

Islamophobia, Religious Conversion, and Belonging in Europe

Book forum

Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and conversion in the New Europe, by Esra Ozyurek, Princeton, Princeton University Press 2015, 192 pp., ISBN: 9780691162799.

Ruth Mandel
Department of Anthropology
University College London

Nasar Meer
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Strathclyde

Paul A. Silverstein
Department of Anthropology
Reed College

Joel Robbins
Division of Social Anthropology
Department of Archaeology and Anthropology
University of Cambridge

Esra Ozyurek¹
European Institute
London School of Economics and Political Science

¹ Corresponding author. Email: e.g.ozyurek@lse.ac.uk

Ruth Mandel

What a pleasure to take part in this event to welcome Esra Ozyurek's new book, *Being German, Becoming Muslim*. This book joins the growing repertoire of critical studies about the increasingly complex and cosmopolitan makeup of Germany.

This book is remarkable for many reasons. First, Dr Ozyurek has taken an understudied field, Muslim-German conversion, and has engaged deeply with it. Moreover, she has uncovered a whole host of nuances entailed in this conversion process that had been neither noticed, nor understood, and she has analysed them. Through the lens of these German Muslim converts, the book reveals a new optics, specifically the articulation of Muslimness through German identity and immigrant identity.

Tens of thousands of Germans have converted to Islam. In a society where 'Muslim' has come to imply 'non-white immigrant,' social inferior, and even enemy of the state, and, moreover, where German-Islam for many is a contradiction in identity terms, how then do native German Muslims tread across these conundra? Ozyurek's engaging book leads us through these and related issues. She asks probing, and key questions throughout the text, just as she proposes possible explanations.

For example, we learn why the former president Wulf's declaration that 'Islam has become part of Germany history,' created an enormous, even scandalous shock. The huge reaction to his statement begs many questions. Why should Islam and German be the contradiction in terms many claim it to be?

Who are these Germans who choose to become Muslim? What are their motivations? Can an indigenous German Islam co-exist with the hegemonically Christian German society, any easier than an immigrant Islam, or, more accurately, immigrant Islams? And, also problematized, is the encounter between German Islam and the various Islams practiced by the immigrants.

The opening sentence of the book (p. 1) speaks powerfully to this. It is a statement from German-Muslim converts that she heard over and over again:

"I would never have become a Muslim if I had met Muslims before I met Islam..."

Clearly, many Germans who convert see Islam in a very inorganic way, as a reified state of being, a static set of strictures and teachings, in other words NOT as a living organic, culturally contextualized set of practices, identities and beliefs that inevitably change with place and time. Their Islam is something unrelated to culture and society, a rarefied intellectual and spiritual project.

The book deals at length with this issue. It describes how many of the German converts believe themselves to be purer, better, superior Muslims than their immigrant co-religionists. With the zealotry common to converts, Ozyurek identifies many newly-Muslim Germans who feel confident and justified in their criticism of the native-born Muslim immigrants' beliefs and

practices. Interestingly, the lack of self-reflection and relativism proves glaring—this attitude reflects an unrealised projection of what might be understood as a 'German' intellectual appropriation of the 'other.'

The living language - like the living Islams practiced in Germany by immigrants - might indeed contradict grammatical or doctrinal theory. To anthropologists, this is what makes the study of culture and society all the more compelling.

Unselfconscious blindspots shade the attitudes of many of the Muslim Germans the author interviews. For example, they claim that the Islam practiced by immigrants is diluted if not polluted by local cultural practices, and as Ozyurek writes "German Muslims claim that as converts, they can even be better Muslims than immigrant Muslims. They imply that by definition, they live a pure Islam not contaminated by cultural practices and urge native-born Muslims also to purify their Islamic practice of the stigmatized cultural traditions." (p. 25)

As an analogy, we might compare it to those who study a new language, and in the process learn its rules better than the native speakers; sometimes, the newly fluent find themselves shocked and confused with colloquialisms that contradict grammar rules. I remember well after having struggled for a year with Turkish grammar and trying to get my head around the complexities of vowel harmony, that amazing feature of Turkish phonetics, and when I finally went to Turkey the following year I was shocked to hear violations of vowel harmony committed by native speakers all around me!

We might ask whether or not the converts' feelings of superiority echo the already powerful *Auslanderfeindlichkeit*, xenophobia, against foreigners that has grown over the past half-century, just as it has assumed a myriad of forms in changing discourses. For example: People who once were thought of as temporary workers-*Gastarbeiter*, guestworkers-occupied this identity until the pejorative ironies overwhelmed any putative objectivity of the moniker. Then, they became *Auslander*-outsiders, foreigners, again, until the stigmatization of **that** term undermined its alleged descriptive qualities. Then as Turks, and migrants (but rarely immigrants, since Germany has taken great pains to deny that it is an immigration country) many began to apply for German nationality. However, they were still Turks or 'Germans with migrant heritage'—never *un-*adjectivalised 'Germans.' The final metamorphose came after 9/11 in particular, when Guestworker-Foreigner-Turk-migrants found they had categorically been transformed into a new category: Muslim. Replacing the previous *auslanderfeindlichkeit*, a more pernicious version rose to the fore: Islamophobia.

