
BOOK REVIEW

Ridgeon, Lloyd, ed. 2015. *Sufis and Salafis in the Contemporary Age*. London: Bloomsbury. x + 301pp. ISBN 978 1 4725 2387 7. Hbk. ISBN 978 1 4725 2387 3223 7 (ePDF). ISBN 978 1 4725 2387 2919 0 (ePub). £65.00.

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The controversial British anti-radicalization Prevent programme and news stories about British teenage schoolgirls joining the Islamic State in Syria are but two examples of public debate, often igniting debates about “good” and “bad” Islam. This usually implies what is considered mystical spiritual Islam (Sufism) versus hegemonic fundamentalist Islam (Salafism) and this book makes for a timely contribution to the academy by addressing this paradigm. It is a highly recommended read for those interested in the anthropology of religious groups, particularly the anthropology of Islam and Islamic studies. The first of its kind, this book draws together a wealth of rich data from a range of socio-political contexts to break through the dichotomy of Sufi/Salafi relations. For readers interested in issues surrounding fieldwork in religion, the insight into overarching methodological challenges of inadequate terminology to label a range of diverse groups within the Muslim worlds as “Sufis” or “Salafis” will be particularly relevant. The book not only addresses but strongly problematizes the terminology of classifying religious identities in oversimplified and unhelpful categories.

This book successfully deconstructs the antagonism of Sufism and Salafism. As various tensions, support and antipathies are assessed, not only with each other but with respective governments and the wider public in different parts of the world, the reader gains insight into a range of local contexts in which these groups operate. Divided by chapter, each case study addresses specific socio-political contexts in Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Morocco, western countries (US, UK), and the Indian subcontinent. Throughout, careful empirical consideration refutes misconceptions of Sufism as “the natural ally of those who are opposing Salafism” (p. 117) and highlights the co-construction of both Islamic fundamentalism and contemporary Sufism as modern subjects (p. 29) that employ a range of identities and agencies in a post-colonial context and among other groups. Furthermore, insightful discussion of complex inner relationships of both groups as well as the Muslim tradition at large shows that these groups are not homogenous, “as both schools of thought include several subfamilies who compete internally for interpretive power, social recognition and hard recourses like funds, disciples and institutions” (p. 178). Some of these rivalries are illustrated through discussion of Sufi ritual practices such as *dhikr* (remembrance of God), shrines, Mawlid (observance of the prophet’s birthday) in Baghdad (chapter 4) and Hyderabad (chapter 8). Other chapters focus on political relationships with governing bodies such as the differences

within Salafi groups endorsing or rejecting the state in Morocco, as well as the states endorsing/rejecting Sufi groups in Turkey (chapter 3), and Moroccan attempts to use Sufism to repress Salafism (chapter 6).

The introduction is an important read as it provides some much needed historical background to fully appreciate the overarching methodological concerns of terminology employed to describe some of these groups. Ron Geaves postulates the main thesis of the book in the final chapter most clearly as he not only raises the question whether Muslims should be categorized as “Salafi” or “Sufi” altogether but also proposes to devise new paradigms by which it would become possible to think of the nature of complex, multi-faceted contemporary Islam. The problematic use of terminology is clearly evident in the empirical chapters. Several authors address the struggle of trying to accurately label the groups and members they studied. This can be seen for instance in Bengali *fakir* and *pir* cults which Ghani identifies as being “on the hinges of Sufis traditions” (p. 119) but remain excluded from mainstream perception of Sufism. Another example are Barelwi and Deobandi groups in India and South Asian diasporas that do not fit into the Salafi category despite their distress with Sufis (chapter 10).

Indeed, the case studies illustrate the challenging and often inadequate nature of definitions quite well, as pointed out by Geaves, although the title still uses “Sufism/Salafism,” most likely for the lack of better terms. Ghani (chapter 7) for instance makes the important point that “Sufism is an outsider category, used by Salafis and scholars but not much used by the Sufis themselves” as “Sufis self-identify not as Sufis but as members of a particular *tariqa*” (p. 116). Additionally, Thomas Gugler (chapter 9) notes that the majority of Muslims give secondary relevance to theological differences and interpretations between specific schools of thought and consider themselves to be “Muslim only” (p. 171). Nevertheless it would be wrong to conclude that labels should be dropped altogether, as definitions remain an important aspect of academic rigour in the study of anthropology and religion, but this book seems to suffer from a missed opportunity of overarching methodological reflection relevant to the anthropology of religion in general. Although pointing out that our current terminology is inadequate is a great step towards a differentiated methodology in the anthropology of Islam, this book could have benefited from a well-rounded conclusion that brings together the problem at hand with some of the different ideas and thoughts on the matter.