Researching Islam and Muslim Minorities in Europe: Missions, Dead Ends and Future Prospects

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Abstract:

Social scientific studies on Islam and Muslim minorities in Europe have previously mainly focused on three areas: the accommodation of Islam in prevailing institutional settings, the specifics of Muslim mindsets and everyday practices, and discriminatory patterns and practices of exclusion of Islam and Muslims. Future research on Islam and Muslims in Europe should fulfill three purposes, both building on previous scholarly work and critically scrutinizing it: enhancing the mainstreaming of diversity research, contributing to the 'normalization' of Islam by ceasing to take up categories of political practice and reproducing it, and fostering democratic resilience while contributing to an inclusive society.

Keywords:

Literature review; Muslim minorities; Islam in Europe; Reflexive research.

Abstract Deutsch:

Forschung zu muslimischen Minderheiten und Islam in Europa kann grob in drei Strängen betrachtet werden: Die Einbettung des Islam in bestehende institutionelle Settings; Ansichten und Alltagspraktiken von Muslim*innen; Diskriminierung und Exklusion von Islam und Muslim*innen; Zukünftige Forschung zu Islam und Muslim*innen in Europa sollte, sowohl aufbauend auf als auch kritisch gegenüber bisherigen Arbeiten auf ein Mainstreaming von Religions- und Diversitätsfragen hinwirken. Durch die Vermeidung des Aufgreifens und Reproduzieren von Kategorien der politischen Praxis sollte zu einer Normalisierung im Umgang mit dem Islam hingeführt, sowie zu demokratischer Resilienz und inklusiven Gesellschaften beigetragen werden.

Schlüsselworte:

Literaturüberblick; Muslimische Minderheiten; Islam in Europa; reflexive Forschung;

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The number of social scientific studies on Islam and Muslim minorities in Europe has increased tremendously over the past two decades. In this short contribution, I sketch my perception of how this research is structured. First, I attempt to systematize research approaches according to their research interests. Second, I aim to identify research objectives and discuss the relevance of different research strands for ongoing debates in public politics and academia. Finally, I will describe the fields in which more research or a different kind of research regarding Islam and Muslims in Europe is necessary.

1. Structuring an exploding field of scholarly work

Most social scientific research neglected religion as a research topic over the second half of the 20th century. With the end of the Cold War and its grand narrations, religious fundamentalism on the rise, and emerging right-wing populism that discovered the mobilization potential of religious categories, social scientists across Europe rediscovered an interest in issues of religion, particularly in Islam. In recent decades, the body of literature on Islam in Europe has grown exponentially, with contributions from political scientists, sociologists, social anthropologists, media scholars, scholars of religion, and many others. While there are many possible ways to approach this broad field, I want to discuss three overlapping but still distinct areas within social scientific research on Islam in Europe.

1.1. Accommodating diversity

First, we may consider the accommodation of Islam in prevailing institutional and state-religion-society settings. Here, researchers investigate issues such as religious education (Uslucan 2011; Heimbrock, Scheilke, and Schreiner 2001; Meijer, Miedema, and Velde 2009), 'chaplaincy' in state institutions (Reiss 2015; Stoeckl and Roy 2015; Michalowski 2015), religious symbols in the public sphere (Sauer 2009; Saharso 2007; Fürlinger 2010; Maussen 2009) and the like.

Comparisons of governance approaches and overviews of challenges and solutions encountered across Europe have become very common (Avramopoulou, Çorbacioğlu, and

Sanna 2012; Bader 2007; Boender 2013). Such comparisons might then be related to different traditions of citizenship or religion-state relations (Fetzer and Soper 2004; Joppke 2013; Brunn 2013). Another important aspect of this first strand of research concerns legal debates and court decisions (Bielefeldt 2012; Koenig 2015).