This surely complicates the situation for the native German Muslims, often adamant about radically separating themselves from these other stigmatised immigrant Muslims. The book describes how some German Muslims make explicit connections between their own conversion

and practices with the lost ideals of the German Enlightenment...personified by Goethe and Lessing. This line of thought serves to further differentiate themselves from the immigrant Muslims, with their romantic historicizing, explicitly linking themselves and their 'true' Islam to the Hochkultur of German and European ideals.

Salafism is dealt with in depth in the book; it has proved very attractive and appealing to a variety of new Muslims. In part it appears to be one of the only varieties of Islam that is divorced from national origins, hence seen to be more inclusive. I urge you to read that fascinating chapter.

The book's discussion of new, path-breaking identity-engineering young Muslims is as intriguing as it is significant. These are perhaps the first Muslims who feel comfortable and confident in their assertion of their Germanness. Given the generalised hostility to Islam in Germany, this is an important opening.

A good book raises questions prosaic and provocative, and suggests new directions for thought and research. This monograph is one of those.

For example, it begs some historical comparisons: one cannot imagine Turkish-Ottoman history without the mass conversions that were central to it, particularly in the Balkans. Today's Bosnian, Macedonian, Pomaki and Albanian Muslims are their descendants of these early converts. Joining the Muslim Ottoman club brought with it many social and economic privileges; by contrast, those Germans who choose to convert to Islam for the most part are *not* joining the large post-Ottoman Turkic club of fellow denizens; rather, they are setting themselves apart and above.

Furthermore, many of the Balkan converts were attracted by the Bektashi movement or sect of Islam, for a variety of reasons. Though beyond the purview of this book, it would be fascinating to learn about German Muslims who have converted to non-orthodox Islam. Likewise, are there among the new converts, any who choose to follow the Gulen movement? As the author concludes, ultimately, this penetrating study reveals as much about Germany and a select group of Germans as it does about Islam. In her words, Converts to Islam break ground for genuinely new ways of being and becoming Muslim, German, German Muslim and Muslim German. At the same time they provoke new anxieties about the changing realities of being European.

Nasar Meer

Esra Özyürek's (2015) *Being German, Becoming Muslim*, makes a welcome and distinctive contribution to – as the subtitle sums up – the study of *Race, Religion and Conversion in the New Europe*. In my reading I would like to pick up on some analytical questions raised by key themes that I think permeate the text. The first centres on the 'Becoming Muslim' part of the title, with observations about what the book adds to how we might approach our understanding of Muslim categories in Europe. The second is to pursue the question of Islamophobia and Europe and it appears amongst Özyürek's respondents..

As ever, much depends on our framing. Islam has a political relevance that is central to all kinds of discourse and policy, but this should not compel us to reduce religion to politics. This would flatten out the analysis and make a category error. But nor should we be naïve about this salience and focus solely on internal Muslim sources such as scripture, practice and orthodox and non-orthodox tradition or convention more broadly. I have elsewhere argued we instead need to better develop an idea of 'Muslim' as a sociological category, perhaps understood as 'Muslim Consciousness', that is not necessarily anchored in either faith or belief (Meer 2010, 2015).

I say this in order to register the contested nature of framing of Muslim identity both amongst Muslims themselves, but also in terms of how it is understood, and I detect this theme running throughout Özyürek's book. Thus she says that 'in a political climate that sees no place for their religion, and is antagonistic towards their conversion, some German converts try to open up a legitimate space for Islam by disassociating it from Turks and Arabs' (p. 2). This kind of de-ethnicisation plugs into an established trend observed by people like Oliver Roy (2004) and others, especially Jessica Jacobson's (1998) earlier writing. Özyürek goes on to say that 'once cleansed of these oppressive accretions, the pure Islam that is revealed fits in perfectly well with German values and lifestyles' (p. 3), and then elaborates in Chapter One how and in what ways.

As Özyürek notes more diffusely throughout, separating culture and religion like this is not about emptying out cultural content from religion, but is instead about re-inscribing religion with new cultural content. Hitherto however scholarship on this question – something which marks this book out further - has not been successful in developing a theoretical language to describe it. Some preliminary exceptions might be found in those interested in the notion of Euro-Islam.

Two poles of Euro-Islam, Tariq Ramadan and Bassam Tibi bring this out well because each focuses on what we might think of as the first tier of Muslim identities – namely that which is derived from religious-devotional readings – but overlook how Muslim identities are subject to sociological forces too. The latter take in the questions of how Muslim identities are subject to issues of ethnicity, and migration and race, and forth as well. Without this stepping stone I do not really see how authors in different Euro-Islam camps can offer a persuasive account of the ways in which Muslims identities are forged. By contrast, in Özyürek's reading, dynamic political

identities emerge out of a sociological process before they take particular (in her case post-national) forms.

In Ramadan's reading (2004), Euro-Islam is a process already underway. It is a 'Muslim personality' that is 'faithful to the principles of Islam, dressed in European and American cultures, and definitively rooted in Western societies' (ibid. 4). But he argues that this is not enough. It still needs theological justification, not least to overcome the binary of *dar al-Islam* v. *dar al-harb* (the abode of Islam v the abode of war). To this end,

Muslims have to go back to the beginning and study their points of reference in order to delineate and distinguish what, in their religion, is unchangeable (*thabit*) from what is subject to change (*mutaghayyir*), and to measure, from the inside, what they have achieved and what they have lost by being in the West (Ramadan 2004: 9).

