

Aslan, Ednan; Kolb, Jonas and Erol Yildiz. 2017. *Muslimische Diversität. Ein Kompass zur Religiösen Alltagspraxis in Österreich*. Weisbaden: Springer Verlag. Ebook. viii + 506 pages.

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Muslimische Diversität is the first in-depth analysis of Islam in Austria and it results from a comprehensive study conducted among researchers of the universities of Vienna and Innsbruck. The study aimed at surveying the magnificent diversity that exists in Muslim communities that in the country, a diversity enunciated not only in terms of differences in the origin of the groups and generational profile, but more importantly in the ways in which Islam is expressed at a more mundane level, by informing the views of Muslims as well as by manifesting in forms of practicing Islam.

Due to its focus on how Islam informs everyday life, and given that most of the existing literature on Muslim communities in Europe places its attention in far more formal manifestations of the faith, the study is a valuable contribution not only for the German-speaking world, but for the study of Muslim communities in Europe more in general. Given that the book is concerned with understanding religion in its day-to-day appearance, rather than on its most institutionalized and formal aspects, it is a useful resource to anyone willing to have a deeper understanding of the multifarious nature of Muslim identity in the country as it occurs beyond religious settings.

Besides, the authors are aware of the given fact that studies that concentrate on revivalist (mostly Salafi) forms of Islam are overrepresented, and consequently, conscious of the existing risk of thinking that these two phenomena (revivalist Islam and institutionalised Islam)

represent the type of identity that is the commonest in Muslim communities is high. They choose to address this bias by focusing on those forms of living the Muslim faith that generally receive less attention. One of the oft-cited problems encountered by academics in the study of modern Islam in Europe is the excessive focus of these studies on religious settings. What happens is that, it is normally assumed that what scholars find in these settings is representative of communities as a whole, and thus, the often-reproduced bias is based on the assumption that affiliated Muslims represent the diverse identities of both the affiliated and the un-affiliated, when the incipient analysis we have in this regard do not seem to see the two as coinciding. What happens at the mosque is not necessarily what happens everywhere else.

Just to name a few examples, studies on institutionalised Islam seldom include women, neither they do – expectedly- include the views of non or loosely religious Muslims; also, they do rarely incorporate those with ideas about religion less conforming with established discourses. *Muslimische Diversität*, is thence particularly interesting in two ways, first, because one can place its findings in contraposition to the works that mainly capsize the views of religious leaders more available in the existing literature on European Islam, and second, because it seeks to understand with more propriety the religious identities of the so-called ‘un-affiliated’, i.e. Muslims not formally adhered to any religious group or congregation.

The ambitious objective of addressing this imbalance is pursued by designing a sample that seeks to be demographically representative, including the largest degree of diversity attainable in terms of place of origin, place of residence, educational background, occupation as well as age and gender. In addition, it includes Austrian-born, Austrian-naturalised as well as non-citizens (I assume they are probably residents). Therewithal, diverse geographies of the country are also significantly well addressed, and I would say that the fact that the study includes places

such as Lower Austria, Carinthia and Tyrol is to be particularly welcomed, as the vast majority of research done insofar has been mainly conducted in Vienna.

The study is overarching and doubtlessly very ambitious on its goals. It seeks to provide a quite complete perspective on the diversity of Muslim identities that exist in the country, so, the authors claim, the calibration of qualitative data with a quantitative ponderation is central to achieve its goal. In this way, the study claims to incorporate both, qualitative and quantitative analysis, although I think it is far more successful in the latter than in the former. The research is mainly based on interviews, and the sample is big, 71 ‘qualitative’ interviews of between one and three hours each, some of them on-site, others online or on the telephone, and 648 ‘quantitative’ ones.

The type of data obtained, although very valuable, allows for a reading of a quantitative kind that although is sparkled with qualitative appreciations that are illustrative and help the reader to better understand the general line of thought, they are not of the same insightfulness as the data obtained from the survey. That would mean that, a study, perhaps not as overarching, but focusing on conducting fieldwork with fewer cases could be an interesting qualitative addition that would help to add nuance in order to develop a more complete (perhaps more contradictory too) overall picture. In short, the qualitative dimension is not as strong as the quantitative and I see room for further exploring the qualitative aspects of this work.

The frame developed to deal with the complexities of the sample is well developed. In particular, I find rich and adequate the two-dimensional criteria, that on the one hand looks at the religiosities’ ‘intensity’ (evaluated through, a) religious beliefs and experiences, b) theological knowledge, c) performance of religious duties and d) degree of alignment of daily

routines in accordance to religious prescriptions) and on the other, at social values (ideas and positionings about the family, education, gender and the respective cultural traditions). The interplay between these two dimensions is explanatory, clear and has the advantage of systematising data in a structured way, though without losing the richness of the detail.

