

### Esra Özyürek

**Being German, Becoming Muslim. Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe**  
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Esra Özyürek's newest book, "Being German, Becoming Muslim. Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe" discusses difficulties Muslims face when Islam is racialized in processes of group identity construction. Based on her lengthy research and fieldwork among Muslim communities in Germany, Özyürek's book moves between the experiences of German convert Muslims and those of German Muslim youth with immigration background.

The book starts by setting Islam historically as a part and parcel of German society, following in six chapters Özyürek's accounts and analysis on how also today Islam is a way of life for many citizens who simultaneously have a strong German national and cultural identity, yet have found their spiritual calling in this Abrahamic religion. Özyürek's ethnographic approach gives the reader insight into a wide range of Islamic life from German living rooms to multicultural youth camps and Salafist mosques.

One of Özyürek's main findings is that Germany's geo-political past affects the way new Muslims have approached Islam in different parts of the country. The book's narratives reveal how Eastern Germans have found their way to Islam largely after the collapse of the Berlin wall and through a spiritual journey rather than through established contacts with Muslims. In Özyürek's analysis, Islam's role for these converts is similar to those who choose the Salafi path amongst many different interpretations of Islam; finding solace and brotherhood in religion when dealing with identity crises or feelings of instability in own life.

The book gives a voice also to those German Muslims, who are descendants of immigrant parents. In her research, Özyürek focuses on young people, who similarly to converts, break from traditions of their own families and resettle in German society and the multiethnic Muslim community. Like Özyürek's convert interviewees, these "born Muslims" experience social discrimination from the majority society, and their "Germanness" is questioned. Thus, to define their distinctive religious and cultural identity, both groups disassociate themselves from national Muslim communities and mosques, live in multiethnic marriages and prefer Islamic learning in the German language and social context.

However, Özyürek's interviews and observations also show the social discrepancies within the bigger Muslim community in Germany. Often, xenophobic resentment

against Muslim immigrants drives Muslim converts to react and establish a distinct convert identity by taking distance from “born Muslims”. Residence location, dress, and constructing an image of the convert Muslim being socially and religiously on a higher level, helps to define the *Self* different from the foreign *Other*, who – according to Özyürek’s interviewees – does not live by the “real, pure Islam”. For many German converts, the new *Self* is a proactive Muslim whose Islamic lifestyle, rationality and values follow the principles of German Enlightenment.

Yet, Özyürek’s argument on converts employing almost Orientalist strategies for their identity construction leaves a rather negatively laden picture of ethnic German Muslims. As an ethnographic work that acknowledges the limits of its own scope, the conclusions are sometimes too generalizing and insensitive to possible variations. For example, Özyürek’s Eastern German interviewees were only those who were raised and lived in the GDR and with no contact to Muslims. Hence, experiences of Eastern German converts of a post-wall-generation might be different, as for instance conversion is now more probable to be facilitated through friendships and relationships with Muslims. Özyürek also argues, that for many, Salafism is merely a phase in the beginning of the conversion. However, it would have been interesting to learn whether there are exceptions in which a person has stayed for several years in that path or opted for it only in the later years of conversion, as in this aspect Özyürek’s sample – or her analysis of it – lacks of such individuals.

For renegotiating one’s identity the title of the book suggests two identity construction processes: one “being German,” which is envisioned as static, and the other “becoming Muslim”, described as a dynamic identification. Yet, along the chapters the reader learns that conversion processes are dynamic both in their religious as well as cultural aspects. While finding the suitable path in Islam from Sufism to Salafism, converts also must simultaneously review their national and cultural identity, to come to terms with a “Germanness” that does not include drinking alcohol or eating pork schnitzels. Although this might seem banal, the reality is often rather complicated for those who have to prove themselves worthy of their “Germanness” in the eyes of their families, friends and the public, when converting to Islam.

To describe such developments in convert Muslims identities, Özyürek introduces in the beginning of her book the concepts “double-consciousness” and “queering ethnicity”. It would be beneficial for the reader not familiar with these concepts, which are indeed fruitful to discuss phenomena of conversion in contexts where religions are racialized, to benefit more of an explicit discussion how they are connected to Özyürek’s findings. The discussion in the book also fails to acknowledge the fallacy in the objective of convert Muslims trying to live by a “culture-free” Islam as opposed to the immigrant Muslims. While they do not want to adhere to Arab or Turkish cultural traits mixed into the Islamic lifestyle, they for instance create a “cultural German Islam” when they offer their children Ramadan-calendars instead of Christmas-calendars. Thus, it should follow, that religion and culture are always intertwined, as no human life is completely separated of its local context.

The book is very timely and a recommendable read for policy makers who deal with intercultural and multi-religious contexts. Islam’s attractiveness for indigenous



Europeans grows constantly and with the demographic developments that many countries deal with regarding both their old immigrant communities and the new ones, the book helps to understand the variety of identities that Muslims in Europe adhere to. It offers students and researchers from a wide range of disciplines manifold insights to the experiences of German Muslims, who have embraced Islam while being in-between, neither quite part of the majority society nor same-minded with rather “traditional immigrant Muslims”. By combining research and narrations from interviews with her own analysis Özyürek’s book in total is a pleasure to read. It is a depiction that is based on real life experiences, but should be read with the disclaimer that there are still many more to explore.

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