This is a question of freedom of interpretation that is quite different from a question of the wider institutionalization of Islam and/or non-practice of Islam in any given society. Ramadan thus sets out both a classicist and revisionist path to propose a qualitatively novel solution that is calibrated to contemporary – traditionally non-Muslim majority – societies. It is precisely this project of reconciliation that is challenged by Bassam Tibi (2008). For him it must be said openly and clearly that 'In defense of the open society, one which promotes rational autonomy and its principles, it needs to be spoken out candidly: Europe is not *dar al-Islam* (or, in the cover language of some, *dar al-shahada*), i.e. it is not an Islamic space but a civilisation of its own, albeit one that is open to others, including Muslims' (Tibi, 2008: 159). I read these tensions running in passages of the book and especially in the kinds of responses she gets from participants. One respondent, Amir, forthrightly tells her:

What we need is a reform of Muslims. It is really shameful that these Turks have been here for more than forty years, and so many of them cannot speak German. If they were good Muslims, they certainly would have read the Prophet Muhammad's traditions that say, 'If you travel in a foreign country for more than fifteen days, make sure you learn its language so that you can communicate with the people there'. So if these people were better Muslims, they would have mastered German and be better integrated into society' (Özyürek, 2015: 58).

But this extract also reveals another dynamic. I said at the beginning that we need to delineate how Muslim identities are forged e.g., religious and devotional teachings, and Muslim as a sociological force. And I think that of the ways in which Muslim identities most obviously take on a sociological form can be illustrated by the negotiation and response to Islamophobia. Academics are very good at 'making a fetish out of words' notes Klug (2014: 448), and it appears that this is no less the case with Islamophobia. But as Klug puts it: 'neither its etymology nor its provenance determines its meaning; only its use in the language does' (ibid. 449).

In this respect the argument against Islamophobia seems politically selective given that there are no uncontested relationships between the object and subject in any complaint of discrimination.

In this respect part of naming discrimination is a social awareness activity, and this has been the case for all concepts that seek to highlight what groups perceive as unfair treatment, including sexism, homophobia and antisemitism, amongst others.

What on first inspection appears different for Islam is that it is concerned with a world religion and so is of a different order to other minority social and political identities. I have spilled much ink over the years showing why this is a profoundly problematic assumption that relies on a false distinction between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' social identity and status (Meer 2010, 2015). To use literatures other than my own, this can be summarised in the statement that in the concept of Islamophobia, 'the involvement of "Islam"...does not relegate discussion to a theological register or matters of belief or doctrine. Religion is "raced", Muslims are racialized... what is primarily and fundamentally at stake in this is not a matter of the protection of belief per se, but rather of unequal power, legal protection and institutional clout, in the context of entrenched social inequalities' (Vakil 2010: 276).

At this point Özyürek (p. 55) raises a compelling challenge: how should do we understand Muslim Islamophobia? In her case studies Muslim converts not infrequently appeal to a universalistic Islam through a means of racializing other Muslim practices and impure. Islamophobic tropes here are pervasive, and this speaks to the race focus of the book too, such that Özyürek's broader analysis supports that view that when talking about Islamophobia we need to be able to grasp the ways in which discrimination against Muslim minorities picks out people on the basis of supposedly discernible characteristics. The latter may in an a priori or inductive way involve the attribution to those individuals of an alleged group tendency, or it may emphasize those features that are used to stigmatize or to reflect pejorative or negative assumptions based on his or her real or perceived membership of the group. The book therefore reminds us that this is a challenge for Muslims too.

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Paul A. Silverstein

Esra Özyürek could not have written a more timely book. In the wake of the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France, moral panics around the conversion and reversion of Europeans to Islam have reached a fever pitch. Ethnographers like Özyürek are perfectly positioned, not simply to counter Islamophobic amalgamations that would conflate Islamic belief and practice with an incipient propensity to violence, by offering instead humanizing portraits of Europe's new Muslims who aspire to harmonize their religious and national commitment, but also to provide insight into the complex social processes and structural conditions that underwrite conversion as a particular meaningful act of self-making at this historical juncture. In *Being German, Becoming Muslim*, Özyürek has done precisely this with an engaging, poignant study of how the different paths taken by converts (whether German urban elites, former East Germans, or born Muslims re-committing to their faith) converge in life-long, collective practices of self-pedagogy that involve learning how to negotiate German secular-Christian social norms and institutions. In so doing, as Özyürek shows, they point to alternate visions of a European cosmopolitan future, where the rigid framing of nationality, ethnicity, and ethical-moral-legal frameworks necessarily become more flexible.

