

Suburban Islam

Justine Howe

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Justine Howe provides a rich ethnographic account of the Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb Foundation in the western Chicago suburbs from 2010 to 2014. Howe argues that the Webb Foundation functions as a third space, an in-between space that critiques local masjids and “engenders possibilities for new ways of being” (9). The organization was founded by and specifically targets university educated, culturally American, “unmosqued” Muslims who feel like outsiders to mainstream American culture and Chicago masjids that have increasingly become influenced by Salafis. Their religion (and often race) marks Webb members as not fully American and local masjids privilege cultural Islam over “true” Islam, forcing them to exist on the margins. For Webb members, masjids aren’t fulfilling their religious or social needs by providing young Muslims with the tools to navigate in a post-9/11 pluralist society. Central to Webb Foundation members is constructing an American Islam that allows their multiple intersecting

identities to co-exist. At the heart of the Webb Foundation is a quest for belonging and a reimagining of Islamic authenticity.

Howe's primary audience is scholars of American Islam and ethnographers of religion. Her main conversation partners are Zareena Grewal, Jamillah Karim, and Kambiz GhaneaBassiri. Whereas Grewal's interlocutors go to the Islamic East to recover the archive of tradition, Webb Foundation members are committed to doing that in the United States in through communal learning and debate in mundane spaces including their homes, libraries, and hotel conference rooms. They construct an American Islam that recognizes the unique challenges American Muslims face as religious minorities and a racially and ethnically heterogeneous community. Like Karim and GhaneaBassiri, Howe examines how this construction of American Islam is mediated by race, ethnicity, class, and gender.

Suburban Islam is broken up into seven chapters. I found chapters four and seven to be the most interesting because of their focus on women and gender relations within the Webb Foundation. The first four chapters highlight the "discursive and ritual construction of American Islam" at the Webb Foundation (20). Chapter one provides a history of the foundation. The second chapter focuses on the specific grievances that members have with Chicago mosques, primarily their perceived ethnocentrism and unwillingness to embrace American cultural norms. Chapter three highlights leisure activities centered on the nuclear family that members engage in including father-son football games and father-daughter camping trips. These activities are central to their construction of an American Muslim identity. Like Catholics and Jewish people did in the 20th century, Howe argues that Webb members are undergoing a process of cultural assimilation, creating a brand of American Islam that is recognizable to non-Muslim Americans. Central to this process of cultural assimilation is imbuing "all-American" activities with deep religious meaning. The fourth chapter annual Mawlid celebrations as simultaneously a space for women to cultivate religious authority and to reclaim an authentic Islamic practice, which Salafis often mark as *bid'ā*, or innovation. Unlike other progressive Muslim organizations, Webb Foundation members do not focus on women leading mix-gender prayer services. However, they are committed to providing Muslim women with multiple avenues for leadership and full participation in the ummah. Women play essential roles in planning and running the Mawlid celebrations plan and run event, including picking the venue, acting as the emcee or keynote speaker, and performing. The Mawlid celebrations privilege an experiential relationship with the Prophet, rather than

a discursive one, allowing for those who are feel as if they exist on the margins of Islam to be centered.

The last three chapters are an “ethnography of reading,” which focuses on the ways in which the Webb Foundation seeks to reclaim authentic Islam and authority through peer discussion groups, debate, and communal readings (20). For Webb members, learning is a social process, where knowledge seekers are encouraged to be in conversation not only with each other, but also other voices that emerge from their readings, Muslim and non-Muslim alike. The foundation seeks out teachers who are classically trained in the Islamic sciences abroad, earned Islamic Studies credentials in the United States, and are sensitive to the unique experiences of Muslims in the United States. These scholars’ authority is derived from their diverse training, however, as Howe notes, Webb members often privilege their own embodied experiences as sources for authoritative knowledge, complicating power dynamics.

