a great overview of what is to be expected in this handbook. It does a commendable job of weaving a comprehensive narrative from articles whose content is not always intuitively connected. The sense that this massive volume has a coherent narrative is reinforced throughout because the editors preface each section with an overview of the articles included therein.

*Section I: Formation of the Muslim Community in North America*

Eight entries form this section and all except for two of them chart a historical course of American engagement with Islam. Beginning with a detailed account of Muslim slaves brought in America's transatlantic slave trade until the late nineteenth century, the chapter by Sylviane A. Diouf, "The First Stirrings of Islam in America," in conjunction with Randa B. Serhan's chapter, "Muslims Immigration to America," give readers a comprehensive sense of the multitude of challenges Muslims in the Americas faced in trying to maintain their religious beliefs and traditions in diaspora. As Carolyn Moxley Rouse demonstrates in Chapter 5, the tide shifted significantly when African American Muslims claimed the space of America as their own. Nevertheless, American Muslim communities encountered less than welcoming receptions that took a turn for the worse after 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror. Issues of race, class, displacement, and longing are paramount to understanding the near constant struggles of American Muslims.

Also included in this section are entries by Timur R. Yuskaev and Harvey Stark, as well as Jocelyne Cesari: a chapter on imams and chaplains and another on Islamic organizations respectively. Toggling between religious leadership and profession, "Imams and Chaplains as American Religious Professionals" provides a historical point of view and highlights concerns about gender dynamics within the leadership of American Islamic communities. Cesari's "Islamic Organizations in the United States" is a clearly written historical record of American Muslim organizations. Yet, other than Muslim chaplaincy, there are no mentions of how religious groups insert their vocabulary into the ordinary parlance of schools, the workplace, or other public spaces.

In terms of methodology, this section is interdisciplinary; the styles and approaches mirror the disciplinary affiliation of the contributors. The titles of some entries suggest a much broader treatment than is actually presented, but given the space limitations all of the authors are clearly knowledgeable about their subject and furnish ample notes and bibliographies for more ardent students. Although the title of this section leads readers to expect entries on Islam in Canada, there were none.

*Section II: Institutionalization of Islam in North America*

The chapters in this section cover a wide range of topics including: "Practicing Islam in the United States" (Muzammil H. Siddiqi); "Shari'a and Fiqh in the United States" (Asma Afsaruddin); "Muslim Women in the United States" (Kathleen M. Moore); "Marriage in American Muslim Communities" (Juliane Hammer); "Mosques in the United States" (Ihsan Bagby); "Developments in Islamic Education in the United States" (Susan L. Douglass); "American Muslim Youth Movements" (Rabia Kamal); "Da'wa in the United States" (Kathleen M. Moore); "Islam in American Prisons" (Susan Van Baalen); and "Volunteerism among American Immigrant Muslims" (Altaf Husain). Readers are introduced to a

remarkable array of writing styles by authors who are professionals, activists, religious leaders, and academics. Especially noteworthy are the entries about: debates on Islamic law within the United States (Afsaruddin); the beginning of changes in Islamic marriage and concern about rising divorce rates (Hammer); the challenges and successes in forming another parochial school system in the United States (Douglass); and how Muslim volunteerism is learned in immigrant Muslim communities (Husain).

Yet, because the previous section provided a bare-bones and mostly historical outline of Muslim communities in North America, there is an unfulfilled expectation for at least some editorial explanation discerning between the two sections. Lacking such an account, the intended purpose and supposed value of each chapter remains unclear. For example the entry, “Practicing Islam in the United States” (Siddiqi), is not about how Muslims actually practice or even the variety of their practices; rather, it asserts itself as an authoritative teaching on what Islamic practices should be. For readers, students and professors alike, who have met Muslims of all ethnicities from every place in the world, the assertion of an authentic Islam could be confusing if not misleading. The author of this entry insists that the reader suspend her disbelief and forget ethnic and theological differences so as to emphasize and prioritize a so-called legitimate interpretation and practice of Islam—namely, Sunni hegemony overshadows this particular contribution.

