

American Muslims: The New Generation, by Asma Gull Hasan.

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reviewed by Rev. Bassam M. Madany

One of the major topics claiming our attention at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the soaring population of the world. Our planet is now the home of six billion people. An equally important phenomenon is the migration to the Western countries of a great number of people from Asia and Africa. Some of our new neighbors may be followers of a major world religion. For example, Muslims are now quite visible in certain metropolitan areas of North America due to a great influx of immigrants from South East Asia and the Middle East. Islam has also gained quite a few converts, especially among African Americans. It won't be too long before Muslims overtake the Jewish population and become the second largest religious community in the USA and Canada. While there is no dearth of literature in English on Islam, most of these works are written by non-Muslims. This is why Asma Gull Hasan's book, American Muslims: The New Generation is of unique importance. We do need to listen to what American Muslims are telling us about their aspirations and hopes, as they develop roots in the New World.

After introducing herself in the Preface as an American Muslim, born in Chicago, and raised in Pueblo, Colorado, Miss Hasan launches into an effort that is sustained throughout the whole book, of giving the American public what she believes to be a true and accurate picture of Islam in general, and of American Muslims in particular. The author is pained as she describes what average Americans think of her faith and her people.

From what I've gleaned from a short lifetime of reading newspapers and watching television and film, I realize that most Americans would associate the word "Muslim" with black America and the Nation of Islam or with terrorism...

This book is about other Muslims like me, who are living as Americans and Muslims and figuring out their spirit and identity as we all go along. (Pp. 3,4)

In Chapter 8, the author describes what the agenda and the goal of American Muslims should be:

American Muslims' primary issue should be a push for greater understanding of Islam and Muslims among Americans. American Muslims should concentrate practically all their efforts on educating fellow Americans. (P. 154)

How successful is Asma Hasan in her effort to educate the general American public about Islam and American Muslims? While in some instances she has succeeded to educate and enlighten, yet her book suffers from a lack of objectivity as well as historical accuracy. In some places, it verges on propaganda.

The strong points of the book consist in the extremely frank manner the author describes the American Muslims. I am not aware of any other book on this subject that gives us such a vivid description of the life of American-born Muslim men and women. This book is therefore an invaluable tool in helping Americans to become acquainted with our new neighbors whose religious and cultural backgrounds are quite different, if not unique. On this point, I give the author a very high score.

Unfortunately, the book has several weaknesses that may be classified as one-sided descriptions of the history of Islam, its spread in the world, and its treatment of minorities. I say this not to distract from the value of the book, but to suggest that the goal of the author would have been enhanced, should she have absorbed more from the American culture when it comes to the telling of the story. In America, the entire story is told without embellishments. For example, we appreciate what the Founding Fathers believed that "all men are created equal," but we bemoan the fact that they were inconsistent because they tolerated slavery. It took decades and a civil war to abolish this inhuman institution.

Here are a few examples to clarify the above paragraph.

After the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, the Arab Islamic armies began the conquest of the world. Arab historians do not hesitate to use the word, "Futuh" which literally means, conquests, when they deal with the spread of Islam. The conquered peoples in the Middle East, North Africa and Europe had to choose between Islam and remaining in their previous religions. If they decided for the latter choice, they received the status of "Dhimmi." Etymologically this Arabic word meant "the Protected Ones;" actually it placed on Christians and Jews, certain burdens and limitations, like paying the poll tax. There is no hint of that in our book. While the author, who is a member of a religious and ethnic minority, enjoys all the freedoms of the American way of life, such privileges are not accorded to minorities living in the Household of Islam.

When dealing with the topic of slavery in Islam, the author states: "In fact, the Qur'an instructed Muslims to allow their slaves to buy their freedom through payment of an agreed-upon sum." But there is a dark side to slavery in Islam. The vast majority of the slaves that were brought into the Middle East from East Africa were castrated. They worked as eunuchs in the palaces of the rich and powerful. Bernard Lewis, the British scholar who taught both at the University of London and at Princeton University, has documented this subject in his book, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*. (New York: Oxford University Press) 1990.

