
The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion. Anabel Inge. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. 322.
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Running against the grain of Western secular modernity, the allure of Salafism to young Muslims in Britain is an unexpected and poorly understood idiosyncrasy of the post-9/11 era. While Salafism is mentioned liberally both in popular media and politics (brandished about more as a tool for othering than defining), voices from within Salafi communities are almost entirely absent from public discourse in Britain. The work of Anabel Inge, in her monograph *The Making of Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion*, tackles the virtual absence of “academic publications on Salafism in Britain, which do not provide any in-depth insight into the women’s side of this strictly gender-segregated community” (3).

Inge’s project wrestles with the existing “academic accounts of Salafism in Britain, which have mostly focused on men, internal politics, doctrine, and security-related issues” and the decontextualized images of “niqab-wearing and [youth] radicalization [... which] dominate media portrayals of Salafism, while the voices of Salafi women remain largely absent from the public sphere” (221). Moving beyond the almost formulaic jihadist lens of critique, Inge’s findings are understood through the methodological approach of new religious movements (NRMs), the output of which is the first sustained empirical research on Salafi women in the UK beyond the work of Katherine Brown, who focuses on the study of young British Muslims who are radicalized while attending university. Through a reverent respect for the women interviewed and a declarative stance on the role and practice of fieldwork as a non-participant observer, Inge was able to transcend the social and sacred boundaries of Salafism to tell a

story of a minority within a minority. Her focus on the normative and sometimes mundane aspects of women's lives in the Brixton Mosque where Inge conducted her field work allows her project to present a rich description of everyday life, akin to the acclaimed work of Saba Mahmood's *The Politics of Piety*. Inge's work offers a bridge into the reflexive world of Salafi conversion, sisterhood, and the pain of searching for a good husband in the rat race of contemporary London.

As the introduction to Inge's work expounds, her interest in the lived experience of female Salafi adherents came after attending a circle of knowledge at a central London Mosque during her master's degree (3). Moving beyond the sensitive political climate of being a Muslim in the UK following the 2005 London Underground attack, Inge was surprised by the ease with which these Salafi supplicants accepted her not as an outsider but as an honoured guest. Moreover, the topic of study in this circle of knowledge was not rooted in the Islamist diction of racialization, but in the *da'wah* of new adherents searching for value and guidance in the confusion and conscious consumption of intense individualism. Inge's work is divided into six chapters. The structure of the first is rooted in the history of Salafism in Britain, where a growing disdain for ethnic and/or nationality-specific mosques has led to a grassroots demand for Salafi mosques, which put being a Muslim ahead of migrant identity. Ironically, however, the parishioners Inge works with are almost exclusively from migrant communities of Caribbean descent. The second chapter is focused on Inge's fieldwork methodology as well as the social dynamic of the Brixton Mosque where her research was based. The third chapter details the circuitous route by which Inge's observed *Salafi* adherents converted to Salafism. Inge makes a determined effort to illustrate that the vast majority of *Salafi* adherents in the UK today were not born into the movement and

instead converted, although much of the community comes from a Muslim-majority background (62). Inge identifies two primary catalysts for conversion, specifically, “gradually [becoming] bored with their lifestyle and [...] feeling guilty about doing ‘un-Islamic’ things to ‘fit in’; or a crisis [which] led them to reassess what they were doing” (75). The transition to becoming Salafi is projected through religious devotion, donning the sartorial accoutrement of the *jilbab* and seeking religious knowledge. The latter is the topic of the fourth chapter, where religious adherence is forged in circles of knowledge that are exclusively attended by women. In an unabashedly paternalistic schism of Islam which openly prioritized male dominance, these circles of knowledge provided a space for both religious study and female empowerment (101). The fifth chapter “investigates several areas in the lives of young Salafi women in London – community, household, higher education, and employment – where clashes between Salafi ideals and social realities frequently occurred” (143). The final chapter focuses on marriage in the context of the religious imperative to get married – as an “often repeated phrase among *Salafis* is that ‘marriage completes half your *din* [religion],’ an expression taken from a *hadith* (Tirmidhi 3096)” (180).

The primary thematic contribution in Inge’s work is rooted in her exclusive focus on normative Salafi women, both in the context of religious worship and in how her interviewees navigate daily life. In diametric opposition to media portrayals of *Salafi* woman, Inge makes a determined effort to challenge normative stereotypes such as poor education attainment and a lack of female agency with the Salafi community. By taking this approach, Inge was able to touch on the importance of self-actualization within the Islamic frame. In other words, once the subjective pretense of Salafism was removed from the positionality in her work, her

adherents were able to expound on a cogent alternative to secular modernity, “an internalization of a Qur’anic ‘worldview’” (53). Beyond the sartorial changes involved in claiming Salafi credentials, or the rigorous religious study required of adherents, or even the myriad of social rules and constructs which govern daily life, Inge’s work goes a layer deeper. Beyond the superficial garb, or even the habitual prayers, the banality of secular consumerism is challenged as these Salafi women turn toward the sacred as the primary guiding principle in daily life. This is where Inge’s work is its most promethean in scope, as she was able to enter the community without pretense, garner the trust of her fellow adherents and in doing so, break through the thick black cloth which separates these women from British civil society. Yet the real magic in her work is two sided, as her reverence for her subjects is shown with the precision with which she references numerous *hadiths* and Qur’anic *ayahs* to explain Salafi justifications for daily practice. It is evident that the rigorous textuality of Salafi thought was not only something she experienced in her fieldwork, and I would assert that the perceptive ease with which she references these textual justifications is more than just good fieldwork notes but is a lasting influence of her time spent with this group, utilizing celestially codified justifications to define the gray areas of daily life.

The care, attention, and professionalism which Inge brings to this project leaves little ground for substantive critique. The stated goal of the project was to problematize the virtual absence of academic accounts of Salafism in the UK that were not codified in the security centered diction of the “other.” By assessing these women on their own terms, Inge was able to cut through the problematic political ethos to bring forward the voices of interviewees. However, in the success of this approach, by only

assessing her interviewees on the basis of their individual perceptions, we lose out on the opportunity for a more explicit comparison with other orbiting factors. Inge's interview questions, although open-ended, did not present an avenue by which more esoteric questions of belief, structures of the *real*, or self-imposed power could be assessed and problematized.

I applaud Inge's choice not to dwell on Western feminist-centered structures of critique in her ethnographic approach. As she states, this choice is specifically due to "the complexity of the construction and logic of a Salafi identity," so "no one theory can accommodate [her] findings" (225). Yet at the same time, gender is not sufficiently theorized and is not leveraged as a primary source of critique in her work. It's apparent that Inge did not want her work to get lost in a reflexive critique of Salafi beliefs from a feminist lens, but, nevertheless, a deeply ensconced gender hierarchy exists (which she acknowledges), and this is not sufficiently problematized. Regardless, Inge's work makes a serious contribution to the study of Salafism in the West, both in the scope and depth of her work with Salafi women in the UK, a minority within a minority. Searching for purpose and meaning in our lives is a battle we all fight on a daily basis. For Inge's adherents, the value rooted in textuality and a community-centric focus within the Brixton Islamic Community reconciles the vapid nature of individualism whilst also projecting forward a canonically codified way to live within a Quranic world view. Whether you are seasoned reader of Islamic studies or just an interested third party, this work presents an important intervention into a world about which the general public knows little but comments liberally.