1.2. Investigating difference

Second, a large part of scholarly work investigates the social circumstances, living conditions and practices as well as attitudes among Muslim minorities. This investigation of Muslim life takes two directions. On the one hand, scholars argue their interest in Muslim minorities with a perceived security threat, the attempt to prove, understand, explain, or avoid radical attitudes and ideas among Muslims, or the politicization of Islam. The specifics of "Muslim mindsets" – often in reference to gender relations (Diehl et al. 2014; Weber 2013) and attitudes towards democracy (Röder and Mühlau 2014; Norris and Inglehart 2008) – or the potential for radicalization (Doosje, Loseman, and Van den Bos 2013; Yilmaz 2016; Lyons-Padilla et al. 2015) come under scrutiny. In research following these lines of argumentation, Muslims are often more or less explicitly equated with immigrants.[1]

On the other hand, studies genuinely interested in Islamic and Muslim minority perspectives investigate living conditions for members of a religious minority or the specifics of contemporary religion, asking how individuals and groups handle difference (Bendixsen 2013; Scharbrodt et al. 2019). Subjects under discussion resemble the aforementioned research, whereby gender relations in particular are also discussed here (Bilge 2010; Siraj 2011), although the methods and objectives of these two lines of research that I subsume in this second strand significantly differ.

1.3. Identifying processes of 'othering'

Third, and slowly moving from the margins to the mainstream, we may identify research on discriminatory patterns and anti-Muslim sentiments, the marginalization of Muslim minorities, discursive exclusion, and symbolic boundary drawing. This research specifically investigates the ways in which Islam and Muslims are addressed; for example, by right-wing

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[1] All of these issues are also the subject of more critical research, taking into consideration the problematic frames that the research interest itself transports and putting forward concepts such as the securitization of Islam (Cesari 2009), headscarf debates as debates of national belonging (Korteweg and Yurdakul 2014), and radicalization control as a form of governing through trust and suspicion (Ragazzi 2016). Contributions of this type are discussed with reference to the third strand below.

populists (Marzouki, McDonnell, and Roy 2016; Dolezal, Helbling, and Hutter 2010; A. Hennig et al. 2019), in mainstream media discourses (Spielhaus 2009; Jackson 2009), and in the course of exercising immigrant integration politics (Mattes 2018; Tezcan 2007).

Often arguing on the meta level, studies in this third strand of research are not primarily interested in particularities about Islam and Muslim minorities in Europe, but rather in those who address them, the ways in which issues of Islam are framed, and the historic trajectory that foregrounds the power relations that we observe in exclusionary practices.

2. Explicit and implicit research objectives

In a next step, I want to examine the explicit and implicit research objectives of the areas of research sketched above. Therefore, I aim to name their common theoretical foundations, their field of application as well as the debates that these research works aim to address.

2.1. Towards the foundations

Research on the accommodation of Islam has shown ways forward in many areas and often identified discriminatory practices where these roads have not been taken. The practical implementations of scholarly work in this area can be found in state institutions, legislative work, and everyday practices of accommodating diversity.

The theoretical foundation of these studies is the question of equal treatment of diversity following a liberal democratic paradigm (Laborde 2013; Backer 2015; Dombrowski 2014; Barclay 2007; Bader 2003). The question concerning the ways in which diverse individuals and groups with contradictory interests may live together peacefully in a democratic setting lies at the core of liberal democratic thought. For liberal theory, the relevant aspect of religion is the accommodation of diversity in a context of state neutrality (Goodin and Reeve 1989; Jones 1989; Madeley 2003; Patten 2012).

This first strand of research touches upon more general questions of religious freedom, secularism, and equality. Consequently, this relates to philosophical debates about liberalism, (post)secularism (Gillespie 2014; Bielefeldt and Heitmeyer 1998), and (post)modernity (Turner 2007), addressing the most fundamental normative questions of social structure. Challenges that are initially perceived as the consequence of a growing Islamic presence often point to the fragility of societal fundamentals (not least concerning

the incomplete separation of religion and state) and end up being debated in much more general terms.

2.2. Research for policy or peers

One line of research in this second strand mainly derives from the fields of demography or migration studies, closely connecting migration – the main driver for the significant growth of European Muslim minorities – with religion (Triandafyllidou 2015). Studies on attitudes among Muslims often ask (implicitly or explicitly) how 'they can be integrated'. Typical for the policy field of migration/integration (Jørgensen 2011; Scholten, Entzinger, and Penninx 2015), many scholars have followed the call for expertise and provided studies for policy-makers. Rather than building on theoretical assumptions, this area of research is mostly driven by the idea of empirically exploring parts of the population perceived as different from the majority population and not (yet) known to decision-makers. In many cases, research from this area informs those who decide upon the accommodation of Muslim minorities. For example, the German Islam Conference started with a large-scale survey on Muslim life in Germany (Haug, Müssig, and Stichs 2009).

