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Reviews

Saied Reza Ameli, *Globalization, Americanization and British Muslim identity*

(Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, London, 2002)

Reviewed by Ali Fisher, Co-Editor, 49th Parallel

Western media coverage of global events has regularly portrayed Muslim beliefs and cultural identity in a negative manner. This negative image propounded by areas of the western media, has been compounded by the post 9/11 political climate in which politicians and commentators have regularly linked the threat of terrorist attacks to “Islamic fundamentalism”. Such a narrow focus on one version of Muslim culture has created a cultural space, and indeed a need, for research, and published work that gives a balanced approach to Muslim culture. Saied Reza Ameli has attempted to fill this gap within the context of Globalisation and British Muslim identity.

The book divides into three distinct sections; a survey of the theories of globalization, an overview of the construction of Muslim identity and the presentation of empirical data gathered in the Borough of Brent. This provides the work with its greatest strengths but perhaps its flaw; the first two sections provide background, while the author’s original research material is confined virtually to the final section. As such, a reader comfortable with the various interpretations of Globalization and the construction of Muslim identity will be interested primarily with this one section. However, the surveys of Globalization and Muslim Identity make the empirical data in the final section accessible to readers without specialist knowledge, thereby attempting to fill the cultural space, and meet the need for greater understanding of Muslim identity, that has been created by the narrow focus of the western media. Though challenging, this book has been constructed to ensure that it is accessible to the widest possible audience; its flaws as an academic work, particularly the length of the surveys, is its strength as a more general cultural work.

The accessibility of the work, however, does not detract from the quality of the empirical research and analysis. Saied Reza Ameli, by linking the overview of the construction of identity to the empirical data, demonstrates that Muslim identity is a diverse concept and one that is in a continuous state of evolution. He follows a framework that identifies not only the homogenisation resulting from globalisation but also its heterogenizing influence and draws out many apparent contradictions that are currently developing in a world increasing connected by media that allow almost instantaneous contact. An integrated global *umma* is identified as a potential result of globalisation and Ameli goes on to suggest that groups attempting to resist Americanisation through globalisation are in fact acting “in a ‘globalized’ manner themselves” (p. 225). In essence he argues that the diversity of British Muslim identity has resulted in British Muslims being influenced by Americanization while concurrently acting within a reverse globalisation movement.

The success with which Ameli has identified the diverse nature of Muslim identity, however, exposes a limitation in other areas; when not dealing directly with the diversity of Muslim identity he tends to refer to Muslims as one homogenous group. As such, there are occasions where points appear to undermine or confuse one another, but as the analysis is focused on research that is dominated by the contradictions of the individuals’ thoughts and actions a blurring of terms is inevitable.

Saied Reza Ameli should be commended for producing a work that contributes to understanding in many different respects. The survey of Globalisation is useful, and adds to the body of work already challenging the simplistic homogenising, Americanizing, image of globalisation. Instead it presents a much more complex and balanced representation of the contradictions inherent in the thoughts and actions of individuals being influenced to varying degrees by pressures acting on local and global levels. However, it is in the analysis of Muslim Identity where this book excels; in his challenge to the tendency of much of the Western media to focus on a narrow representation of Muslim identity Saied Reza Ameli demonstrates that British Muslim identity is “a notion that may be singular in linguistic terms, and which may be conceived as singular in theoretical terms also, but that turns out, on closer empirical inspection, to be an internally differentiated phenomenon” (p. 288)

Further research is needed in areas outside the Borough of Brent if this study is to extend to a true representation of *British* Muslims but as the work stands it offers a basis from which this line of research can develop, while fulfilling a need for greater understanding of Muslim identity in Britain.