

My Year Inside Radical Islam

by Daveed Garenstein-Ross
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Reviewed by Dr Susan Robinson



The book, *My Year Inside Radical Islam*, is written as an autobiographical memoir by the author, Daveed Garenstein-Ross, and examines his experience as he struggles to find spiritual fulfilment and social connection in America in the period just prior to 9/11. Throughout his life, the author was greatly influenced by his liberal, non-orthodox Jewish parents to question and try out different religions, but their seeming inability to be committed to one doctrinal belief system frustrated and disappointed him.

One thing his parents did give him though was a love of intellectual inquiry and he also loved the freedoms he enjoyed under the American Constitution. Garenstein-Ross valued most highly, the freedom of speech, the freedom to question, and the freedom of religious expression. As a result, he was an accomplished debater at college.

His exploration of religion began relatively early in his life. He was introduced to Christianity by a high school friend, but once they commenced college he found his friend's increasing fundamentalism concerning as it coincided with what he felt was a growing tendency toward narrow mindedness. He was also put off by the constant pressure he felt from this friend and his friend's fiancée to convert to Christianity. When he looked into Christianity he was troubled by what he saw as an ambiguity in relation to the trinity and the concept of Jesus as being a man and also God.

The author felt frustrated that people such as his friend and his parents were unwilling to help him explore these questions. Interestingly, he states that in retrospect, he considers this early experience with Christianity as a milestone on his path toward radical Islam. The other milestones that he saw as influential on this journey were two life threatening health events in his late teens and early twenties that prompted him to think more seriously about mortality and the

theological issues of life. It was at this time in his life that he was introduced to Sufism which he describes as an uncommon, but moderate form of Islam.

Garenstein-Ross was impressed by the simplicity and open mindedness of this faith and it was through the lens of Sufism that the author became attracted to Islam. He found it reassuring that Muslims were clear about what they believed and there was no apparent ambiguity in their beliefs. At the same time there appeared to be a respect and acceptance of other religions.

It was during his first visit to a mosque that he became aware of the intolerance within Islam. He heard a sermon on the deficiencies of other religions with a particular emphasis on the Christian belief in Jesus as being the Son of God, and for the first time he felt uncomfortable. Due to his earlier frustrations over the apparent ambiguity of the Christian religion he justified the sermon when it attacked Christianity but his discomfort grew when Judaism and the concept of ‘the chosen people’ was called into question. Despite his unease, he was able to throw off these unsettling rumblings mainly because the sense of brotherhood and the acceptance he experienced in the mosque was so overwhelming.

He decided to become a Muslim in Venice while away on a study trip. When he returned to the United States, Garenstein-Ross and his friend attended a local Muslim meeting that was held in a private home. It was a more formal meeting than he had been to previously and he noted that the women were banished to another room. He had begun dating a Christian woman and found the views of this group toward women and courtship to be oppressive, but he was unable to express this within the group.

The author also discovered that the moderate Muslims he had previously associated with were hated by this group. Almost immediately, the group offered him a job with a branch of the organisation known as the al-Haramain Islamic Foundation and he began to spend all his time there. The Foundation was a Muslim charity but was constantly accused of fund raising for al-Qaeda.

During the course of his employment, Garenstein-Ross was exposed to many more extreme views held by the organisation, including a ban on music which he loved, and a strong disapproval of his relationship with his Christian girlfriend; whom he also loved. The camaraderie and male bonding was so strong that he overcame these disappointments to embrace the more radical views being espoused in the group. There was a strong internal culture in the organisation that forbade questioning and helped to keep him within the group. If there was any sense that he was waning in his allegiance to the radical ideology being espoused,

he was “talked to” by senior members of the group in order to get him back on track.

Throughout this time, he was aware that his relationship was disapproved of and he tried to get his girlfriend to convert to Islam. When this failed and he was unable to talk about his concerns, he became more and more disillusioned with the religion. Although he was unaware of it, he had also come to the attention of the Federal Bureau of Investigation while he was working for this group. After twelve months with the group, his belief in Islam waned and he left the job and became a lawyer. It was while he was practising law that the FBI finally raided the offices of the al-Haramain and he became an informant for the FBI.

This is a book that shows how the author was drawn into the religion of Islam and how he was influenced gradually to become radicalised, despite being aware that the thoughts and views he expressed were frequently at odds with his inner feelings and beliefs. It was only when he recognised how unhappy he had become with Islam that he began to question the spiritual road he had taken and sought to leave a religion that expressly declared that execution was the punishment for leaving it.

The author succeeded in leaving Islam however and converted to Christianity, eventually becoming an informant for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. By addressing the topic of radicalisation in an autobiography with a conversational tone, the author has provided ordinary people the opportunity to understand how the Islamic radicalisation of western young men can occur.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Dr Susan Robinson is a criminologist, lecturer and researcher with the Charles Sturt University, Graduate School of Policing and Security. She has extensive experience working as a practitioner and manager in the public service in South Australia, the Australian Capital Territory, and the United Kingdom in the areas of child protection, juvenile justice and adult corrections. She holds a PhD in sociology (criminology) from Flinders University, South Australia and an Honours Degree in Social Work.

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