

Why I Am a Salafi

Michael Muhammad Knight

Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2015. 320 pages.

Is it possible to develop a theory of Salafism, the school of thought which affirms the authority of the first three generations of the Prophet's pious followers, that is based in heterodoxy, theological disorder, innovation, sensation, and the body? One normally finds in Salafi thought support for the Hadith corpus over the Qur'an, a scathing critique of the *madhhab* system of scholarly authority, and a preference for a strictly literal interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah. But with new scholarship in this field, we must recognize the wide diversity of Salafi thought and begin to avoid reductive clichés.

Fortunately, Salafism has recently come under increasing scrutiny in academic studies. For example, we have movements such as "neo-Salafism" in politics and "sophisticated Salafism" emerging today, which are open to forms of knowledge outside the Sunnah. It is in this vein of new scholarship on Salafism and western expressions of Islam that Michael Muhammad Knight's *Why I Am a Salafi* (2015) should be read.

The book combines an academic and journal-based reflection on the author's evolving religious identity as an American Muslim. It begins in the wake of Knight's experience of ingesting ayahuasca, a hallucinogenic plant known to promote spiritual epiphanies and insight. This experience was the focus of his last book, *Tripping with Allah* (2012), that documented his psychedelic journey. *Why I Am a Salafi* is written less as a travelogue or an open-journal format than were his previous books *Journey to the End of Islam* (2009) and *Tripping*. For example, in *Journey* Knight documents his adventures and travels in Pakistan and India, throughout the Middle East, to where he lives in America, and finally in Makkah, where he performs the hajj.

By the end of this book Knight comes to two realizations: (1) Islam is dominated by its cultural milieu and (2) where political power manipulates

Islam (e.g., Pakistan or Saudi Arabia), this limits the Muslims' ability to personalize their faith. Knight realizes that as an American Muslim, precisely because his faith is far away from political power, he is more able to personalize his Islam and let his faith speak to his cultural surroundings. Islam may not be fully American yet, but Knight's Islam is as American and as postmodern as one can imagine.

In the book under review, we are introduced to Knight's academic side, which is notable for readers of his work because this is his first major book to reveal his scholarly and bookish aesthetic and style. The text is written with a clear grasp of some of the major events of Islamic thought and history; however, it is far from pedantic. We learn that Knight has been taking graduate-level courses in Islamic thought and religion at Harvard, and the time that he has spent with books and intellectual contemplation pays off for the reader. Knight provides a quote from figures such as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Aristotle, or other canonic figures in western philosophy at the start of each chapter. While his graduate school reading in deconstruction, postmodern theory, and philosophy is evident throughout, Knight thankfully refuses to adopt the typical jargon of theoretical texts.

The core of the book is a reflection on the major pamphlets, Qur'an translations, and seminal shots at texts that Knight read before and after choosing to become Muslim at the age of fifteen. As a young American kid growing up in the 1990s, he was drawn to Islam through hip-hop culture, where the Five Percenters, the Nation of Islam, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* all had a massive influence on his young identity. Knight re-reads the main books that he was introduced to as a young teenage Muslim, but with a scholarly lens on this time.

This book is a sedentary reflection at his desk, not a vibrant travelogue à la Jack Kerouac that one expects to find. He reflects on how American popular culture fused with the various pieces of Wahhabi-influenced Islam at his local mosque community and went on to create the type of Muslim and person that he became. His local mosque was partially funded by Saudi Arabia, and thus he names many of the texts on Islam that he was given "Pamphlet Islam." This form of Islam is a vestige of colonialism and the effort of Islamic intellectuals such as Rashid Rida (1865-1935) to fuse Islamic thought with Western science. Pamphlet Islam seeks to prove Islam's superiority vis-à-vis Western science and how it remains relevant in modernity and postmodernity.

In a strange solidarity with his younger self, Knight finds a new appreciation for Pamphlet Islam because it offers a postmodern "ready-made" version of the faith. It provides an account of the tradition at the level of what Knight

will eventually name “simulation” or simulacra. The Qur’an’s eternal message, the Prophet’s sublime example, or the Companions’ binding precedent – all of these are de-authorized because they never had any authority to begin with. What this leaves us with is Islam as simulation – where all of the major belief nodes (i.e., the Qur’an and Sunnah) are recognized as confronting the Real.

Although Knight does not provide a rigorous definition of the Real, we are left to assume that it is too much reality, perhaps a version of truth that resembles Plato’s cave allegory, where the Real truth is too difficult to integrate into one’s practical life. What we are left with is a version of Islam-as-fictional-belief – a postmodern embrace of Islam as a “do it yourself” religious identity based in personal choice. This sounds like the textbook definition of religion as postmodernism, and Knight gives us reason to think that this is his version of Islam.

But this is not entirely the case, for the core of *Why I Am a Salafi* consists of his grappling with normativity and with the tradition itself. What he realizes, largely through his more advanced reading in graduate school, is that one cannot occupy a normative position within Islam, for every major figure that formed “the canon” of Islamic thought was considered a heretic in their own time, Ibn Hanbal included. This historical realization allows Knight to develop a distance from the literalness of the text and the tradition. As he notes, “orthodoxy is created by heretics” (p. 330) and “‘Islamic tradition,’ properly defined, is a house of cards. If we stand too close, our breath sends it crashing down” (p. 332).

What we are left with is a deconstructive Salafism, one in which the absolute is available only at the level of the body and sensation. What makes the simulation real is our shared yearning to make it real, Knight comments, and the refusal to surrender to this yearning is what becomes of submission itself. This leaves us with a stripped down community definition of the sacred – a flesh and blood absolute found in prayer at any mosque. This de-absolutized version of Islam does not result in a postmodern relativism where “Islam is anything a Muslim says that it is,” for this would only be possible if he [Knight] were the only human being on Earth.

It is not clear whether “deconstructive Salafism” will have a life outside of Knight’s experimental playground of Islam. But this bodily based and lived community aspect of Islam is most certainly compelling and worth reading, if not to understand Knight’s idiosyncratic Muslim identity, but also to gain a new understanding of Salafi thought.

Daniel Tutt
Adjunct Professor of Philosophy
Marymount University, Arlington, VA