The largely women converts are clearly the protagonists in Özyürek's deeply empathetic narrative. They struggle to carve out a space to fulfill their religious obligations in an otherwise non-Islamic German contexts of education, employment, and entertainment. They face the skeptical and occasionally hostile attitudes of family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers who, in trying to come to terms with the transformation, often write off the conversion as a passing phase, a moment of insanity, or a dangerous seduction. In some cases, they discover that kinship is indeed revocable, that family is not forever, much as generations of gay and lesbians have learned in coming out to parents and siblings (see Weston 1991). Indeed, Özyürek deploys Fatima El-Tayeb's term 'queering ethnicity' (2011) to describe converts' adoption of a minoritized position and the unexpected alliances across racialized lines their conversion potentially enables. In this regards, it would be productive to think about the complex ways in which Islam and queer sexuality are intertwined within the German (and more broadly European) practices of exclusion, whether in terms of perduring Orientalist fantasies of Muslim sexual deviancy/repression, or in terms of contemporary demands placed on Muslims to tolerate homosexuality as a condition for entry into modernity (see Brown 2008). Converts, like gay and lesbians in certain historical and cultural contexts, risk abjection as 'social pariahs' (to use Özyürek's phrase) in large part because of their racial invisibility, because they defy the certainty of social classification, because they deviate from normative obligations of social and biological reproduction. When one of Özyürek's headscarved interlocutors Miriam gives her papers with her German name at a government

office, 'everyone looks horrified. They look at me as if I'm a traitor' (p. 28). Likewise for Zeyneb: 'They call us traitors, people who left their culture behind and took on someone else's' (p. 27).

Such accusations of cultural treason sting particularly hard for converts decidedly committed to their Germanness and who are at pains to distinguish themselves from 'immigrants.' After a teacher attributes her son's naughty behavior to being raised in a Muslim household, Sara fumes, 'I get furious when I hear such accusations. I am an educated woman and I am a German. They always think I am a stupid immigrant' (p. 45). Many of Özyürek's interlocutors desired and believed they could uniquely achieve a 'pure,' 'authenticated' Islam (Deeb 2006) liberated from Arab or Turkish or African cultural 'traditions' understood to be later, retrograde (and, for some, heretical) accretions. For some converts, this involved efforts to forge a specifically German Islamic practice attuned to the everyday social and cultural contexts in which converts lived, with some even tracing a genealogy of this effort back to the interest in Islam of German Enlightenment thinkers like Goethe and Lessing. The insistence on the Germanness of Islam presented what some saw as an opportunity for the creation of an individualized, 'do-it-yourself' Islam (p. 34). Others found themselves in the literalist, anti-culturalist, anti-nationalist stance of Salafism, which provided a set of rigorous precepts and practices while allowing for new converts to accede to positions of authority without formal religious training. If these two paths represent seemingly opposite directions of authentication, they both present converts with ways to become Muslim without, from their perspective, having to give up being German. Or, less generously, they offer ways for converts to embrace Islam without subordinating themselves to those born Muslims already stigmatized in German society.

Indeed, if many of the women and men Özyürek interviews came to Islam through a personal (often romantic) relationship with a born Muslim, their own Islamophilia is all too often tied to what amounts to anti-Muslim racism directed against Turks and Arabs. In many cases, they re-orient popular vilifications of Islam as a religion to Turkish or Arab culture which they, in various interviews and ethnographic vignettes Özyürek transcribes, seem to insinuate are inherently misogynist, intolerant, and violent. One might potentially understand this racism as a defensive maneuver against the marginalization to which they subjected themselves with their own conversion, as a means to deflect the stigma Islam carries in German society by reproducing immigrant abjection. In many contexts across Europe, anti-immigrant racism has provided the performative means for certain members of socially marginalized classes to make claims to inclusion within the nation, as true British or French or Germans (see Turner 1995). As Ghassan Hage (2000) has argued in the case of Australia, such working-class xenophobia shares with more publicly acceptable discourses of multicultural tolerance a claim to sanctioned management of the national environment – the capacity to determine what can be allowed entry and what must be excluded. In embracing Islam but deriding Turkish/Arab culture, converts are both insisting on their continued 'homeliness' as Germans and acting as gatekeepers in a double sense, policing the boundaries of both Germanness and Islam. They occupy dominant positions in German Islamic associations, public functions related to Islam, and various interfaith initiatives, taking it upon

themselves to represent and be the spokespeople for Islam in Germany. Understood by them as a particular responsibility that comes with occupying the both-and liminal position of being German and Muslim, it is ultimately a sign of their privileged position and the social wages their whiteness continues to pay in spite of their conversion (see Roediger 1999).

Given the centrality of whiteness to the German convert experience, it is fascinating that Özyürek deploys W.E.B. DuBois' theory of 'double consciousness' to analyze their experiences. Certainly converts experience the twoness DuBois references, of being simultaneously German and Muslim, and thus have the gift of seeing from the inside what is often presented as an irreconcilable antimony. But, in DuBois' Hegelian formulation, this 'second sight' is ultimately a curse of unachieved self-consciousness, of 'always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of world that looks on in amused pity and contempt' (quoted on p. 7). Such is arguably the fate of born Muslims in the West, particularly those of Middle Eastern, North African, South Asian, sub-Saharan African, or Turkish background, as Moustafa Bayoumi (2009), Nasar Meer (2011) and others have documented. For Abdelmalek Sayad (2004), their inescapable racialization and permanent status as a tolerated guest demands continual self-circumspection, precludes the establishment of intimate local belonging, and raises the stakes of any demands on the state. Özyürek explores precisely these dynamics and modes of overcoming such 'suffering' in her chapter, 'Being Muslim as a Way of Becoming German,' which explores precisely at how younger generations of born Muslims seek to forge halal publics in contradistinction to their parents' largely social and political quiescence. But for white German converts, however much work there is to reconcile (as they see it) their Muslim and German senses of self, this selfhood is ultimately precisely of their own making, with their rights and privileges as fully cultural and political citizens never in doubt. Taking on the stigma of the *hijab* in a context of wide-scale Islamophobia is undoubtedly a courageous act, but it is precisely the self-consciousness of the act – the individualized narrative of conversion – that defines the converts' experience of being Muslim in Germany in opposition to those born Muslims stigmatized from birth.

