

The making of a Salafi muslim woman: paths to conversion

Bonino, Stefano

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***The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion* by Anabel Inge. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 320pp., £22.99 (p/b), ISBN 9780190611675.**

This book explores the life experiences of Salafi women in the United Kingdom. Notwithstanding problems negotiating trust as an outsider, Anabel Inge gained unprecedented access to Salafi mosques and circles in London, where she conducted fieldwork for more than two years. Her book represents the first sustained, in-depth exploration of everyday Salafism. The author locates Salafism within the theoretical framework of the new religious movements, which share the following characteristics: a small size, atypical population representation, charismatic leaders, subjection to external hostility, an emphasis on ‘them/us’ divides and new belief systems.

Of particular interest is Inge’s description of converts, who need to handle a busy ‘Islam market’ once they have decided to take religion seriously. Female converts therefore find themselves facing the competing choices of groups and preachers that work in London and online. Here, Inge is able to capture the intra-Sunni clashes that converts must deal with at university, ‘since various Muslims groups – notably, Islamist or Muslim Brotherhood-inspired groups, Hizb ut-Tahrir, Sufi groups, and Salafis – operate on British university campuses, often through their links to student societies’ (p. 80).

The most consistent finding that emerges from the book is that adherents see Salafism ‘as the only group that teaches the Qur’an and sunna *purely*’ (p. 90; emphasis in original), insofar as it seeks ‘to restore Islam to its imagined original form, free from *bid’a*’ (p. 90). Moreover, the book usefully highlights the household challenges, the educational dilemmas and the life negotiations that Salafi women must undertake in their everyday lives. The last substantive chapter explores the unique challenges faced by women when trying to find a partner – and the matchmaking process that they undergo to marry within the Salafi community.

Some of the minor faults of this book are its lack of a ‘critical distance’ from the subjects under study, as the author appears too easily to accept the inevitability and inherent ‘normality’ of Salafism as a key theological choice within the Islamic market and could better reflect on the long-term, domestic implications that foreign policies have had in mainstreaming this theological orientation on British soil. The writing style would benefit from a more academic tone, and the use of the first person pronoun should be left to journalists. But overall, this book is an outstanding addition to the literature on Islam in the United Kingdom and represents a truly unique ethnographic piece of fieldwork within a hard-to-reach community.

STEFANO BONINO
University of Birmingham