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## Islam in Denmark: The Challenge of Diversity

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# Review

## ***Islam in Denmark: The Challenge of Diversity***

Jørgen S. Nielsen (ed). Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books,  
2012. 268 pp.

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In public debates contemporary Denmark stands out as an extraordinary nationalist and racist country. This is particularly so on issues concerned with Islam and Muslim immigration. The growth of the nationalist political party Dansk folkeparti, the Muhammad caricatures and harsh laws regulating family reunion are often used as examples by outside observers trying to describe political transformations in the country. These, and some other themes, are discussed in the anthology *Islam in Denmark: The Challenge of Diversity* (2012), edited by Jørgen S. Nielsen, professor and director of The Centre for European Islamic Thought at the University of Copenhagen. What kind of Islamic diversity is it that challenges Denmark?

The content of the book is organized into three parts, which comprises fourteen chapters written by scholars from disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and theology. Muslims, who are politically and religiously active in Danish public life, write

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two chapters and one of the texts is formulated by a Christian pastor in the Danish Lutheran church. The chapters in part one are concerned with national questions such as the history of Muslim immigration to Denmark, the institutionalization of Islam, religious legislation and a discussion about how to estimate the number of Muslims in the country. Part two is composed of articles discussing a variety of disparate themes. Here we can read about gender, conversion, security aspects, Muslim schoolchildren, and urban space in Copenhagen.

In part three most chapters are concerned with the relationship between Muslims and Danish society. Hence, young Muslims who protest against the majority society by becoming Islamists or criminals, counseling efforts in the health sector, mentality dilemmas in interreligious relations and the problem of how Europeans should understand Islam, are themes for chapters in this part. In sum, the book covers several aspects of Islam in Denmark from a perspective where Danish culture is problematized rather than Muslim thinking of Islam. Hence, all chapters, if contextualized in the broader discursive universe of multiculturalism, are written from a clear “antiracist” position.

Not surprisingly, Denmark fits the general Western pattern of Muslim immigration, as described in the chapter by Nielsen. During the economic heydays after WWII it was mainly Muslim men who settled in the country looking for employment. However, this labor migration came also in Denmark to an end during the 1970s when refugees and family reunion replaced it. Since then the number of Muslims in the country have been growing roughly from 29,500 people in 1980 to approximately 231,200 persons in 2011, as counted in the chapter by Brian Arly Jacobsen. The three largest national groups are Muslims from Turkey (54,628), Iraq (24,916), and Lebanon (22,885). Parallel to this social transformation, there has been, in Denmark as elsewhere, a growth in the number of institutions offering Islamic services of different kinds. Lene Kühle points out that there are about 130 mosques (but no purpose-built), 22 state funded Islamic private schools, several Muslim youth and women’s organizations, Islamic financing, several halal butchers and clinics for circumcision of boys. Thus, on a structural level Denmark shows the same pattern of Muslim settlement as other Western countries.

The potential for Muslims to construct a European Islam has been debated among scholars and activists during the last decade. Or, should we instead talk about a Swedish, French, Finnish, British, German etcetera Islam? The question is addressed in

the book by Abdul Wahid Pedersen who argues that it is desirable to construct a Danish Islam, not least in order to help young Danish Muslims to feel at home in the country. What Danish interpretations of Islam are characterized by, however, is given a vague answer in the chapter. Is it, on the whole, possible for Muslims to construct nationally flavored interpretations of Islam in the global market place of Islamic and other ideas provided by the Internet and other technologies for communication? Contemporary Islam is an object for global public debate involving all kinds of actors. We know from other studies that Muslims, particularly young ones, are not limited by the nation state in their search for *fatwas*.

A peculiar aspect of the book is that there are few Muslim voices representing Islamic diversity in Denmark. The reader is left to understand various issues by reading how certain scholars and influential Muslim activists such as Pedersen interpret the political and social situation. Indeed, several Islamic political organizations are mentioned in different chapters. For example, as Kühle points out, Minhaj ul Quran, Milli Görus, Jamaat Tabligh, The Muslim World League, Hizb ut-Tahrir, United Council of Muslims and Danish Muslim Union are some of the organizations active in the country. However, the reader does not get to know how Muslims in these political groups formulate the situation for themselves or for Muslims in general. The closest one gets to this is in Lissi Rasmussen's text about political radicalization of Muslim youth. However, here focus is mainly on why Muslims left Hizb ut-Tahrir; pro-hizb voices are left out of the discussion. Thus, the book does not offer any answers to how Muslims, Islamists and other, interpret short and long term problems for Muslims in Denmark.

In Europe there is a general consensus among scholars and policymakers that certain aspects of Islam and Muslim immigration are problematic. To name a few areas of contention, there are gender issues concerning constructions of femininity and masculinity, dilemmas in the school system when it comes to notions of nakedness and sexuality, the concentration of Muslims in certain urban localities and the social marginalization following from this. Another problem has to do with *sharia's* system of person- and family laws, in the EU discussed under the heading juridical pluralism. These themes can be found in the book, but they are mostly framed within political discourses that offer a limited intellectual space for discussing them as important empirical phenomena in the social reality of Muslims.

