Moving the Mountain: Beyond Ground Zero to a New Vision of Islam in America

Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf
New York: Free Press, 2012. 240 pages.

Few are as qualified as Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf to articulate a vision for American Muslims. He has been involved with several major institution-building projects to address the concerns of American Muslims; his wife, Daisy Khan, has also participated in some of these projects. Since 1983, he has served as imam of New York City's al-Farah Mosque and thus is rather familiar with the achievements, struggles, and diversity of the American-Muslim experience. His involvement with one of this community's most formative post-9/11 undertakings, the Cordoba House Project (also known as Park 51 and the Ground Zero Mosque), attracted national and international attention.

Several other American Muslims have written about the community. For example, James Yee's *For God and Country* (2005), Sumbul Ali-Karamali's *The Muslims Next Door* (2008), and Asma Nomani's *Standing Alone in Mecca* (2006) have experienced modest mainstream success. Mucahit Bilici's *Finding Mecca in America* (2012) is a notable, although a more academic, work. Imam Rauf's book belongs to the first genre. Aimed at a general audience, it provides a good understanding of such issues as jihad and gender relations in Islam, the Shari'ah, and American-Muslim identity formation.

The author's key idea is that American Muslims are on their way to creating a unique identity, one that is true to the spirit of Islam and also fits into American cultural norms. If fully realized, this identity would have three major potential benefits: making the United States more tolerant and just, healing the wounds between it and the broader Muslim world, and inspiring Muslims everywhere to reclaim Islam from the extremists. According to Rauf, this identity can only be fully realized if Muslims have a good understanding of Islam, uphold American laws, and engage in the country's ongoing multi-faith projects.

This is a bold and inspiring vision. To substantiate it, the author starts with the basics: terms and meanings. He argues that Muslims should consider themselves as "believers" in a larger sense of the word, for this is both true to Islam's spirit and would allow them to clarify their deep connection to Jews and Christians. For Rauf, when Muslims as believers reclaim their religion, they will find that it is composed of three layers, each of which builds on the other: *islām* (surrender [to God]), *īmān* (faith), and *iḥsān* (virtue). Seeing Islam a "set of actions that we do, not a concept in which we believe" (p. 37), he writes that "I would like to see a return to our original tradition of calling ourselves *believers*, not merely *Muslims*, and demanding of our community a serious level of faith commitment and ethical virtue" (p. 44).

After this conceptual mapping, Rauf discusses the meaning of the Shari'ah in terms of its overarching objective: to help people achieve their best in this world and the hereafter. Diverging from the literal view, he further builds his argument on the "objectives of the Shari'ah" (*maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*), which identifies six rights that it protects and promotes: life, religion, intellect, property, family, and dignity. The author does not view the Shari'ah as something static, for "*when a Sharia law is shaped by context, and the context changes, the law may change*" (p. 61). This flexible reading allows him to reject the traditional punishment for apostasy (execution) and advocate the abolition of capital punishment.

In the rest of the book, the author engages with four major debates.

- *Religious diversity.* For Rauf, the common roots of the Abrahamic tradition established a strong bridge among Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Islam also accommodates a broader diversity than "the People of Book." To this end, he reminds the readers of a well-known Islamic tradition that God sent prophets to every nation. This view creates space for non-Abrahamic faiths based on the understanding that they also contain truths revealed by God's prophets. Although Rauf believes that atheists should

be respected because of the centrality of religious freedom in the Shari'ah, he cautions against militant atheism on social and political, as oppose to religious, grounds.

- *American-Muslim women*. Rauf emphasizes the importance of women in creating a unique American-Muslim identity. He states that this priority reflects the Prophet's promotion of women's rights and the role of major female figures during Islam's formative period. He gives several examples of how American-Muslim women have worked to empower their peers at home and abroad on issues such as combating extremism, female genital cutting (his choice of term), and domestic violence. Rauf also examines two controversial issues by arguing that (1) the Qur'an asks for modesty instead of a particular dress code and that (2) Muslim women can marry non-Muslim men if the husband respects his wife's religious freedom and he believes in God and accepts "Muhammad as a prophet of God, even if not necessarily the prophet he follows" (p. 132).
- *Combating extremism*. Rauf states that all forms of political and religious extremism should be met and countered with a non-violent strategy similar to the civil rights movement. For this strategy to succeed, American Muslims should build a multi-faith coalition with Jews, Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and atheists, thereby forming "a global movement of moderates." In his vision, once this movement is formed it should both combat extremism and work toward advancing "women's rights, economic justice, and democracy" (p. 150).
- *Religion and politics*. Since 9/11, Rauf has spent considerable time and energy on the Shari'ah Index Project (http://www.cordobainitiative.org/2011/10/shariah-index-project/), which seeks to measure and compare "states' adherence to Shariah" (p. 164). He holds that an Islamic state is based on divine sovereignty, a concept which he then demystifies by arguing that such sovereignty requires the collective will of the people and the supremacy of the Shari'ah. In his opinion, representative democracy is the best mechanism by which to realize the former. Regarding the latter, he writes that the Islamic scholars who collaborated on the aforementioned project used the standard that a state should "deliver justice, equality under the law, and, as best it could, the objectives of Shariah" (p. 167). In other words, divine sovereignty amounts to representative democracy, checks and balances, and the protection of human rights. Following this line of reasoning, Rauf believes that the United States satisfies the requirements for divine sovereignty because it meets these conditions. He therefore considers it to be a Shari'ah-compliant nation: "American Mus-

lims fulfill the obligations of Shariah by virtue of our respect for American law and tradition" (p. 172).

The book has several strengths: The language is accessible, Arabic terms are used sparingly, and a glossary of these words is provided. The author's use of anecdotes and personal stories provides a reflective and narrative character to the text and thus increases its readability. Rauf's ability to explain such complex issues as the Shari'ah is commendable. His good grasp of theological issues distinguishes this book from such other American-Muslim writers as Yee, Ali-Karamli, and Nomani, all of whom also wrote for the general public but lack Rauf's authoritative voice on theology. Several of his discussions appear particularly thought-provoking and courageous: Islam is "action," Muslims are "believers," the United States is a "Shari'ah-compliant" nation, Muslim women can marry non-Muslim men, and Muslims should support the abolition of the death penalty.

Some bibliographical information or in-text references to other authorities would have been beneficial. First, since many of the arguments will be new to Muslims and non-Muslims alike, a list of additional sources and readings would have been useful. Second, for a book about American Islam there is little reference to survey data summarizing this particular community's attitudes and beliefs. The inclusion of anecdotes and personal stories makes the book accessible, although relying on them exclusively invites the reader to question whether Rauf's progressive interpretations enjoy broad support within the community.

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