

**Tamara Gray and Najiyah Diana Maxfield. *Project Lina: Bringing Our Whole Selves to Islam*. Minnesota: Daybreak Press, 2020.**

**Introduction**

I start this review with a disclosure: This book's main author, Dr. Tamara Gray, happens to be my *murabīyyah* (spiritual guide).

I first met my teacher in Damascus when I was around 19 years old. During our brief time together, she had such a huge influence on me that within a matter of months, I returned to my home country to pursue secular knowledge. After all, she had told me in no uncertain terms that for this “work” we need people with an encyclopedic knowledge, not merely knowledge of the sacred sciences. My “drop-out” academic status was not so impressive to her, and so I was instructed to do the very thing my *nafs* didn't want to do at the time: return to the difficult task of completing the “worldly” pursuit of secular learning, as my young zealous mind had understood it at the time.

It is only now as an adult approaching 40 that I can comprehend my teacher's wisdom and foresight. She saved me from numerous pitfalls on my path, and this, for me, is the very purpose of a spiritual guide (one of the many important chapters within this book). I feel it is appropriate to disclose this information because I have been evaluating the level of bias that I have while reviewing this book. But I would like to take this opportunity to illustrate my teacher's process and approaches. My teacher has always welcomed feedback and discussion, for the very mission of her organization is to give rise to Muslimas' voices. Therefore, this book was not written merely from an idea drafted on the back of a receipt, as my teacher so humbly describes in the introduction, but is the result of years and years of hard work serving students of knowledge even while she was residing in Damascus before the war broke out.

When I first met her, I was so struck by the level of care and attention she gave to her students' well-being, for she was always following up with all of them. She would ask us about students that might have returned to their home countries and would express such longing for those she had not seen in a long time. To me, my teacher is an illustration of what it means to be an inheritor of the Prophet. She is both the manifestation of the *shamā'il* that I read of in text form, and emblematic of it in spirit and character. That she dedicated this whole book to her friend gives an insight into how much the co-author loves this *ummah* and how hard she works for this “work.”

I have no critique of *Project Lina* (2020), not because Dr. Gray is my teacher and not because of my reverence for her. I have no critique because all of the feedback was noted during the process of forming this book. *Project Lina* was a workshop before it became a book, and along the way, its topics and content have been tweaked and improved. This book is not a mere book for converts, but rather a book written by someone who loves the *dīn* and the Prophet so much that upon fleeing the war in Syria and leaving her beautiful home and all her belongings behind, the tears she shed were for the faith of her friend.

This work is a beautiful labor of love, mercy, and compassion. The other co-author of this book is Najiyah Diana Maxfield, whom I have also had the honor to get to know.

Maxfield is one of Rabata's directors and, in personality, larger than life, witty, warm, and is a known nerd and stickler for grammar. Thus, she is also perfect for running the Daybreak Publishing project. These women are completely dedicated to working for this *dīn* and are very educated, professional, down-to-earth, and super fun to be around.

### **Project Lina**

This book is named after a friend of Dr. Gray's: as mentioned in the introduction of the book, Lina and Dr. Gray raised their children together. This book was born out of the immense grief that Dr. Gray experienced when her dear friend left Islam. The Arabic word "*līna*" translates into "palm tree," and therefore the metaphor of the palm forms this book's groundwork and thesis. "A palm tree could survive a hurricane! A drought in a desert! And a palm tree is an evergreen, so it stays green and fresh year-round [...] there are over 2,600 species of palm trees, so they are diverse, just like converts. And perhaps most importantly, palm trees bear fruit. Fruit that was beloved by the Beloved" (p. 19). The author then lists some essential questions that gave rise to the chapters' formulation. "So how to grow deep roots, a strong trunk, and beautiful greenery plus luscious dates? We need to bring our whole selves to Islam, develop deep '*aqīda* and tend our relationship ties. Hence the modules were born" (p. 19).

Module One comprises of chapters under the main title of "Know Yourself" and discusses backgrounds, personalities and cultures, bringing our whole selves to Islam, and making sure that converts have compassion for themselves and allowing their whole selves to be embraced by the loving embrace of Islam. This section is full of paradigms in which to know oneself and is extremely useful for people of all backgrounds. However, it is tailored to meet a convert's needs and thus fits wonderfully into the book's larger framework. Subheadings include "Background," "Trauma," "Habits," "Personality," "The MBTI Framework," "Tips for Self-Reflection," "Life is Managed not Cured," "What is a Healthy Self?," "What's in a Self?," "What's in a Name?," "Religion, Culture and Name Changing," "How Many Identities?," "What's in a Culture?," "Seeing Culture in Holidays," and "The Whole Self."

