

[Review] M. Dunne, N. Durrani, K. Fincham, and B. Crossouard (2017) Troubling Muslim Youth Identities: Nation, Religion, Gender

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Troubling Muslim youth identities, by M. Dunne, N. Durrani, K. Fincham, and B. Crossouard, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. Number of pages: XVII, 295. eBook \$79.99 ISBN 978-1-137-31279-2, hardback \$99.99 ISBN 978-0-230-34837-0.

Troubling Muslim Youth Identities: Nation, Religion, Gender is a qualitative, comparative account of identity constructions among Muslim youth in the Global South, namely Pakistan, Senegal, Nigeria and Lebanon. The book is co-written by the four authors. The study is of particular interest to scholars working on citizenship education, religion and religious education, gender, youth identities, and all those in comparative and international education whose work, theoretical or applied, relates to Muslims or Islamic contexts.

The introduction (Chapter 1) is followed by a theoretical chapter (Chapter 2). Youth is presented as a relational category, and identity understood in the post-structural sense as “an ongoing discursive accomplishment, [...] constructed through difference, and in relation to the ‘other’” (p.53). The authors note that ideas of national belonging reflect colonial and postcolonial inequalities, and deconstruct the supposed opposition between religion and ‘secularism’/‘modernity’ particularly where Islamic societies have been analysed through this lens. Gender is understood as constructed and performative, but often perceived as essentialised. Individuals are constrained by discourse but negotiate within it, and the authors specifically criticise assumptions that Muslim women lack agency.

In Chapter 3, the authors explain their comparative methodology. They collaborated in designing fieldwork, data analysis and writing. Each author conducted fieldwork in one context in which she was familiar, namely: Durrani in Pakistan, Crossouard in Senegal, Dunne in Nigeria, and Fincham in Lebanon. Using the authors’ respective networks, a total of 276 youth were interviewed across the four countries. Focus groups were undertaken in each setting over two weeks in 2014, following a pilot study in Nigeria. Muslim and Christian youth (aged 16-36) were interviewed, and focus groups were organised between individuals with similar characteristics, with young people trained as research assistants. The authors used focus groups due to time and resource constraints, but recognise their limitations compared to ethnographic methods for capturing the nuances of identity negotiations (p.63). They acknowledge a bias towards university-educated youth of higher socioeconomic status in their samples (p.69).

The empirical chapters (Chapters 4-7) on each country share a uniform structure to aid comparison. They outline the socio-historical and demographic context, and analyse young people’s identity constructions in relation to nation, gender and religion. In the conclusion (Chapter 8) the authors summarise findings common across the four contexts. National identity was highly salient among youth – challenging assumptions of its declining significance in favour of more ‘cosmopolitan’ identities. Colonial and post-colonial histories influenced young people’s national imaginaries, and distinctions between internal and external ‘others’. Religious identity was interwoven with national identity, as were essentialised constructions of binary and hierarchical gender relations. Youth favoured democracy, but rejected the imposition of certain formations of secular modernity by external ‘others’. Islam was consistently described as a religion of peace, and young Muslims were acutely aware of - and opposed to - simplistic associations with violence. Religious identity intersected with multiple axes of locally specific forms of belonging. Nonetheless, men in particular appealed to constructions of ‘proper’ Islam which imposed homogeneity on local differences and ‘othered’ different religious communities. Gender was relatively unquestioned with women positioned as embodying domesticity and ‘traditional’ or national values, although some women used religious texts to counter these constructions.

This book definitely achieves its main goal: to challenge homogenised representations of Muslim youth in the Global South in policy texts and statistical research (p.21). The

book's comparative methodology is an original contribution, as existing qualitative compendia on Muslim youth are co-edited volumes assembling accounts from independent fieldwork. The four case studies enable contrasts between geographical regions (South Asia, the Middle East and Sub Saharan Africa); colonial experience (British, French); type of government (religious or secular democracy); Muslim majority and minority populations; and different Islamic orientations (Sunni, Shi'a and Sufi).

As mentioned in the opening statement by Dr Jordan Naidoo, Director of the Division of Education at UNESCO, the book's nuanced portrayal of young Muslims' identities is relevant to policy, especially global citizenship education in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals. While the book itself could have made this link clearer, it nonetheless provides a sensitive depiction of how young Muslims understand citizenship, gender, democracy and Islam in the context of these debates.

However, the book exhibits some weaknesses. Its primary justification, that there has been little "empirical, fine-grained analytical engagement" (p.3) with young Muslims' identity constructions in the Global South, is inaccurate. Anthropologists in particular have analysed these issues in depth through long-term ethnographic fieldwork, especially since 9/11. One major example is Herrera and Bayat's edited volume *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North* (OUP, 2010). Key debates within this literature are relevant to this book. For example, the authors fail to engage with theory on what 'Islam' is, and hence assume that readers share a common understanding. In the current context of misinterpretations of Islam, this is a serious omission. Furthermore, rich evidence exists of Muslim women challenging kin, state and religious authority, for instance Bano and Kalmbach's co-edited *Women, Leadership and Mosques: Changes in Islamic Authority* (Brill, 2012). Mention of more such literature on the four contexts would have complemented the limited data on negotiations of gender identity generated from the study's focus groups.

Comparison of the empirical chapters suggests that the researchers who conducted fieldwork in Lebanon and Pakistan had stronger networks in these settings, and more familiarity with the cultural contexts and associated literature, than those on Senegal and Nigeria. For instance, while the chapters on Lebanon and Pakistan feature perspectives of students from religious as well as secular schools, in Nigeria and Senegal only youth with secular educational trajectories appear to have been interviewed despite the rich landscape of Islamic schools in these countries. The statement that "interviews with non-elite youth might have put the interviewers at risk" in Adamawa State in Nigeria (pp.185-186) is questionable. It potentially replicates the associations between Muslim youth and violence that the book criticises earlier. The chapter on Senegal takes for granted that 'African' Islam is more 'syncretic' than Islam elsewhere. Historical evidence proves that this notion ('*Islam noir*') is flawed and inherited directly from French colonial policy in West Africa. It should not be uncritically reproduced even if informants believe it, and sits uneasily with the book's claims of commitment to a postcolonial perspective (p.28). Equating Senegalese Islam with Sufism (p.132) also neglects the Salafi minority ('Ibadous') – one of whom was interviewed (p.138) – and their influence on Islamic culture including introducing alternative gender norms.

To summarise, *Troubling Muslim Youth Identities* provides a convincing and methodologically original counter-balance to simplistic portrayals of young Muslims in the Global South widespread in policy and statistical analyses - of great relevance to current policy debates. Yet, greater engagement with wider theoretical and qualitative empirical literature from other disciplines, the use of ethnographic methods, and a broader sample of youth, would enable the authors to nuance this understanding further.

Dr Anneke Newman, postdoctoral researcher at the Laboratoire d'anthropologie des mondes contemporains, at the Université Libre de Bruxelles.

