

Islam in Europe: Public Spaces and Civic Networks

Spyros A. Sofos & Roza Tsagarousianou's

الإسلام في أوروبا: الفضاءات العامة والشبكات المدنية

سبيروس أ. سوفوس وروزا تساغاروسيانو

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ABSTRACT

This book review explores Islam in Europe: Public Spaces and Civic Networks by Spyros A. Sofos and Roza Tsagarousianou, which offers a nuanced examination of the socio-political and cultural dynamics shaping Muslim identities in Europe. The authors trace the historical development of Europe's self-definition in relation to Islam and investigate how European Muslims navigate issues of identity, belonging, and civic participation. The book emphasizes the significance of public spaces, cultural expression, and civic engagement in understanding the evolving presence of Islam in Europe. By highlighting Muslim agency and cultural creativity, the authors advocate for a more inclusive and empathetic discourse that fosters mutual understanding and social cohesion.

KEYWORDS:

Islam in Europe; Muslim Identity; Public Space; Civic Networks; Social Cohesion.

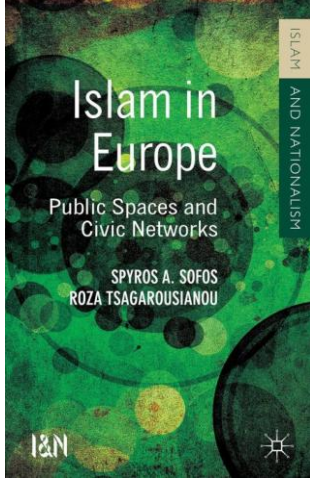
الملخص:

تتناول هذه المراجعة كتاب الإسلام في أوروبا: الفضاءات العامة والشبكات المدنية من تأليف سيروس أ. سوفوس وروزا تساغاروسيانو، والذي يقدم فهماً دقيقاً للديناميات الاجتماعية والسياسية والثقافية التي تشكل هويات المسلمين في أوروبا. يتتبع المؤلفان تطور أوروبا ككيان ثقافي وجيو سياسي في مقابل الإسلام، ويبحثان في كيفية تعامل المسلمين الأوروبيين مع قضايا الهوية والانتماء والمشاركة المدنية. يؤكد الكتاب أهمية الفضاءات العامة، والتعبير الثقافي، والانخراط المدني في فهم الحضور المتغير للإسلام في أوروبا. ومن خلال تسليط الضوء على الفاعلية الثقافية والإبداعية للمسلمين، يدعو المؤلفان إلى خطاب أكثر شمولاً وتعاملاً لتعزيز الفهم المتبادل والتماسك الاجتماعي في المجتمعات الأوروبية.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

الإسلام في أوروبا؛ الهوية المسلمة؛ الفضاء العام؛ الشبكات المدنية؛ التماسك الاجتماعي.

The study of Islam in Europe is a journey replete with complex interplay of cultural, historical, and geopolitical forces. In *Islam in Europe: Public Spaces and Civic Networks*,¹ co-authored by Spyros A. Sofos and Roza



Tsagarousianou, the authors embark on this journey, delving into the intricate relationship between Europe and Islam. They trace the historical evolution of Europe as a distinct cultural and geopolitical entity, juxtaposed against the backdrop of Islam, shedding light on the challenges encountered by European Muslims in their quest for identity and belonging within a highly politicized environment. The debate emphasizes the need for a

deeper comprehension of the experiences of European Muslims, exploring themes of Muslims' presence and their cultural creativity in shaping European Muslim identities. Through the seven chapters, they unravel the multifaceted dimensions of European Muslim experiences, highlighting the importance of

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inclusive dialogue and empathetic understanding in fostering social cohesion within European societies.

The discourse surrounding Islam and Muslims in Europe is often biased and sensationalized, focusing primarily on extreme behaviors within the Muslim community. This skewed narrative contributes to the exclusion and marginalization of European Muslims, perpetuating societal insecurities and misunderstandings. The emotional intensity of the debate makes it challenging to grasp the authentic experiences and aspirations of ordinary European Muslims. There is a pressing need for a more mutual understanding of what it truly means to be Muslim in Europe and how this identity influences daily life and societal actions. The presence of Islam and Muslims in Europe is frequently framed through a securitization lens, emphasizing perceived threats and leading to tensions and misinterpretations between European societies and Muslim communities. This securitization approach often oversimplifies the complex cultural interactions between different groups. While some view the interaction as a clash of civilizations, others advocate for a more democratic perspective that acknowledges the diversity within Muslim communities and avoids portraying Muslims as a monolithic threat to European values and culture. The portrayal of Muslims as a danger to European values can result in discrimination and marginalization, further exacerbating the challenges faced by Muslim communities in Europe. Negative stereotypes and stigmatization of Muslims have tangible impacts on policies and interactions between Muslim communities and mainstream society. The debates surrounding integration, multiculturalism, and the securitization of Islam necessitate the need for a more inclusive and informed dialogue that recognizes the multifaceted nature of Muslim communities and identities in Europe. In essence, the first chapter

