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The title of Vanja’s Mosbach’s dissertation nicely encapsulates the main outlines of her research where her focus is on women, living in Sweden and the Öresund region, who publicly identify themselves as Muslim feminists.

It is fascinating to read about this new phenomenon of Muslim feminism, emerging in Sweden and elsewhere in Europe also, where individual women start questioning age-old traditions and decide for themselves how they want to live within this tradition. Mosbach’s dissertation is a story about women’s agency in a situation where they are driven by different and perhaps at times contradictory forces created by modernization, but also by the perseverance of religions and religious traditions. It is somewhere in the whirlwind of these forces that Muslim feminists are navigating their way as women and as Muslims. How they do it, and how to study this ‘doing’, are the questions that are the focus of Mosbach’s doctoral dissertation.

Muslim women in the 20th century were very active in finding new ways to understand issues pertaining to gender and Islam. In consequence, there have been, and are at present, many well-known female scholars who question misogynist interpretations of Islamic texts and each in their own way put forward alternative interpretations that are not anti-women. In brief, there is a very active process of gender-sensitive knowledge production going on. However, these internationally well-known figures are not at the centre of Mosbach’s thesis, but instead their work functions to a large extent as background information. Instead, Mosbach focuses on local and, perhaps one could say, ‘ordinary’ women who struggle in their personal life to find a balance between their own gendered experiences and Islamic tradition.

Mosbach has chosen three questions to guide her research. The first question concerns the self-identification of the participants as Muslim feminists; the second one focuses on their views concerning Islam, and in particular on issues pertaining to Islam and gender. The third question concerns the theory of religious individualization that helps to place the findings of the research in a larger conceptual and theoretical framework within the study of religions and especially within the sociology of religion.

The research questions are reflected in the structure of the dissertation, which is divided into two parts, where the first part (chapters one to five) focuses on the aim and scope of the thesis, about collecting and analysing the data, about the theoretical background, and about the development of transnational Islamic feminism as a general background to the topic. The second part (chapters six to ten) primarily consists of an analysis of the interview data that Mosbach collected by means of in-depth interviews with eight Muslim feminists in Sweden and the Öresund region, over a time span of five years from 2015 to 2020. Chapter six covers the self-representation of the interviewees as Muslims and thereby lays the foundation for understanding how the women who participated in her research identify themselves as Muslims and how they present themselves as Muslims. Chapters seven and eight focus on the ways these women negotiate Islam and gender in the private and public sphere and chapter nine deals with how they negotiate religious authority. Chapter ten consists of a concluding discussion.
In her analysis of the data, Mosbach offers a very detailed and comprehensive description of the views put forward by her interviewees. However, in these chapters there are very few references to research on transnational Islamic feminism, nor to the theory of religious individualization. What to a large extent is also lacking here, is a discussion about the research results vis à vis previous studies that have covered similar issues. This is regrettable since such an analysis would have offered many opportunities for deeper reflection.

It is only in the final chapter (the conclusion) that the discussion is brought to a more abstract and general level. The theory of religious individualization that Mosbach utilizes, basically maintains that religion has not lost its meaning in people’s lives in contemporary society, but instead people are active in creating new forms of religiosity. In doing so, people take on themselves the task of defining what to believe and how – tasks that have traditionally belonged to religious specialists. In other words, people to a growing extent rely on their own, individual authority and tend to defy external authority. Moreover, as we can see in Mosbach’s study, people are also active in defining what is true and authentic in their religion.

However, where Mosbach takes a critical stand towards the theory of religious individualization concerns the question of the exclusion of external authority. The theoretical aim of her dissertation is to demonstrate how the Muslim feminists that she interviewed, on the one hand, resort to their own authority in deciding about their faith, but, on the other hand, try to do it in such a manner that it does not undermine Islamic tradition. Hence, they each in their own way acknowledge some sort of external Islamic authority.

As Mosbach’s dissertation aptly demonstrates, these women constitute their own ways of being Muslims and Muslim feminists but they do not and cannot do it in a vacuum. They constitute their religiosity in relation to their social surroundings, namely, secular and liberal Scandinavian society with its widespread anti-Islam sentiment. In addition, they also have family connections which tie them to certain religious and cultural backgrounds, and on a wider level they are members of a very heterogeneous Muslim population in Europe. Hence, it is between different inner and outer forces that these women are navigating and aiming at finding their own ‘voice’, to use the metaphor chosen by Mosbach.

Mosbach’s dissertation is a valuable contribution to the study of contemporary Muslim women and of Islam and gender in general. With its timely discussion of religious individualization, it is also an important contribution to the sociology of religion at large.

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