The other entries on the demographics of mosques (Bagby), youth groups (Kamal), and efforts both at explaining and spreading Islam (Moore) seem to be more connected to the previous section by their further elaboration of diaspora living instead of the “institutionalization” of Islam in North America. Although not discussed explicitly, the hegemony of neo-liberal thinking is circulating in the background of each entry, as is Protestantization as a controlling aspect of the American religious landscape.

In overview, institutionalization is understood broadly here perhaps eliciting questions of coherence between the section title and the entries. Some entry titles do not reflect the narrowness of the content.

### *Section III: Integration and Assimilation of Muslims*

The third and final section has twelve entries and signals a focus on issues of deep concern to the majority of American Muslims. The Introduction raises a host of questions as well as individual and communal beginnings for potential solutions. Entries cohere with the editors’ Introduction by providing readers with sketches of the complicated contours of these issues. The chapters included in this section are: “Muslim Americans and the Political System” (Abdulkader H. Sinno); “The Intellectual Contributions of American Muslim Scholars” (Sara J. Chehab and Marvin R. Whitaker, Jr.); “Muslim-Christian Relations in the United States” (Peter Makari); “American Muslims in the Age of New Media” (Nadia Khan); “Muslim Artists in America” (Munir Jiwa); “American Mosque Architecture” (Akel Ismail Kahera); “Islamic Dress and Fashion in the United States” (Rabia Kamal); “Health and Medicine among American Muslims” (Lance D. Laird); “Muslims in Film and Muslim Filmmaking in the United States” (Hussein Rashid); “American Muslims and Global Islam” (Peter Mandaville); “The War on Terror and Its Effects on American Muslims” (Charles Kimball); and “Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Sentiment in the United States” (Peter Gottschalk).

Each entry strives to navigate the often tension filled terrains of these issues. American Muslims of immigrant descent, for instance, do not exist in a vacuum nor is their presence uncontested. Thus, reading about the facts of Islamophobia, anti-Muslim politics, and the

complex network of individuals and organizations instigating anti-Muslim rhetoric and even physical confrontation (see especially Kimball and Gottschalk) will be very instructive for students and general readers alike, as will learning about how Muslim Americans engage new technologies and social media to vent their frustrations and chart new waters (Khan). The chapters on the varieties of dress and its impact on the American landscape of religious attire (Kamal), filmmaking (Rashid), artistic expressions (Jiwa), and involvement in the political system (Sinno), however, all point to a slow yet steady acclimation of Muslim immigrant communities. Nevertheless, separation remains, as is clear in many of these entries. That there is conflict in belonging *to* in addition to being citizens *of* the United States is still clearly evident. In the ethnic groups featured in this section, strongly identifying with or belonging elsewhere while being citizens in America is a major dilemma. The fact that this state of affairs will change in the near future is stressed throughout these chapters.

### *Conclusion*

This is a much-needed handbook that has far more positives than negatives regarding its usefulness. Professors, students, and general readers will find its entries enlightening and extremely helpful in sorting through the myriad presences of Islam in America. In the courses I teach, I have used more than half of the entries to afford students information on subject areas not covered in other texts to enormous satisfaction. Hopefully libraries and bookstores will keep copies for those interested in this subject area. Reference notes after each entry are handy for researchers and readers who want more information on particular topics.

Aminah McCloud  
 Professor of Islamic Studies in Department of Religious Studies  
 Founder of the Islamic World Studies Program  
 DePaul University

© 2016: Aminah McCloud

Authors retain the rights to their review articles, which are published by SCTIW Review with their permission. Any use of these materials other than educational must provide proper citation to the author and SCTIW Review.

#### Citation Information

McCloud, Aminah, Review of *The Oxford Handbook of American Islam*, *SCTIW Review*, August 2, 2016. <http://sctiw.org/sctiwreviewarchives/archives/1132>.

ISSN: 2374-9288