Module Two is titled "Declare Independence," describing how converts face some unique challenges. One of the challenges described in its introduction is when converts suddenly find themselves not knowing the answer to many aspects of their new religion. This can be difficult when a person has been a confident adult in other aspects of his/her life. This section offers a strong foundation in Islamic knowledge, one "that will fill learning gaps and provide direction for continuous growth" (p. 20).

I would like to make a note on the interesting use of language in this book, using this section as an example. As a metaphor given for the reasoning of this module, the author says, "Many converts remain in a Swiss cheese state of knowledge, regardless of the number of years they have been Muslim" (p. 20). This clear imagery and self-reflection to readers is powerful and ties in well with the book's title. Bringing our whole selves to Islam is a multi-fold process during which not only are readers being encouraged to evaluate their cultural selves, as we see in the prior module, but are also being asked to reflect on the level of knowledge they acquire to feel whole in this area. As a non-convert reading this

book, this is also useful imagery and language to reflect on the areas in which I am Swiss cheese-like. Cheeses, like people, come in many varieties, maturities, and ages.

This section also explains that the module is there to guide converts in terms of being able to see when something seems a little “wonky.” The book is interspersed with a voice and vocabulary that is both formal and includes some of the vernacular. This tone adds a personalized feel, one which enables readers to connect on a level and acts as a reminder that the authors are human beings who lead ordinary lives and have ordinary struggles. The content of this module includes “Know the Terms,” “Know the Belief,” and “Know the Tools.” These sections are not the typical outline for attaining knowledge. For example, great emphasis is placed on the importance of acquiring an adequate level of Arabic proficiency in order for one to maintain independence as a Muslima. So many stories and anecdotes are shared to illustrate the importance of declaring independence.

The final chapter of the book, “Module Three: Tend your Ties,” is intended to proactively protect converts from feeling lonely and isolated. It addresses the loneliness that can result from a cross-cultural marriage, strained family relations due to the conversion, or the loss of friends. It sets out how to heal or repair relationships with those whom converts grew up with and those who are with new families. It has a section on how to wed wisely, as well as a list of questions to ask a potential spouse. The religious and family holidays section is important, since many converts end up feeling torn about conflicting values regarding spending valuable time with family, while trying not to celebrate or participate in non-Islamic holidays. But the chapter on nostalgia is a brilliant gateway into tying together culture, values, and family ties.

### **Research**

A fascinating element of this book is Karla Kovacic’s special foreword, which details her Master’s research on the importance of “feeling Muslim” for Muslima converts. I do not believe that I have seen a foreword as detailed with graphs and charts, taken directly from her research thesis, in any other book. What is so wonderful about this foreword is the clarity and analysis of the data – methodical and concise with clear subheadings and recommendations. The foreword could be a whole book within itself, because I do not believe there is another publication on the importance of “feeling Muslim.” The language introduced to me via this foreword enabled me to see things that I had not even grasped were tangible things. It is a special skill and talent to be able to gather data and present it in this way.

### **Conclusion**

This book, for now, is new and unknown in the canon of Muslim literature. My personal belief is that it will eventually form a foundational and core component of Islamic learning in the future. Although written for converts by converts, it is an extremely beneficial resource for all Muslims. This is almost like a self-help book, for it gives readers very practical tools with which to see, evaluate, and assess themselves. The book can be described as a roadmap for converts for the journey they have chosen to embark upon. Moreover, it is a conversation by converts who are further along the path (and in the case of Dr. Tamara Gray who is also a spiritual guide – a shaykha) that provides an opportunity

for the non-convert to gauge needs, struggles, and recommendations on how best to assist, support, and accommodate converts. In doing so, they will also, no doubt, be enhanced by acquiring tools for themselves in their own personal development and progress.

I found this book exceptionally well structured, with aptly selected and relevant ḥadīths and anecdotes. It is interspersed with personal stories, experiences, and reflections. Existing tools used in corporations such as the MBTI have been thoughtfully and intelligently adapted to mirror the religious personality types of each MBTI type. Filled with invaluable tools such as these, the book offers many avenues for self-reflection, independence, and maintaining important relationships – all of which is placed within the larger framework taken from the metaphor of the palm tree, *līna* in Arabic. A palm tree that survives the hurricane, “that shoots out hundreds of roots into the surrounding soil” (p. 19), they stabilize and anchor the tree, and “the taller the tree the wider the root base” (p. 19). And most pertinently, a tree that bears nourishing fruit – a fruit beloved to the Beloved.

**Review by Aysha Fazil**

*Aysha Fazil is a Master of Divinity student at The Islamic Seminary of America, and concurrently studies at Ribaat Academic Institute. She obtained an MA Honours in English Literature and Arabic from the University of St. Andrews, Scotland, and obtained an Ijāza in Qur’ān from Damascus in 2011. She recently completed a Bachelor of Education in Canada and is a doting mother of two children.*