The research results have been analysed in accordance to a five-fold typology, that makes more manageable the data and helps us to make sense of the diversity of religious approaches. It is done by identifying the following categories: the first category is called preserving religiosity and it refers to cases in which

“religious commands are strictly adhered to, belief is a central component of the person’s self-image, everyday life is primarily seen as regulated by religious principles [...] there is a partial distancing from non-Muslims [...] life takes place mainly in the family, in the mosque or in religious organizations, and leisure time also takes place in religiously-oriented communities” (p. 66).

They are defined as less accommodating, i.e. Islam is perceived as the only true, or at least the best religion and religious regulations are considered a must that have to be observed by Muslims in all circumstances; ideologically speaking these interviewees would be conservative, and would argue for their views by following a religious rationale.

The second group is named pragmatic religiosity and is used to refer to highly religious people for whom being a Muslim is central to their self-image, yet they only practice Islam when the circumstances are considered optimal, what means that for them ritual obligations (the ones considered in the study are daily and Friday prayers, fasting and wearing a headscarf) are not

seen as unquestionable, but that can rather be negotiated due to work or family reasons. Members of this group do not always support their ideas on religious logic and may not always align with teachings of the Islamic schools of law (p.131).

The third category is called open religiosity and refers to people that adopt liberal positions with regard to

“life plans, ideas about upbringing, gender-specific role models and sexual orientation [...] and it is characterized by [...] an individualized approach to Islam that breaks free from strict religious rules; [...] they do not refer to traditionally accepted perspectives on religion and make sense and live out their religious convictions individually” (p.223).

The fourth group is identified as *“religiosity as a cultural habit”*, which consists of people who does not consider themselves to be particularly religious, seldom pray although more often observe other ritual prescriptions in which the collective takes more relevance, such as Friday prayers or fasting. This is because among members of this group, being *“religious is neither a conscious decision nor the result of a personal search for meaning [...] but rather a vestige of their migration background [...] [an attitude adopted in order] to preserve family tradition”* (p. 299).

The last group is defined as having a residual religiosity, which translates in the detachment from religious regulations as well as by a minimal religious character in terms of *“experience, ideology, rituals and religious knowledge”* (p.387). This is an interesting category since it identifies individuals for whom *“being Muslim is due solely to their family’s migrant*

background or their nationality, yet, their way of life is in no way based on religious regulations and rules” (p.388). The authors acknowledge existing debates on the appropriateness of considering them Muslims that exist both in scholarly and religionist circles and convincingly argue in favour of including them in the study for they have opted for the use of emic categorisations as foundational criteria, meaning that those who describe themselves as Muslims are included.

The classification is useful in that it helps the reader and the researchers to make sense of otherwise highly complex set of data, which in itself is indicative of the high degree of diversity that characterises Islam in Austria. It shows however, a number of strengths as well as weaknesses. An interesting aspect of the ways in which religiosity is conceptualised by Aslan, Korb and Yildiz is that highly religious people is considered to be diverse (against what is commonly thought), representing the three first clusters of the typology, and including a broad range of positions, from the more liberal to the more conservative. It is the emphasis on the everyday that allows the authors to identify these differences among the pious, because the categories preserving, pragmatic and open, *“although similar to one another in terms of religiosity’s intensity, they differ markedly from one another with regard to the everyday”* (p. 131). I also appreciate the fact that people with a more loose approach to religion are considered, since they, as the authors themselves recognise are normally overlooked both by the media and by academia, and the argument in favour of prioritising emic categories of religious identity seem to me to make more sense than uncompromising delineations made on the basis of someone else’s criteria.

The categorization, however, falls short in understanding the changing evolving nature of religious identity, as it capsizes how individuals relate to religion in one particular moment in

time, without recognising that these are predispositions that can change over time. As a result, a series of misconceptions can emerge. For example, the group of the preserving type is considered to be made of people reluctant to change (based on the conservative position they seemingly adopt in life), yet there is a number of studies suggesting that conservative Muslims belonging to revivalist groups who require a high degree of commitment from their members tend to sustain this level of commitment for relatively short periods of time (e.g. Inge, 2017; Adraoui, 2020), what means that if the same person would be interviewed, let's imagine, ten years later, s/he would possibly appear as being part of another category.