All of which further underlines the need to contextualize and historicize Islamophobia within the development of broader racialized, patriarchal, and heterosexist discourses and practices of contemporary Europe. It also recapitulates that Islamophobia and Islamophilia are but two sides of the same coin of modernity (Shryock 2010), of the aspiration for wholeness of selfhood in deeply fragmented and uncertain times. Esra Özyürek's book provides an important testament to just how challenging such a quest proves to be.

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Joel Robbins

This book about Muslims in Germany, and particularly about ethnic German converts to Islam, is of great importance for the way it works from the ground up to destabilize widely held notions of the nature of Europe and of the nation states that constitute it. That is to say, it puts common conceptions of Europe and of Germany in particular in question not by repeating widely circulating academic commonplaces about the normative failures of social categories and formations such as these that are not as inclusive nor as conducive to justice as they should be, but rather by bringing us close to so many individuals who we might think should have no problems of belonging in the worlds these categories help to create but who in fact do have many such problems. Being German, Becoming Muslim is thus in part a major contribution to our understanding of what it is like to be the kind of person who lives a life that is inextricably mixed up with major political categories that fit well enough to grab you firmly – to interpellate you, as we used to say, with great force – but not so well as to allow you a settled sense of being at home. This facet of the book of necessity, and also by authorial intent, makes it a powerful work about the politics of inclusion and exclusion, security and threat, and recognition and fairness.

At the same time, this is also a book about religion. Of course, in principle we as scholars should never be so naïve as to separate religion and politics. But as anthropologists we have to be careful, as Ozyurek has been, not to lose sight of how those with whom we work sometimes do want to pull them apart. Thus we learn that “the great majority of Salafis in Germany are not involved in politics” (p. 22). And more importantly for my point here, that German conversion to Islam is generally a “politically unmotivated personal choice” (135-6). In this respect, the politics of Germaness and of the nature of Europe are ones converts find themselves enmeshed in, but perhaps do not go looking to join.

As an aside in relation to this observation, we might speculate in passing that these converts’ imagination of or even aspiration toward a personal faith that is private and not political is one of the most culturally German or even European things about the people we meet in this book.

But to return to the main point I would like to make, on my reading we find that the big German and European political stories Ozyurek tells us in this book, stories that are absolutely central to the phenomena she has studied, are not ones many of the people about whom she writes have exactly chosen to be part of. These are politics they are thrown into by choosing to become Muslim. It is important to recognize this because there is another, ‘smaller’ politics that does seem to preoccupy many of the converts with whom she worked, and that does stand out as a kind of politics in which they are wholeheartedly existentially engaged. This is a kind of micro-politics of status. One of the deep ethnographic findings of this book is how thoroughly and elaborately hierarchal the world of German Muslim converts, and of many other Muslims in Germany, turns out to be. Strikingly, positions in this hierarchy, which to be sure relate back to ‘big’ issues of immigration, class and national and regional belonging without collapsing into them, get negotiated in religious terms. In this world, immigrant Muslims are ranked lower than German converts for their failure to practice a correct, culturally purified Islam, rather than for

being poor or ill-mannered or 'different' in other ways. At the same time, East German converts do better than immigrant ones by this scale, finding in Islam an escape from a German political-economic hierarchy in which they find it difficult to move up. And by the time we get to the Salafi Mosque in the penultimate chapter, we realize that even born Arab and Turkish Muslims can join this hierarchy if they are willing to purify their Islam of its cultural accretions. It is almost as if the micro-politics of rank on display in Being German, Becoming Muslim posit Islam as a coherent hierarchical world on its own, separate from wider German society, in which one can work out a satisfactory place for oneself based only on one's efforts in ways one cannot in Germany or Europe more generally. In its openness to pious talent and commitment, the Islamic hierarchy does in fact neatly reflect "German Values", and in a way that solicits a different, more self-conscious and steady participation from converts than does the national level jostling over what conversion means for the definition of Germany or Europe or the "West."

Before leaving this set of observations about religion and politics, and particularly about how important a religiously defined politics of status ranking appears to be to those with whom Esra worked, I think it's worth making an observation about something that surfaces a number of times throughout the book, but which never quite becomes a central analytic focus. We learn that Germans, both West and East, frequently convert when they enter into relations of romance or marriage with born Muslims. There is something of a politics of intermarriage that haunts the whole German convert scene. One wonders if this politics of marriage is one factor in making the politics of status so absolutely central to the converts Ozyurek got to know? One potential next step onwards from this research could be experimenting with putting intermarriage front and center, and asking if conversion and its effects look any different when viewed from that angle.

