



Being German, Becoming Muslim

Özyürek on Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe

Ethnographer Özyürek, born and raised in Turkey and now living in America, explores Muslim life in [Germany](#). She investigates Muslim immigrants and post-1989 East German converts. Her key thesis is highly controversial: that the search by German and other European-born converts for a purified Islam can best be understood in a climate of increasing xenophobia and hostility to Islam. The reader might ask if that hostility is increasing, and, if in a less heated climate, would there be no search for a "true Islam?"

[Khadija Moschee Berlin](#)

Religious minorities, Özyürek posits, cannot fully embrace their minority position, nor entirely abandon it, nor cause it to disappear completely. Politicians insist that Muslims can live in Germany as citizens, but their religion or Islamic identity is often not accepted. In turn, they try to respond to this challenge by showing that one can be, for instance, a conservative Muslim and a good German citizen at the same time. Thus, they willingly let their ethnic identities as Arabs, Turks, Bosnians, or Indians slip into the background, says the author. Members of the Muslim Youth of Germany, founded in 1994 by the German convert Muhammad Siddiq Borgfeldt, have been successful "in conflating the categories of German and Muslim, confusing insiders and outsiders." However, according to Özyürek, they remain perceived by some officials as "internal enemies" who might potentially disrupt the society, and they must be "kept under constant observation."



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Her field work from 2006 to 2011 included studying lectures and social activities for converts in eight mosques operating mainly in the German language. Additionally, Özyürek conducted interviews with sixty-six converts and fourteen born-Muslims; these form the most vibrant section of her book. Almost all the converts she met embraced Islam following some intimate contact with individuals born Muslim. But following conversion, many converts distanced themselves from immigrant Muslims and did not always find it easy to identify with those born as Muslims. Surprisingly, she finds that, for East Germans, becoming Muslim is "a way of escaping their East German identity" (although many East Germans still have a proud identity as participants in the overthrow of a totalitarian regime). Born Muslims, on the other hand, promote a more de-culturalized Islam as a way for them to integrate. In field research, this book is a trail-blazer. Although not free of stereotypes, including those regarding East Germans, it offers quality food for thought on many of the main issues of Muslim integration and non-integration in Germany, and constitutes a solid base to compare results with other parts of Europe.

[Wolfgang G. Schwanitz](#)

Esra Özyürek, *Being German, Becoming Muslim: Race, Religion, and Conversion in the New Europe*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. 172 pp. This review appeared first in [MEQ 22\(9/15/2015\)4](#).