

Muslim Minorities in the West: Visible and Invisible

*Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane I. Smith, eds.
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The Muslim diaspora, which has become established as a significant area of publishing in the past 2 to 3 decades, is being charted by a number of books and journals. This edited collection is a valuable addition to the literature, although specialists in the field will notice some degree of overlap with existing sources.

The book is divided into three sections exploring the Muslim experience in America (seven chapters), Europe (three chapters covering France, Germany, and Norway), and areas of European settlement (five chapters covering Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the Caribbean). The best way to view this book is to consider it a series of case studies examining how Muslims in different contexts have moved from being temporary and peripheral individual sojourners to being, within their adopted societies, generally well-established communities that have largely overcome their internal differences and external structural barriers in order to be publicly recognized as a part of multicultural and multifaith communities and societies. Many of the contributors believe that Muslim minorities are growing, dynamic, confident, and demographically “young” in most of their new societies, and that wherever they have established themselves, they have sustained their presence and thrived, sometimes in the face of extreme hostility.

This case study character has advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, this reviewer found it extremely valuable to learn more about the experience of some very specific minority groups, such as Sahelians in France, who are usually ignored and overshadowed in the literature by the overwhelming Algerian-Moroccan presence in France. Likewise, with relatively little academic material available on Muslims in New Zealand, for example, this book fills many of the academic gaps in the literature. The first-hand accounts from previously unpublished sources were similarly valuable, and the chapter on establishing the Islamic Party in North America constitutes an important documentary record. On the other hand, some chapters went over well-established ground, such as Turks in Germany. Specialists on Muslim minorities will find that some chapters repeat already well-known data and profiles of Islam in these contexts.

The book would have been much more informative if the countries or cases had been selected according to a clearer underpinning rationale. For example, why was the Muslim experience in Britain, given its size and significance, omitted while two chapters were devoted to Muslims in Australia: one on community building and one on Muslim women in Perth? The selection appeared to be somewhat random and without a guiding principle.

The theme of visibility and invisibility is the supposed theme linking the various chapters together, but the degree to which the contributors really give it any theoretical space varies considerably. They have been more or less skillful in drawing out the theme's parameters and dynamics, and some chapters are factually heavy but rather light in terms of analysis. This being the case, the book warranted a strong theoretically informed conclusion to complement the editors' introduction to the chapters and themes. The implications of the similarities and differences of the Muslim experience in the contexts considered needed to be addressed, and some indications of future directions would have been welcome.

Many of the analyzed contexts and cases suggest that Muslim minorities have become more visible by challenging the established frameworks of law and civil society, and gradually are becoming more accepted by the government, media, local populations, and so on. Over time, their priorities have shifted gradually from straightforward material and economic survival to combating Islamophobia and overcoming barriers toward symbolic and political recognition in public life. In working from exclusion at their society's edges to inclusion in the mainstream of public life, the role of Islamic organizations, religious leaders, and Muslim activists has been crucial.

But one concern, apparently common to many Muslim minority communities, remains: the availability of an appropriately trained leadership. In many ways, the dissatisfaction, especially among young people, with imported imams and a corresponding desire for home-grown imams is an important marker of this ongoing transition. Their psychological and spiritual orientation is less and less toward their parents' and grandparents' countries of birth and more toward the societies in which they live.

Finding scholars and religious leaders who are familiar and concerned with issues related to living Islam in non-Muslim societies is perhaps a key challenge facing Muslims in the West. It is key due to the challenge of finding Islamically informed individuals who can speak to and unite Muslims from a variety of ethnic and philosophical schools of thought, and who can recognize and address the needs of a frequently overlooked

group: women. Furthermore, it is a significant challenge because, as Tamara Sonn points out in her chapter on South Africa, Muslims in minority western contexts also act as “pioneers in the struggle to reconcile Islamic principles with life in technologically developed and pluralistic societies.” Seminaries located in the Islamic world are perhaps not the best training ground for meeting these diverse challenges.

Far from telling anything like a complete (or even incomplete) story of Muslim minority experience in the West, this book nevertheless brings together a fascinating collection of diverse and often rich accounts of Muslim life in different contexts. The surprises are many (Did you know that New Zealand was the largest exporter of *halal* meat?), but the variability of the contributions in terms of actually relating empirical experience to the theoretical issues of visibility and invisibility makes the book useful, but not outstanding.

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