And speaking of marriage, I recently read an article by Andre Iteanu (2013), an anthropologist who has studied the Paris Banlieu for several decades. Iteanu's article is the freshest thing on the politics of veiling in France that I have read in a long time. I don't have time to summarize his striking argument here, but I want to take from it his observation that since the enlightenment and the revolution French notions of freedom have been deeply tied up with ideas about the right to criticize religion and the right to disregard religiously based moral strictures concerning sexuality. It would be interesting to set some of Ozyurek's findings in relation to a similar kind of cultural analysis of the place of religion and sexuality (and marriage) in the German tradition as well – If German converts and participants in intermarriage are not for Germany at large proving their freedom in valued ways, and one senses they are not, this is a hint that religion, sexuality and marriage line up differently in this world than the French one.

And this leads me to my final point, one I make as a scholar mostly of Pentecostal conversion on the part of indigenous peoples who do not come to their new faith from some other 'world religion' (Robbins 2004). A lot of ink has been spilled demonstrating that very often Pentecostal converts vehemently disavow not only the religions but also the cultures from which they come. They aim to make, as the Ghanaian Pentecostals Birgit Meyer studies put it to her, a complete break with their pasts. Esra Ozyurek cites the discussion about Pentecostal anti-culturalism at the outset of her book in order to differentiate the cultural attitudes of German

converts to Islam from this rejectionist Pentecostal one. The converts Esra studies want to remain German, and want to show that Islam, when properly understood and practiced, supports German values. Clearly, they understand themselves differently than do Pentecostal converts who want to make a wholly fresh start. But as one reads on in the book, one does begin to catch some complications in practice – for converts very much do reject German gender norms surrounding dress, male-female interaction, and sexuality among other things. One wants to dig deeper here, asking why they feel they can reject these things but still embrace German culture in general. They are making some fascinating choices in this regard. And their preoccupation with issues of gender put us right back in the same neighborhood in which we have already come across issues of intermarriage in the German case, and sexuality in the French one. Those parts of German culture converts do reject, then, strike me as another thread worth following further into the fascinating material Esra has so brilliantly opened up for us in her wonderful book.

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Response to comments

Esra Özyürek

I am thrilled to have the opportunity to have a conversation with four scholars whose work deeply influenced my thinking in relation to race, religion, and conversion in Germany. Their comments and questions pushed me think through new dimensions that relate to my work. Here I will be able to respond only to some of their insightful suggestions and questions.

Ruth Mandel is most familiar with the ethnographic context in which I did my work. Her *Cosmopolitan Anxieties* (2008) has been an eye opener for me in understanding the complicated and contradictory ways in which diversity works itself out in Germany. Based on her deep knowledge of German society, Mandel asks a very meaningful and challenging question: how German converts to Islam stand in comparison. She wants to see a discussion of German converts to Islam compared to Germans converting to other religions, or for that matter other cases of 'intellectual reappropriation of the Other' and in relation to other East European and Balkan Christians converting to Islam under the Ottoman rule in the earlier centuries.

In my work I tried to contextualize German converts to Islam through another comparative perspective, namely in relation to contemporary Turkish converts to Christianity in Turkey. In a 2009 article I looked at the way how two small communities of converts to the marked minority religion generate an unproportional and unprecedented amount of fear and anxiety and that they are seen as threats to national security in their respective countries. I tried to explain this commonality as a factor of 'anxiety of Europeanization' at the wake of the Berlin Wall and the shift in the hegemonic language of racism from that of biology to culture. I suggested that '[t]he culturally and religiously defined Islamophobia [and Christianophobia for that matter] of the twenty-first century differs from hereditary anti-Semitism in another important way: it opens up space for the fear that minority culture and religion might take over the minds of individuals in majority society' (Ozyurek 2009: 94-95). I further argued '[a]nxiety over Europeanization, as most acutely expressed in fears of Islam and Muslims within Europe, finds its refracted counterparts in places excluded from what gets to be defined as Europe. Just as essentialist Europeans define Europe as fundamentally Christian or humanist, nationalist Turks who oppose Turkey's integration into the European Union define Turkey as fundamentally Muslim or at least non-Christian. Furthermore, they express parallel fears that Christians or Western powers will take over the Turkish culture and state from within by converting individual citizens to Christianity' (ibid, 95). Even though, Germany and Turkey are positioned in almost diametrically opposite positions in relation to the European Union, the process of Europeanization mobilized new anxieties in relation to minority religions in both countries. In both countries acts of conversion to marked religious minorities hence point to focal points of the post-Cold War European order as well as its fragility.

I find the other comparisons Ruth Mandel suggests very fruitful. The Christian conversion to Islam in early modern Ottoman Empire is deeply interesting as the complex dynamics of it are

revealed by Marc David Baer's *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe*. In this book Baer argues that Islamization in the 17th century Ottoman Empire was first and foremost motivated by a turn to piety movement among the Ottoman elite. The same elite was then interested in Islamizing the space around them as well as the non-Muslims. Even though conversions were not forced, they were encouraged through financial and social incentives as well as the direct involvement of the Sultan in the process. Hence, even when it is totally voluntary, converting to the religion of the ruling power involves quite different dynamics than converting to a religion that is associated with marginalized groups.

