

Book Reviews

Islamic Ethics and Female Volunteering: Committing to Society, Committing to God

Kayikci, M. R. (2020). *Islamic Ethics and Female Volunteering: Committing to Society, Committing to God*. Springer.

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What do you do when you are inundated by questions about whether you can be trusted with European values, whether your loyalty to your religion is more than that toward Europe? Or, what if you evoke debate simply because of what you wear? This is the bind many of Europe's Muslims find themselves in. To navigate these tensions, some Muslims root their contemporary sense of being and belonging in the past—narrating tales of how their identities were forged *in* and *of* Europe (Hussain, 2021). But what of the present? How might European Muslims find a middle ground and negotiate how they experience religion in the public sphere today? This is the subject of Merve Reyhan Kayikci's book *Islamic Ethics and Female Volunteering: Committing to Society, Committing to God*.

At a time when there is an “ongoing and never-ending debate” about the compatibility of Islam with European values (p. 4), Kayikci's book provides refreshing insight into the everyday lives of a group of Muslim women volunteering in Brussels and Antwerp. These women use volunteering—conceived as a modern, liberal, and secular sphere of activity—to fit in and counter the label of “orthodoxy” often imposed on their community. What makes this book a necessary read is its focus on the everydayness of Muslim lives, instead of dealing only in binaries between the “good liberal individualistic European Muslim” and the “bad traditionalist extreme Muslim.”

The introductory chapters take a deep dive into Turkish associations active in Europe and the controversies surrounding Islam and Muslims on the continent, interlacing both with specific lived experiences from the volunteers themselves—most of whom are of Turkish descent and children of labor migrants. This is done in a way that makes historic incidents or events more relatable to the present. For example, Asli, who volunteers in Antwerp, started wearing a headscarf and nearly all her colleagues and boss were critical of her. She says, “The audience of the Good Muslim is not just God, but the whole public” (p. 221). This conscious tension of what it means to *be a Muslim* in Europe runs throughout the book, albeit implicitly. Each chapter engages with various ways in which Muslim subjects are in constant conversation with two traditions—the liberal secular order and tradition of ethics and the supposedly non-liberal Islamic tradition of ethics.

In the existing literature, the author points out that volunteering is looked at as “a secularized modern institution,” based on the impulse to *do good*. Even when Christian churches are involved, the form and content of volunteering remains “secular” (p. 3). The work these volunteers do—such as baking goods and cakes, raising money for charitable programs—is the same as other volunteer organizations, contributing to multiple publics and holding up a common, shared civil society ideal. However, Muslim voluntary activity consciously breaks away from the “liberal” and “secular” definition of volunteering (p. 3) in two respects: first, these women do not look at volunteering as a timeline-based project, but a lifelong endeavor of feeling responsible. Second, while the form and content of their work is secular—in that it contributes to shared spheres of Belgian public life—these women volunteer for *razay-e-ilahi*, or God’s consent.

Volunteers Kayikci profiles try to embrace their religion in a way that is “compatible,” or that merges, with broader Belgian society “peacefully.” As one of Kayikci’s volunteers says: “The Belgians do not want or need you to be better Muslims at the end of the day. They want you to be integrated. This way (by volunteering), we can do both” (p. 78). Each of the women profiled in Kayikci’s book identifies as a devout and pious Muslim, wearing visible markers of the religion, such as a headscarf. For most, the headscarf has created tensions in their social engagements at work, their children’s schools, or in their own education. Volunteering, in a way, has provided a space where they can confront these tensions on their own terms. They wear their religion on their sleeves while engaging and helping their community with utmost “goodness, kindness, altruism and forgiveness” (p. 224) in such a way that their presence, and by that extension, their headscarf, is no longer “contentious,” Kayikci argues (p. 313). Thus, not only are they working on issues for social betterment, but also on their public image *as Muslims*.

With that said, Kayikci’s interlocutors consciously do not organize events that explicitly reference Islam or are held in an Islamic setting like a mosque. For them, *ibaada* (personal worship) and volunteering are complimentary, in the sense that a good Muslim is one who sincerely does her *ibaada* and at the same time is committed to responsibilities to greater society. To experience religion in a more unrestricted way, to do *ibaada*, they hold their own “discussion groups,” called *sohbet*. *Sohbet*, which means conversation in Turkish, are spaces where these women come together to discuss a predetermined subject from the Quran, Hadith, a sermon video, or texts featuring Quranic commentary or jurisprudence (*fiqh*). The aim is to work on “self-making in the pious trajectory” (p. 75), which can be understood through the words of another volunteer Meral: “... being respectful and compassionate ... not teasing and making fun of the other ... not breaking another person’s heart, not calling them names or reprimanding them ... tahkiki iman (true piety) lies in sorority,” she said. The practice of the other half—volunteering—is what fulfills their sense of duty to society as a whole.

While their efforts will be perceived as “modern” by European secular logics and thus, more acceptable to Belgians and Europeans at large, perhaps showing Islam in a “good” light, what is also noteworthy is the burden of proof these volunteers must carry while living in Europe. As long as they are willing to leave behind their religious traditions and pick and choose those that are “compatible,”

they will stand a chance to survive. As the author says, “the question is how to make sure that Muslims are a certain kind of Muslim—one who lives in a way that is loyal to Europe and its values.”

The above stories and analysis are augmented by Kayikci’s succinct and non-jargony prose. The book also does a good job in making Islamic values and Muslim vocabulary, terms like *zakat*, *sadaqa*, and *sadaqai jaariya* (the three forms of giving in Islam) and *rizk* (God’s allocation of resources), more accessible to a non-Muslim audience, which in turn invites a wider section of society into new ways of thinking about voluntary practices and perspectives.

Altogether, Kayikci’s monograph does well exploring the ambiguities and tensions of the Muslim lives she profiles, disturbing and upending simplistic narratives about what it means to be a European Muslim. Considering how giving to the needy is an important part of Islamic tradition, this aspect should be interrogated in a sustained manner that highlights the role Muslim philanthropy plays in civil society. Such research will be more reflective of the Muslims than the often reiterated “West and the Muslim rest” (Phillips, 2009) narrative. Kayikci’s work is a vital step in the right direction and can act as an example of what might be interrogated in other contexts across the globe.

References

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