Book Reviews

Anabel Inge


The label “Salafi” is now used extensively, if not loosely, in academia, the media and daily conversations to designate a wide array of Muslim orientations, ranging from conservative to fundamentalist; from extremist to radical and violent. With the global rise of Al Qaeda and Daesh (i.e., the Islamic State), Salafism is increasingly appraised through the lens of “Jihadism;” and moreover, there is an almost exclusive focus on men. Anabel Inge’s *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion* breaks this pattern by providing a more narrow and compelling definition of Salafism and by shifting attention to its female adherents. A dedicated female researcher, Inge has managed to secure unprecedented access to the ordinary lives and daily experiences of Salafi women in the UK. The result of her investigation is a rich and sensitive description of how women navigate strict Salafi teachings in a non-Muslim society, and how they persevere in their beliefs in spite of hardships and inconsistencies.

Chapter 1 documents the growth of Salafism in the UK, with an emphasis on the Brixton Mosque in south London, the largest Salafi bastion in the UK. Chapter 2 offers a detailed presentation of the author’s methods. Chapter 3 examines the interviewees’ journey towards Salafism. Chapter 4 delves into Salafi circles of knowledge, which are presented as tools to secure commitment and foster a sense of belonging. Chapter 5 investigates how women strive to apply Salafism in their daily lives and negotiate the tricky areas of community integration, family relations, education, and work. Chapter 6 explores the thorny issue of marriage and the many challenges it raises for practicing women.

One of the central contributions of the book is to clearly explain Salafism to non-Muslim audiences. Inge spells out key differences between Salafism and other conservative Muslim movements, such as Barelwis, Deobandis, Wahhabis, the Tablighi Jamaat, the Muslim Brotherhood and the UK Jihadi organization Al-Muhajiroun. She particularly insists on dissociating Salafism from
the latter by recalling that Salafi organizations have often been at the forefront of counter-extremism efforts in the UK. Rejecting political activism and violence, Salafis have been very vocal in their critique of Jihadism and have published countless refutations of it. Hence, Inge advocates meticulousness in using the label “Salafi” and proposes to restrict it to those who promote non-violent religious and social reform. One of the distinctive features of Salafism is its promotion of the return to a pure, unadulterated form of Islam, whose authenticity is exclusively located in the Qur’an, the Sunna and the example of the salaf (early ancestors). Salafism derives its authority from a literalist understanding and deferential attitude towards scripture. Promoting a back-to-basics approach and rejecting madhahib (various schools of jurisprudence), it seeks to decontaminate Islam from culture and politics, and provides a univocal manual to live one’s life according to strictly defined Islamic principles. It is mostly concerned with proselytism, fighting bid’a (harmful innovations) and ensuring individual salvation through a strict monitoring of everyday life (up to trivial details, such as bathroom etiquette and sartorial rules).

Having defined Salafism, Inge also addresses its ethnic and racial composition. In the UK, Salafism tends to be disproportionately Black. That is, in addition to South Asians, Arabs and European converts, large numbers of Afro-Caribbean converts and Somali Muslims are swelling its ranks. Curiously, these two groups (especially the latter) remain critically understudied. Before becoming associated with Salafism in 1993, the Brixton Mosque had for instance long been known as the “Jamaican Mosque.” This is a fascinating finding that echoes the US context, where Salafism is mostly African-American, having replaced the Nation of Islam as a source of dignity and respectability in rough neighborhoods. One can regret that Inge does not investigate the matter in further detail: she simply talks about a “curious fashion” that took hold of Brixton disadvantaged Black youth in the early 2000s (Salafism progressively offsetting Rastafarianism as a provider of street credibility) and of the quest for meaning and discipline that characterizes second-generation Somali refugees.

Inge’s main objective is to explore the experiences of Salafi women, which are too often disregarded. Her approach is resolutely qualitative. She conducted in-depth interviews with 13 Salafi community leaders in London and Birmingham, as well as with 23 young Salafi women. This relatively limited sample size is largely made up for by the wealth of ethnographic data that Inge collected through participant observation in Salafi female circles of knowledge. During her two-year fieldwork, she attended five different Islamic classes held in Salafi mosques or organizations, irregular gatherings in private homes, Friday prayers, conferences, charity fundraisers and women-only wedding parties, and followed religious exchanges on various apps such as Blackberry.
Messenger. The book is particularly valuable for its methodological reflection: Inge delves at length into the challenges of studying a suspect community, whose teachings and activities are constantly scrutinized and which has been the object of unwanted media attention (including an undercover television show that resulted into violation of privacy and misrepresentations). The book makes a strong plea against covert research, a scorched-earth policy that erodes trust in the long run, and lays out a clear research ethics based on openness and honesty. Inge is reflexive about her position as an agnostic, liberal English white researcher studying mostly Black, religiously conservative Muslims. Honest about her mistakes and shortcomings, she presents the strategy of humility and transparency that she devised in order to be granted access into a wary religious group. Her comprehensive findings, quite unprecedented in the literature on Salafism, proves her approach right.

