Book Reviews

Schmidt, Garbi (2004) *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press. ISBN-1592132235.

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Garbi Schmidt's *Islam in Urban America: Sunni Muslims in Chicago* is an invaluable contribution to ethnographic research about Islam and Muslims in the West. It provides an insightful perspective on Muslims' life in the United States and refutes some of the most common stereotypes about Muslims.

A Danish researcher in the history of religions and Islamic studies, Schmidt developed her interest in the subject almost by chance during one of her visits to New York (p. 2). She realized that, although the United States as superpower 'clashes frequently with Middle Eastern countries and radical Islamic groups' (p. 13), Islam in America was a topic that few researchers had yet investigated'. This aroused her curiosity about the way American Muslims constructed their identity, and how their experience and life in the United States affected their interpretation of 'Islam' (p. 13). But the two main questions she tries to investigate throughout the book are the following: Can Islam be considered an 'American' religion? Can Muslims be considered a unified community? (p. 2).

Using ethnographic methodologies, Schmidt conducted an empirical study that concentrated on Muslim institutions and community organizations in Chicago as they are 'the focal points for community activity' (p. 10). The study revealed noticeable ethnic rivalries, conflicts and various forms of identification within the investigated institutions, including the Mosques (p. 162). As Schmidt makes it clear, notwithstanding American Muslims' belief in the ideal of one Umma, or a global Muslim community, '[e]thnic affiliation within the Chicago Muslim community was clearly still running strong' (p. 59). But while asserting that ethnicity is not as important a source of identification for the second generation of Muslims as it is for their parents, Schmidt stops short of concluding that ethnic affiliations will just melt away. In fact, 'it would be misleading to claim that the Muslim community in America will grow out of ethnic fragmentation when the next generation takes the reins of leadership' (p. 191).

Gender is another issue with which the Muslim community in America is grappling since Muslim women increasingly challenge traditions that limit their independence. Describing school girls who question their teachers' traditional discourse on the role of women, activist women in such community organizations as IMAN who use their own interpretation of religion to help abused women in the community (p. 44), and university student girls who wear *hijab* as a symbol of their gender and identity (p. 105), Schmidt presents a quiet but influential revolution inside the Muslim community. Many of these experiences and testimonies bring out how Muslim women are reinventing their gender identity and role to respond to their experiences within both their community and the secular American society. In brief, Schmidt succeeds by and large in answering the two main questions she raises in the introduction. She demonstrates that neither 'Islam' is monolithic nor the 'Muslim' community is homogeneous. She also affirms that Islam has become an American religion in the sense that 'the Muslim-American community practices and interprets its religion on the social context called the United States of America' (p. 103).

However, Schmidt fails to grasp the full complexity of identity formation among Sunni American Muslims. Her methodological and conceptual choices for studying the Muslim community clearly show that she presupposes that religion is the focal point in the life of every Muslim in the United States and that religious knowledge is the main component of their culture, a component that guides their life and experience[1]. Her use of the terms 'Muslim' and 'Islam'[2] as self-evident forms of reference becomes, thus, problematic. While Schmidt recognizes some major divisions within the Muslim community, such as those of ethnicity, gender and class, she does not identify the ideological divisions that permeate all Muslim communities, whether in the West or in majority-Muslim societies. Actually, it is possible to distinguish between a variety of ideologies that form the spectrum of political Islam, among which are Islamic modernism, radical Islamism, traditionalism and neo-traditionalism (see Shephard 1987, 308). Because the term 'Islam' becomes problematic when dealing with the ideological manifestations of this religion, the term Islamism is more appropriate 'to view Islam as an Ideology' (Ibid).

Accordingly, in comparing first to second Muslim generations, for instance, Schmidt points out that as 'second generations immigrants, young Muslim Americans faced the choice of forcefully declaring their heritage or giving it up altogether and assimilating into the American mainstream' (p. 129). It is clear here that identity is considered as a substance that one can hold to or lose altogether when encountering a different culture. While Schmidt finds space in her book to talk about a 'Hafiz' or Qur'anic school that comprises 25 students, she disregards a significant portion of young Muslims who do not attend Muslim schools. Schmidt advances blatantly that 'those young Muslims who disregard the faith of their parents are not the focus of this book' (p. 83), thus reflecting a refusal to recognize that there are other forms of 'Muslim' identity which do not necessarily fit into the model she presents.

To conclude, Schmidt's book provides an insightful analysis of revivalist Islamic ideology and discourses within Sunni American Muslims in Chicago. It presents a complex issue in a clear and accessible style, which can certainly help readers beyond academia obtain a first-hand insight into some important and controversial issues surrounding Islam and Muslims in the West. However, by claiming that it is trying to provide an understanding of 'Islam' and the Sunni American 'Muslim' community as a whole, Schmidt's argument weakens into a discourse that constructs the 'Muslim' community more than it really describes it in its full complexity. By not acknowledging and recognizing the ideological variety, along with the other variables of gender, nationality and ethnicity, that permeate all Muslim communities, her study ends up neglecting an important segment of the Muslim community in the US, and in the West generally. This is not just a methodological issue of sampling, but it goes to the heart of how Islam as a religion, practice and identity in the 21st century can be constructed and imagined. But these limitations notwithstanding, it is no justice to reduce Schmidt's book to an ideological text or 'Orientalist' argument. Rather, it should be read as a courageous attempt to understand part of the complex experience of being and living as a 'Muslim' in contemporary urban America.

Notes

[1] In a study on the history of Muslims and Islam in Britain, Humayun Ansari (2003, 12) rightly points out that 'Islam may, in some contexts, be the prime form of political and social identity, but it is never the sole form and is often not the primary one within Muslim societies and "communities" '.

[2] Maxime Rodinson, for instance, distinguishes between three levels of reference to Islam: the first level is the teachings contained in the sacred texts, mainly the Qur'an; the second consists of the various and conflicting interpretations of these texts; the third, refers to the way in which various ideologies have been lived and put to practice. Edward Said (1997, 57-58) adds a fourth level, that of the connotations the term Islam evokes when used or referred to in the West.

References

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