That takes us to the second appreciation with regards to the categories. Since the categories scrutinise what people tell about themselves in order to discuss what people are, researchers assume that people are simply telling the truth. Not necessarily questioning the validity of the data collected it is worth remembering that narratives elaborated by people to refer to their religious identity do oftentimes incorporate an important aspirational content. For this reason, people (especially the ones that see themselves as most pious) depict themselves in more ideal terms than their everyday would actually reflect. Thus, people sometimes would more closely describe the kind of Muslim they want to be, rather than the ones they are, which may have an effect of the outlook of their everyday religious practice (but possibly not so much on the ideological front). On a related note, I think the authors only tangentially address the identity interplay between interviewer and interviewee, which in the case of the aspirational representations of the self would be quite poignant, because the fact that the interviewee identifies the interviewer as a co-religionist, for example, can substantially alter what s/he actually says.

Something similar may occur with regards to gender; a female interviewee might present herself as more pious than she actually is in trying to fit with cultural ideals of the feminine that she might think expected from her to behave modestly in front of a (Muslim) stranger. Issues of representation and of the identity of the researchers are certainly discussed in chapter 4, but these considerations do not seem to be substantially taken into consideration neither when developing the strategies to conduct the research itself, nor when interpreting the data obtained. Acknowledging that this kind of structural bias is difficult to avoid, I would also suggest that including in the study a lengthier observation of peoples' lifestyles would help to calibrate what they claim with what happens – although that would necessarily mean to mow the size of the sample.

Finally, a consideration on agency and choice in relation to religious identity. When concentrating in the analysis of religiousness in everyday life, one can easily blame the individual for matters that are probably equally attributable to the circumstantial. An example of this is found in the discussion about social withdrawal, in which Muslims who 'choose' to socialise with non-Muslims are generally (it appears) more liberal. The authors often recognise the relevance of the context and understand that the result is different when one, for example, chooses to mix with non-Muslims than when one is forced to do so because lives in a small village with a small or almost inexistent Muslim community. After all, as members of a religious minority, Muslims choose their acquaintances in this regard, mostly only in urban contexts, and not even there. The study also discusses the case of neighbourhoods in Vienna in which the degree of social mixing is extremely low. The extent to which this is matter of individual choice is, I would say, open to debate.

In another instance but in a similar line, the study suggests that it is rare to find highly religious (I understand conservative) people who is happy about their life in Austria, the rationale being that someone who values the religious freedom and liberal values (that might in a more abstract sense define Austrian society according to the authors) would feel more at home than someone who does not. Yet, one might think that beyond these more abstract ideals, the experiences and circumstances of each individual (what kind of economic or social situation they endure) may be also important in deciding the satisfaction of the person with the country of birth and/or residence. In this regard, I think a more serious discussion on social exclusion would be interesting and an inclusion into the analysis of aspects such as how stigmatised may a devout, practicing Muslim feel in certain contexts, social segregation, racism and Islamophobia, are elements (beyond religious identity) which might be worth considering to enhance our understanding of questions such as the satisfaction with the country of birth and/or residence.

Overall, the book illuminates interesting aspects about the Muslim communities in Austria and develops a rich and detailed profile, while opens interesting venues for future research. For example, a) what are the reasons behind the fact that the consumption of halal food is considered as a less negotiable prescription than prayer or dress?; why are there certain prohibitions on food and drink more observed than others? b) What is accounted for the uneven gender distribution in the different categories? Does it have to do with the fact that first generation migrants (which are predominantly male) are overrepresented in certain groups? Or are there other reasons?; c) how does social contexts influence by promoting or discouraging the expression of certain religiosities? What role does censorship play in the diminishing or increasing popularity of certain religiosities? d) what are the reasons behind the decline in religious literacy across generations? What constitutes religious literacy?; and e) The study suggests that some among the less religious see themselves as becoming more religious when

they will age; why? will they? And, last but not least, how does the detour of time affect the religious identities of Muslims in Austria?

The number of open venues for future exploration that the study inspires is only indicative of the fact that we are indeed in front of a rich study, useful, insightful and quite comprehensive. Not only the first in analysing the variegated map of Muslim identities in Austria, but also, unique in its comprehensiveness, quite pioneer in exploring protractedly Islam in its detail and assortment as manifested in a given European country. For that reason, I think the study is a valuable contribution not only to the field of Islam in Austria, not only to the scholarship on Islam in German speaking contexts, but to a broader public with an interest in understanding Muslim minorities in the West. Its consistent analysis and overarching scope constitute one of its main strengths. A recommended read for those willing to obtain a more realistic and perhaps more ambivalent picture of Europe's Muslims, and with more precision on the evaluation of the specificities of the Austrian context.

References

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