The Political and Racial Ramifications of Conversion in Europe: The Case of German Muslim Converts

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Özyürek, E. 2015. *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Following the racist attacks at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, by an Australian white supremacist with links to far-rights groups in Europe, Esra Özyürek's book on religious conversion is a very illuminating read for understanding rising anti-Muslim and anti-migrant radicalism. Political anthropologist Esra Özyürek's book *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* is based upon her three and a half years of research in Germany amongst German converts to Islam. From the very beginning of the book, Özyürek underlines an astonishing fact. Even German converts to Islam express their anti-Muslim sentiments by stating: 'I would never have become a Muslim if I had met Muslims before I met Islam.' (p. 1)

The book sheds light on the paradoxical circumstances and feelings of tens of thousands of indigenously European or more specifically ethnically German converts who leave their Christian and/or atheist origins behind to embrace Islam in a context where Islam is considered as external. Özyürek explains the exclusionary attitudes towards Muslims as Islamophobia. The Islamophobic understanding basically racialises Muslims, disseminating the idea that white Europeans cannot be Muslims. As opposed to this understanding, ethnically German converts play a subversive role by showing that it is perfectly possible for a white/German/European to be a Muslim. The cover of Özyürek's book shows the subversive image of what looks like a white woman wearing hijab, who, according to the photographer Lia Darjes, is a convert named Ela. Ela has beautiful make-up, with a matching colour of lipstick and nail polish; her 'difference' is also reflected in her hand, which has a henna tattoo and with which she holds a cigarette. Ela is not just an image. She has a voice and offers an important explanation about her conversion: 'I received a Koran from a friend. For me, the special thing about Islam (as compared to other religions like Buddhism) is that it is clearly structured. We converts have the advantage that everything we did wrong before is wiped away. The moment you speak the Shahada, you are practically absolved from all your prior misdeeds.'[1]

1 https://www.lensculture.com/articles/lia-darjes-konvertieren-converting-to-islam-in-germany#slideshow.

Even if conversion promises absolution from one's misdeeds, it cannot prevent prejudice and misdeeds against converts in Europe. The book shows how converts are marginalised and their very identity as German and European is questioned; they are even labelled 'internal enemies' with the potential to engage in terrorist attacks. As the first chapter of the book explains, German converts are determined to give Islam a German face even despite the hostile environment. Converts try hard to find a middle way between their German identity and their new Muslim identity; they try to prove that they are still German, because even their relatives accuse them of not being German anymore. Proving their German identity can entail distancing themselves from immigrant Muslims such as Turks and Arabs. Özyürek surprisingly witnesses that ethnically German convert women have serious concerns about not being taken for Turkish women in their neighbourhoods. The easy way to not look like a Turk but still look like a Muslim is to use a different style of head covering. Unlike other Muslim immigrants, Turkish migrant women tend to be working class; they are under-educated and most of them cannot speak German. This public image usually irritates converts. As the author observed: 'Many German women who had donned the headscarf found themselves suddenly being treated as helpless, oppressed females short on linguistic ability, or worse, intelligence. In other words, overnight, they began to be treated as if they were Turks.' (pp. 67–68).

German converts to Islam seek to combat the racialised image of Islam in the German social and political context by purging Islam of the cultural practices of poor and undereducated Muslims by birth. However, at the same time they racialise immigrant Muslims, particularly Turkish women, as unenlightened subjects. They idealise Islam per se as opposed to all its cultural interpretations, so that, they argue, Germany (and perhaps also Europe) could be the best place to live an Islamic life. The only condition is, as Özyürek states, 'if one can eliminate immigrant Muslim traditions-if not traditional Muslims themselves, who give Islam a bad name'. (p. 68)

If such racist discourse aims to disseminate the idea that a Muslim cannot be German, or a German cannot be Muslim, then one may fairly ask whether someone from East Germany can be a true German. And what happens when an East German converts to Islam? Chapter 3 deals with East German converts to Islam after the fall of the Berlin Wall. From the very beginning of unification, East Germans have found themselves as second-class members of the new Germany. A group of East Berliners converted to Islam during this process of unification. While Islam has offered them a kind of spiritual fulfilment that they were not able to enjoy under an atheistic regime, being Muslim, and being a convert as well as being an Easterner, offers a very limited asset within the new German context.

The story of Zehra, an East German convert, provides a good illustration of the difficult situation of an 'Ossie' (as opposed to a 'Wessie'). Having grown up in an

authoritarian regime, Zehra sees nothing good in communism; but since unification, she has found nothing desirable about capitalism either. This is not an isolated feeling on the part of Zehra, as, the author explains, East Germans generally feel disappointed: 'After a few weeks of euphoria, the dominant feeling that surrounded East Germans was collective depression.' (p. 74)

First of all, the economic situation of many former East Germans is bad, and everything seems very expensive for them. The fall of the wall does not sound so much like it was a victory but a defeat for them. Like others, Zehra does not know what to do with her life and gets very depressed. She explains her feelings, which seems quite similar to an immigrant's feelings, as follows:

> I began to see everything through dark glasses. It was not possible for me to get a job anywhere as an East German. In East Germany, we did not learn how to use computers. That was a big disadvantage... They were already firing all East Germans from their jobs and appointing West Germans in their place... Imagine, suddenly your money is worth nothing, you are poor, no one wants you to work for them, you have no value... (p. 75).

