Esra Özyürek

*Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe.*

The rapid increase in conversion to Islam in Europe has become a phenomenon in the last two decades, but few studies so far have examined the complex socio-political, religious and ethnic aspects of the experiences of converts to Islam. *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe* by Esra Özyürek fills this gap by analysing the socially and religiously transformative aspects of conversion experiences as recalled by German converts, who are playing an enormous role in carving a space for Islam in an increasingly antagonistic German climate. Over a period of three-and-a-half years, the author conducted various interviews, attended numerous prayers and lectures among converts and born Muslims and participated in their various Islamic activities in and around the cosmopolitan capital city of Berlin.

The book starts by highlighting the experiences of being Muslim in Germany that converts share with born Muslims, such as fighting for acceptance within a society that has historically always been hostile towards Islam and Muslims and regards the headscarf in particular as a sign of female oppression and alien to German society. Unlike born Muslims, however, after converting to Islam, converts lose a great deal of their social status and have to learn to cope with the new marginality they are suddenly forced into within their own society. They soon have also to realise that they do not fit into the existing ethnic Muslim communities, mainly Turkish or Arab, either. Borrowing from DeBois, the author argues that converts now have a “double consciousness”—they are fighting on two fronts: on the one hand, converts try to convince German society that their conversation to Islam is part of their individual rational choice and therefore fits into the intellectual development of German history since the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), while, on the other, they turn to the first generation of immigrant Muslims and try to convey to them how to establish a purified “true” Islam as defined by the converts themselves.

In Chapter 2, the author critically engages with the link between conversion and the German Enlightenment period that some converts make. She argues that, although the Enlightenment was open to diversity, it was still very much based on Eurocentric dichotomising power structures, regarding the European mind as rational and superior to the non-European. German converts here fall into similar Eurocentric attitudes of cultural superiority over non-Europeans. They regard immigrant Muslims as being not only caught in but also oppressed...
by their traditions, which prevent them of understanding and living out “true” Islam. These converts believe that only they as rational Europeans are capable of understanding Islam. Immigrant Muslims should therefore adopt the converts’ version of an idealised Islam, purified of cultural accretions. By doing so, the author argues, these German converts implicitly support the existing racist prejudices against Muslim immigrants prevalent in German society as a whole. The author’s findings resonate with other studies on converts to Islam in Europe and add thereby an important example from within the German context.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, East Germans hoped for prosperity after unification with the economically stronger West Germany. However, they soon discovered that they were regarded by Western Germans as second-class citizens and were very often stigmatised and marginalised within the united Germany. It therefore comes as no surprise, as discussed in Chapter 3, that some East Germans joined violent right wing parties that carried out a series of racist attacks against foreign workers mainly from Turkey and various parts of Africa. On the other hand, however, there were a number of East Germans who saw similarities with these immigrant Muslim groups, particularly with regard to shared experiences of economic and social deprivation. Criticising the general materialistic and capitalistic orientation of the Western German society, some East Germans sympathised with Muslim immigrants and socialised with them. The majority felt welcomed and accepted among Muslim communities, despite their East German background, and this affected their decision to convert to Islam. They found in their conversion, the author argues, an escape from their East German identity. Relating conversion to the converts’ own experiences of discrimination is very original within conversion studies and so Being German, Becoming Muslim makes an important contribution to existing literature on conversion to Islam in Europe.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Muslim Youth of Germany (MJD), established by a German convert to Islam in 1994, which is an organisation that promotes an Islamic youth culture. It presents a strong German identity and lifestyle combined with self-declared Islamic halal practices such as halal hip-hop music. Muslim young people and converts try to find ways in which to carve out an active space within German society that is in accordance with Islamic principles, actively and progressively engaging in redefining what it means to be Muslim and German at the same time and highlighting that an Islamic lifestyle does not necessarily have to mean rejecting a German one. As an example, the author concentrates on Muslim young people’s use of hip-hop music as a way to criticise the intolerance of German society towards Muslims and Islam which, they argue, drives the marginalisation and criminalisation of some Muslims.