Chapter five examines debates around pluralism in the Qur’an. This focus on pluralism requires a delicate balance between affirming Islam’s superiority while embracing the idea that there are multiple acceptable paths to God and heaven. As Howe notes, positioning Islam as one of multiple Abrahamic faiths has become a “test of national belonging” (133). The next chapter explores debates around Islamic law and ethics in *fiqh* classes hosted by the foundation. Members are committed to reclaiming *fiqh* and *sharia* from Islamophobes and Salafis to construct an ethical and adaptable ethical framework that would allow their children to seamlessly navigate their daily lives as Muslims and Americans. The final chapter focuses on the interpretive authority in women’s book club that meets in a public library. Like the Mawlid celebrations, the women’s book club shows how the Webb Foundation temporarily transforms secular spaces into sacred spaces where definitions of Muslim-ness can be challenged and redefined. The women’s book selections open up conversations around contested topics including homosexuality, male authority, and marriage norms in which they explore how religious power is deployed in different settings. The book club highlights how the dichotomy between secular feminists and religious women does not accurately address how these women construct and contest gender roles and expectations (198). Interestingly, the women choose more academic and critical scholars to read like Kecia Ali and Amina Wadud, instead of popular scholars like Abd-Allah or classical texts, because they find the former to be more accurate and authentic (203). For these mem-

bers, modern thinkers have more access to religious authority than classical Muslim scholars.

Perhaps the most compelling thread throughout the entire book is the foundation's attempt to control the post-9/11 racialization of Islam. Webb members experience a double consciousness, always aware of the white gaze, which marks them as Other. To counter being viewed as violent and foreign Brown people, Webb Foundation members embrace whiteness as a means of becoming American. This explains the members' decision to name their foundation after a white revert, Mohammed Alexander Russell Webb, rather than Malcolm X, arguably one of the most popular Muslim figures in American Islam. Howe notes that this is a broader trend within North American Islam in which white male reverts are valorized as the idealized Muslim, although it requires a "hyper-performance' of authentic belief" (82). Whiteness is seen as universal, transcending race and ethnicity. Thus, it is non-threatening. The Webb Foundation's definitions of American and Muslim challenge the notion that they are mutually exclusive, while simultaneously drawing the boundaries of both in way that marginalizes other Muslims. The foundation replicates what Mamdani calls the good Muslim/bad Muslim framework, where Salafi Muslims are positioned as inauthentic and irredeemable.

Howe addresses some of these tensions in chapter three with her discussion of Umar Faruq Abd-Allah, one of the foundation's main teachers. Abd-Allah provides a clear link to the Black Muslim tradition, as he cites Malcolm X as one of his inspirations for reverting and aligned with the Civil Rights Movement. While Howe interrogates how the Webb Foundation simultaneously redirects the white gaze and embraces whiteness, she spends little time exploring how that shows up within the foundation. While most of the Webb members are South Asian and Arab, there is a sizeable Black membership, who by virtue of their Blackness cannot deploy whiteness in the same way. How do Blackness and Muslimness interact within the foundation? How might the good Muslim/bad Muslim framework perpetuate anti-Blackness? What role does colorism play in determining a scholar's relatability within the foundation? These are some of the questions I wish Howe would have addressed. This area proves to be the only weakness of an otherwise thoroughly fleshed out manuscript.

Howe's clear, organized, and engaging writing style makes Suburban Islam a perfect addition to undergraduate courses on Islam in the United States or ethnographic methods. Her main contribution to the study of Islam in the United States is her focus on suburban religious life—so much

that has been written on Islam in the U.S. focuses on major cities like New York City, Atlanta, and Chicago, yet research on suburban religion remains underdeveloped. Howe also contributes to the study of Islam in United States through her emphasis on everyday religious practice outside of the masjid and her exploration of Muslim identity construction through leisure activities. *Suburban Islam* is a must-read for anyone who is interested in understanding how the boundaries Islam and Muslim-ness in the United States are constantly reimagined in the most mundane of places.

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