One of the most important passages in the book deals with the problems young American Muslims are facing. Here is how Miss Hasan puts it:

We must distinguish between what is culture and what is religion. In order to be both American and Muslim, we are going to have to let go of certain aspects of our ethnic cultures, of Islam, and of our American culture. If we don't make some hard choices we'll end up being confused and in denial.

American Muslims don't have the cultural support system most Muslims all over the world have. Each Islamic country has its own set of Qur'anic interpretations, even a group of academics that set those interpretations, called the ulema. Here in the United States, Muslims are mostly flying blind, although we do have a national Fiqh Council, created by and consisting of some American Muslim leaders... However, we need to create our own support systems to do with our new approaches to the Qur'an. (P. 132)

The book ends on an optimistic note:

When a Muslim prays, it is between him or her and God; there are no clergy that must conduct the relationship. ... In Islam, individuals must read the Qur'an themselves and interpret. God will deal with them and their interpretations on Judgment Day. It is not the place of a Muslim to tell another that he or she has sinned against God; Muslims believe that only God can make such a pronouncement. (180)

Asma G. Hasan rightly describes the lack of "the cultural support system" that most Muslims have. But the problem is not so much the absence of this specific support system, important as it is. The real problem is that in the lands of Daru'l Islam (The Household of Islam), it is primarily the state that has always played the crucial role in seeing to it that the faith is practiced. A good example of the necessity of an Islamic regime for Muslims is illustrated in the fact that back in 1930, a Muslim Indian leader, Muhammad Iqbal, began to speak about the absolute necessity of creating a Muslim state within the sub-continent. Eventually the British Raj accepted this concept, and partitioned India in 1947, thus creating the Muslim state of Pakistan, alongside of India.

Theologically speaking, Islam like Orthodox Judaism is a legalistic religion. The "Shari'ah" plays a unique role in the life of the Muslim. But it is not an internalized principle. The obligations of the Muslim believer, known also as the Pillars of Islam, do require the cooperation, even the enforcement of the state, in order to enable the believers to live in harmony with the faith. During the 1400 years of Islamic history, Muslims have lived within their homelands. Even during the colonial era (19th and first half of 20th centuries), the laws governing the practice of Islam were respected by the foreign rulers.

The problem facing those Muslims now living in the secularized West is new and daunting. The Jewish experience in North America does not afford a proper paradigm, since the followers of this oldest monotheistic faith have learned, over the last two millennia, to live and partially survive in the lands of the Goyim. Muslims have had no such experience. Only the future will tell whether the large Muslim minorities in Western Europe and North America will remain basically Islamic.

In the closing part of the book as quoted above, the author overemphasizes the right of private interpretation in Islam. While it is true that Islam has no clergy similar to the Christian clergy, this does not imply that there is no body of Muslim religious leaders that decide on matters of faith and practice. Quite early in the history of the Muslim community, there arose a great need for the proper interpretation of the Qur'an. Commentaries were written by famous scholars whose writing are still authoritative today. Furthermore, the science of separating the authentic

from the spurious Hadith (Tradition) was created. Among the Sunnis, only four schools for the interpretation of the Shari'ah Law were and are still recognized as Orthodox.

After a relatively short period of theological ferment in the second Islamic century (800s AD), Muslims arrived at the consensus that the "door of Ijtihad, i.e., of theologizing, should be closed." The Muslim scholar who played a great role in the call for the cessation of theological discussions, Al-Ghazzali died in A.D. 1111. While there have been several calls for the "reopening of the door of Ijtihad" during the last one hundred and fifty years, this has not yet happened. And it is not likely to take place in the near future, due to the rise of Islamic radicalism. I doubt it very much if the leaders of the Islamic communities living in the West would "buy" our author's claim that Muslims have the right for a private interpretation of the Qur'an.

There are a few misspellings that should be corrected. The fourth pillar of Islam should be spelled "sawm" (the fasting during the month of Ramadan,) and not "swam" (P. 60) "Talikan" is a misspelling of "Taliban." (P. 108), the radical Muslim party that controls Afghanistan. 'Interpreneurs' should be spelled, "entrepreneurs." (P. 133)

I would like to congratulate Asma Gull Hasan for her venture in sharing with the American public her innermost thoughts about what it means to be both Muslim and American. I also hope that as she studies more about the history of both the United States and Islam, her future works would manifest more balance.