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Without Forgetting The Imam: Lebanese Shiâ€™ism In An American Community



Synopsis

Without Forgetting the Imam is an ethnographic study of the religious life of the Lebanese Shi'ites of Dearborn, Michigan, the largest Muslim community outside of the Middle East. Based on four years of fieldwork, this book explores how the Lebanese who have emigrated, most in the past three decades, to the United States, have adapted to their new surroundings. Anthropologist Linda Walbridge delves into the ways in which politics and religion have converged as the Lebanese Shi'i community has remade its identity and accommodated itself to a new environment. She captures a broad picture of religious life within the realm of community living and within the mosques which have proliferated in Dearborn. Walbridge explains how Shi'ites, affected in one way or another by Islamic revivalism, have brought different notions of how their religion should be expressed and carried out in America.

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Customer Reviews

Without Forgetting the Imam is an ethnographic study of the religious life of the Lebanese Shi'ites of Dearborn, Michigan, the largest Muslim community outside of the Middle East.

Linda S. Walbridge received her Ph.D. in anthropology from Wayne State University. She is a visiting professor at Indiana University.

Aside from two pioneering anthropological works done in the 1960s, a completely different era from

the present one, Walbridge has written the first book-length study of an immigrant American Muslim community. And she's picked perhaps the most interesting one of them, Dearborn, Michigan, a town of nearly 100,000 population that is mostly Arab and largely Muslim. It's a place where "recently arrived villagers [from Lebanon] can manage adequately . . . without ever tasting a hamburger or uttering a word of English." Walbridge is not only a keen observer of Dearborn but brings the added insight of having earlier lived in Lebanon itself, and so can compare the peoples she encounters in the suburbs of Detroit with their relatives back home. Her years of research in 1987-91 and "vast amounts of time" spent with the subjects of her study have permitted a subtle and convincing portrait of a people still very much outside the mainstream of American life. Take the distinctly Shi'i institution of temporary marriage (mut'a in Arabic): Walbridge tells of a young man, hoping for sex with a woman without breaking the rules of his religion or forming a permanent bond with a non-Muslim. He propositioned a number of American women with the prospect of a temporary marriage and "all of them laughed at him except one," and she ended up converting to Islam and getting permanently married to him. Among the most valuable information here is a careful review of Islamic practices; Walbridge finds the avoidance of pork to be most widespread and the full complement of prayers perhaps the least. *Middle East Quarterly*, December 1998

One of the best books I have read on Arab-Americans, it has been singularly helpful for myself personally. Walbridge writes from her extensive experience and study in the Lebanese population in Dearborn, MI, home of the largest concentration of Arabs in the world, outside the Middle East. I read this book shortly before moving to Dearborn, and it helped me understand the community I was moving into and adapt to it much quicker. She was able to make many inroads into the neighborhoods, as a woman in a semi-closed society, and as a Western woman interacting with Imams and men. She goes into detail on the history and development of the various Muslim denominations, and shares details on the minutiae of the culture that those in other places in Michigan, including West Dearborn, would be otherwise completely unaware of. Examples of excellent research- scholarly and ethnographic- include stories on the wedding/engagement traditions and the Shi'i tradition of muta'a. Her use of Arabic words throughout (defined initially) is particularly helpful. For those who do not live in Dearborn, this is still an excellent study/ethnography on the situation of Arabs in America in general. It will give great insights for those studying the situation of Muslims and Arabs. It is also a helpful book for the layman interested who wants to get a grasp on the people of the now second-largest religion in America. Read this book to get past the media stereotypes of a violent people, and the stereotypes of Arab-Americans in particular.

Walbridge brings them alive as humans and Americans, with different traditions and beliefs.

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