highlights the importance of moving beyond simplistic and biased narratives about Islam and Muslims in Europe. It calls for a more mutual understanding that appreciates the diversity and complexity within Muslim communities, challenges stereotypes, and promotes inclusive dialogue to foster better integration and social cohesion in European societies. This chapter emphasizes the detrimental effects of securitization and biased portrayals on Muslim communities and advocates for a more empathetic and informed approach to discussing European Islam.

The second chapter delves into the multifaceted relationship between Islam and Europe throughout history, exploring the complexities of Muslim presence in the continent. It highlights the ongoing debate among Muslim scholars and activists regarding the integration of European Muslims into Western societies, with differing perspectives on whether the West should be seen as a potential land for Islamic conversion or as a space for Muslim integration and responsibility. The struggle to balance religious and cultural identity with integration into European, and by extension, Western societies is a central theme in this discourse, reflecting the broader challenge of navigating the relationship between Islam and the West, characterized by historical antagonism, fear, and suspicion. The historical context of Islam in Europe is extensively discussed, tracing back to the eighth century when much of Europe was under Muslim rule. The chapter also explores the long-standing presence of Muslim communities in Europe, leaving a lasting impact on the landscape, culture, and memory of European societies. It also delves into the influence of migrant communities and converts on European societies in more recent times. The encounter between Islam and Europe has been marked by dramatic tensions, with Muslims often viewed as the significant 'Other' that helped

define Europe as a Christian continent. The chapter also highlights the historical Muslim conquests in territories such as the Iberian Peninsula, southern Italy, southern France, and the western Mediterranean, leading to the flourishing of Islamic civilization and culture, which significantly impacted the European Renaissance. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the challenges faced by Muslim communities in Europe, particularly those who migrated as guest workers in the postcolonial era. The social transformations brought about by mass migration led to issues of segregation and denial of basic rights to migrant populations, with varying degrees of integration and visibility in countries like France, Germany, the UK, and Belgium. The diverse Muslim population in these countries continues to grow, presenting challenges in terms of access to education, employment, and social integration. The chapter also touches upon the discrimination and segregation faced by Muslim communities in Europe, despite state attempts to co-opt Islam. The complex relationship between Europe and Islam is explored, with some perceiving Islam as incompatible with European civilization. Muslim perspectives on the presence of Islam in Europe vary, with some rejecting European culture while others advocate for a more flexible approach to integration. Overall, the chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the historical, social, and cultural dynamics shaping the presence of Islam in Europe, shedding light on the complexities and challenges faced by Muslim communities in navigating their identities and integration into Western societies.

The third chapter delves into the multifaceted experiences and self-perceptions of European Muslims, focusing on cities like London, Paris, Antwerp, Amsterdam, and Frankfurt. It sheds light on the challenges and tensions encountered by Muslim communities in these urban areas, including

issues of marginalization, discrimination, and cultural integration. The debate highlights the diversity within Muslim communities and the myriad ways in which they practice their identities within European societies. In Frankfurt, a significant hub of Muslim settlement, there exists a vibrant associational life comprising community centers, mosques, and charities catering to Sunni and Shi'a communities. The city boasts a plethora of organizations and mosques affiliated with diverse ethnicities, sects, and religious groups. The study on European Muslims employed multiple sampling frames to capture a diverse sample reflecting the polyphonic nature of European Islam. The interviews were characterized by openness and flexibility, allowing participants to articulate their understanding of Islam and 'being a Muslim' in their own terms. The research also delved into collective action, interpersonal relationships, spatial and emotional investments, and observations within Muslim neighborhoods and spaces.