Clearly, there also are studies within this second strand of research that are more genuinely interested in Islamic religious life, mostly coming from scholars interested in religion or minority perspectives as such, primarily writing for an academic peer group, often from an ethnographic or religious studies background (L. Hennig 2017; Dessing, Jeldtoft, and Woodhead 2016). Here, a diaspora perspective is frequently the lens through which the research of Islamic life is approached (Tunger-Zanetti, Endres, and Martens 2019). Such studies are particularly interesting when results are reconnected to concepts of practiced religion (Ammerman 2016) that aim to grasp religion as a fluid phenomenon rather than a static tradition. Insights into Muslim life in Europe can then not only be applied in policy development, but also in advancing concepts of religion in contemporary society discussed among scholars of religion.

2.3. Pointing to power relations

The third and growing strand of research under discussion here demonstrates the functioning of exclusionary discourses and practices concerning Muslim minorities and Islam in Europe. Unlike the research strands sketched above, scholarly work in this area does not

aim to learn about Islam and Muslim minorities but rather about its functioning as an 'other' to the imagined notion of a European 'self'.

Research in this area builds on the social scientific literatures of boundary making (Laborde 2013; Korteweg and Triadafilopoulos 2013), racism (Grillo 2010), antisemitism (Meer 2013), and governmentality (Tezcan 2007; Ragazzi 2016). Furthermore, critical concepts on power relations derived from postcolonial studies, Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1991), Talal Asad's work on secularism (2003), and authors such as Fatima El-Tayeb (2011) who highlight the racialization of religion hold key importance here. Political acts and actors, media discourses and policies, as well as research per se on Islam and Muslims all constitute the subject of research here (Johansen and Spielhaus 2012; Amir-Moazami 2018).

As the aim of most studies in this area is the dismantling of power relations, it connects well to other research on hegemony. In fact, scholars who are interested in power relations and were previously hardly interested in (minority) religion have increasingly taken up arguments about the marginalization of Muslims in Europe. Furthermore, intersectional approaches now almost always consciously include religion along with ethnicity, race, class, and gender (Silvestri 2011; Banton 2011; Rasheed 2016). Thereby, this area of research raised awareness of religion as an increasingly influential category of difference.

3. Looking for ways forward

While serving highly diverse purposes, all areas of research discussed above have produced significant amounts of literature but have meanwhile reached a certain degree of saturation. Research on Islam based on liberal theoretic approaches has discussed accommodation in a multitude of ways. However, liberal theory has not yet sufficiently managed to develop ideas about diversity governing taking into account the notion that the principle of equality is in distress (Mattes 2016). Rather than analyzing religious diversity as the problem to solve, scholars have looked at the problematization of Islam as the symptom of a liberal principle under attack.

This is undertaken by the third strand of research discussed above, although – as with other strands of 'critical research' – too many publications fail to extend beyond critique for the sake of criticism, thereby making criticism a mission in itself. While I do not by any means want to devalue constructivist approaches, it is important to combine them with more

essentialist perspectives on societal functioning to provide better concepts and not only scrutinize existing ones.

Regarding research on Muslim life in Europe, we see two developments: One is a policy-driven interest in the inspection of populations of 'others', which – due to its questionable starting point – hardly produces knowledge on Islam that is fruitful for broader academic debates. The other is a genuine interest in developments of religion and religiosity in contemporary contexts, determined by secular structures and diversity, which speaks to the rather small scientific community for which the phenomenon of religion is the primary research interest.

In light of these achievements and shortcomings, future research on Islam and Muslims in Europe should fulfill three purposes, both building on previous scholarly work and critically scrutinizing it: research on Islam/Muslims in Europe should contribute to the mainstreaming of diversity research, research must stop contributing to the exceptionalization of Islam by taking up categories of political practice and reproducing it, and research must furthermore address democratic resilience and provide ways of thinking towards fostering inclusiveness in diverse societies.

