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Zain Abdullah (editor); *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Race*. London and New York: Routledge (Taylor & Francis), 2025). 746 pages. Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-367-17985-4.

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*Islam and Race Beyond America:
Reflections on The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Race*

It is an honor to offer closing reflections on a volume which is both ambitious as it is necessary. *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Race* brings together more than forty chapters, nearly fifty scholars, and perspectives from six continents. It shows, with impressive clarity, that race is not a marginal theme in the study of Islam; rather it is central to how Muslims have been imagined, governed, celebrated, excluded, and sometimes rendered invisible in archives and in public life.¹

What this *Handbook* showcases, above all, is that there is no singular narrative of Islam and race. Instead, we encounter a constellation—a sea—of racial formations shaped by religious edicts, empire, colonialism, migration, media, gender, and memory. Each chapter illuminates a different island in that sea, and together they offer a powerful corrective to the silences that have long shaped our field. Yet, such an achievement also highlights the work that remains. We should begin by addressing several gaps—in theory, class, geography, history, practice, and digital futures—because doing so will enable us to advance to the next stage of the field, which demands de-Americanization, deeper historical excavation, attention to lived practices, and engagement with digital futures.

¹ A version of this article was presented as a closing remark at the virtual book conference on *The Routledge Handbook of Islam and Race*, held at Duke University on December 12-13, 2025.

As we navigate these chapters, one conspicuous absence emerges: a shared analytic language for connecting cases beyond clinging to an Americanized form of race discourse. Race, in its current formulation, is as American as the Fourth of July or cherry pie, echoing H. Rap Brown's characterization of violence in America. W. E. B. Du Bois was, therefore, correct in observing that race (the color line) is enduring into the future and central to the American experience of the 21st century. Yet, American race discourse is also deeply shaped by the history of slavery and its aftermath—Jim Crow segregation and the civil rights movement. Carl Becker was likewise right to argue that great historical moments can be assessed by the new languages they produce. In his *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century*, he notes that each era is defined by a small set of words that encapsulate its worldview: the Middle Ages by faith, grace, and God; the eighteenth century by rights and reason. In a similar way, the vocabulary of race has become a defining catchword of the twenty-first century, particularly within the American idioms of individual freedom or social mobility.

In this volume, we observe the racialization of Muslims everywhere, yet we still lack a deeper theory of the *Muslim network* itself. How do Muslim forms of belonging, mobility, ambivalent toward the West, and textual and spiritual authority sometimes resist racial categories, sometimes reproduce them, and sometimes create alternative hierarchies of their own? This volume poses that question but does not yet synthesize it. The challenge remains for scholars to address.

There are other gaps that reflects not to the limitations of the editor, who has crafted a remarkable feat of an *umma*, a symbol of impactful effort, but the scale of the project ahead.

Class and global capitalism, for example, appear only at the margins. We need more scholarship that takes ownership of the discourse: research on labor migration, Gulf economies, and the racialization embedded in global supply chains. Moreover, we require fuller engagement with Muslim-majority regions that are still underrepresented in the scholarship—West Africa beyond the Senegambia, the Horn of Africa, the wider Indian Ocean world, and Central Asia. These are not peripheral zones; these are sites of Muslim memories; they are historical centers of Muslim life, racial thinking, and racialized practices.

The Handbook also reminds us that much of the field remains temporalized within the 19th to 21st centuries—the age of modern racism. But race in Muslim societies has a deeper genealogy. We still need to recover the *longue durée*: medieval Islamicate debates on *shu'ūbiyya* (the polemical debate over ethnic superiority

within Islamic civilizations), lineage and slavery, racial semantics in classical Arabic literature, popular culture, the racial politics of Ottoman and Mughal courts, and the shifting categories of “Arab,” “Turk,” “Persian,” and “Habashi” across centuries. The discipline is ready for a deeper historical excavation.

When addressing Islam and race, deeper engagement with Muslim intellectual history matters. It is true that race matters relatively little in the Qur’an itself, but it has mattered greatly in Muslim thought and social practices over time and across generations. A striking example is Ibn Buṭlān’s *Risāla fī shirā’ al-raqīq*² (Treatise on the Purchase and Examination of Slaves), which offers 11th-century slavers a guide to a global racial hierarchy. As he sums up his long list of racial hierarchies, the physician and scholar from Baghdad, states:

In sum, the Armenians are the worst among the White race, just as the Negroes are the worst among the Black race, and they are similar to each other in body strength, abundance of corruption, and cruelty.

Such ideas formed a basis for practices that persisted well into the nineteenth century. As Professor George Junne reminds us in his contribution to this volume, there has always been a tension between the spirit of the law and Muslim social practices, even as late as the 19th-century Ottoman courts continued to deploy Black eunuchs.

While Islamic texts often constrain race, Muslim practices have historically reproduced racial hierarchies. As many chapters in the *Handbook* demonstrate, texts alone have limited power to shape perceptions of race. We must, therefore, move beyond texts to examine practices on their own terms, for, as James Baldwin reminds us, those subjected to racial abuses judge systems by their lived experiences, not by the nobility of the law. We must train a new generation of scholars by equipping them with both linguistic competence and intellectual courage to de-Americanize the field and move beyond American-centered race discourse. As long as the discipline remains framed primarily through external paradigms, it will fail to grasp how unintended legal interpretations of Islamic texts gradually became standardized practices in Muslim lived experiences.

² Ibn Buṭlān’s treatise’s Arabic title is رسالة في شري الرقيق وتقليب العبيد

We must also confront the internal critique—how Muslims themselves recycle and regenerate racial distinctions through colorism, lineage, caste, Arab/non-Arab hierarchies, and the silencing of Blackness in Arab Islamic discourses. Some chapters touch on these issues, but a systematic treatment is still lacking. As we learn from many chapters in this volume, race is not only something done to Muslims; it is also something negotiated within Muslim communities.

As we celebrate the extraordinary achievement of this *Handbook*, I propose a forward-looking agenda for our field; something we have been entertaining at Duke and UNC for almost two decades. We must develop a robust theory of Muslim networks that can stand alongside race, nation, and empire as a central analytic. Finally, at a moment when digital technologies shape perception more powerfully than text or law, the field must turn to a new frontier of research: algorithmic Islamophobia, AI-driven classification, digital Muslim youth cultures, and the visual economies of race circulating on social media. Only a handful of chapters gesture toward this emerging terrain, yet it is an urgent field that demands sustained scholarly engagement.

To de-Americanize the field, we must integrate class, capitalism, and labor into our analyses. This move would entail two strategies: On one hand, recovering the deeper histories that predate modern racial regimes, and on the other, charting the digital futures in which new forms of racialization are emerging—often at a pace faster than our theories can adequately explain or capture.

I have no doubt that the contributors to this volume would agree with me that this work is not a conclusion but an invitation. It marks the opening of a new era in the study of Islam and race—one that calls for greater theoretical clarity in understanding Muslim networks, history, capitalism, and digital futures. Let embrace that invitation with the seriousness, creativity, and ethical commitment that the field demands.

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