For instance, the urban division of space is discussed in Garbi Schmidt's article about Nørrebro—a famous plural neighborhood in Copenhagen—through a theoretical framework which communicates that it is a myth to think of this neighborhood in terms of social problems related to its residents, in this case Muslims who populate the place. The chapter is basically a critique of how the former leader of Dansk folkeparti, Pia Kjærsgaard, has represented the neighborhood in a newsletter. "Today, Nørrebro is totally changed...the tolerance is gone," as Kjærsgaard says, and she continues "one of the main reasons for this is that Nørrebro has become a Muslim enclave." General statements like that can be studied empirically, interpreted and problematized in various ways. However, in the article the statement is not taken seriously as a proposition about empirical reality. Instead, it is used as an element in how nationalists use a local place in the construction of a so-called "mythscape."

Hence, the scientific question if it is "true" or "false" to describe the neighborhood as a Muslim enclave (or, as a parallel society, as this has been debated in Denmark for several years) falls outside the discussion. Indeed, if it is a "myth" that Muslims cluster together in enclaves, problems like segregation and marginalization do not exist as dilemmas to come to terms with. Thus, despite *who* argues what, to reduce the problem of Muslim enclavization to a nationalist myth is to trivialize problems for this group of citizens. Furthermore, this may be particularly troublesome for Muslim children and women who have to deal with patriarchal structures in everyday life. That there is a high degree of social control of women in Muslim neighborhoods has been reported in various empirical studies about Muslims and Islam from other countries. Consequently, it seems plausible that this also is an aspect of the Danish Muslim reality.

Another topic in the European debate concerns norms in *sharia* that regulate social relations within the family. This is something most Muslims are familiar with, particularly those who are married according to Islam and, therefore, are obliged to follow an Islamic marriage contract. In the book, Mona Kanwal Sheik and Manni Crone are the authors who discuss *sharia* in their article about Muslims as a security threat. Of course, as the authors argue, it is problematic when *sharia* is contextualized within a discourse of national security as if this is a "dangerous" phenomenon. However, the authors do not offer an alternative way of dealing with *sharia*. They are so occupied with attacking the security discourse for its immorality that they end up denying that *sharia* is an important aspect of belief in Islam. A consequence of this is that important political

and religious aspects of Islam in Denmark are not dealt with in an earnest way in the book.

For instance, if it is regarded as suspicious to say that there is a “loyalty conflict between *sharia* and democracy,” as Kanwal Sheik and Crone does, there is not much intellectual space left for problematizing *sharia* in Denmark or in other nation-states and at the same time avoid being ex-communicated as Islamophobic or racist. However, as Muslims and many scholars know, there are real conflicts between *sharia*’s family law and civil law in various European nation-states. Which system of rules shall organize and regulate Muslim marriages? The question is of great importance for Islamic leaders in Denmark and in other European countries. Indeed, also for Islamic judges in the Arab world who are trying to cope with European Muslim couples in need of authoritative Islamic legal decisions. Diversity challenges like this ought to be debated outside the discourse of Islam as a threat in order to transform the meaning of *sharia* into a more practical issue of Muslim everyday life.

The challenge of Muslim gender diversity is discussed in Rikke Andreassen’s chapter, the most clearly outspoken “postcolonial” text. Accordingly, the text is a critical attack on how “white” Danish actors have debated Muslim gender differences rather than an analysis of how Muslims themselves use Islamic ideas in the construction of femininity and masculinity. Thus, the text does not cast any light whatsoever upon Islam as a lived religion in Danish society. Andreassen summarize her main point in the slogan “Muslim women are talked about—not talked with.” Paradoxically, this is exactly what she herself is doing in the article. The scientific veracity of the book would have increased if Islam and gender had been discussed more empirically close from a Muslim point of view. Unfortunately, postcolonialism does not offer the most productive discursive context for such a methodological approach.

To sum up, generally the book offers some apprehensions of Islam and Muslims in Denmark. Readers will get insights into the history of Muslim settlement in the country and learn some things about the process of the institutionalization of Islam. The book also mediates a feeling of how a specific type of multiculturalist Danish scholars and activists position themselves in the Danish debate about Muslim immigration and Islam. However, the title of the book, *Islam in Denmark*, and the sub-title *The Challenge of Diversity*, is to a great extent misleading since most chapters discuss how secular Danish society thinks about Islam rather than, as said above, how Muslims think of Islam

in Denmark. Thus, students and scholars who are interested in how Muslims practice Islam in Denmark and what various Islamic organizations want, will be disappointed. Unfortunately, the book does not take the challenge of Muslim diversity as seriously as an interested reader could wish for.