

## Islam is a Foreign Country: American Muslims and the Global Crisis of Authority

ZAREENA Grewal's *Islam Is a Foreign Country* offers a valuable contribution to the growing body of scholarship on American Islam by illuminating the motivations and pedagogies of American Muslims who seek Islamic knowledge overseas in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. Some of these "student-seekers," as Grewal calls them, pursue studies at universities like Egypt's famed Al-Azhar University, while others join study circles and communities of students who learn from a "traditional" scholar. The majority of Grewal's ethnographic informants sought knowledge in both spheres, and she conducted participant observation across a number of sites in this "network of pedagogies."

Coupling ethnography with historical-archival research, *Islam Is a Foreign Country* is an extensively researched, and at times lyrically written, study of a unique subculture in American Islam. This subculture of devout Muslim Americans is variously referred to as the "traditional" Islam or "neo-orthodoxy" movement (not to be confused with the Christian neo-orthodoxy movement of the twentieth century). The Muslim Americans going overseas to study with these religious scholars, many of whom are themselves American Muslims who undertook similar journeys in the 1970s and 1980s, are seeking more than concrete knowledge of texts and traditions. These journeys, Grewal argues, are also an effort to articulate an authentic Islam in the "mobile, heterogeneous, transnational community of believers" that comprises Muslim America. This effort to resolve dilemmas of "authenticity" and "religious authority" in American Islam has implications not only for this subculture, but also for Muslim American citizenship.

The book is organized into two

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### Penulis

Zareena Grewal

### Penerbit

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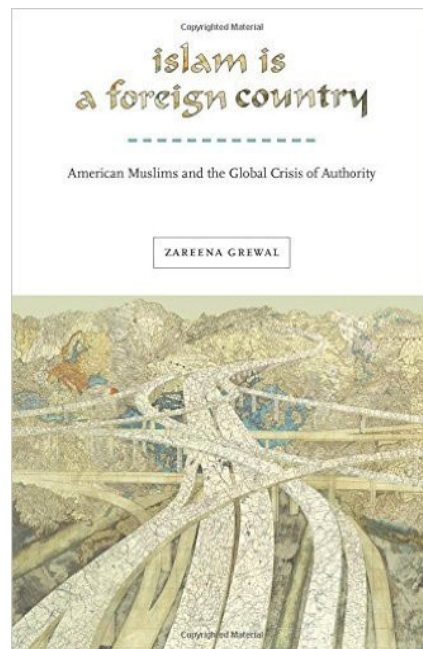
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parts. Based on the back cover synopsis of the book, readers may expect *Islam Is a Foreign Country* to be structured around Grewal's ethnographic data and analysis. While the book opens with a brief narrative of Grewal's own background, identity, and positionality, in the first half—"Part I: The Roots and Routes of Islam in America"—Grewal focuses on articulating the striving for

"religious authenticity" that is perennially at the heart of American Islam. While Part I is peppered with often poignant vignettes from the field, it is not until the second half—"Part II: Tradition Bound"—that Grewal shifts from a largely historical-archival framework to a more overtly ethnographic approach to the subject. Part II more fully engages and relies upon Grewal's years of fieldwork in Cairo, Damascus, and Amman with Muslim Americans seeking "authentic" Islam.

Grewal's analysis highlights a key paradox of the Muslim American student-seeker's experience. On the one hand, the student-seeker expends considerable effort and resources to journey overseas for knowledge that they believe will "reintroduce a common vocabulary of argumentation in their mosques," and "[help them] develop a local, American expression of Islam, safeguarded from the incoherence and instability of crisis." Indeed, Grewal's respondents framed travel to the "East" as an effort to access the timeless "Archive of Tradition" and bring it back to the United States so that they may resolve the "crisis of authority" in their own mosques.

However, *Islam Is a Foreign Country* problematizes this quest for "authenticity." Grewal unflinchingly demonstrates that these efforts all too often fail to translate into new kinds of mosque leadership or culture building. She concludes by asserting that external political pressures compel Muslim American leaders to acquiesce to the "good Muslim/bad Muslim" binary, thereby forgoing the complex negotiation of authentic Muslim American citizenship that this knowledge might facilitate.

While the book is overall a solid addition to the social scientific analysis of American Islam, it would have

further strengthened Grewal's analysis to more systematically consider how the student-seeker is largely an elite position. Many of her informants appear to come from relatively affluent families who are able to financially support this kind of travel, which can last for years. Given that one of Grewal's key findings is the small impact student-seekers end up having on their communities, it would have been appropriate to consider whether this is, at least in part, an artifact of class difference and class distance within the American Muslim community.

While I would not recommend using the entire book as a text for an undergraduate survey course in the sociology of religion, particularly one intended to be taught at an introductory level, selections of Part I offer an excellent, concise history of American Islam that would be a strong addition to such a course. At times, the book can be rather sprawling, and some undergraduates may find the writing style a bit dense and inaccessible. However, *Islam Is a Foreign Country* would be strong addition to an advanced undergraduate or graduate course focused explicitly on American Islam. Scholars of Islam, religious transnationalism, and/or American religion will also value its contributions.

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