Book Review: The Daily Lives of Muslims: Islam and Public Confrontation in Contemporary Europe by Nilüfer Göle

In **The Daily Lives of Muslims: Islam and Public Confrontation in Contemporary Europe***,* **Nilüfer Göle** *explores the everyday experiences of Muslims in a number of European countries. While commending the wide range of different European societies covered and the examination of European Muslim and Jewish experiences,* **Jennifer Philippa Eggert** *found some aspects of the book's treatment of key figures, terms and theological concepts disappointing.*

***The Daily Lives of Muslims: Islam and Public Confrontation in Contemporary Europe*. Nilüfer Göle (translated by Jacqueline Lerescu). Zed Books. 2017.**

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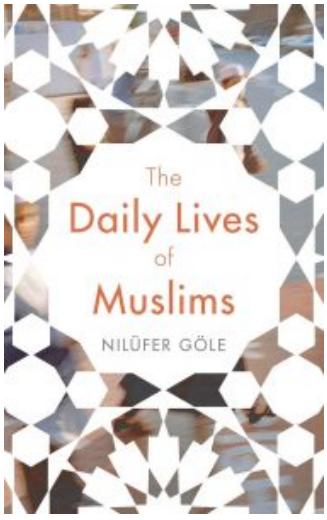

The 2015 terrorist attack targeting the offices of the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo shook France to the core. The perpetrators of the attack claimed to be motivated by Islamist ideology. France has long had an uneasy relationship with its Muslim citizens, and in the aftermath of the attack an increasing securitisation of Muslims and Islam could be observed. In *The Daily Lives of Muslims* (the French version of which was published in 2015, shortly after the Charlie Hebdo attack), Nilüfer Göle, French-Turkish sociologist based at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), tries to counter this development by focusing on 'ordinary Muslims' instead.

Göle's book examines the experiences of European Muslims in the post-immigration phase (45), where a rupture with authorities of Islamic knowledge and the experience of living as a religious minority in Europe have led many Muslims to adapt and renegotiate their religious identity and practice (59). *The Daily Lives of Muslims* is based on a research project on Islam in the European public sphere implemented by a group of researchers led by Göle at the EHESS. It involved more than 400 Muslim and non-Muslim research participants in 21 European cities who were engaged in interviews and discussion groups.

The book consists of nine substantial chapters, in addition to the introduction and conclusion. The first chapter sets the scene by providing context about debates on multiculturalism, Islamophobia, right-wing extremist populism and identity politics evolving around Muslims and Islam in Europe. The second chapter outlines the methodological approach, and the following chapters focus on different controversies around Muslims and Islam in Europe, namely: prayer, mosques, art, the headscarf, the shariah and halal food. The last chapter compares Jewish and Muslim experiences in Europe.

The last chapter of the book presents one of its main strengths. The chapter brings in the Jewish experience in Europe and compares it with the situation of European Muslims. It outlines the rise of both antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe (246), and stresses how both Judaism and Islam have been perceived to be opposed to secular modernity (248, 255). A discussion of the history of the Jewish and Muslim presence in Europe reveals striking similarities. Moreover, Jewish and Muslim positions on religious questions often align; examples include rulings on male circumcision or dietary requirements. Nevertheless, non-Muslim Europeans have often emphasised a Judeo-Christian lineage to marginalise, 'other' and exclude European Muslims, as Göle writes in this chapter: 'In post-Shoah Europe, a process of reconciliation with Jews was under way, and notably led to the growing affirmation of the ''Judeo-Christian roots'' – and no longer the ''Greco-Roman'' ones – of European civilization, while disavowing its Arab and Muslim heritage' (246).

