Spyros A. Sofos and Roza Tsagarousianou


The ever expanding pool of books on Islam/Muslims in Europe can be roughly divided into two categories—overviews, which could serve as textbooks, and case studies, dealing with certain specific aspects of the Muslim presence in Europe. *Islam in Europe: Public Spaces and Civic Networks*, co-authored by Spyros A. Sofos and Roza Tsagarousianou, appears to aim at both. The first part of the book (Chapters 1 to 3) reads as a rather broad general overview of arrival and settlement of Muslims in Western Europe in the second half of the 20th century, while the second part (Chapters 4 to 7) is based on fieldwork research in several Western European localities. It is this latter part which contains original findings and is therefore worth a closer look. One might be even tempted to suggest that the book could have started with Chapter 4.

Many, if not most, texts on Muslims in Europe written in Western Europe tend to identify Western Europe with the entire continent. In this regard *Islam in Europe: Public Spaces and Civic Networks* is no exception—though throughout the book Muslims in Europe are referred to as ‘Europe's’ or even ‘European’ Muslims, only those living in Western Europe are included. Therefore, one is left wondering whether, for instance, Greece's and Bulgaria's Turkish-speaking Muslims, Pomaks, Torbeshis and Tatars elsewhere in Southern and Eastern Europe fall into the category of ‘Europe's Muslims’. The feeling that these Muslim communities are not included is strengthened when the authors suggest that there are only ‘some six to eight million, depending on one’s sources’ (p. 2) Muslims in Europe, while most accounts (most notably, the ones by Pew Research Center) reveal that the number of people of Muslim background in the EU alone is close to 20 million and throughout Europe (including the European part of Russia with its another almost 20 million), exceeds 40 million!

Furthermore, on the same page, the authors maintain that the ‘bulk’ of ‘the continent's Muslim populations' ‘settled originally as industrial workers’, betraying yet another methodological pitfall in research on Muslims in Europe—that of identifying Europe's Muslims with immigrants and their progeny, practically eliminating sizeable native Muslim communities some of which have been living in Europe for half a millennium or more. Though the last two observations do not necessarily diminish the value of the book under review (though they arguably do in the case of Chapter 2 titled ‘Islam in Europe: A Genealogy’), one could wish that authors indicated from the onset that they concentrate on Muslims of immigrant background in Western Europe, perhaps also indicating this in the title of the book.
In any case, the latter chapters come closer to what the authors claim to be the book’s intention, namely, ‘to examine in some detail aspects of the complex way in which European Muslims relate to each other, construct and populate spaces they call home and create spaces of dialogue and debate’ (p. 6). For this purpose, the authors embarked on a discussions-based fieldwork research in a number of Western European countries, the bulk of interviews, focus groups and discussions having taken place in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, the UK and France (some might say, the usual suspects), all in all totaling 735 informants.

As alluded to above, chapters beginning with Chapter 4 are the most original and informative. Personally, to the reviewer, Chapter 4 appeared to be the most interesting as it deals with what the authors call ‘construction of (physical and mediated) locality’ which in its own turn is instrumental in the construction of one’s identity as a European Muslim. Excerpts from interviews and discussions reveal an interesting aspect of the perception of ‘safe spaces’ (in the physical but equally so in the spiritual sense) among young persons of Muslim background living in urban conglomerations of Western Europe—many claim to feel physically safe only in what in the public discourse has often been referred to as ‘ghettos’ as wandering outside these safe zones exposes one to unwanted and as a rule hostile attention and reaction. This aspect of the European Muslim reality, called by authors ‘topography of fear’, twists the oft exploited argument that Muslims in Europe do not want to integrate, when in fact they are often forced to construct their exclusive (safe) localities. In other words, ghettoisation, both physical but also mental, is as much forced on them as willed by them as a sign of unwillingness to integrate into the wider society.

Another interesting aspect uncovered in the research is the use of media by Western Europeans of Muslim background. Many informants lament that the mainstream media stigmatises both them and Muslims outside Europe. Many of the informants also maintain that local Western European media are not only unfair to Muslims but deliberately distort the image of Islam and Muslims (as informants in the research would indicate, they do not recognise themselves in the media reports on them, Europe’s Muslims) and as such is not consumable for Muslims. In the end, they look for and even create alternative media outlets, both on- and off-line. Though the authors do not go that far, one may talk of parallel information frameworks that Western European Muslims and non-Muslims may find themselves in, and what consequences that might have for attempts at dialogue and understanding between the two groups. For if Europe’s Muslims increasingly turn to alternative media for information on world events and processes, the prospects for a common ground with non-Muslims on many if not most issues diminish further. The successful