Converting to Islam in Germany may not seem like the right way to get past a sense of worthlessness, but Zehra was searching for something, something spiritual, something that Germany, East or West, cannot give her. She enjoyed meeting different people and different religions. She wanted to see Arabic lands, but she had no money to travel. If she could not travel to any Muslim lands, Muslim people in Germany could enter her life. She started praying and trying to understand the idea of God, which was quite unfamiliar to her. Her conversation with a German convert to Islam at a library, affected her positively. For the first time in her life she began accepting everything as it is, and she accepted herself: She was even able to look into the mirror and see herself as beautiful. Apparently, embracing Islam has deeply empowered her and given her a chance to leave all her turmoil behind and embrace a new life in Germany as it is.

A more organised claim to German identity and Muslim identity can be observed in an organisation named the Muslimische Jugend Deutschland (Muslim Youth of Germany, or MJD). This organisation was established in 1994 by a German convert and quickly became an important agent for empowering German Muslim youth by 'developing practices that are Islamically acceptable and compatible with the German way of life' (p. 89).

German as a common language gives the members of the MJD a chance to transcend their various ethnic origins. Mixed marriage in this sense becomes another significant opportunity to raise generations of genuinely German Muslims and

to create a feeling of Ummah as opposed to partial nationalist identities based upon different ethno-cultural roots. Creating an entertainment culture for German Muslims is another aim of the MJD. Accordingly, Germany's first 'halal rapper' Ammar114 has the right context in which to flourish thanks to the MJD network. Ammar144 in his songs expresses resistance to German nationalism and racism by voicing the idea that Muslims are also part of Germany, they are Germans and claim equal rights.

In the heterogenous social context of Germany and Europe, converts do not follow the same path in embracing Islam. Accordingly, 'Is Salafism the Future of European Islam?' is made the central question of Chapter 5. Here Özyürek investigates why 'the allegedly most conservative and most radical mosque in Berlin" attracts so many German speaking youth from indigenous German background to Russian, eastern European, African and Latin American roots' (p. 112). Salafism is the most stigmatised interpretation of Islam and the German authorities usually associate Salafism with radicalism and terrorism. Özyürek's explanation for Salafism's appeal to converts runs counter to the functionalist idea that underlines how Salafism helps school drop-outs and drug addicts to pull their life together; that is to say, it gives deprived groups and gives people who feel alienated an instrument with which to empower themselves in a hostile society.

Özyürek instead argues that Salafism attracts converts through its peculiar theological, anti-culturalist and anti-nationalist stance. In this sense, the author likens Salafism to Evangelism and Pentecostalism, all of which appeal to human beings in a psychological and spiritual sense. In addition, Salafism is a form of fundamentalism that has commonalities with Christian fundamentalism. Özyürek observes four common features that make Salafism efficient and transformative for newcomers. These are conversionism, a rejection of tradition, literalism, and the breaking of traditional religious hierarchies (p. 116). Salafi puritanism in short appeals to both converts and Muslims by birth by making them feel superior to all other Muslims because of their rejection of traditionalism, hierarchy, and nationalism. It embraces people from all backgrounds, in this sense it fits well with a multicultural German/European context. And this context resembles the golden age of Islam, when Meccan and Medinans transcended their tribal roots and united together as the first Ummah.

In her concluding remarks, Özyürek reminds us of the rising anti-Muslim sentiment in Germany. She describes how converts have been instrumentalised in a way to create a public fear of Islam; to make ordinary German citizens worry about the idea that Islamic culture is taking over Germany. This idea is particularly voiced by the mainstream media and by certain best-selling anti-Muslim and anti-migrant authors. Among others, the author of the best-selling *Hurra, Wir Kapitulieren* (Hurray! We

Are Capitulating), Henryk M. Broder, is fuelling anti-Muslim sentiments, is seeking to enrage the public against Islam, and even suggests that 'young Europeans who love their freedom should emigrate to Australia or New Zealand' (p. 135). These ideas resonate with the Australian white supremacist's discourse on Muslims in Europe as 'invaders'.

All in all, Esra Özyürek's book is a great contribution to the fields of anthropology, political science, and religious and racial studies in that it richly documents the growing racist, xenophobic, and Islamophobic discourse in the new Europe. The book successfully shows the counter-discourses and empowerment strategies used by Muslims by birth and converts to make Europe a home for Islam. While revealing to us the most intimate details of the lives of converts, the book also indicates the political ramifications of religious conversion, which can take the form of threats, fear and violence against the converts. This book should be on the current 'must-read' list of books about the new Europe that is being re-shaped along the lines of race, religion, and the 'refugee crisis'.

Unveiling Lower-Class Bodies and Queering Labour History: 'Industrial Sexuality'

Claire Savina

Hammad, H. 2016. *Industrial Sexuality: Gender, Urbanization, and Social Transformation in Egypt.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

In *Industrial Sexuality, Gender Urbanization and Social Transformation in Egypt,* Hanan Hammad investigates the effects of industrialisation, urbanisation, and mass capitalism on the construction of modern gender and sexual identities. She focuses on the daily experiences of male and female workers, adults and children, in al-Maḥalla al-Kubrā, the largest and most productive Egyptian textile factory and, in 1947, the stage of the most important protest in the history of modern Egypt. Through a challenging exploration of archival sources that have been left aside by historians of labour, on the one hand, and historians of gender, on the other hand, the author describes how the industrial modernisation and organisation of the town and a coercive class hierarchy led to the concentration of tens of thousands of strangers, men, women, and children at work and at home and to aggravated