The concept of "European Muslims" emerges as complex and diverse, with individuals from various ethnicities, nationalities, classes, genders, and generations constituting the Muslim population in Europe. Factors such as migration routes, socio-economic backgrounds, and levels of religiosity all contribute to the distinct experiences and challenges faced by European Muslims. The intersection of identities such as ethnicity, gender, and generation further complicates the comprehension of European Muslim identities. The identification of European Muslims is multifaceted, encompassing ethnic, cultural, religious, and political dimensions. Studies have revealed varying levels of religiosity among European Muslims, with some emphasizing formal religious aspects while others consider cultural or political dimensions. Convert Muslims and those not engaged in formal

institutions may be overlooked in conventional definitions. A multilayered approach to defining European Muslims, incorporating ethnic, cultural, religious, and political dimensions, may offer a more holistic understanding of the diverse Muslim populace in Europe. The European Muslim population emerges as diverse and intricate, with varying degrees of religious adherence and cultural identity. Second and third generations of Muslims in Europe may not necessarily identify strongly as religious Muslims. There is a noticeable trend towards convergence and interaction among Muslims from different backgrounds. Collective identity among European Muslims is depicted as an ongoing process shaped by interaction, negotiation, and shared experiences. Understanding European Islam as a social movement with varying levels of intensity and consciousness is deemed crucial. The chapter emphasizes the complexity and richness of European Muslim experiences, highlighting the need for new approaches to understanding their identities, challenges, and interactions within European societies.

Chapter four delves into the delicate construction of locality for European Muslims, shedding light on the physical and mediated spaces that play a pivotal role in shaping their experiences, interactions, and identities. It emphasizes the significance of neighborhoods as safe havens where European Muslims find solidarity, intimacy, and a sense of belonging. Mosques, community centers, and local institutions are highlighted as key players in fostering this sense of community and belonging among European Muslims. Moreover, the chapter explores the impact of media, such as Ramadan Radio, in fostering a sense of community and intimacy among local Muslims. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the emergence of Muslim media spaces like Al-Jazeera and independent media, which provide European Muslims with a profound sense

of connectedness and solidarity with Muslims worldwide. These media platforms serve as avenues for sharing experiences and narratives, creating a translocal landscape that bridges local and remote Muslim communities. This interconnectedness and simultaneity enable European Muslims to partake in processes of exchange, translation, and hybridization, ultimately contributing to the multifaceted construction of European Muslim identities. European Muslims are depicted as actively utilizing various forms of media, including mainstream, diasporic, and Muslim-specific media, to express their dual identities as Muslims and Europeans. They exhibit a critical stance towards mainstream media representations and are increasingly turning to new digital technologies to access information and engage with transnational communities. This evolving media landscape significantly influences the experiences and interactions of European Muslims in both local and global contexts. The main concepts and theories highlighted in this chapter revolve around the pivotal role of physical and mediated spaces in shaping European Muslim identities, the significance of community institutions and media platforms in fostering a sense of belonging and connectedness, and the evolving nature of the European Muslim Mediascape in influencing how European Muslims navigate their dual identities in contemporary society.

The following chapter (chapter five) discusses how European Muslims utilize technologies of time-space distantiation to reshape their experiences of presence and absence, fostering a sense of immediacy and co-presence. While technology plays a crucial role, sustainable transnational identities are formed through it. European Muslims engage in processes of creating and sharing meaning, building a collective experience, and disseminating injustice frames to construct their identities and address grievances. Injustice frames,

encompassing feelings of exclusion, prejudice, and invisibility, are pivotal in defining and tackling injustices encountered by European Muslims. These frames are often integrated into a broader European discourse of injustice, transcending national and cultural boundaries. Additionally, European Muslims exhibit empathy and solidarity with Muslims facing injustices globally. Discussion delves into the fascination of some younger, often male, European Muslims with jihadi websites and videos exhibiting violence. However, not all individuals who express interest in such content endorse or idolize violent acts. Many perceive violence as a means of communication or protest against injustices. The experiences of distant others become intertwined with the narrative fabric shaping the identities of European Muslims, who shuttle between local and transnational networks to forge their sense of self and solidarity with Muslims worldwide. The ongoing construction of a European Muslim identity is heavily influenced by experiences of injustice and marginalization. Moreover, the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s, particularly the plight of Bosnian Muslims, significantly impacted the identity formation of some European Muslims. Injustice and discrimination faced by Muslims globally and within Europe have strengthened the identification of many with their Muslim identity. Islamic charities, jihadi websites, and fundraising events have played roles in mobilizing support and fostering a sense of community among European Muslims. The creation of injustice frames through shared narratives of suffering and solidarity has been instrumental in uniting Muslims in Europe, despite their geographical dispersion. Key concepts highlighted in the chapter include the role of technology in reshaping experiences, the significance of injustice frames in identity formation and grievance addressing, the impact of shared narratives of

suffering on community building, and the interplay between local and transnational networks in shaping European Muslim identities. The chapter focuses on the complex and multifaceted processes through which European Muslims show their identities, experiences, and connections within a global context of injustice and solidarity.

