

Shahram Akbarzadeh (ed.), *Challenging Identities: Muslim Women in Australia*, foreword by Hanifa Deen, Islamic Studies Series 5, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2010, pp. vi + 196, ISBN: 9-780-522-857-153 (pbk), ISBN: 9-780-522-857-160 (pdf). Review doi: 10.1558/ arsr.v23i3.378.

Challenging Identities is the type of work one reads in a weekend. The eight studies it contains present some of the challenges Australian Muslim women encounter in Muslim minority contexts. The work seeks to contribute to our understanding of some of the impediments to being 'free to enjoy their full citizenship rights' (p. 7). All contributors address these issues in one way or another via the lens of religion.

Jamila Hussain (Chapter 2), for example, presents the results of a project that sought to identify 'women-friendly' mosques (2005), together with a follow up study (2006–2007) on the attitudes of fifteen Imams (from Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey, Iraq, Indonesia, Malaysia, South Africa, Fiji, Bangladesh and the United States) toward the inclusion of women in Sydney Mosques (mostly Sunni, but also Shi'i). Even in the best mosques, 'there is still room for improvement' (to accommodate women with small children, the elderly and disabled, access to Friday and *Eid* prayers, participation in mosque associations and executive bodies), to counter unamiable ethnic and cultural community attitudes and to engage more, and in English, with young Australia born Muslims (p. 26).

Karen Turner (Chapter 3) studies the shifting identities of women who have converted to Islam through the narratives of two female converts, from Melbourne, a process that 'often' leads 'to a "closeting" effect during the conversion process' (p. 31). As with any other type of conversion, converts to Islam undergo a period of 'crisis' that often becomes 'a central component' of their (reported) motivation for conversion, but that also leads them subsequently to inhabit 'multiple subject positions as they negotiate their new identities' (pp. 51-52).

Alia Imtoual (Chapter 4), in her study on 'religious racism' (an unfortunate term) in the everyday experiences of six young Muslim women of South Australia, adopts a feminist-standpoint theory perspective together with 'narratives of self-analysis'. Those narratives allow her to uncover and to argue that their refusal to respond to discrimination, prejudice or abuses (airports, workplaces, schools) 'is a way of dealing with racism that provides emotional distance and a measure of control' over Islamophobic (not the author's term) situations or incidents (p. 65) and not an 'experience of desensitisation'; in fact, it is 'an active and carefully crafted response' (p. 71).

Anisa Buckley (Chapter 5) provides an exploration of the social dynamics and tensions faced by Muslim women living in minority contexts ('Western' countries) who experience divorce where *shari'ah* and state laws co-exist, tensions she labels the 'divorce dilemma'. Unlike the previous three contributions, her study provides a (rather general) overview of the debate on 'gender and Islamic laws and ensuing women's activism in Muslim and Western countries' (though the scope is unfortunately too broad), followed by a discussion on Muslim communities in the West, i.e., Britain, Canada and Australia, through the lens of the four elements of this dilemma: '(1) western statutory laws or "secular laws"; (2) Muslims statutory laws or *qanun*; (3) laws dictated by informal "Muslim law structures"; which I term "Islamic family law processes"; and (4) what Mir-Hosseini calls the "lived experiences" of individuals and their communities: "actual opportunities, power, control of resources and self, employment, education and gender roles and relations", which I call "social placement"' (pp. 80-81). This allows her to frame the complex situation in which Muslim women who divorce find themselves in minority contexts.

Like the previous contribution, Ghena Krayem (Chapter 6) does not offer an ethnographical case study; instead, she explores the challenges that 'liberal democratic states', like Australia, pose to Muslim women with an analysis and criticism of the concept of 'liberal multicultural citizenship'. She sets out to explain why there is a need for the 'adoption' of 'policies that aim to accommodate or recognise the diverse practices of the many minority groups' in a multicultural society (p. 104) like Australia, as 'the Muslim community in Australia would like some recognition or accommodation of Islamic family law', e.g., in dispute resolutions (p. 123). This would take into account Muslim women's lived experiences and their complex and 'multiple affiliations (including religion, culture, gender and citizenship)' (p. 125), as well provide 'a more stable, cohesive society' in which the Muslim minority would become 'a much-valued part' of society, 'an important objective of multicultural policies' (p. 124).

Helen McCue and Fatima Kourouche (Chapter 7) report on the two separate research projects they undertook (2006–2008) on the identity of Muslim women in sport and recreation with 110 Muslim women of mixed ethnic background. They demonstrate that Muslim women engage with both the 'dominant' discourses of Islam and Australian sports culture 'in a fluid and dynamic two-way process that actively contests their exclusion from sport and recreation' (e.g., innovation in swimwear, going to non-gendered gyms wearing headdress and modest clothes), thus creating both 'new meaning' (p. 130) out of their experiences and a 'new identity of self' (p. 154) in the process.

Shakira Hussein (Chapter 8) discusses the 'double bind' and the 'double responsibility' (a Catch-22) in which Australian Muslim women find themselves. On the one hand, when they criticise anti-Muslim discrimination and harassment, they are encouraged and supported by the Muslim community and too often meet with hostility from non-Muslims. On the other hand, when they 'speak about dysfunctional gender norms' within the Muslim community, 'their voices are appropriated and woven into anti-Muslim discourse', but they equally 'risk being labelled as disloyal by some members' of the Muslim community (p. 171). At this juncture in time, it is not surprising that the Australian Muslim community prioritises the 'external' issues of Muslims and Islam's image over the 'internal' gender issues; in spite of this, some Muslim women's organisations choose to try to address both (p. 171). Finally, to these seven chapters, a very general introduction and a short foreword are included; the work also contains a bibliography (pp. 178-88) and an index (pp. 189-96).

Like with a great many similar collective works, contributions presented here vary in quality, methodological approaches, findings and theoretical groundings. For example, a study barely touches upon the Australian context and about half of the contributions provide findings based on ethnographic research and analyses of narratives. The latter studies, nonetheless, provide one of the strengths of the work, as they offer the reader greater insight into the lived experiences of ordinary Muslim women and their local religious communities. On the other hand, the unfortunate use of the term 'religious racism' by Imtoul may rest on a category mistake, whereby religion and race are conflated, especially in light of the fact that racism is usually understood as prejudice and antagonism towards people of other races (nationalities or ethnicities). A better term is Hussein's 'anti-Muslim discrimination', which is undoubtedly fuelled by various degrees of Islamophobia, another alternative term defined as hatred or fear of Islam (often as a political force) or as hostility or prejudice towards Muslims. This does not mean that the reported anti-Muslim discrimination was not coupled with racism, especially if the women interviewed were of an identifiably different ethnic group (no information about this is

provided by the author), which would, in fact, illustrate the far more complex discriminatory processes that are at work. On the whole, the work succeeds in contributing to a better understanding of some of the challenges faced by Australian Muslim women today.

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