Book Reviews


In a post-cold war world where the ultimate Other of Western imagination has shifted from the communist Other to the Muslim Other, and in a post 9/11 world where religious fundamentalism and Islamophobia have grown rampant in both subtle and blatant ways, *Localising Salafism* stands against the current, joining a stream of studies that give a different and nuanced understanding of Islam and the Muslim Other. Especially in the Horn of Africa where the constant hunt for Al-Qaida often leads to misinformation, sweeping generalizations, and blanket condemnation of local Muslims, this insightful, pathbreaking book makes significant contributions in an area where there is an acute dearth of local information. By focusing on the experiences of religious change among Muslim Oromos in the particular locality of Bale, Ethiopia, Østebø challenges generalities with a razor-sharp critical edge and unveils a great diversity of actors within the locality. The book develops out of original research where Østebø lived and worked in Bale for his doctoral dissertation in 2005 and 2006, thus bringing an aura of freshness and currency to the issue.

In the ten chapters of the book Østebø uses a chronological sequence of events to tell the story of religious change among the Muslim Oromos of Bale. In the first two chapters he introduces the study and maps out its conceptual and methodological contours. In chapters 3 and 4 he discusses the arrival of Islam in the area and focuses on an aspect of the religious universe of the Bale Oromo affected by the encounter. Chapters 5 and 6 zoom in on the emergence of Salafism as a particular genre of purist Islam, named by detractors as the Wahhabi movement. Highlighted here are intense struggles between an emerging purist Salafism that seeks to rid Islam of its Oromo traditional practices and the established, traditional Islam, which is indigenised and localised Sufism blended with traditional Oromo spiritual practices and thoroughly Oromized. The next three chapters give rich ethnographic details and comparative historical accounts of the expansion and fragmentation of Salafism in Bale. The last chapter provides a summary of the work. Throughout the book Østebø meticulously moves between the general and the particular, elucidating the constant dialogue between the two. He walks readers through the complex interface of murky, conceptual confusion and everyday practical realities of the people on the ground.

The book poses conceptual and methodological challenges to established norms in the broader production of knowledge in general and in the discipline of religious studies in particular. By combining a historical-chronological approach with an interpretive, anthropological methodology, Østebø provides a close examination of the delicate and intricate processes of religious change in Bale. Contrary to the dominant representation of religious change as a response to crisis and discontent, his findings depict religious change as an
active pursuit and stimulus for contentment. Taking on dominant discourses that view religious change as an imposition of the global on the local, Østebø uses the concept of glocalisation to break down the global/local binary and unveil the intimately interwoven nature of the global and the local in this area. The notion of translocality grounds the global in a particular locality and shows that religious change is a product of the mutual engagement and mutual transformation of localities. Here the locality of Bale is presented not as a passive recipient of global Salafism but as an agent, grabbing, bending, and indigenizing Salafism. Salafism is itself localized in Saudi Arabia and its movement into Bale does not necessarily make it global. The global is not a disembodied abstract sweeping over the local, and the local is not an embodied concrete receiving or resisting the global. The two are presented as intimately twinned, translocal processes.

By breaking down the global/local binary and establishing the mutual transformation of Salafism and the Bale Sufism, Østebø adds a new wrinkle to broader philosophical and epistemological debates on agency and structure. What is striking about this book, however, is the incredible diversity of local agents of change. Østebø places a great emphasis on how these agents actively seek out, subvert, bend, indigenize, and localize Salafism and how they make it their own in order to serve their localized needs. There is no blanket Salafism that comes from abroad and covers all Muslim Oromo Salafis of Bale in one sweep. The Bale Salafism is as diverse as the agents who make sense of it and make it their own. Its variation is manifest in how older and younger generations, those with varying degrees of literacy and those in urban and rural settings, make it their own in such different ways. It is manifest in how differently Oromos who come back from a variety of localities abroad (e.g., Islamic universities versus refugee camps) with very different experiences of Salafism make the practice their own in their newer, local Bale settings. By paying particular attention to particularities, Østebø brings out the richness, complexity, and diversity of the subtle in-between spaces of religious change across time, space and culture. This monograph is pathbreaking in that no other work, to my knowledge, has delved into the cracks and crevices of this particular locality.

Like all pathbreaking works, however, this study also opens itself up to numerous critical questions. First, with all the critical edge of his analysis and his notion of translocality, Østebø does not question the dominant Abyssinian discourse of Oromo migration. His critical edge goes blunt and translocality goes mute as he unquestioningly accepts this dominant Abyssinian version and prematurely dismisses alternative views from an Oromo perspective. Second, with all his incredible diversity of localities within localities, gender remains a glaring absence in the author's analysis. By his own admission he had no access to female religious participants, but he does not further address his silence in terms of gender analysis. One does not have to interview women to unveil the gendering of religious change, but Østebø remains gender blind even when the opportunity of Oromo Muslim women's rebellion presents itself to him in a dramatic way. Third, those who are philosophically inclined and want to see a work that takes on the Hegelian dialectics of change will be disappointed since Localising Salafism is deeply wrapped up in the dialectical struggle of opposites, framed in the language of stimulus and response. For Østebø, religious change and transformation still happen in the ‘good, old’ dialectical way. Last but most importantly, beyond strongly arguing that Salafism is neither radicalized nor politicized in Ethiopia, Østebø does not address the ‘so what’ question, although his