

Muslims among us

by [John L. Esposito](#) in the [February 16, 2000](#) issue

*Islam in America*, by Jane I. Smith

Muslims are us!" Americans are realizing. In but a few short decades, Islam, the second largest of the world's religions, has emerged as the third and soon to be second largest religion in America. We can no longer simply speak about Islam and the West; today we must be equally aware of Islam in the West--especially the Muslim presence in Europe and America. Jane Smith, a prominent scholar of Islam and Christian-Muslim relations, provides an exceptionally clear and engaging introduction to the Muslim experience in America, an introduction that combines religion, history and biography.

The story is more complex and textured than many appreciate. Muslims (in particular Moors from Spain) may well have been among the early explorers. But the bulk of today's Muslims came to America in successive waves of immigration that began in the 19th century. Unskilled and skilled laborers, students and professionals came seeking jobs and educations and escaping the political turmoil of their home countries in Africa, the Middle East and South and Southeast Asia (especially Palestine, Lebanon, Iran and Afghanistan).

Smith's profile of Muslims and Muslim communities reveals the rich mosaic of diverse ethnic groups of immigrants and converts. The major branches of the Islamic community are here, Sunni and Shi'ite as well as Sufi (Islamic mystics). Muslims take seriously the obligation to preach and call (dawa) others to the straight path of Islam, as the Qur'an calls it. Muslim communities span the American landscape, from Cedar Rapids, Quincy (Massachusetts) and Dearborn to Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and New York.

Smith tells the story of the Islamic community's growth and diversity, problems and accomplishments. A unity based on the ideal of the equality of all believers is often strained by the realities of ethnic and racial diversity. While many mosques are "integrated," many cities contain diverse ethnic mosques and Islamic centers. Until recently, there was often little contact between the immigrant community and

African-America Muslims. Like many religious and ethnic groups before them, Muslims struggle with the issues of assimilation and integration.

How does a minority preserve its faith, identity and values while also becoming part of the broader secular and Judeo-Christian American society? While most Muslim parents send their children to local public schools, others create Islamic schools or home school them. The Quranic prohibition on the accumulation of wealth has raised significant questions regarding banking and investments and has also led to the creation of such things as Islamic mutual funds. Concern about religion and religious values has led to cooperative efforts between some Muslim and Christian groups on issues such as school prayer and social/family values.

There are striking parallels between the Muslim and the earlier Jewish minority experience. Both groups have struggled to preserve identity, to honor their religious observances and celebrate their holidays, and to deal with such social issues as education, dating, intermarriage and the taking of "American" names. Smith provides an informative chart, "Answer Key: Comparison of Islam, Judaism and Christianity," provided by the Council on Islamic Education, which will prove useful as America's children of Abraham--Jewish, Christian and Muslim--become more aware of their shared beliefs and values as well as their differences.

A significant number of Muslims are African-American, many of them descendants of slaves. The breadth and diversity of the African-American experience has often been shrouded by its more visible militant political and sports dimensions: from Elijah Muhammad's black separatist movement, the Nation of Islam, through key figures like Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, to Louis Farrakhan, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Hakeem Olijwan. Smith counters this narrow vision and offers an excellent overview of the origins and development of Islam in the African-American experience. The result is a better appreciation of the community's diverse personalities and groups. Readers will learn that the leader of the largest group is not Louis Farrakhan but Warith Deen Muhammad, the son of Elijah Muhammad, who has transformed his father's organization into an effective mainstream Muslim community that rejects racial segregation and black nationalism and is part of world Islam.

The family has always been central to Muslim faith and life. Redefining the status, roles and responsibilities of Muslim women is both a global and an American challenge and struggle. Smith's analysis gives insight into the major issues faced by American Muslim women: education, employment, child rearing, dress, marriage,

divorce and care of the elderly. Readers will come to appreciate many of the time-honored Muslim values regarding the nature and function of the family and to better understand the challenges that many parents face in raising children in American society.

Perhaps the clearest examples of the vitality and adaptability of Islam in America is its institutions. The role of the mosque, its functions and architecture, and of imams (religious leaders or leaders of public prayer) has been gradually transformed. At the same time, as Smith effectively demonstrates, new institutions such as the Islamic Society of America, the Muslim Student Association, the American Muslim Council and the Muslim Public Affairs Council have been created to address the religious, social and political challenges facing Muslims. These organizations respond to issues ranging from religious education and organization to voter registration and political lobbying.

For those who wish to understand the changing American religious landscape, understanding Islam and American Muslims is essential. Jane Smith is the perfect guide to start one on that path.