

## SHI'ISM IN AMERICA

**New York University Press, New York, 2009, ix, 285 pages**

The recently published book *Shi'ism in America* by Professor Liyakat Takim, currently the Sharjah Chair at McMaster University, is a tremendous contribution to the study of Islam in the contemporary world. It is the first book that specifically attempts to provide an overview of the Shi'a community in the United States from documented arrival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to post-9/11 identity. The book begins with an introduction outlining the development of the Shi'a tradition within Islamic civilization. Chapter one on the early history of the community includes very interesting points, such as the account of the sole Shi'a survivor from the *Titanic* (p.13.). This introductory chapter establishes the basic genealogies for the earliest communities in the Great Lakes region.

Chapter two hones in on the ethnic diversity of the Shi'a communities in the United States and diversity of views within them. In this the Iranian-Americans are the interesting, many polarized between the exiles and their descendants from the Shah's regime articulating a secular Persian identity and the pro-Iranian regime Iranian-Americans who wish articulate an overtly religious Iranian identity (p.27). Some of the most original material in the book has to do with the Khoja communities in the United States. They are among the most organized and least researched of the Shi'a communities, they have an interesting tension in identities between an East African identity and South Asian heritage (p.36). The photographs in the book are from a shrine in a Khoja center in Canada (pp.66-68). References to their unique rituals such as the circular mourning rites performed during Muharram are provided in excellent ethnographic detail.

Chapter three attempts to place the Shi'a experience within the larger Muslim experience in the United States and relationship to the Sunni majority. While ethnic tensions within divide the Shi'a community, at university level many instances of antagonism by Sunni students have helped to create an American pan-Shi'a identity distinct and yet connected to the Sunni majority. The subtlety of the Shi'a as minority is not understood by most Americans as Takim later states, "...American Shi'is have been held equally responsible for the terrorist attacks even though none of the terrorists were Shi'is." (p.212) Special attention in the chapter is paid to youth culture, interesting hybridization has occurred from

interfaith marriages between Sunni and Shi'a Muslims, their offspring sometimes referred to in the vernacular as "Sushi" (p.82). The flexibility of identities is later expanded in the final chapter on the American Shi'a identity post-9/11.

Chapter four goes deep into questions of religious law and authority for Shi'a Muslims living in the United States far from the traditional centers of authority in Qum and Najaf as well as living in fundamentally different worlds from the reality of life in the Islamic heartland. The primary translation of legal opinions by scholars such as Fadlallah and Khamene'i on contemporary issues such as single parent in-vitro surrogates is in stark contrast to their image as extremists in the American media as related to political activities (p.165). This strong chapter attempts to sketch the extent to which the religious lives of American Shi'as are connected to the traditional hierarchy and the evolution of this relationship with advances in telecommunications and new media.

The final chapter, five, pays special attention to a hitherto understudied demographic, black Shi'as. Takim explores the question of their conversion and why Shi'a Islam is perhaps more of an authentic alternative based on the story of Karbala and their historical oppression in the context of American history compared to the Sunni majority tradition. The chapter concludes with the issue of 9/11 and how it has fundamentally changed the American Shi'a and more generally the evolution of American Muslim identity as "Muslim" and "Islam" have become the existential other for the American self-narrative.

The contributions of this book to the academic study of Islam in America are numerous- establishing the early history of the Shi'a in America, contemporary ethnographic notes on various communities, and placing the Shi'a within the larger socio-religious context of Islam and/in the United States. It provides a look into the voice of the Shi'a within the larger debates of defining an American Islam, hitherto silent. The book highlights the numerous tensions of being both Muslim and American as the state engages in two wars in Muslim majority countries and domestically Muslims are categorically defined and politically marginalized as insufficiently American. In our age of globalization, American Muslims are finding themselves wanting to define a separate American identity yet are constantly associated with and tied to the larger Muslim world. This book adeptly documents this tightrope walk of the Shi'a in America, how religious authority and identity are being reconstructed by second and third generation Americans as a double-minority.

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