ForeWord Reviews

SOCIAL SCIENCES

Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam
Akbar Ahmed
Brookings Institution Press
978-0-8157-0387-7
(Jul 28, 2010)

With the curiosity and zeal of Alexis de Tocqueville, Akbar Ahmed and his team of assistants spent nine months, beginning in September 2008, visiting 100 mosques throughout the nation to assess what life is like for America's six to seven million Muslims, especially in the aftermath of 9/11. Ahmed is an engaging and perceptive tour guide who interviews Muslims from all walks of life: imams, rappers, businessmen and women, doctors, engineers, and refugees. Also included are two poignant interviews with Andre Carson and Keith Ellison, the first two Muslim US congressmen.

Ahmed is Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies at American University in Washington DC, the first Distinguished Chair of Middle East and Islamic Studies at the US Naval Academy, a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, and the author of *Journey Into Islam: The Crisis of Globalization*. His excellent credentials make him the ideal scholar to carry out this investigation. The book is infused with the author's spirit of fellowship as he builds bridges between non-Muslim and Muslim societies divided by misunderstanding and prejudice. He shows how Muslims live in fear of the "September 11 Syndrome," which characterizes Muslims as evil. Conversely, he includes interviews with people who reach out for reconciliation between Muslims and non-Muslims.

Most mosques welcomed Ahmed and his team, but heated discussion flared between the Jewish and Muslim audience about the Palestinians at a public forum he conducted. Some African-American Muslims ("the first American Muslims," according to the author), raged about being thrown into slavery centuries before 9/11 and its impacts. Despite enslavement, these African-American Muslims retained the Muslim faith their ancestors practiced in Africa.

An important feature is the author's narrative about American identity, and how Muslims, African-Americans, and Native Americans have fared accordingly. Minorities have had more opportunities when an accepting pluralist identity was prominent, but endured abuse and death when primordial (the belief that divine intervention has made the United States the greatest country) and predator (the Darwinian belief that white society must prevail over

“inferior” societies) identities dominated.

The author demonstrates that Muslim society is not monolithic and bitter schisms have resulted between those who accept American and Muslim culture and those who follow the Koran literally and adhere to Sharia law. Ahmed has written an important account that could help non-Muslims and Muslims create a more tolerant and welcoming nation.

Karl Helicher