

Book Review

Keeping it Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys

by John O'Brien. 2019. Princeton University Press

America is the proverbial land of opportunity, freedom, and choices. While one might disagree with these proclamations as they apply on substantive political and economic issues, there is no doubt that a high number of options and freedoms exist within the narrow field of mundane everyday choices that people can make. America is also seen as a highly individualistic society where personal autonomy is often seen powerful enough to constantly threaten notions of community. With cross country migration, urbanization, and a deep embeddedness in a bourgeoisie master narrative, Americans are one of the most individualistic people on the globe. How do immigrant minorities, especially those who do not completely share this individualistic worldview, and who insist on maintaining their own counter master narratives navigate their lives in America? This has been an attractive question for ethnographers for a long time. The current book engages with this question about such a minority group, Muslim-Americans, with a sharper focus on the younger population. John O'Brien, American sociologists, and a white converted Muslim, probes this question with both an outsider and probably a neo-insider view. In particular, O'Brien helps understand the complex and fascinating ways through which young male Muslim Americans manage their social selves in order to be both Muslim and Young Americans at the same time.

O'Brien conducted multiyear intensive participant observation at a mosque in a large American city that remains unnamed. He chose a mosque without a strong ethnic affiliation, thus ensuring access to a wider group of young Muslim-Americans who were all working class and second-generation immigrants, but with different ethnic backgrounds including Jordanian, Somalian, South Asian, and Sudanese. This is especially productive in emphasizing some of the macro similarities that emerge from being immigrants, people of color, and working class, and yet provides variations tied to ethnic cultures at home.

O'Brien carefully ignores the trope of radicalization among American Muslims and instead chose to study the regular, 'normal' or 'unmarked' young Muslim Americans who

have been made invisible by persistent Islamophobia in the US. The author places his study within the broader intellectual subfield of adolescent/teenage/young adult studies that focus on how individuals adopt, adapt, and make meanings in everyday pulls and pushes between expectations of an American life, and those of one's own ethnic or religious culture refracted through the family and local community. While readers interested in this subfield will have some familiarity with studies of code-switching, this book offers a more nuanced description of how multiple pressures are managed and addressed in constructing and expressing a complicated messy identity that is not contingent on switching, but that embraces all conflicting elements in varying degrees. The author explains the absence of perspectives on young Muslim-American women because of the cultural difficulties in establishing rapport between them and a young male researcher without raising suspicions.

The book is spread across 6 chapters, four of which are organized thematically corresponding to issues that concern young Muslim Americans such as participating in popular culture, everyday religious obligations, dating, and presentation of the Muslim self in public. All of these fit well into an investigation of the 'culturally contested' lives that these young men live where they navigate between two rival 'cultural rubrics': urban American teen culture, and religious Islamic as practiced in their mosque and families.

In one of the chapters, the author shows how 'Legendz,' the group of young Muslim men that he conducted his ethnography with, relate with their non-Muslim peers through Hip Hop. Hip Hop emerged as an everyday sphere where being a young American, and being Muslim came into tension. A fine grained analysis of everyday patterns of interaction show how these youngsters create and participate in 'cool-piety' that balances between popular hip hop music, often including profanity, and the local norms of Islamic propriety.

Another chapter describes the discursive ways in which the Legendz push at the boundaries of rigid, and time specific rituals like the Muslim prayer, by circumventing it through ingenuous ways such as delaying, and in the process asserting their agency and autonomy. This flexing of rigid rules reflects how these young Muslim Men follow religion but not completely as the community or their elders want them to. Instead, they adopt and modify individualism and autonomy that are hallmarks of a typical American youth and inject it within a predominantly communal set of religious practices.

Probably the hardest to navigate area of young life is romance and dating, which is the focus of one of the chapters. O'Brien demonstrates two broad models of dating that Legendz members innovated in their striving for balance between American youth culture, and expectations of Islamic behavior. One of these models, labeled 'keeping it halal,' involved explicitly stating Islamic norms of limited physical intimacy in open contradiction to the American youth norm. The second model involved an avoidance of discussions about physical intimacy, thus keeping the possibilities alive. However, this model compensated by drawing upon ideas of traditional love such as fidelity, planning for the future, and striving to be a good partner/spouse. While the first model is outwardly Islamic, the second one also draws upon behaviors associated with being 'good Muslim,' and yet it cleverly underplays the Islamic label for these 'good' practices. The author found the keeping it halal model to become untenable for its proponents as they progressed in their romantic relationships, thus emphasizing their somewhat greater alignment with general American youth norms than with Islamic ones.

One of the most recurring dilemmas for the Legendz was to decide on how they would present their selves, both Muslim and young American, in day to day life. The mosque leadership proposed a model for them which was mostly oriented towards outgroups. It encouraged publicly sharing one's vulnerability to the everyday possibilities of harassment, and also expected youth to be spokespersons for and protectors of their religion. However, the Legendz preferred a model that included the development and presentation of a low-key Islamic self, expression of autonomy, and other behaviors that were acceptable for American teenagers. This model crafted by the young Muslims was much more durable than the one that was imposed by the Mosque elders and was a source of manageable friction between the youth and the elders.

The book makes a contribution to teenage studies by bringing in teenagers of color, and from communities that align with multiple notions of being a minority – working class, immigrant, and Muslim. One of the main findings of the study is that the main anxieties, interests, questions, and concerns of young Muslim men in America are similar to those of any other young American man- dating, pop culture, coolness, freedom, and self-sufficiency. While this may sound surprising to those who are largely plugged into the quintessential otherness of Muslim Americans, or who are tuned into sources that portray Muslims in the 9/11 frame, to others this would be a reasonable finding, one that is supported by a rich and

fascinating description based on years of fieldwork. However, the other major finding that the author proposes, that young Muslim Americans differ from other young American men because they are also pulled towards the pressures of being a good Muslim is a bit underwhelming. The letdown comes from a somewhat flawed assumption that a regular American teenager is not dealing with similar pressures of being a good Christian, a good Catholic, a devout Jewish, or a traditional Hindu. The expectations of being a good Religionist seems to have been accepted by the author as an extraordinary pressure that only Muslim teenagers are subjected to.

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