

Brodard, Baptiste 2023. L'action sociale musulmane en Europe - Engagement communautaire, contribution caritative et activisme religieux en France, en Suisse et en Grande-Bretagne. L'Harmattan. 297 pp. Hb: 31,00 €. ISBN: 9782140485671

Book review by

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For over two decades in Europe, the commitment and social activities of European Muslim citizens and organisations have steadily grown, far beyond the intra-Muslim circle of mosques, to take root in the public space of contemporary European secular societies.

These assistance activities for vulnerable Muslims and non-Muslims have taken place in contexts that are often unique to each European country. How are these activities and commitments performed in the name of Islam in largely secular European societies? What are the underlying issues and players driving these phenomena? How do European societies perceive these patterns?

Such issues concerning European Islam and its Muslim citizens are the subject of documented analysis in a recent book, published in French: *L'action sociale musulmane en Europe - Engagement communautaire, contribution caritative et activisme religieux en France, en Suisse et en Grande-Bretagne*. Baptiste (Yahya) Brodard is a Swiss religious sociologist of Islam, who has travelled to nearly fifty countries to analyse various Muslim communities in Europe, Asia, the United States, and Latin America.

The book is the result of a doctoral dissertation carried out in Switzerland, France, and Great Britain. Using an ethnographic perspective through three case studies, the author analyses community engagement, charitable giving, and religious activism in European public spaces among European Muslim organisations and individuals in these three European countries. To highlight these debates, Brodard defines Muslim social work in Europe as an encounter between Western professional practice and an Islamic worldview developed by people and organisations defining themselves as Muslim and acting in the name of their faith (p. 12).

The book's first part explains the recent causes of Muslim community engagement and activism in European societies' public spaces. The Swiss sociologist highlights that over the past thirty years, the influence of religious diversity has grown dramatically in European societies, diminishing the power of the major faiths. Furthermore, neoliberal changes linked to globalisation have emphasised market logic and individual consumers affecting world religions. For the author, these various developments have helped Muslim religious and community leaders establish themselves in social work (p. 44).

The first wave of Islamic transnational movements was called into question by more regional and local interpretations of Islam. Indeed, Muslim mosques and associations engaged in social work, Islamic education for youth, and other social activities. Eventually, European-raised young Muslims began to distance themselves from Muslim mosques and associations led by the first generation of Muslim immigrants. They opted for more grassroots-based, autonomous, and flexible forms of social involvement that matched their needs and concerns and disconnected from the mosques and associations' authority.

The book's second part is mainly based on an empirical analysis of some European Muslim associations involved in social work through various case studies in France, Switzerland, and Great Britain. According to the author, most Muslim organisations active in social work in France and Switzerland operate outside Islamic centres, while Great Britain has many places of worship that act as true community hubs, hosting social, cultural, and educational activities in addition to daily ritual prayers (p. 136).

The case studies highlight how public institutions have developed and accepted a new type of social activism at the nexus of religious logic and community. Despite the stark sociopolitical differences between the three countries, the empirical cases studied show some degree of cross-border coherence. The author concludes that, at least in Western Europe, Muslim social work is a uniform transnational phenomenon.

The book's final section focuses on the purposes and drives of Muslim associations regarding social work. Muslim associations in Europe, residing in countries where Muslims are a minority, often grapple with ethical dilemmas concerning their religious beliefs and the way they live in Europe. They share community-driven aspirations and strive to positively contribute to the places they live through social activism and civic participation. However, Muslim associations are often active in social work, entangling charitable, educational, and spiritual components in their projects and activities. Their beneficiaries and the public institutions that fund them frequently misunderstand them because of this role confusion, (p. 173). Furthermore, the writer stresses that public funding institutions encourage Muslim organisations to approach social work from an intra-cultural perspective. They strongly advocate for an integrative approach to Muslim organisations to prevent extremism and radicalisation and increase their visibility and recognition.

Moreover, Brodard points out the emergence of young European Muslim groups in the last decade and a half, along with the active involvement of regional Muslim associations in community service initiatives. Choosing localised and contextualised social activism above anything else, these new players combine a pragmatic understanding of their Muslim faith with engaged and inclusive involvement in the communities in which they live. Despite a tentative start towards professionalising their structures, these associations are primarily the product of individual efforts or groups mainly operating through volunteering.

This book provides a fine-grained analysis of European Muslim associations' involvement in social work across three distinct sociopolitical and cultural contexts. My only minor regret is that Switzerland's case analysis only focuses on the French-speaking parts, leaving out the German-speaking regions, which form the country's majority.

More research is required to understand European Muslim associations' involvement in their respective countries' public spaces, which combines contextualised pragmatic approaches of their faith and social activism through social work. Such initiatives will demonstrate that European Muslims are just like any other citizen, debunking misconceptions regarding violent extremism and radicalisation still associated with Muslim associations in Europe.