What I find most suggestive in terms of understanding the contemporary dynamics of German conversion to Islam is a project that compares different German appropriations of other Others. For example, it is crucial to remember that Germans (or for that matter other Europeans) do not convert not only to Islam but also to Buddhism and to Judaism in larger numbers. Indeed the largest Buddhist community outside East Asia is in Germany and similarly Germans, after Americans, constitute the largest national group who convert to Judaism. Ruth Mandel's aptly put phrase 'intellectual appropriation of the Other' also opens up the door for us to think about many other ways in the large spectrum of dis-identification with the Germanness and re-identification with another happens. Germans are also well known for their passion for the Native American culture and religion, with many Germans associating with it. There are a number of Germans who joined the armed Kurdish resistance and many others who joined the guerilla movements in Latin American countries in the 1980s. In his book *Schwarz warden*, Moritz Ege discusses the Afro-Americanophilia in the 1960s and 1970s when a good number of Germans affiliated themselves with African Americans. In that sense, the phenomenon I focus on in this book is neither unique nor unprecedented. Its roots can be found in German romanticism that idealizes and Orientalizes certain cultures as well as a more recent discomfort in embracing German identity whole heartedly at the aftermath of the Holocaust. Thinking through such dis- and re-identifications, one of course needs to be careful in thinking through the similar as well as different possibilities spiritual and cultural identifications open up in imagining oneself as well as the German nation differently.

Nasar Meer, who is one of the freshest voices in conceptualizing Islamophobia in the European, and specifically in the British context, brings to our attention that the Muslim identity is not only about individual belief but also has a lot to do with sociology. In his work Meer convincingly shows the racialized aspects of Muslim identity and how individuals and communities get marked as Muslim independent of their belief. In his comments he attracts attention to the new dynamics white converts to Islam bring to a context where religious identity is racialized, and invites further theorization of this issue. It is no wonder that political figures who argue against recognizing Islamophobia as a form of racism frequently bring out the example of converts to Islam. They argue, since people can convert in and out of Islam, it cannot be considered as racism. My study, on the other hand, shows that the fact that people can convert in and out of Islam does not diminish any of the racialized aspects of Muslim identity, but rather make them even more prominent.

Meer also points to the fact that there are scholars often see Muslim identity either as a factor of religious and devotional teaching or as a sociological force. I fully agree with him that there is such a separation in the scholarship. And it is true that sociological forces do implicate people as “Muslims” whether they have anything to do with Islamic belief and practice or not. Yet, for large numbers of Muslims, both religious and sociological forces are operative at the same time and in relation to each other. For the group I studied, it clear that sociological forces bring them into contact with other Muslims: where they live, where they work, what they do for livelihood or for fun determine whether they have contact with Muslims or not. After this initial contact, however, deeply individualized and spiritual processes are operative in their conversion to Islam. Among Germans who have deeply meaningful relationships with Muslims, a significantly higher percentage does not convert to Islam. The smaller group who convert, however, find that their experiences and further actions are once more fundamentally shaped by sociological forces operative in Germany society. Once they are Muslim – especially if they carry visual reminders, such as the headscarf, they experience the heavily racialized aspects of their society for the first time. They suddenly become both insiders and outsiders to the mainstream as well as to immigrant Muslim society, because they do not neatly fit in any of the groups. In my book I tried to explain how German Muslims come to terms with these sociological forces that they now experience from the difficult end and how they develop a double consciousness as Germans and Muslims.

In my research I found that converts to Sufi oriented interpretations of Islam try to come to terms with this new tension in their lives by distancing themselves from immigrant background Muslims. They move to East German towns where practically no immigrant Muslims live; wear clothes that do not conflict Islamic practices but also do not mark them as Muslims; and simply do not identify with immigrant background Muslims. Converts to Salafi Islam overcome sociology, or racism operative in German society, by preaching and practicing irrelevancy of ethnic background as long as one commits his or herself to Salafi teachings. In their communities they are able to truly mix Muslims of all backgrounds, but at the cost of creating isolated communities that have little contact with the mainstream society as well as other Muslim communities. Some elite or well educated converts to Sunni Islam, on the other hand, try other strategies. They, for example, argue German Enlightenment thinkers such as Goethe and Lessing open up space within German culture for curiosity and adoption of other religious traditions and especially of Islam. In that sense, they implicate, not only they can be better Muslims than immigrant Muslims, but also they can be better Germans than non-converted Germans.

Meer’s insistence on focusing on the sociology helps answer some of the questions I set out in the book, such as how to understand new Muslim’s perception of the born Muslim culture as inferior. Do we name this as Islamophobia or not? Or for that matter, can we speak about Islamophobia in a Muslim majority context, such as Turkey? Answers to these questions lie in the sociology: who does the discrimination and stigmatization? To what ends? Who suffers and who benefits from these discourses? No stigmatized group, including women, blacks, LGBTs, handicapped individuals, is immune from discriminating against members of their own groups.

