

# RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

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## *ISLAM IN URBAN AMERICA: Sunni Muslims in Chicago.*

By Garbi Schmidt. Temple Univ. Press.  
242 pp. \$64.50 (hardcover), \$22.95  
(paper)

Perhaps seven million strong, the Muslim population of the United States continues to mystify most Americans, a situation that fuels prejudice on the part of non-Muslims and fear of marginalization on the part of Muslims. Any study of the group is therefore welcome. Garbi Schmidt, a senior researcher at the Danish National Institute for Social Research in Copenhagen, spent a year and a half in the 1990s doing fieldwork among Muslims in Chicago. She has produced a straightforward, low-key account, with no grand theoretical frame. Readers must come to their own conclusions—a sensible approach in the current climate.

Looking at Islam through the microcosm of the Chicago community, Schmidt considers two related questions: After a century-long encounter with America and with American religion, is Islam simply a temporary transplant that will never take root? And do Muslim Americans constitute a single community? These questions are central to the future of Muslims in America. If Islam becomes deeply woven into the nation's religious fabric, Muslim Americans will gain public acceptance and a big stake in the country's future. And if Muslims establish themselves as a unified voice in American society, then, given their potential numbers plus their economic and educational assets, they may make a substantial impact at many levels.

As Schmidt suggests, the blending of Islam with contemporary American life today is especially significant. When I visited the Averroes Academy, a Muslim school in Chicago, I saw children learning about computers as well as Islam. The girls wore traditional Islamic dress, but the boys wore ties. The multinational background of the community impressed me, too: There were Muslims from Bosnia and the United States as well as India, Pakistan, and elsewhere in South Asia. Indeed, more than 400 people

from nearly every ethnic background in Chicago, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, attended the academy's annual dinner.

But the cultural integration is far from complete. Schmidt reports that in 1997 and 1998 the FBI questioned and, by some accounts, harassed Arab Muslims in Chicago about their alleged affiliation with the Palestinian-Islamist movement Hamas. "Federal investigations fueled mistrust and feelings of social exclusion, especially because most of the community tended to see the investigations solely as products of prejudice," writes Schmidt. "Although the FBI may have had serving American interests as its goal, one consequence of its actions was that an entire community found itself intimidated, misrepresented, and isolated." And this was *before* September 11. Schmidt's solid study is a laudable step toward ensuring that such misunderstandings do not recur.

—AKBAR S. AHMED

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## *NATURAL LIFE:*

### *Thoreau's Worldly Transcendentalism.*

By David M. Robinson. Cornell Univ.  
Press. 234 pp. \$24.95

In a bookstore the other day, I saw a desk journal whose cover proclaimed, "Go confidently in the direction of your dreams! Live the life you've imagined.—Thoreau." Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) might be spinning in his grave at the thought of being cataloged with calendars and gift books, but the desk journal does reveal something: Nearly a century and a half after his death from tuberculosis, Thoreau lives.

Think of the phrases that have entered our lexicon. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation"—more relevant than ever. "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer." And the refrain repeated by every bar mitzvah boy, "Beware of all enterprises that require new clothes." Why is Thoreau read and remembered long after the reputations of most of his contemporaries have faded? What is there about this