

Young Muslim America: Faith, Community, and Belonging

Muna Ali

New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 360 pages.

Muna Ali's *Young Muslim America* is a multi-layered, multi-disciplinary work that delivers a snapshot of American Muslim life, grounded in history and theory. She begins by saying she is looking at individual narratives embedded in a larger narrative "about being and belonging, about identity politics in a globalizing world where grand narratives of national and civilizational histories, secularism, and global wars are summoned" (4). The idea of "narrative" is repeated because it signals a primary methodological approach of the book, where narratives are seen as full of information used to navigate social realities (5).

Ali's first chapter focuses on her method. She describes her work as not having a stable research site—she is working in two cities and on the internet—but helps the reader to understand how she is able to turn that instability into a strength. She is constantly questioning assumptions and engaging with her informants in new ways. This chapter does not just de-

scribe but models her work for us, as she weaves together narratives from her informants, theory, and historiography to tell a larger story. Her approach in this chapter is mirrored to great effect throughout the remainder of the book.

The second chapter of the book is a brief account of the history of Muslims in America. It is a concise overview of current scholarship. Ali has to sift through a large amount of work in the field and distill this to what is necessary to move her own project forward. As a result, the chapter fits well into the scope of the book, but should not be read as a standalone history of Muslims in America. (These comments are not a critique, but are observations about the way the book is structured.)

The next chapter deals with questions of “identity crisis” in a manner notable for its depth and clarity. Her review of the literature around identity is both broad and deep, as she explores the relationship between individual and social identities. She also encourages the reader to reconsider the analytical utility of “identity” as a category, or if “identification” is more meaningful. Here readers also see how she integrates narratives from her informants, narratives from written/spoken sources, and her own analysis. For example, she looks at how Zuhdi Jasser and Eboo Patel understand American Muslim youth development. Jasser is considered by many scholars to be part of the Islamophobia industry in America, and she examines his 2011 congressional testimony about radicalization among Muslim youth. Patel is founder of the Interfaith Youth Corps, and his memoir of founding the organization is the source for Ali’s intervention (53). Rather than focus on individual aspects in these cases, Ali is focused on the broader tensions reflected in her examples which contribute to forming an American Muslim identity. She balances the need to discuss figures that are currently newsworthy without focusing on the personal or the present.

Ali’s fourth chapter engages discourses around “pure” and “cultural” Islam. Her analysis creates a rich conversation among various thinkers, cutting across multiple disciplines. Where she makes a strong intervention is in arguing that self-described “liberal” Muslims use culture talk, as described by Mahmood Mamdani, to deploy a sense of identity, as much as “conservative” Muslims and non-Muslims do. This complication in how we perceive of culture talk adds nuance to American Muslim narratives. The chapter includes a concise review of the relationship amongst religion, secularism, and the secular. All these elements generate the conclusion that a notion of “pure” Islam is ahistorical and that a “Muslim culture” is always tied to space and place.

Chapter 5 offers a review of Islamophobia and the Islamophobia Industry in America, particularly post-9/11. Ali mobilizes a variety of sources in this chapter (including popular culture) to give readers a detailed sense of the issues at play. This chapter is probably the most descriptive of the chapters in the book. It seems like a pivot in the book's structure, from the debates in the American Muslim community she has discussed so far to the creative output from these debates to be considered in following chapters.

The sixth chapter starts bringing the various threads of earlier chapters together, including an explicit return to centering narrative. Ali takes the debates around labels like "immigrant" and "indigenous" Muslims seriously, and lays out the strengths and weaknesses of using the terminology. She sums up a broad range of issues and community self-perceptions in this debate, which she then leverages into addressing other debates in American Muslim communities, including questions of race and gender. Both of these areas are dealt with well, and point to how American Muslim communities are trying move beyond simple divisions. Her discussion on gender is particularly rich, and could be productively pursued further.

Chapter 7 offers a response to the question "is there a unique American Muslim culture?" Ali considers a variety of cultural interventions, from literature, music, politics, and sports, to demonstrate how Muslims contribute to American culture, and even go toward building a self-referential cultural space. Ali's effort in this chapter is not to assess these cultural productions but to lay out as much as she can, in to demonstrate the creative urge that is located in and shaped by contemporary America.

Ali's work is a welcome contribution to the study of Muslims in America, both for its substance and its method. She covers a large amount of information through a strong framework that keeps the material from becoming overwhelming. While she specifically signals questions of gender and race, she also incorporates diversity of interpretation organically in her informant narratives. She talks about various Shi'i perspectives (Ithna'ashari, Isma'ili, Bohra, and Zaydi) as part of the American Muslim experience, without marking them as internal "Others." While not an introductory textbook, this book is a good introduction to the issues facing American Muslims which incorporates a wide array of disciplines and sources. It should be a valuable option for use in Islam in America classes.

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Muslim Americans: Debating the Notions of American and Un-American

Nahid Kabir

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Muslim Americans: Debating the Notions of American and Un-American is an ambitious attempt to explore how American Muslims, especially immigrants and their children, see the US and are seen by it. It uses the voices of Muslim Americans to explore what peoples and cultures can be considered American, and which are not. The author offers it as “a counter-narrative to the reactionary thinking of academics ... and some media and politicians who have placed Islam/Muslims as the Other.”

The first chapter describes a background discourse in which Islam is assumed to be in conflict with America specifically, and the western world more generally. It also describes the multiple methodological tools that the book brings to bear in order to understand how Muslims see US society and their place in it. Finally, it lays out some of the limitations of the research—one of the most prominent of which is its focus on Muslims of South Asian or Middle Eastern descent and living in areas with relatively large numbers of Muslims, such as parts of New York, New Jersey, and Michigan.

Chapter 2 uses in-depth interviews with US Muslims to describe their views of what it means to be American or un-American. It finds that Muslims living in the US generally see Americanness in a positive light, and generally see themselves as American. In fact, some argued that anti-Muslim treatment and bigotry are themselves un-American. The chapter also highlighted considerable diversity, with Muslims disagreeing about whether positive American values were uniquely American and some highlighting racial components of American identity.

Chapter 3 highlights some of the tools that immigrants and their children deploy in attempting to navigate “Islamic” culture, “American” culture, and “ethnic” cultures on issues such as parenting, dating, and gender roles. It argues that those who have substantial literacy across multiple cultures (i.e. those who are “bicultural”) can more effectively navigate norms across cultural contexts. Further, it suggests that bicultural parents are better equipped to aid their children.

Chapter 4 analyzes some media coverage of Islam and Muslims. It argues that this coverage is often (though not exclusively) itself un-American

(or at least seen as such by some Muslim respondents) because it treats Muslim Americans as “other”.

Chapter 5 draws parallels between the current state of public concern about Islam with the mid-twentieth century scrutiny of communists and socialists by Senator Joseph McCarthy and his allies. It suggests that McCarthy’s program and some contemporary treatments of US Muslims are both un-American in their failure to live up to the ideals of the country.

The final chapter brings the bulk of the research (conducted between 2009 and 2014) into discussion with the political and social situation in 2016, when the book manuscript was completed. It also suggests a number of policy and civic proposals aimed at increasing cross-cultural understanding.

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