

Islam Is a Foreign Country

THE Islamic tradition looks kindly upon student-travelers, who are seen as pious seekers willing to sacrifice time, energy, resources, and personal comfort in pursuit of knowledge. It is in that spirit that many Muslims in America travel to the Middle East to learn “real” Islam, with the intention of returning to America to educate their fellow Muslim Americans at home. Though the numbers of Muslim Americans making this journey spiked in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Zareena Grewal argues that student-travelers have always been at the heart of American Islam, and that these travelers continue to shape American Muslim discourse.

Grewal provides an erudite history of prominent Muslim American student-travelers, interspersing her analysis with personal interactions with student-travelers in Syria, Jordan, and Egypt. In these vignettes, Grewal’s writing style soars, the stories are powerfully evocative and eloquently written. Grewal manages to level a critical and skeptical, but simultaneously compassionate and understanding gaze on her interlocutors; she captures the sincerity, hypocrisy, privilege, earnestness, wonder, disgust, amazement, and often uncritical thinking that these journeys entail. The vignettes capture ephemeral experiences of a generation of student-travelers seeking out a religiously authentic world that has ceased to exist, if ever it did.

Islam Is a Foreign Country is divided into two parts; Part I provides a narrative of Islam in twentieth-century America, intertwining the histories of two groups that constitute the largest numbers of Muslims in America: African American Muslims and Immigrant Muslims, the latter mostly from South Asia and the Middle East. Part II provides an ethnographic study of Muslim Americans traveling to the Middle East in pursuit of Islamic knowledge, and, in some cases, their return to the United States.

In chapter 1, Grewal offers a theo-

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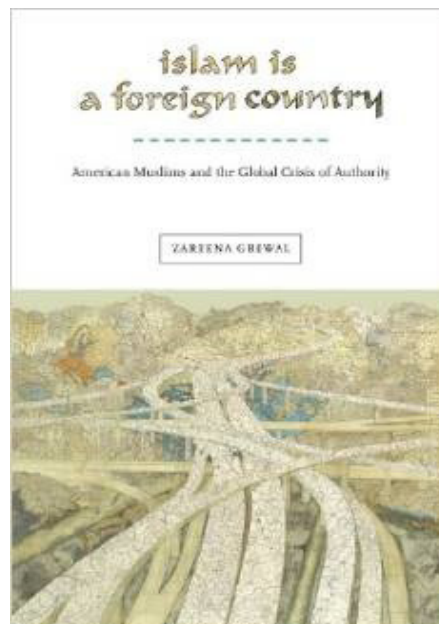
Aysha S. Chaudhry

journeys form a “counter public,” a term that describes groups of people in motion without an organized structure, yet serving a singular purpose.

Chapter 2 recounts the intertwined histories of African American and Immigrant Muslims in America, such that participants in the civil rights movements in the United States and anticolonialist movements in the Muslim world were aware of and in conversation with one another. Muslim civil rights advocates would travel to Africa and the Middle East to study under and strategize with anticolonialists therein, and in this way, Elijah Mohammad’s sons and Malcolm X are the intellectual predecessors of contemporary Muslim American student-travelers, whether African American or Immigrant.

Chapter 3 calls to attention three crucial developments in American Islam as a result of the Immigration Act of 1965: large-scale demographic shifts in the American Muslim community with the influx of immigrant Muslims; a re-ordering of Sunni Muslim leaders along class lines such that religious authority was accorded to Muslims educated in technical fields like medicine and engineering; and shifting constructions of race in a postcivil rights ethnic revival in the United States. Grewal likens the Muslim American longing for an “Islamic homeland” during this time to the Jewish American commitment to the state of Israel. Just as thousands of American Jews volunteered for the Israeli Army after the Six Day War, so too did hundreds of American Muslims volunteer to fight alongside American troops in Afghanistan in the 1980s and in Bosnia in the 1990s. Thus, prior to September 11th, “radical narratives of counter citizenship” actually Americanized Muslims (154).

