Aaron Rock-Singer, *In the Shade of the Sunna: Salafi Piety in the Twentieth-Century Middle East*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022. xix, 255 pp., ISBN 978-0-520-38256-5.

If there are two things Salafīs are widely known for, they are the piety they express through their appearance and the segregation they implement between men and women. Although praying in shoes, gender segregation, sporting long beards and shortened pants or robes are not exclusively Salafī practices, they are all often associated with this branch of Islam. It is also these practices – or, more precisely, the reasons (mostly Egyptian) Salafīs have adopted these practices in the twentieth century – that form the subject matter of this book by Aaron Rock-Singer, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

As he did in his first book,[[1]](#footnote-1) Rock-Singer largely draws on Islamic magazines for his sources, deals with broadly the same subject of the expression of increasing religiosity, mostly focusses on Egypt, and concentrates on the twentieth century. This new work is nevertheless an original contribution, in which Rock-Singer rightly presents Salafism as a modern phenomenon, although one that leans heavily on pre-modern sources and precursors. The author states that the idea that women socially mixing with men is corruptive and, as many Salafīs believe, “primarily reflects a modernist view of society in which each person is responsible for him or herself and is equally capable of transmitting virtue or vice” was what “would define Salafism’s development” (p. 2). Rock-Singer claims that the growth of Salafī social practices in the period he studies here (1936–95) did not so much reproduce “either the model of early Islamic Arabia or established models of Islamic piety”, but “emerged out of the assumed communicative power of the body that is characteristic of modernity” (p. 5).

Rock-Singer maintains that Egyptian Salafīs – particularly those in the Anṣār al-Sunna movement, on which the book focusses – have adopted certain ritual practices to signal their differences from rival trends, movements and organisations in order to compete with them. The author emphasises how visible appearance and the body have been used to communicate a certain message about identity and, in doing so, community. The media that are used to do this, the author claims, are central to this because they have “facilitated not merely the greater standardisation of social practice in the service of a particular vision of society, but also the conceptual shift that acts could be praised or denigrated primarily based on the public message that they communicated”. Rock-Singer sees Salafism as therefore “grounded in both the possibility and necessity of communication through visible signs”, contextualised by the twentieth-century Egyptian state’s “efforts to lay claim to citizens’ bodies” (pp. 24, 25).

In Chapter 1, the author describes the rise of Anṣār al-Sunna in the context of three different phenomena: projects of subject formation and abstraction that were heavily influenced by the British colonial rulers, the printing and distribution of classical Islamic texts and the changing world in which traditional religious authorities and markers of piety were challenged. These factors fostered a focus on bodily regulation, furnished the textual basis to justify this in Islamic terms and shaped a context in which contestation over these issues was freer than before.

Chapter 2 builds on this by showing how scholars affiliated with Anṣār al-Sunna increasingly associated acts related to bodily regulation, which were previously often seen as mere customs (*ʿādāt*), with worship (*ʿibāda*), thereby elevating their importance, and how they subsequently fused this with their vision for society. This process was not only facilitated by the classical texts by scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) that became widely available in this period, but was also shaped by the contestation over bodily regulation between the state and various political, social and religious actors.

Chapter 3 concentrates on the issue of praying in shoes, which Salafīs claim – based on specific *ḥadīth*s – is authentically in accord with the Prophet’s practice. Rock-Singer shows how Anṣār al-Sunna’s initial claim of this practice’s legitimacy as distinctively Salafī was supported by scholars from Saudi Arabia, only to be played down in later years because of its divisiveness.

“Divisive” is also a term that could be applied to gender segregation, the subject of Chapter 4. Here, the author charts the development of Islamist criticism of women’s “flaunting” (*tabarruj*) of their appearance in the context of Egypt’s state-endorsed feminism. While groups like the Muslim Brotherhood had a fully-fledged political programme, Anṣār al-Sunna sought to distinguish itself through promoting certain social practices, doubling down on the need for gender segregation, a practice that had already become the norm in Saudi Arabia, where it often meant women staying at home. This was not an option in Egypt, however, because women were not in a position to give up their public roles. This meant that gender segregation took on the form of self-regulation rather than the actual seclusion of women from public life.

Chapter 5 deals with the phenomenon of the Salafī beard, the length of which slowly but surely came to be associated with a fist and something that should be accompanied by a trimmed moustache. Particularly on this issue, Salafīs sought to express this as an ideal without associating it with radical Islamists, who often sported long beards too. The same was true for the prohibition on wearing full-length pants or robes (*isbāl*), which is associated with arrogance, a topic on which the author concentrates in Chapter 6. Rock-Singer points out that this custom was not widely adopted by Salafīs in Egypt until the 1980s, although frequently associated with Salafism as a text-based practice.

Rock-Singer has done the field a great service by publishing this book. It is theoretically robust, empirically rich, deeply rooted in relevant primary sources, very well structured and written and successfully draws on the existing literature. The major selling point of this book is that it contextualises Salafī bodily regulations, showing that Egyptian Salafīs have not simply adopted certain practices from the Qurʾān and the Sunna, but ones often intensely contested and negotiated by various political, religious and social actors, including the state, in order to create distinct group identities.

Nonetheless, anthropologists might argue that the book, which explicitly deals with practices, is silent on what “ordinary” Egyptian Salafīs actually do. Because this book is based entirely on textual sources and not on fieldwork, its discussions and conclusions pertain only to a certain Salafī scholarly elite. The author also provides few verses or *ḥadīth*s as evidence in favour of gender segregation, thereby making Salafīs appear less textually grounded in this respect than they are. There are, in fact, many *ḥadīth*s used by Saudi scholars (though contested by others) to support a prohibition on gender mixing (*ikhtilāṭ*), but Rock-Singer does not mention them. This problem is even clearer regarding *al-walāʾ wa-l-barāʾ* (loyalty and disavowal), a decidedly Salafī concept that deals precisely with the issues discussed in this book but of which, surprisingly, the author makes no mention. He may have had his reasons for this, but he should at least have mentioned the concept as relevant here.

These comments notwithstanding, Rock-Singer has written an excellent book that furthers our knowledge of Salafism both in Egypt and generally. It makes clear once again that Salafīs are not simply slaves to the text but have a much more dynamic approach to the sources they hold so dear. Because of the author’s pleasing and accessible style of writing, the book should also reach broader audiences, which would be an achievement in and of itself. I therefore wholeheartedly recommend it.

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1. Aaron Rock-Singer, *Practising Islam in Egypt: Print Media and Islamic Revival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)