Muslims are no different. A close look at white converts to Islam in the European context clarifies how a number of identities are intersectionally at stake at any given moment and what a complex set of attributes Islamophobia is. I suggest because it is next to impossible to separate culture and religion on objective grounds, it is safe to conceptualize white Muslim stigmatization of immigrant background Muslims as both racist and Islamophobic, or at least informed by both frameworks dominant in German society. White German Muslims refer to cultural attributes of Turks, Arabs, and other Middle Eastern background Muslim communities as backward, hence not-fitting for German society as well as the essence of Islamic teachings. Ironically, it is exactly these attributes that are defined as Islamic and backward by the mainstream Islamophobic actors. The main difference is that the mainstream society argues immigrant Muslims do not fit German society because they hold onto the Islamic values, and the converted Germans argue that the mis-fit is caused by their not holding onto the correct Islamic values.

We can not expect neither born Muslims nor converts to be above and beyond the discourses hegemonic in the society they live in. But the arguments they create to defend themselves and their position in society are illuminating to better understand these hegemonic discourses, so is the hatred and fear converts attract to themselves. Looking closely to how converts position themselves as well as how the mainstream society and immigrant Muslim communities position themselves vis-à-vis converts give us crucial clues to understand the complex dynamics at stake, at least in Germany.

Joel Robbins, an expert on conversion to Christianity in Papua New Guinea, could not be looking at Germany from a geographically further distance. Yet, his comments and questions are intimately relevant. He reads the book as an effort to answer the question “what is it like to be the kind of person who lives a life that is inextricably mixed up with major political categories and not let you feel settled.”

He also observes that the idea converts hold on to, that personal faith is private and not political is one of the deepest German/European attributes about the people the reader meets in the book. Despite their belief, the ethnographic analysis of the converts lives show how deeply political the field of belief is in Germany. Simple acts of the heart and politically unmotivated acts of choosing are attributed political value and they end up being political in the sense that they have transformative effects for the individuals and the society. Such intermingling between religion and politics, or belief and social action, might be apparent to any scholar who studies lived experience of religion, or who had read Max Weber. However, an equally interesting fact the lives of converts to Islam reveal is the insistence of individuals on a conceptual separation of religion and politics – the very thing Robbins defines as deeply German/European. Hence, such an understanding of secularism, very well discussed with Talal Asad (2003), is far from being an abstract concept operative in the social field. Rather, it heavily shapes the ideas of ordinary individuals as they decide on how to act and what kind of meaning they give to actions.

Joel Robbins' question regarding intermarriage hits the nail on its head in so many ways. Reflecting on how in French society freedom is framed in terms of right to criticize religiously

based moral strictures concerning sexuality, he asks why is intermarriage not considered as a way of freedom in Germany. The irony is that in German society, and for French society as a matter of fact, freedom in relation to sexuality and to religion is defined only in possible one way. In contemporary Europe where Islam is framed as “the religion” any free decision towards embracing Islam, as well as sexual practices associated with it are not framed as freedom. Choosing the don on the headscarf, practicing polygamy, arranged marriages, abstaining from non-marital sexuality, or male circumcision are all interpreted as practicing non-freedom, embracing hindrances to individual expression. In that sense, even though marrying someone who is not German is an act of transgression that is purely individually motivated, ironically it is often interpreted as giving up freedom. Freedom, hence, is interpreted only as getting away from religion and never as choosing religion.

An expert on racism, immigration, and post-colonialism in France, Paul Silverstein also points our attention to the complex interplay between sexuality and Islam, and especially between queer sexuality and Islam. He notices similarities between converts and gays and lesbians, especially in terms of their racial invisibility and their transgression of social classification and deviation from normative obligations of social and biological reproduction. In my effort to understand Islamophobia, I found comparison to homophobia illuminating. The question of choice seem central to both forms of exclusionary practice. The question of whether LGBTs and Muslims choose their identity or they are destined for their marginalization due to biology comes up frequently especially in relation to granting them special rights and protection to counter their discrimination. In the book, I try to argue for demanding rights also for individuals who might be clearly choosing to belong to marginalized groups and that it should not be seen as a ground for dismissing their discrimination. The new European cosmopolitanism is taking shape, not only through people who are travelling in and out of Europe, but because a true mixture leads to deliberate acts of choosing, transgressing, and mixing. Groups and individuals that thoroughly interact, learn from, and acculturate, rather than distinct communities that stand next to each other and show a measured respect, is the new European reality. Hence, even though some of the practices of German converts that I covered in the book seem to be reproducing the hegemonic Islamophobia in Germany, it is really important to point to the fact that their act of conversion, and their definitions of themselves as German Muslims, help create a new European way of being where the perceived boundaries among ethnic, religious, national, racial lines are much more porous and do not make sense in the way they are imagined.

Ironically, even though converts transgress boundaries, they also act as gatekeepers in policing the boundaries of both Germanness and of Islam. Silverstein takes this as ultimately a sign of their privileged position. More than that, this is also their effort to maintain their privileged position. They want to give the message to the mainstream society that even though they became Muslim, they still are Germans. They also want to make sure that the Muslim community engages only proper Islamic practices, which they believe would give Muslims a better perception in German society. In that Paul Silverstein points out how Islamophobia and Islamophilia can be two sides of the same coin. In other words, it is really difficult to escape

racializing and essentializing discourses around Muslims, no matter from which side one approaches Muslims.

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