Religion & Philosophy

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

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

oddball loner who never married and who probably had more communication with the muskrats of Walden Pond than with humans?

From the time he was a student at Harvard College, Thoreau understood that the United States was breaking free of the intellectual chains of Europe. He took his mentor Ralph Waldo Emerson's spirit of self-reliance and built on it. He also built on the philosophy of transcendentalism—the intellectual movement that celebrated heightened consciousness, the power of inspiration, and the divinity of the individual—and melded it with environmental concerns and abolitionism. Individualism, anti-materialism, environmentalism: No wonder we still read him.

In this critical study, David M. Robinson of Oregon State University painstakingly describes the unfolding of Thoreau's life and ideas. We meet the spiritual ancestors of the earliest transcendentalists, men such as Orestes Brownson and Victor Cousin. We watch Thoreau blossom under Emerson's guidance. And we learn, tantalizingly, about a relationship between Thoreau and Emerson's wife, Lidian, that seemed to grow stronger during Emerson's long trips to England. In one journal entry, Thoreau addresses an unnamed "Sister," whom some scholars believe was Lidian: "You are of me & I of you I can not tell where I leave off and you begin." Henry Seidel Canby and other critics have maintained that Thoreau was in love with Lidian Emerson.

Robinson hesitates to speculate about such matters. Instead, he devotes himself to explicating observations that stand perfectly well on their own, and in the process often smothers Thoreau's vivid, concrete language beneath his own clunky prose. "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation," for instance, is followed by this from Robinson: "They have become convinced that their financial entrapment is inescapable, and thus have lost any larger sense of the purpose of life." Readers who seek a connection with Thoreau would be better off turning to *Walden*, *Civil Disobedience*, or *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*.

—Debra Bruno

BORN AGAIN BODIES: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity.
By R. Marie Griffith. Univ. of California Press. 323 pp. $55 (hardcover), $21.95 (paper)

When Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee's weight-loss crusade gained national publicity last spring, so did the deep-fried traditions of his Southern Baptist heritage. In his weekly radio address to one of the nation's fattest states, Huckabee told a story about schoolchildren who were asked to display symbols of their faith at show-and-tell: "The Baptist boy brought a casserole."

Streaks of religion do indeed run through our food and fitness culture, and R. Marie Griffith thinks it's time we cop to it. The metaphor of salvation through slimness, the need for sacrifice, the guilt associated with "sinning" by overeating—these are not coincidences. An associate professor of religion at Princeton University, Griffith traces the religious overtones of America's body obsession from early Puritan fasting, to the New Thought movement's attempts to will away the body completely, to the present-day ideal exemplified by the diminutive white models in such magazines as *Today's Christian Woman*. Modern Christian dieting is populated by the likes of Gwen Shamblin, a string bean in a business suit who heads up a Christian diet corporation called the Weigh Down Workshop. A cornucopia of Christian diet titles have hit the market, including *Slim for Him* (1978), *More of Him, Less of Me* (1998), and *What Would Jesus Eat?* (2002), plus the culprit-fingering *"Help, Lord: The Devil Wants Me Fat!"* (1977).

Unfortunately, Griffith doesn't allow herself a moment's levity, even when describing early-20th-century fasters who sought a state of such purity that their excrement wouldn't stink. Her most provocative argument—that religion, primarily Protestant, has had a hand in America's exaltation of slender white bodies over all others—dribbles away among caveats that make her sound as though she's afraid of giving offense. And she does no more than mention research showing that Christians on average are heavier