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This historical perspective illustrates that many of the current controversies over what are perceived to be 'Muslim issues' indeed reveal centuries-old inner-European conflicts over the role of religion. At a time when many debates on Muslims and Islam in Europe treat the topic as an exception from the norm, as something unique, and therefore inherently different from the mainstream European experience, such an approach is refreshing and very much needed. Indeed, in some cases their shared experience of being religious minorities in Europe has made Muslims and Jews rethink their positionality vis-à-vis each other and the non-Jewish, non-Muslim European majority.

Another strength of the book is the wide range of different European cities that are included in the analysis, which goes beyond the 'usual suspect' cases in Western Europe. The research team conducted fieldwork in France, Germany, the UK and the Netherlands (which a lot of research on European Islam focuses on), but they also included Italy, Spain, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Turkey. Their inclusion of the Bosnian and Turkish cases is particularly commendable as European majority-Muslim countries are usually left out of analyses of European Islam. It would have been interesting to also see the inclusion of more Central and Eastern European cities – but perhaps that would have gone beyond the scope of this research study and book.

Göle claims to want to challenge simplifying representations of European Muslims, and in large parts of the book, she does that very well. That is why those parts of the book that reproduce Eurocentric views, combined with widespread stereotypes about Islam, are so surprising. For example, Göle describes France as 'an inspirational centre for a new democratic imaginary' (xv) and Islamophobia in Europe as 'breaking with Europe's pluralistic and progressive tradition' (46) – as if France were inherently democratic and Europe mostly pluralistic and progressive, thus sidelining a long history of racism, Islamophobia and deeply undemocratic practices. This perspective may be explained by the author's socialisation in France, where uncritical discourses of the nation being 'the home of human rights' are deeply engrained into political culture. Nevertheless, her portrayals of Bassam Tibi as a defender of an 'enlightened form of Islam' (27) and of Ayaan Hirsi Ali as a 'spokesperson for feminism and the value of freedom' (50) and 'the voice of secular Muslims' (51) irritate. These descriptions brush aside the deeply problematic positions of Tibi, who has claimed that the term Islamophobia was 'invented' by Islamists to ward off criticisms, and Hirsi Ali, who has a long track record of racist and Islamophobic statements.

In a similar vein, Göle's usage of key terms, for which she often does not provide a definition, perplexes. For example, she speaks of 'orthodox religious' Muslims (xxiv), 'modern' women (189), 'Islamic extremism' (xxvi) and 'Jihadi terrorism' (4), without specifying what she understands under these terms. Considering how vague – and at the same time loaded and politicised – a lot of these terms are, one wonders if more specificity would have been advisable. Similarly, Göle speaks of 'citizens of Muslim culture' (7) – without explaining what 'Muslim culture' is to her and how it differs from 'Muslim faith'. This is surprising for a sociologist who would be expected to reflect on such central sociological concepts.

Göle's book takes a social science (rather than a theological) approach. She is interested in everyday practices of Muslims – and not theological stances. Nevertheless, in those parts of the books where Göle does refer to theological concepts, one would have expected for her to show a basic understanding of theological Islamic terms. However, this is missing in several parts of the book. Key terms are mistranslated (she translates *ibadat* as 'ritual prayer' at one point in the book, on page 63, and as 'cultural practices' at another, on page 188 – when the correct term would be 'worship'). Misleading statements are made (she states that 'the obligation to wear the veil is a subject of debate among theologians' on page 64, yet there is consensus amongst mainstream Islamic scholars that hijab is compulsory); and her representation of the shariah (see, for example, 21, 57-59) seems rather simplifying and not at all reflective of the depth at which Islamic theologians discuss the concept.

In conclusion, Göle's comparison of European Muslim and Jewish experiences is to be commended, as is the book's inclusion of a wide range of different European societies in the analysis. However, her celebration of extremely controversial figures with deeply problematic positions who have underplayed or expressed Islamophobia, the lack of theological knowledge of basic concepts and poorly defined key terms are highly disappointing.

Note: This article first appeared at our sister site, LSE Review of Books. It gives the views of the author, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: Rachel Martin on Unsplash

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