
Finding Mecca in America: How Islam is Becoming an American Religion

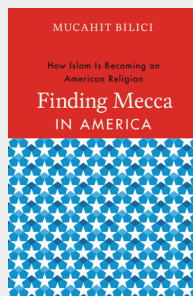
By Mücahit Bilici

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012, 272 pages, ISBN 9780226049571.

Reviewed by Karen Leonard

NEAR the end of this interesting book, the author characterizes his final chapter as “a series of interpretive judgments about the venture of Islam in its American habitat (p. 205),” and I find this true of the book as a whole. It began as a doctoral dissertation, and Bilici defines himself a cultural sociologist who takes an agonistic (combative, contesting) approach, an approach that “pays attention to the margins more than the mainstreams, to lived experience more than to floating abstractions (p. 21).” Yet, lengthy discussions of philosophy and social theory punctuate the chapters, enabling readers to debate the stated balance. Bilici also characterizes his work as ethnography, and while he draws on his work in Detroit, Michigan, as part of a team project and his internship with the Council of American-Islamic Relations, CAIR, in Washington, DC, the ethnographic material is limited, providing illustrations for various points Bilici wants to make rather than systematic evidence for them. He argues that his topics have escaped attention (or been taken for granted) or are postdiasporic, meaning they have not yet fully appeared above the horizon (p. 19), such as Abrahamic discourse and Muslim comedy. He writes that “what should be prized is not the sea of data but the wisdom of elucidation (p. 23),” and this personal interpretation is certainly worth reading.

Focusing on immigrant Muslims in the United States, Bilici mentions African American and



other indigenous Muslims occasionally and also utilizes material from Canada in his chapter on Muslim comedy (The Little Mosque on the Prairie TV show). He takes an optimistic stance, one that sees Muslims becoming part of the whole, developing “an American asabiyya (p. 10).” He defines asabiyya as “a solidarity that is not only a work of consciousness among individuals who choose to come together but a deeper sense of oneness within a collective individuality (p. 219, note 3; also 203 and 212).” Other writers on Muslims in America often define asabiyya in contrast to the umma, as a particular collective identity rather than that of the universal Islamic umma, for example, when discussing African American Muslims and their particular history and needs. However, Bilici tends to avoid issues causing conflict and disunity within the American Muslim community, such as those based on race or gender. Instead, he stresses processes of entanglement, appropriation, and inhabitation that he sees linking Muslims not only with each other in America but with American citizenship and civic religion. In his first part, “Cultural Settlement,” Bilici argues that unification or agreement on the qibla, the direction of Mecca, for orientation of prayers in American mosques symbolically unifies the disparate Muslim communities. He also argues that efforts to make English a Muslim language (rather than a resented language of missionaries and colonizers) and to make America a

land of Islam rather than a land of chaos (*dar al harb*) have been underway and are taken for granted by second-generation Muslims. In the second part, "Citizenship Practices," he focuses on the claiming of citizenship through the exercise of civil rights, of kinship through Abrahamic religious discourse, and of shared humanity through comedy.

He writes clearly and well, but others will disagree with some of his interpretations. He asserts that mosque communities are becoming more and more diverse and that today almost all mosques deliver most Friday sermons in English, but he gives no sources for these statements (p. 84). He asserts that African American Muslims prefer Arabic words like *al-Islam* to authenticate themselves as Muslims, while immigrants prefer English words such as "God" to authenticate their Americanness, again without evidence (p. 88). Chapter 3, on Muslim comedians, is insightful but probably overstates their impact and does not really distinguish between

humor based on ethnicity and that based on "Muslim culture" (p. 191). Bilici introduces the phrase "negative incorporation," apparently preferring it to Andrew Shryock's compelling publications on "disciplinary inclusion (p. 145)." Finally, he sees American Muslims resorting "to Abrahamic discourse/language rather than to that of liberal pluralism (p. 146)." He goes on to discuss Muslim involvement with interfaith dialogues, arguing in his conclusion that "Islam disappears from sight. The language of 'religion' gives way to that of 'faith,' which makes Muslimness a part of the unity of American civil religion (p. 202)." Some of us would see the alternative path of liberal pluralism, calling as he says for "de-emphasis of Judeo-Christianity (p. 164)," as more compatible with interfaith activism and more followed by Muslim political leaders and organizations today. In sum, Bilici has written a provocative and intelligent book about Muslims in America today, one that should stimulate discussion and further research.

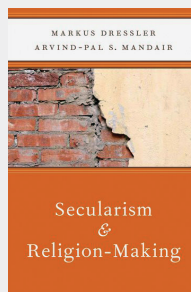
Secularism and Religion-Making

Edited by Markus Dressler and Arvind-Pal Mandair

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 288 pages, ISBN 9780199782925.

Reviewed by Nurullah Ardıç

RECENT scholarship in the sociology of religion has produced fresh perspectives on the understanding of religion and its inter-relationships with society. Largely influenced by post-structuralist social theory, these new perspectives call for a re-evaluation of existing theoretical and methodological approaches as well as empirical analyses, as reflected in the oft-used terms to describe their projects, including



"rethinking," "imagining" religion and its "invention" and "manufacturing" *a là* "invention of tradition". The term "religion-making" is one such concept that questions the traditional ways of studying religion (and its constitutive other, secularism). It refers to the reification by political and intellectual actors (with different motivations) of a religion (its beliefs and practices/rituals) based on certain taken-