

Muslims of the Heartland: How Syrian Immigrants Made a Home in the American Midwest

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The American Midwest is not a region typically associated with racial and religious diversity. This is in part because, in popular narratives about the US, urban coastal cities are diverse and small towns in “Middle America” are monolithically white and Christian. When ethnic and religious heterogeneity is acknowledged, it is seen as a new historical development based on mid-twentieth and twenty-first century immigration patterns. Muslims, perceived as quintessential outsiders, are perceived as recent and unwelcome interlopers in the religious fabric of America. Edward E. Curtis IV’s *Muslims of the Heartland: How Syrian Immigrants Made a Home in the American Midwest* calls our attention to both the inaccuracy of these assumptions, and the factors that contribute to these inaccuracies in the first place. Based on archival research, Curtis weaves together vivid portraits of the deep roots that Arab Muslim immigrants have in the Midwest, dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century. By uncovering these erased narratives of Muslims in the Midwest, Curtis

provides readers with a powerful corrective to commonplace assumptions about immigration history in the United States.

The Muslims of the heartland refers to the Ottoman-era immigrants hailing from Greater Syria, which includes modern-day Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, who settled in cities and in rural regions of the American Midwest. While many of these Ottoman-era immigrants were Christians who were escaping persecution, a sizeable portion were also Muslim. The book is divided chronologically into two sections: 1900 to WWI and the 1920s to WWII. Geographically, it spans Muslim communities from North and South Dakota and Iowa to Michigan and Indiana. Curtis presents portraits of these Muslim Midwesterners that are analogous to white settlers of the Midwest in the early twentieth century: they were homesteaders on dispossessed indigenous land that had been sanctioned for settlement by the federal government through the Dawes Act of 1887. While stating that these Muslims were simply seeking better lives for themselves after becoming victims of their circumstances back home, Curtis writes “like other settler myths, their [Syrian] pioneer stories established how hard they worked to put down roots in America, to become native to America by participating in the most American of things, the settlement and cultivation of Indigenous peoples’ land” (p. 23). By drawing out these parallels between Syrian Muslim settlers and European Christian settlers that dominate most historical narratives of the region, Curtis shows us that this book does not seek to *rewrite* Midwestern history, but rather to situate Syrian Muslims into a familiar one.

In addition to homesteading, Syrian migrants across the Midwest were also industrial workers and peddlers; they started businesses and fought in the US military. They retained their culture and customs through building religious and cultural institutions and through establishing specialty ethnic grocery stores, even as they also became “American.” Indeed, Curtis shows that ethnic-religious congregations actually served as a “vehicle of assimilation” for Syrian Muslims as they were centers of community across sectarian and religious traditions (p. 12). These community centers enabled Syrian Muslims to put down roots in America while preserving their own ethnic traditions. The role of these religious

congregations to facilitate Syrian communities' establishing roots in America is interesting to consider in light of xenophobic assumptions that Islam is antithetical to American values. The notion that assimilation did not have to entail the relinquishing of religious traditions and local customs was well illustrated in an example where a local Cedar Rapids newspaper includes respectful and informative coverage of Ramadan. This same paper also featured Levantine cuisine alongside Jewish and Italian delicacies in an article about the importance of retaining ethnic recipes and dishes, which can eventually become incorporated into the American palate (pp. 70-75).

Instances of positive news coverage, however, does not indicate that Syrian immigrants did not face anti-Muslim discrimination. Indeed, Curtis offers readers portraits of conflict—sometimes violent—between Christian and Muslim Syrians. He reminds us that in the early twentieth century, citizenship was legally tied to whiteness, and Muslims routinely faced Islamophobia on the individual and structural levels. Whiteness was more readily accessible to Levantine Christians, who often made the case for their own whiteness by positioning themselves against their Muslim counterparts. In these narratives of anti-Muslim discrimination, Curtis offers a new approach to thinking about US Islamophobia that is rooted in social histories, adding to the existing literature that examines legal discrimination and citizenship cases. In so doing, *Muslims of the Heartland* offers readers a nuanced portrait of anti-Muslim sentiment in the twentieth century that reveals that patterns of discrimination were not uniform across the board and differed across region and time period. For example, whereas Muslims in Cedar Rapids were accepted as white, those in Michigan City were legally discriminated against in the public sphere before World War I.

For Curtis, the project of uncovering the erased histories of Syrian Muslims in the Midwest is both a professional and personal pursuit. As one of the pioneering scholars of Islam in America, Curtis' prolific academic oeuvre has been in the service of telling Muslim histories and establishing an accurate historical record. This broader thread is woven throughout *Muslims of the Heartland* as well. Yet, it stands out in one distinct way in its narrations of these family histories because it is

also his own family history. A native of Southern Illinois, Curtis begins the book with a story about his maternal grandmother, who was not Muslim but likely descended from Muslim ancestors who immigrated from Ottoman Syria. He draws on his own family accounts to further illuminate and reconstruct the lives of a select number of individuals and communities.

By offering readers these rich individual narratives, Curtis sheds light on some of the ways that these stories came to be obscured in the first place. For example, Joe Hassan Chamie, a Syrian Muslim from Sioux Falls, fought in WWI, and died after being wounded in battle in 1918. However, he is buried underneath a cross in an American cemetery in France. The US military did not recognize Muslims at the time, and therefore service members were all buried underneath a cross unless they were Jewish. Given that joining the military offered Syrian Muslims a pathway to American citizenship, Chamie was one of many Muslims whose sacrifices to the United States were written out of history. Reflecting on the erasure of Chamie's Muslim identity, Curtis writes, "We Midwesterners have become invisible to ourselves. To rediscover the diversity of our origins, we must adopt the mindset of an archaeologist...we must assume that the evidence of our shared past is hidden in plain sight, right beneath our feet, in the heartland" (p. 42). Muslim invisibility in the military shifted by WWII, when fallen Muslim soldiers were accurately identified through proper Islamic rituals.

Other notable narratives that Curtis brings to the surface are those of Syrian Muslim women who played significant public roles in institution building and communal life. Readers learn about renowned activist Aliya Ogdie Hassan, from Sioux Falls, whose personal biographies are preserved at the Smithsonian. Hassan worked through the Great Depression, was married and divorced, and worked with Malcolm X. In Cedar Rapids, there were several women leaders such as Fatima Igram, Negebe Sheronick, and Hasibe Aosseyy who organized the women in their community to raise funds to build a mosque. These women raised their children, worked in their local businesses, and even partook in public Qur'an recitation at the mosque (p. 152). In other words, Syrian

Muslim women were key players in the preservation of their religious and ethnic traditions.

Muslims of the Heartland will appeal to both students and scholars of religion, American Studies, Middle East Studies, and ethnic studies—and would work well in a range of course syllabi. At the same time, as Curtis notes in his introduction, the book is intentionally written in accessible language and would also be appealing for crossover audiences who are interested in broadening their understanding of Midwestern American history and American immigration in the first half of the twentieth century. For this reason, it could also be adopted for use in secondary education as a part of a US history curriculum. *Muslims of the Heartland* offers readers a powerful corrective to the assumptions that dominate commonplace narratives about the Midwest as a region that is monolithically white and Christian. Moreover, not only does Curtis deftly situate Syrian Muslims within American Midwestern history, but he also shows us the complexity of Muslim life throughout the region. In this way, the book reads as a refreshing celebration of Muslim and Arab heritage and culture in America, as opposed to a plea for Muslim acceptance in a xenophobic climate that is hostile to immigrants.

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