

REVIEWS

BOOKS

The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman: Paths to Conversion

By Anabel Inge

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In December 2015, Chancellor Merkel declared that ‘Multiculturalism creates parallel societies and remains a Grand Delusion’. President Sarkozy, in a speech in February 2011 was more forthright; ‘Multiculturalism has failed’ he said, a view endorsed by at least half of the candidates in the forthcoming French presidential election. Meanwhile, the leitmotiv of the Trump campaign (both before and in office) ‘Make America Great Again’ is understood by liberal America to contain a coded rejection of multiculturalism.

Whilst European and American storm clouds were gathering over the increasingly toxic issues of asylum and migration, Anabel Inge gained privileged and intimate access to a small group that in many ways symbolise the debate surrounding assimilation, *laïcité* and multiculturalism – British Salafi women.

Over a period of several years, she gained both the confidence and trust of twenty-three converts, their teachers, imams and community leaders. It is a trust well earned. Yet distance and objectivity are maintained. In her own phrase, she sought ‘empathy, not sympathy’.

What did she learn? In restrained, measured and accessible prose published in her book *The Making of a Salafi Muslim Woman*, Inge debunks many of the easy assumptions that have dominated the public discourse. Each convert, no matter her ethnicity or social background, had agency. The proposition that they, or any of them, were victims of brainwashing is untenable and treated with derision by the women themselves.

The most outward demonstration of agency is also the one most likely to be misunderstood by press and politician alike: dress. As ‘Safia’ told Inge:

When you see a sister in a light blue abaya, you know with her yellow hijab, to me, it’s like she is trying to fit into society, you know. Where you know from the Salafi sisters, when you just see the black, black, black niqab, niqab, niqab ... I see them as very firm and not trying to conform to society at all. It’s like ‘I’m not even bothered about what you think of me’ ... The way I look at sisters with jilbab and niqab, I am truly inspired by them. (p. 91)

As Inge describes in Chapters 5 and 6, the life of a Salafi woman in a liberal democracy is far from easy. The contradictions abound. Contrary to popular belief, Salafi women are not required by their faith to remain at home, wholly dependent upon a husband or family. Yet higher education and the workplace are difficult to navigate whilst remaining true to Salafi core principles. As the author observes, these contain myriad injunctions and prohibitions that govern every aspect of day-to-day living. Young Salafi women intent on avoiding the sin of ‘free mixing’ will inevitably find a university campus or lecture theatre a place of anxiety. Most employers, unless also Salafi, are understandably reluctant to remodel their working environment to accommodate the demands of strict segregation.

Inge also explores the theme of Salafi exclusivity within the Muslim world itself. Salafism holds that its practices alone are rooted in the early faith and therefore authentic, *al-salaf al-salih*. Any deviation is ‘reprehensible’, *bida*. Salafis consequently claim that the

famous hadith that consigns 72 sects to the torments of hell, sparing but one, is irrefutable validation for the correctness of their beliefs. Salafis are the 'Saved Sect'.

Unsurprisingly, such an interpretation is contested by non-Salafis. As Inge succinctly describes, many voices within contemporary Islam compete to be heard, such that it can be particularly difficult for the outsider to distinguish the significant differences between them.

Salafism rejects terrorism in any form. This matters, because groups that lay claim to the Salafi name, or profess to have adopted Salafi teaching and yet promote *jihad* (e.g. Al-Muhajiroun) have been roundly condemned and anathematised by Salafi leaders. Yet this important and courageous stance has been largely ignored by both press and politician.

Anabel Inge has shown that Salafism is not the enemy within. More broadly, she has underscored the extent to which Islam is richly multifarious. Her book is useful reading for Western policy-makers everywhere.

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