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retical framework for her study of the global networks that connect Muslims in America to Muslim intellectuals in the Middle East, tracing the genealogy of such travel. Despite the long history of American Muslim student-travelers, and the formal and informal connections between U.S. mosques and educational institutions in the Middle East, Grewal emphasizes that student-travelers do not form a cohesive movement. Rather, these

Post-Islamism: The Changing Faces of Political Islam

THIS volume focuses on the transformations of political Islam in the Middle East in the past two decades. Editor Asef Bayat calls these transformations “post-Islamism.” To trace the history of this concept and discuss its problems, he wrote an informative introduction to the volume. In addition, he contributes two chapters on the changes of political Islam in Iran and Egypt. The other authors attempt to verify the applicability of this concept to other Muslim countries: Ihsan Dagi and Cihan Tugal to Turkey, Sami Zemni to Morocco, Noorhaidi Hasan to Indonesia, Joseph Alagha to Lebanon, Humeira Iqtidar to Pakistan, Stéphane Lacroix to Saudi Arabia, Abdelwahab El-Affendi to Sudan, and Thomas Pierret to Syria. None of these authors was able to clearly identify Bayat’s pattern of post-Islamism.

Bayat’s argument for post-Islamism relies on his assumption that fusion of secular values (rights, freedom, democracy) and Islam is possible. It is also based on his belief that post-Islamism can establish a “pious society within a civil nonreligious state” (p. x). The notion of post-Islamism has been criticized for its inability to clearly periodize the history of political Islam, even in Iran itself. In this country, a return of the conservatives since 2005 aborted any hope of a post-Islamist society in the near future. Another example would be Egypt where the Muslim Brotherhood took over power in 2012–13. Yet, it did not promote any secular values. It is evident that Islamism changes; however, it is not necessary that these changes should take the direction of progress rather than regress. If anything, what these changes tell us about the history of Islamism is that there are “successive Islamisms.” Furthermore, Middle Eastern countries differ in their political systems, cultures, and evolutions. One might hope to see Islamism evolving in Iran and Arab

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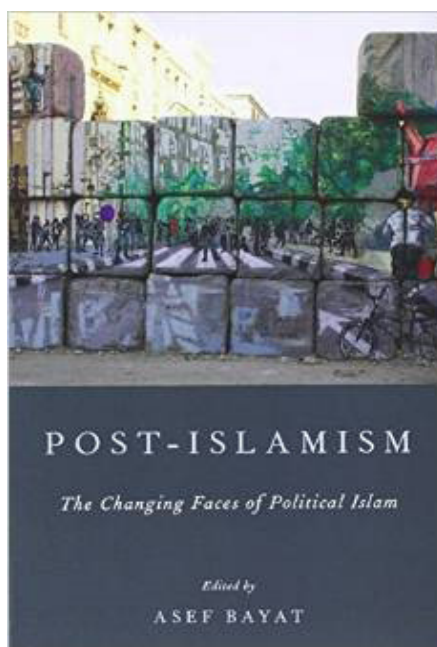
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countries in the direction of Turkish Islamism, but that could be mere wishful thinking. Turkey represents a different ethnicity, geography, continent, and economy.

One notable shortcoming of the book is its overestimation of changes in Iran. In the first place, Iran does not have an Islamist movement. Its passage from a secular authoritarian regime

to a theocracy occurred without one. Almost twenty years after Bayat’s thesis of post-Islamism, women still have to cover their hair under close surveillance of the religious police and the theocratic regime. Additionally, the rise of radical Salafism, a violent variant of Sunni Islamism, undermines the plausibility of the argument of post-Islamism. The victories of Islamist movements and parties in the elections of the so-called Arab Spring question further this argument. Increasingly, Islamism diffuses to other Muslim countries and prospers even in the West. Dictatorship seems to be the only thing that holds Islamism back, as can be attested in Algeria and Egypt. Even so, repression and failed development policies make Islamism more popular among the disinherited masses in the Muslim world.

That having been said, the volume is a compelling piece of scholarship. The authors largely succeed in highlighting the changing faces of Islamism in the Middle East. They disclosed some of the rhetorical and political strategies of Islamism to cope with internal and external transformations. They could not, however, persuade the reader of this thesis of post-Islamism.

Most authors cultivate an accessible and plain style, appropriate for the subject matter they treat, and even use a journalistic style at times. In general, the volume addresses scholars and students of Middle Eastern studies. Nevertheless, because the volume is a major critical approach of the history of Islamism, the reader’s prior knowledge of Islamist movements and the history of the contemporary Middle East is taken for granted. Hence, the volume cannot serve as a teaching manual for students. Readers who are interested in the transformations of religion and politics in recent decades might also find it stimulating.

(Sumber: *Journal of Church and State*, April 15, 2015)

