



# Book Review: Keeping It Halal, The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys

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The study of Muslims in the West, particularly in the United States, over the past two decades has been dominated by perspectives of security, integration, and radicalism. Since the events of September 11, 2001, Muslims have often been positioned as problematic subjects in public and academic discourse, often reduced to objects of state surveillance, targets for deradicalization policies, or symbols of tensions between Islam and Western modernity. As a result, the daily life dimension of Muslims—especially the younger generation—is often marginalized in the scientific literature. This article summarizes and analyzes John O'Brien's book *Keeping It Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys* (2017), an ethnographic study of the daily lives of Muslim teenage boys in the United States. Based on more than three years of field research in an urban mosque, O'Brien shows that American Muslim youth live a "culturally contested" life, having to negotiate the demands of religious Islam with the norms of modern American adolescence. The book's main findings challenge the dominant narrative that associates Muslims with radicalism, and instead present young Muslims as reflective, creative, and adaptive social actors. This article confirms the book's contribution to the sociology of religion, youth studies, and Islamic studies in the West.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Muslim representation in the United States—both in the media, political discourse, and some academic studies—tended to focus on issues of terrorism, radicalism, and security. John O'Brien through *Keeping It Halal* took a different position emphatically. The book does not address extremism, but rather the daily lives of "ordinary" American Muslim youth who are "ordinary", not alienated, and relatively content with their lives.

O'Brien's main goal was to broaden the framework of analysis of American Muslims by focusing on everyday experiences, rather than on security issues. With a sociological ethnographic approach, he seeks to answer a fundamental question: how do American Muslim teenagers live life as devout Muslims as well as "normal" American teenagers?

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In that context, American Muslim youth are at a complex social crossroads. On the one hand, they are an integral part of American society, raised in a popular culture that emphasizes individualism, self-expression, and personal freedom. On the other hand, they also inherited Islamic religious traditions that were loaded with moral norms, ritual obligations, and communal identities. The tension between these two realms is often assumed to be a source of chronic identity conflict, as if being a devout Muslim is incompatible with being a "normal" American teenager.

The book *Keeping It Halal: The Everyday Lives of Muslim American Teenage Boys* by John O'Brien (2017) is an important intervention against this assumption. Instead of focusing on extremism or alienation, O'Brien shifts the focus of the analysis to the active, reflective, and relatively integrated daily life practices of American Muslim youth. Through a long-term ethnographic approach, this book shows that Muslim youth do not live in a permanent identity crisis, but rather in a dynamic and contextual process of social negotiation.

The introduction to this article places O'Brien's work in a broader academic debate about the sociology of religion, youth studies, and Islamic studies in the West. In particular, this article departs from the argument that a macro-structural approach—which emphasizes civilizational conflicts or value incompatibility—is inadequate to understand the lived religious experience among young Muslims. In contrast, a micro-sociological approach that examines everyday practices, interactions, and meanings offers a more nuanced understanding.

This article aims to (1) summarize the main arguments and empirical findings of *Keeping It Halal*, (2) analyze the book's theoretical contributions to the study of religious identity and popular culture, and (3) discuss its relevance to contemporary research on Muslim minorities in Western societies. Thus, this article serves not only as a critical summary, but also as a bridge of dialogue between O'Brien's ethnography and the broader academic literature.

The structure of the article is structured as follows. After this introduction, the next section reviews the theoretical framework and research methodology that O'Brien used. Next, the article presents the book's main findings thematically, followed by a critical discussion of its theoretical and empirical implications. The final section presents the conclusions as well as the further research directions that can be developed from this study.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The book is firmly rooted in the tradition of interpretive ethnography in sociology, particularly the study of religious identity, culture, and practice. O'Brien uses the concept of culturally contested lives to describe a situation when individuals are faced with two sets of cultural norms that are partially at odds with each other.

The research was conducted in a multiethnic mosque (called the City Mosque) in a major American city, focusing on a group of teenage boys who call themselves "Legendz". They come from diverse ethnic backgrounds (Arab, African, South Asian), but have a strong Islamic identity.

The main methods used include: long-term participatory observation, informal interviews, and direct involvement in youth religious and social activities. This approach allows O'Brien to capture micro-dynamics in everyday interactions, including humor, light conflict, moral negotiation, and religious practices that are not always formal.

## KEY FINDINGS

One of O'Brien's most important arguments is that American Muslim teens are essentially American teens. They have an interest in hip hop music, sports, dress styles, social popularity, and romantic relationships—just like other teenagers. However, they also bear specific religious expectations: the five-time prayer, the fasting of Ramadan, the prohibition of alcohol and premarital sex, and the obligation to maintain Muslim identity in public spaces. The tension arises not from Islam itself, but from the way the social environment interprets the incompatibility between "Islam" and "American youth".

In the chapter on hip hop music, O'Brien introduces the concept of "cool piety", which is a way for Muslim youth to express their piety without having to withdraw from popular culture. The Legendz listen to rap, form hip hop groups, and write lyrics—but still discuss halal-haram boundaries reflectively. Instead of seeing popular culture as a threat, they filter, reinterpret, and justify the practice to keep it compatible with Muslim identity. This shows that piety does not always mean cultural conservatism.

O'Brien also shows how worship practices such as prayer are negotiated in the context of American individualism. The youth understood prayer as an obligation, but also adapted it to school, work, and social life schedules. Here it is clear that the Islam that is practiced is not a rigid Islam, but an Islam that lives in a certain social context. Obedience is not measured solely by ritual perfection, but by intention, effort, and consistency.

In his most sensitive issue—dating—O'Brien identifies two types of Muslim romantic relationships: those that are hidden and those that are "permissible" through certain religious narratives. The young men are aware that dating is normatively prohibited, but they also live in an American teen culture that normalizes romantic relationships. Interestingly, they do not necessarily reject Islamic norms, but rather try to find a middle ground that is morally and socially acceptable.

The Legendz in general do not experience extreme alienation. They are relatively confident in displaying Muslim identities in schools and public spaces, although they remain wary of stereotypes. This shows that Muslim identity is not always defensive, but can also be affirmative and stable.

O'Brien shows that religion does not only exist as a system of doctrine, but as a negotiated social practice in everyday life. Muslim adolescents are understood as active agents, not victims of cultural

clashes. They are creative in arranging multiple identities. This book challenges the view that Islam and the West are inherently opposites. Instead, compromise and hybridity became a daily practice.

O'Brien honestly acknowledges the limitations of his research, among other things: the almost exclusive focus on men, the lack of representation of the African-American Muslim experience, the limitations of generalization due to the nature of local ethnography. However, this limitation does not diminish the analytical value of the book, but rather clarifies its scope.

## CONCLUSION

Keeping It Halal is a powerful, empathetic, and academically important ethnographic work. This book shows that American Muslim youth do not live in a permanent identity conflict, but rather in a dynamic and relatively stable negotiation process.

Through detailed everyday stories, John O'Brien manages to break down stereotypes about young Muslims and present a humane, normal, and nuanced portrait of American Islam. For researchers of sociology, Islamic studies, education, and public policy, this book is a very valuable reference.

## REFERENCE

O'Brien, J. (2017). Keeping it halal: The everyday lives of Muslim American teenage boys.