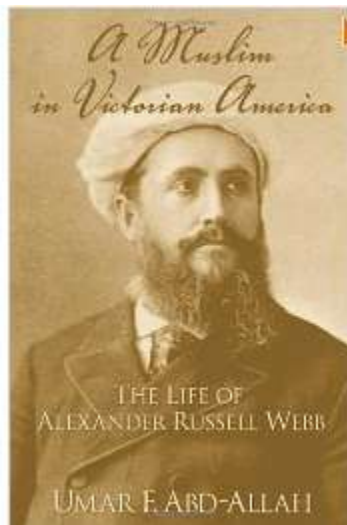


A Muslim in Victorian America, The life of Alexander Russel Webb

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Usually when we think of Islamic history, the pieces that come to our mind are the Middle East, Africa, or the Sub Continent. As Muslims in the West, it seems like our history in North America is relatively new or just being formed. With further research it shows that Muslims have deep roots here, in our new home. The historical mosques in the prairies of Canada and America, the coming to the new world by the Chinese Muslims, or our African brothers and sisters who were ripped from their homeland to become slaves in Colonial America, are just some of the example of our rich heritage.

Many of us are familiar with the earliest mosques in Edmonton, Alberta and Ross, North Dakota¹ but not too many of us know much more when it comes to the history of American Islam. There are several examples of Muslims that not only shaped the North American Muslim identity but also the North American identity too. One of them is Alexander Russell Webb. There are a couple of books written on his life, including a biography written by Dr. Umar F. Abd-Allah titled “A Muslim in Victorian America.”

The book is quite intriguing and goes into great detail of every part of Webb’s life, from his upbringing in New England’s Hudson Valley, his many diverse occupations, his travels to the Philippines and India, his dialogue with his many contacts and of course his spiritual life. One of the more interesting chapters in the book was Passage to India, in which Dr. Abd-Allah does such an amazing job at describing the travels of Webb throughout India that it feels like we are right there in the audience listening to one of the numerous lectures Alexander Russell Webb would give. Another chapter that is very fascinating is Manhattan Beginnings. After Webb had finished travelling and gaining both knowledge and monetary backing, he began to spread the message of Islam in New York City. He had started one of the first Muslim organizations in North America, called the American Propaganda.² Actually one of the buildings in which he ran the organization and in which had a mosque, is today still intact in the Chelsea neighbourhood of Manhattan.

Webb was a great speaker and excelled in giving Islam an appropriate image, to the point that even Samuel L. Clemens (Mark Twain) had mentioned him as a Missouri Moslem in “Tom Sawyer Abroad.” He was even mentioned in the New York Times when he had arrived from India; they described his office and gave him the opportunity to talk about his mission. He represented Islam at Chicago World’s Fair and First Parliament of Religions in 1893.

Dr. Abd-Allah gives us plenty of interesting stories from Webb’s life, including the dialogue between himself and Ghulam Mirza Ahmad. This was before Mirza Ahmad started his Ahmadiyya movement. Their correspondence included letters about the basic elements of Islam and had no evidence of Webb being Ahmadiyya.

¹ The mosque in Ross, North Dakota is labeled as “the first American mosque,” it held prayers in 1920, while the more famous mosque in Cedar Rapids, Iowa opened in 1922. Alexander Russell Webb’s mosque in Manhattan held prayers before both mosques, in fact seven years prior (See Dr. Nyang’s *Islam*).

² Propaganda in Webb’s time had a positive meaning

Another captivating story is about how Webb came to Islam. It is an interesting example of how people become Muslims and how they try to speak to everyone to see which path is right for them. Webb started the first Muslim publishing company in North America. From there he printed his newspaper Moslem Word and his many journals. One of the lessons we can take from Webb is his determination to get things done and always thinking positively while completing a task. He had many struggles to overcome to spread the message of Islam and May Allah (SWT) reward him for his perseverance.

Although the novel may be at times a little dry, Dr. Bad-Allah provides many details including dedicating a quarter of his book to footnotes, citations, and his bibliography. "A Muslim in Victorian America," is a great book for anyone who is looking for more information about Muslims and their heritage, especially for those who love history.

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