
BOOK REVIEW

Tamimi Arab, Pooyan. 2017. *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape: Religious Pluralism and Secularism in the Netherlands*. London: Bloomsbury Academic. x + 216 pp. ISBN: 978-14742-9143-9 £90.00 (hbk); 978-13500-8118-5 £28.99 (pbk).

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While visible manifestations of Islam in Western European countries—particularly the clothing of Muslim women—have received much scholarly attention in recent decades, few researchers have examined the presence of audible manifestations of Islam in these contexts. In *Amplifying Islam in the European Soundscape: Religious Pluralism and Secularism in the Netherlands*, anthropologist Pooyan Tamimi Arab begins to fill this gap by examining contemporary debates surrounding the *azan*, the Muslim call to prayer, in the Netherlands. Embedding recent tensions concerning amplification of the *azan* within the cultural history of public religion in the Netherlands, Tamimi Arab provides a timely exploration of how religious difference is experienced and negotiated at the local and national levels of Dutch society. Along the way, he also raises important normative concerns about secularism, pluralism and tolerance.

After an introduction, four substantive chapters address historical and contemporary debates concerning public worship in the Netherlands. The first chapter details recent proposals to replace the sung call to prayer with a visual alternative: a “light-*azan*”. Thought to be less disruptive to other Dutch citizens, the avant-garde light-*azan* translates the live call to prayer into a series of flashing lights. Despite the enthusiasm of a few, Tamimi Arab reports, this innovation has not provided a national solution. Among ordinary Muslims living in the Netherlands, the demand for the amplification of the *azan* through loudspeakers has increased in recent decades.

Noting the lack of scholarly attention to the history of the Muslim call to prayer in the Netherlands, Tamimi Arab presents a history of the *azan* in the Netherlands from the colonial era to the present (Chapter 2). An opening pair of vignettes sets up an effective comparison between Dutch resistance to Catholic processions in the nineteenth century and to the Muslim call to prayer in the twenty-first. As Tamimi Arab shows, the experiences of these two groups are legally and historically connected. In the 1980s, an important legislative victory for Dutch Catholics—the *Wet Openbare Manifestaties* (Public Manifestations Act)—brought about the formal end of the legislation that had limited Catholic processions in the nineteenth century. Importantly, it also enabled Muslim communities in the Netherlands to perform the call to prayer.

Today, politicians and ordinary citizens from across the political spectrum are challenging the right for mosques to amplify the *azan* using loudspeakers. In Chapter 3, Tamimi Arab describes liberal, religious and secularist objections to the amplification of the *azan*. He then discusses the cultural and constitutional dimensions of secularism in the Dutch context at length, presenting a compelling argument that, although secularist ideologies have fuelled proposals to ban the *azan*, the constitutional secularism of the Netherlands has protected the performance of this religious practice in the public sphere: secularism is a “double-edged sword” (p. 81).

In Chapter 4, Tamimi Arab uses his own ethnographic observations in the small town of Deventer in the Netherlands to analyse how municipalities work out constitutional secularism on the ground in their local contexts, where they have the right to limit religious sounds on the bases of public order, traffic or public health. A major strength of this chapter—and of the book as a whole—is the author’s attention to the complexities and internal contradictions present within the groups in this study. Instead of conceptualizing “the state and Muslims as two homogenous blocs in a face-off”, he carefully examines the complex perspectives of those who desire the amplification of the *azan* as well as those who oppose it (p. 113).

Through a case study of *azan* negotiations at the Turkish Center Mosque in Deventer, Tamimi Arab unpacks the cultural meanings imbued in the projection and reception of the call to prayer. He employs the concept of nostalgia to explain how Muslims’ desire for the *azan*, as well as their challengers’ opposition to the *azan*, stem from competing notions of “home”. Tamimi Arab also examines the relationships between state actors, mosque leaders and neighbourhood residents, noting that despite the provocative statements of prominent politicians, “*azan* negotiations happen mainly on the local level without interference from state actors at the national level” (p. 133). Due to the decentralized nature of *azan* negotiations, in some cases the pragmatic actions of local municipal leaders directly contradict the formal positions of their national party leaders.

While the original ethnographic observations presented in Chapter 4 constitute a valuable empirical contribution, I was disappointed that the discussion of this fieldwork was confined to a single chapter. My main criticism of this book, however, concerns Tamimi Arab’s limited discussion of his research methodology. Although all four substantive chapters include insights gleaned through interviews or observations, there is no methodological discussion of this fieldwork. Readers are left without any indication of how many people were interviewed, under what circumstances the interviews took place or how respondents and locations were selected. Likewise, any discussion of data analysis is entirely absent from this volume. A more thorough treatment of the author’s research methodology in an appendix or additional chapter would have strengthened the empirical contribution of this book and may have made it more appealing to a social-scientific audience.

Despite these shortcomings, *Amplifying Islam* makes an important contribution to the literature on Muslim integration in Western Europe by illuminating the ways religious difference is conceptualized and negotiated at various levels of Dutch society. In particular, Tamimi Arab’s analysis of the Deventer case offers new insight into the negotiation of religious difference at the local level, revealing complex processes of compromise and pragmatic accommodation. This book will appeal to scholars from a range of disciplines interested in the cultural and legal dimensions of Europe’s changing religious landscape, as well as those interested in religious pluralism and tolerance more broadly.