Chapter 6 delves into the intricate landscape of European Muslim identity, shedding light on the multifaceted themes of injustice, identity, and agency that shape the experiences of the muslim communities in Europe. It explores how European Muslims deal with societal challenges, such as the wearing of the veil, fashion choices, and relationships, while asserting their rights and identities in the face of societal scrutiny. The chapter refers to the emergence of Muslim lifestyle magazines and online platforms as crucial spaces where European Muslims engage in discussions to redefine their identities within a Western context. Furthermore, the chapter delves into how European Muslims are actively reshaping the perception of Islam through dialogues on gender equality, pushing the boundaries of acceptability, and seeking authenticity through digital platforms. These conversations challenge traditional authority structures and norms, paving the way for new avenues of dialogue and exploration of Islamic beliefs and practices. The pursuit of authenticity is portrayed as a contemporary yet anti-modern yearning, drawing upon both individual and collective endeavors to construct a fresh interpretation of Islam that comes to terms with the modern world. Moreover, the chapter highlights how young Muslims are utilizing internet resources and lifestyle magazines to engage in discussions on sensitive topics like relationships and sexuality, thereby challenging conventional Islamic teachings. This redefinition of Islamic practices aims to foster inclusivity and adaptability to modern realities,

including advocating for LGBTQ rights within the Muslim community. Some individuals are even establishing support networks for LGBTQ Muslims, signifying a shift towards a more diverse and open Muslim community that embraces a spectrum of identities and perspectives. In summary, the chapter provides a comprehensive exploration of the evolving landscape of European Muslim identity, emphasizing the ways in which individuals negotiate societal expectations, redefine Islamic practices, and engage in dialogues that shape a more inclusive and diverse Muslim community in Europe. The concepts of agency, authenticity, and redefinition emerge as central themes, underscoring the dynamic nature of Muslim identity in a European context.

The last chapter targets the diverse challenges faced by European Muslims within a continent historically resistant to Islam. It sheds light on the various modes of integration adopted by European Muslims, ranging from acceptance to avoidance and resistance. The perception of marginalization and injustice experienced by European Muslims, both locally and globally, is a central theme throughout the chapter. The importance of empathy and solidarity with Muslims worldwide is viewed as crucial in shaping European Muslim identities. One of the key findings of this study is the diversity and complexity of European Muslim identity. This identity is shaped by a multiplicity of factors, including language, ethnicity, gender, generation, and national frameworks. European Muslims engage in a wide array of practices and responses to their cultural and religious identities, resulting in a plethora of beliefs and experiences. The construction of a European Muslim identity involves interactions, shared frameworks, and collective actions, related to the formation of social classes as described by E.P. Thompson. The study emphasizes that European Muslim identity is not static but rather constantly

evolving through negotiation, interaction, and contestation at both local and transnational levels. The project of European Muslim identity relies heavily on cultural practices and narratives to envision a community that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. This process of identity formation is dynamic and multifaceted, reflecting the complex interplay between local, national, European, and transnational experiences. In conclusion, the study provides a deep understanding of European Muslim identity, highlighting its diversity, complexity, and ongoing evolution. By exploring the various modes of integration, perceptions of marginalization, and the importance of empathy and solidarity, the study offers valuable insights into the intricate dynamics shaping European Muslim identities in a continent with a complex historical relationship with Islam.

In conclusion, the authors reiterate the key themes and findings discussed throughout the book. They emphasize the importance of understanding the multifaceted experiences and identities of European Muslims, highlighting the complexities of integration, marginalization, and identity formation. The authors stress the need for inclusive dialogue, empathy, and solidarity to address the challenges faced by European Muslims in navigating their identities within European societies. They call for an approach that moves beyond simplistic narratives and stereotypes, recognizing the diversity and agency of European Muslims in shaping their own experiences and identities. The book reflects on the broader implications of the research for understanding the relationship between Islam and Europe, advocating for a more inclusive and pluralistic approach that embraces the cultural richness and diversity of European societies. Overall, it serves to encapsulate the key arguments and insights presented throughout the book, offering a compelling call to action for

scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to engage with the complex realities of Islam in Europe.