



# **A Muslim in Victorian America: The Life of Alexander Russell Webb**

*Umar F. Abd-Allah*

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Conflicts and controversies at home and abroad have led Americans to focus on Islam more than ever before. In addition, more and more of their neighbors, colleagues, and friends are Muslims. While much has been written about contemporary American Islam and pioneering studies have appeared on Muslim slaves in the antebellum period, comparatively little is known about Islam in Victorian America. This biography of Alexander Russell Webb, one of the earliest American Muslims to achieve public renown, seeks to fill this gap.

Webb was a central figure of American Islam during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A native of the Hudson Valley, he was a journalist, editor, and civil servant. Raised a Presbyterian, Webb early on began to cultivate an interest in other religions and became particularly fascinated by Islam. While serving as U.S. consul to the Philippines in 1887, he took a greater interest in the faith and embraced it in 1888, one of the first Americans known to have done so. Within a few years, he began corresponding with important Muslims in India. Webb became an enthusiastic propagator of the faith, founding the first Islamic institution in the United States: the American Mission. He wrote numerous books intended to introduce Islam to Americans, started the first Islamic press in the United States, published a journal entitled *The Moslem World*, and served as the representative of Islam at the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago. In 1901, he was appointed Honorary Turkish Consul General in New York and was invited to Turkey, where he received two Ottoman medals of merits.

In this first-ever biography of Webb, Umar F. Abd-Allah examines Webb's life and uses it as a window through which to explore the early history of Islam in America. Except for his adopted faith, every aspect of Webb's life was, as Abd-Allah shows, quintessentially characteristic of his place and time. It was because he was so typically American that he was able to serve as Islam's ambassador to America (and vice versa). As America's Muslim community grows and becomes more visible, Webb's life and the virtues he championed - pluralism, liberalism, universal humanity, and a sense of civic and political responsibility - exemplify what it means to be an American Muslim.

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