

## **American Muslims: Bridging Faith and Freedom**

*M. A. Muqtedar Khan*

*Beltsville, Maryland: Amana Publications, 2002. 194 pages.*

With a picture of a minaret superimposed on the Statue of Liberty, this book's cover is a striking introduction to what is inside. Like the Statue of Liberty that has acted as a beacon of freedom for wave after wave of refugees and immigrants, Khan argues that Muslims in America are beacons for the Muslim world, calling the *ummah* to an Islam of moderation, tolerance, and excellence; helping to bring the *ummah* out of its current malaise by engaging in *ijtihad*; and, the same time, bringing Islam to an ailing United States. And as the minaret and the Statue of Liberty also can represent poles of tension for Muslims (the love/hate relationship and the spilt personality syndrome that Muslims have toward the United States), Khan's book investigates the Muslim experience of living in the United States. He criticizes the United States for failing to live up to its promises of liberty for its Muslim citizens and inhabitants, as well as for Muslims around the globe.

*American Muslims* has eight chapters, each presenting a different angle of the relationship between being Muslim and being American. Khan sets the scene by discussing "Islam in America" (chapter 1), moves to "American Muslims and American Politics" (chapter 2), "American Foreign Policy" (chapter 3), and "American Muslims and American Society" (chapter 4). He then introduces the notion of an American Muslim perspective (chapter 5) and has a chapter on the compatibility between Islam and democracy (chapter 6). The 9/11 attack and its impact upon Muslims is discussed next (chapter 7), and the book ends with his perspective as an American Muslim on politics in the Muslim world (chapter 8).

Khan presents forceful and consistent arguments that are both thought-provoking and often refreshing in their honesty. He is not afraid to say out

loud what many Muslims say privately about the corruption and general mess in which the *ummah* finds itself. He is uncompromising in his call for Muslims to both shed and confront extremist Qur'anic interpretations, such as those propagated by Osama bin Laden. Moreover, he insists that since Muslims are living in the United States, they must make it their home. In other words, he strongly refutes the isolationist trend among Muslims by challenging them to make a difference here, in the society in which they live physically, instead of in the society of "back home," in which they live mentally. Khan argues for a resurgence of the tolerant and compassionate Islam that Muslims like to remember as part of their Golden Age, when they led the world in scientific and cultural achievements. He suggests that Muslims have much to offer the United States, such as a cure to racism, as long as we can stop the petty bickering, small mindedness, and intolerance that sometimes characterize our communities.

Each chapter is a collection of Khan's previously written columns or opinion pieces published in various forums, such as the *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*. Due to this, there were sometimes redundancies, as Khan had used his opinion pieces to discuss similar topics from different angles. The book needed a more thorough edit to mold together the collected articles more smoothly, though obviously this is not the author's responsibility. In addition, an index and a listing of when and where the various articles were published would have made the book more user-friendly.

*American Muslims* is an outstanding and insightful addition to the small but growing genre of books about Muslims in North America. I enjoyed the book immensely, as will other readers. Many Muslims who live in North America (and I suspect his arguments will find fertile ground in Britain, Australia, and other western countries) are looking for fresh ideas such as those presented in this book. Especially for those who were born and grew up here, but also for those who converted in adulthood, Khan addresses head-on the tensions and desires that come from the hybrid identity of being Muslim and being American.

Much of the traditional Muslim discourse places these two identities as opposites, as irreconcilable. Khan, however, charts a course to reconcile them: take the best in America and the best of Islam, and you will find that they match up. Khan does call for *ijihad*, but remains squarely inside of what we might consider "orthodox Islam." His is not a version of Islam that is watered down to suit western criticism; rather, he backs up his arguments with opinions from classical Islamic scholarship. Moreover, he is not afraid

to criticize the West for its faults and oppression of Muslims: American foreign policy toward Iraq, Palestine, Kashmir, and other Muslim areas; racism and discrimination against Muslims; and the assault on civil liberties since 9/11.

This book should be recommended to a non-Muslim audience. Khan's call for compassion and tolerance, as well as his critique of western society from a Muslim perspective, will be an eye-opener – in a good way – for many Americans.

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