



**LIVING ISLAM: WOMEN, RELIGION AND THE POLITICIZATION OF CULTURE IN
TURKEY (I.B Tauris & Co. Ltd, New York, Paperback 2018 (Hardcopy 2002), p.
312. Ayşe Saktanber)**

In her very thorough and impressive ethno-sociological work, *Living Islam*, with its double meaning, Saktanber sets out to explicate the dynamics of Islamic revivalism in Turkey through the Islamist women whom she considers as the bearers and active participants of this revitalization. She covers her arguments through the ethnographic analysis of a *site*, residential complex, in the capital city of Turkey, Ankara built and exclusively inhabited by Islamists. The author's observations of the *site* cover the time frame from 1989 to 1993. Most of her interactions were with women, which is compatible with the main concern of the book: "why women are the target of Islamic revivalism and how they came to be the chief actors in the effort to build an Islamic way of life."

Saktanber's decision to begin with redressing existing misleading and inaccurate conceptual framework such as cultural Islam (endorsed by the regime) and political Islam (attributed negative connotations by the regime) is a good starting point. The author embeds her study in the vast literature on Islamic revivalism comprising Islamist movements in Islamic world. She provides a rich review of the literature that sometimes runs the risk of making readers lost in the text. In order to justify her decision to understand the living Islam in Turkey through Islamist women, she points out that in a globalized world, the boundary between the private and the public becomes blurred. In such a context the role women play gains significance in understanding the Islamic revivalism in Turkey. In addition to this, visibility of Islam is best observed with the activities of covered Islamist women in public space.

Employing a multiplicity of sociological and ethno-sociological techniques (survey questionnaire, in-depth and focus group interviews, participant observations) with twenty five families, she was able to cover many subjects like of daily life, backgrounds and profession of households. She tackles many stereotypes and theoretical assumptions carefully. Using her privileged position of being a woman in this research, she explores 'habitus, taste and faith' relations of these people making choices for their life styles and middle class ethos development. (p. 112) Through exploring the central role women play in organizing economic, domestic, emotional relations within the family, Ayse Saktanber, underlines her argument successfully that parameters of domestic life "constitutes the basis of an expected life order." (p. 118)

After conducting her fieldwork, Saktanber comes to a conclusion that Islamist women are not passive members dominated and directed by Islamist men as portrayed. They are, on the contrary, active participants, even bearer of such movements. In her words, "...women therefore become the active organizers and carriers of this ideal (Islamic) rather than being passive recipients of a body of belief given to them by men." To put it another way, "women are the main actors in the task of rendering Islam in a living social practice, that gives them a crucial role in the daily articulation and reproduction of Islamic ideologies" (p.98).

Saktanber's work is lacking in several ways. First, she considers how the Muslim residents attempt to build an Islamic way of life despite modern pressures. Their hesitance regarding sending their daughters to school, watching television, and participating in the social life of unconscious Muslim environments all exemplify the difficulties of "living Islam" in a society where the secular way of life is accepted as routine. However, observations of this residential complex inhabited exclusively by religious people do not provide any information about how Islamists interact with non-Islamists (secularists as well as non-Islamist religious people). This prevents the author from analyzing Islamism within a variety of interactions. Therefore, the position of Islamists in the wider society and their relations to their "others" are clarified through the narratives of the Islamists themselves. Thus, what we end up with is a description and analysis of how Islamists would like to see themselves ("conscious," "moral," and "modest") instead of a rich depiction situating the voices of Islamists within the Turkish social and political life.

In addition to this, those who live in the aforementioned residential complex have enough financial power to create an alternative reserved environment for themselves and maintain their way of life. However, the large segment of the religious Muslims in Turkey lacks this opportunity. It would have been more helpful and academically valuable if the author had examined how this large segment of Islamic groups maintains Islamic way of life within an unsecure and financially weak environment.

Another drawback of the work is about authors writing style. She uses very long and complex sentences; most of them include multiple clauses and parenthetical explanations. This makes some of the theoretical passages hard to follow.

Despite these shortcomings, Saktanber very successfully presents her case and reasonable arguments with quite an insight. Her publication is a very informative and thought-provoking read regarding a sociological perspective of Islam in post-Ottoman Turkey paying special attention to the lenses of women and social spheres. What really appreciated in this work is the topic of gender in its relation to Islam. This topic seems to be a constant battle ground in the common media sources with western media screaming about female oppression, and the Islamists arguing for the rights of women to cover themselves as appropriate in religious lifestyles, but the voices are often male, or non-Muslim, and rarely the result of good scholarly work.