Building on the New Religious Movements’ (NRMs) literature, Inge frames the entry into Salafism as a conversion process, even for those who hail from a Muslim background. Indeed, Salafism involves a drastic refashioning of self that often places one at odds with one's upbringing and generates sharp family and generational conflicts. This process, however, is far from linear: Inge coins the concept of “delayed conversion” to account for the intermittent, long-term character of commitment to Salafism. Her interviewees often experimented various Muslim factions within what Inge calls the crowded “Islam market” and often delayed their involvement with Salafism, whose negative image (puritan ethos, harshness, superiority complex) tended to repel them. Upon further investigation, however, Salafism’s weaknesses turned into strengths: its strictness and the uncompromising attitude of its adherents were held as proof of truthfulness. Inge challenges the well-established finding in the conversion literature that relational networks are determining factors of religious change: instead, she shows that many women became committed Salafis despite having had negative encounters with Salafis. Many of the women Inge talked to come from fragile backgrounds (traumatic migration experiences, single-parent households, street violence, abusive romantic relationships). Yet, against pathologizing accounts of conversion, Inge portrays her interviewees as independent rational agents who were attracted by the comforting univocalism of Salafism (subjective interpretations are ruled out; teachers stick to scripture), its rationality (salvation depends on a quantification of rewards and punishments), its individualism (redemption is presented as a matter of self-interest), its affordability (most lessons are free, in modest locations), its liberating nature (individuals are responsible for seeking Islamic knowledge and taking decisions for themselves, independently from their parents), its inflexibility (strict churches are strong), its theodicy (sufferings are interpreted...
as a test from God), its distinctiveness (Salafi dress, notably the niqab, provides a visible and anti-conformist identity) and its exclusivism (Salafis engage in strict boundary maintenance with secular society and other Muslim groups, which fosters a sense of religious elitism). Because of these various elements, Salafism is presented as “refreshingly clear” by its adherents. The various commitment mechanisms that are put in place in circles of knowledge also help explain why they persevere in their belief despite considerable hardships, including family conflicts, discrimination in the job market, street attacks, and above all contradictions.

Another important contribution of the book are the paradoxes Inge highlights that affect the practice of Salafism in the British context. For instance, Salafi teachings presuppose a segregated society where women can evolve in men-free environments and be supported by their fathers or husbands: this hardly corresponds to the situation of Inge’s interviewees, most of whom are young educated women working in the UK, who are still unmarried and are frequently estranged from their fathers, often because of their very religious choices. Salafism also emphasizes universal sisterhood but its culture of refutation generates constant monitoring, ethnic conflicts, and inter-clique tensions. Salafism teaches marriage as rigidly sacred, but Inge points out that the divorce rate among Salafis is disproportionately high. This is partly because the process of arranging marriage, which is impaired by strict gender segregation rules, proves impractical in the UK. Most women end up making poor choices by marrying men who take advantage of Salafi teachings to justify their own tyrannical attitudes. Inge’s description of the “Muslim spinster crisis” due to the high expectations of women (who tend to be more educated and professionally successful than men) is vivid and compelling. In sum, Salafi ideals constantly clash with social realities at every step of a woman’s journey, which compels her to adjust her expectations and to craft creative solutions to live by the dictates of her faith. But while Salafism places considerable burden on these women, Inge shows that they hardly challenge Salafi teachings. Instead, they try to work around them. Inge’s book stresses the uncertain, emotional, and disordered aspects of religious experiences and draws a more complex picture of Salafi practice than what media accounts or Salafi ideologues tend to suggest.

Finally, Inge’s book contributes to gender studies by illuminating the position of women within a conservative religious movement. She shows that strict gender segregation norms paradoxically enable women to secure substantial religious authority (within female circles of knowledge). In addition, Inge very effectively explains that although Salafism insists that women should gain knowledge, it also stresses their uncompromising duties as wives and
mothers. These two objectives are hard to reconcile in a limited time schedule, and Inge’s work is insightful in explaining how her interviewees resolve this tension by prioritizing some religious rulings over others. Overall, they fully embrace traditional gender roles while fiercely rejecting the misogyny of some Salafi men.

If Inge’s book has a fault, it is for being overly descriptive at the expense of explanatory/theoretical depth. In this regard, the data will sound familiar to scholars of Salafism and/or of Muslim conversions. This critique does not, however, take away from Anabel Inge’s beautifully written scholarship. By providing a thorough inquiry into the fastest-growing Muslim faction in Britain, *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman* is a must-read for anyone interested in Muslim minorities in the West, Salafism, religious conversion, and women in conservative religious groups.

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