3.1. Reflexive research and mainstreaming religion

The question frequently occurs to me concerning why a specific research problem is framed around Islam and Muslims when it also concerns other religious groups, other minorities, other women, other youngsters, etc. For future research, it is important to limit research on Muslims and Islam to questions particularly concerning this very segment of the population. We need to carefully consider whether a research interest is best served when investigating Islam and Muslims. Scholars should furthermore ask themselves where their interest in Islam and Muslims derives from. While such a reflexive approach should be self-evident in any social scientific study, research realities show that this is often not the case.

For example, when asking for gender perspectives on labor market participation, it might be more fruitful to look at people of a certain class or socio-economic background than Muslims. If scholars are indeed interested in the influence of any religious orientation on labor market participation, they should aim for the mainstreaming of religion, which means the inclusion of Christians, Jews, Buddhists, etc. into the research setting. Such a mainstreaming of religion would avoid the production of scientific knowledge that fails to

distinguish between cause and effect, categories of analysis and practice, research interest and research objective.

3.2. Differentiating research from policy development or dealing with the migration background problem

The frequent adoption of categories of practice in academic research as categories of analysis (Brubaker 2013a) leads me to a second appeal directed at future researchers on Islam and Muslims. Muslim minorities in Europe grew due to migration inflows. While there are historic trajectories and the Muslim presence in Europe is not a novelty, the current size of Muslim minorities is the result of more recent migration processes.

This intersection of Islam and migration is frequently referred to by policy-makers when attempting to address populations seen as not (yet) being part of mainstream society. While talking about 'immigrants' when referring to the third generation surely raises questions regarding labeling, a religious category to mark difference is apparently more easily digested and in fact inter-generationally robust (Brubaker 2013b). Of course, either of these differentiations are problematic, since they do not allow for any end to processes of 'integration'.

From a social scientific perspective, it is particularly problematic that this perception of Muslims as 'others' is taken up and reproduced in research on Islam and Muslims. Recent scholarly work has significantly contributed to the exceptionalization of Islam and Muslim minorities (Amir-Moazami 2018; Johansen and Spielhaus 2012). Research that does not simply adopt political claims for certain kinds of knowledge therefore holds the strongest importance if the study of Islam and Muslim minorities in Europe should be prevented from becoming a programme of systemic exclusion.

3.3. Approaching resilience and inclusiveness

While it has been established that Muslims in Europe are subject to processes of severe exclusion in a multitude of ways, research has invested less effort in discovering and understanding the continued effects of these exclusionary practices, and finding ways of countering them. It is debatable whether it is the task of scholarship to develop such concepts. However, I personally experience the deconstruction of prevailing concepts and structures, devoid of thinking about better ways to shape societies, as a tiring process.

The normative question of how especially young people – among them young Muslims, growing up in a setting excluding Islam/Muslims – can be sensitized and strengthened to contribute to an inclusive society is highly relevant to liberal democracy and thereby also to its theoretical foundations (see for example De Groot 2018). While the word 'resilience' is increasingly used in different contexts, I find it a useful way of thinking about how inclusive societies might be built, and how liberal democratic achievements and human rights can be protected. Here lies strong potential in pedagogic research, not least religious pedagogy. Equally, political science, sociology, and philosophical approaches can help in advancing such perspectives.

4. Conclusive remark

In this paper, I have sketched the rapidly growing field of social scientific research on Islam and Muslim minorities in Europe and potential ways forward. To conclude, I wish to point to a structural development that I believe will help to overcome some of the dead ends in this research field, namely the establishment of academic institutions focusing on Islam research, borne by self-identified Muslims and inclusive of theological perspectives.

European perceptions of religion are based on centuries of institutionalized Christian theology. This is equally true for social scientific research on religion that has often developed in opposition to theological concepts. It is also important to have endemic perspectives from Muslims on Islam – both theological and social scientific – to counter the dominating research perspective on Islam as something 'other' and Muslims as 'the others'.

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