

British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies

ISSN: 1353-0194 (Print) 1469-3542 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cbjm20

Islamic studies in European higher education: navigating academic and confessional approaches

edited by Jørgen S. Nielsen and Stephen Jones, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 250 pp., (hardback), ISBN: 9781399510851; €209.95 (eBook), ISBN: 9781399510875

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To cite this article: Zulkarnain (28 Apr 2025): Islamic studies in European higher education: navigating academic and confessional approaches, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, DOI: 10.1080/13530194.2025.2497166

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2025.2497166

Published online: 28 Apr 2025.

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BOOK REVIEW

Islamic studies in European higher education: navigating academic and confessional approaches, edited by Jørgen S. Nielsen and Stephen Jones, Edinburgh University Press, 2023, 250 pp., (hardback), ISBN: 9781399510851; €209.95 (eBook), ISBN: 9781399510875

The edited volume by Jørgen S. Nielsen and Stephen Jones offers a comprehensive examination of how Islamic studies is being integrated into European higher education systems. Through twelve well-researched chapters, the book explores the tensions and opportunities that emerge when Islamic knowledge traditions encounter European academic frameworks. The editors have assembled contributions from academics across Europe, offering rich insights into how different countries are responding to the educational needs of Muslim communities while navigating questions of academic rigour, religious authority, and political expectations.

The volume's greatest strength lies in its comparative approach, presenting case studies from diverse European contexts including Germany, the United Kingdom, Belgium, Poland, and Turkey. This comparative framework allows readers to understand both the shared challenges and country-specific responses to incorporating Islamic studies into secular university settings. For instance, in Chapter 5 (pp. 69–88), Agai and Engelhardt demonstrate how Germany has established formal Islamic theological faculties within state universities, while Chapter 7 (pp. 110–124) by Sidat shows how the United Kingdom has developed bridge programmes between private Islamic seminaries and universities, and Chapter 9 (pp. 151–170) by Lafrarchi reveals how Belgium has implemented policies heavily influenced by counter-terrorism concerns.

The contributors skilfully unpack the dichotomy between what are perceived as 'confessional' and 'academic' approaches to Islamic studies. In Chapter 2 (pp. 14–29), Nielsen provides historical context for how this distinction emerged in European academic settings. Several chapters highlight how this dichotomy is increasingly blurred as more Muslim scholars enter academia, bringing with them perspectives that challenge traditional Western notions of objectivity and critical distance. Particularly notable is Chapter 12 (pp. 223–234) by Cheruvallil-Contractor, which argues that power dynamics related to gender, race, ethnicity, and religion determine how knowledge about Islam is produced and valued.

The volume provides valuable insights into the political contexts that have shaped Islamic studies in Europe. On page 157, Lafrarchi's examination of Belgian Islamic religious education clearly demonstrates how governments can stretch constitutional boundaries regarding the separation of church and state when operating under the rationale of preventing radicalization. Chapter 3 (pp. 32–49) further explores how security concerns have influenced government investment in Islamic studies programmes, creating tensions between educational goals and political agendas.

Another significant theme is the evolution of Muslim scholarship within European contexts. Chapter 7 (pp. 110–124) on British *dar al-ulums* (Islamic seminaries) by Sidat and Chapter 8 (p. 134) by Mesbahi on the Islamic College in London both illustrate how Muslim educational institutions are adapting to European contexts while maintaining connections to traditional knowledge systems. Their research challenges assumptions about Islamic educational institutions promoting insularity, instead showing how they can enable students to navigate their identities within European societies.

Despite its many strengths, the volume suffers from notable limitations. The book's theoretical framework relies heavily on the confessional/academic binary, which several contributors acknowledge is problematic, yet few chapters move beyond critique to offer robust alternative frameworks. Additionally, while policy and institutional development receive thorough treatment, only Chapter 6 (pp. 92–105) offers substantial ethnographic insight into actual classroom dynamics. This methodological imbalance creates a somewhat top-down perspective that privileges institutional structures over lived educational experiences. Furthermore, student voices are largely absent throughout most chapters—while Chapter 11 (pp. 202–220) briefly addresses student experiences, a more systematic inclusion of their perspectives would have strengthened the volume's claims about navigating between knowledge traditions.

The geographical scope of the book represents another significant weakness. Despite claiming a pan-European perspective in the introduction (p. 3), Eastern European cases receive limited attention with only one chapter dedicated to Poland, while major countries with significant Muslim populations like France, Spain, and Italy are completely absent from the analysis. This imbalance undermines the comparative framework and leaves readers with an incomplete picture of European approaches to Islamic studies. Moreover, the volume's pricing (€209.95 for the eBook) makes it inaccessible to many scholars and students, particularly those in Muslim-majority countries who might benefit most from its insights, limiting its potential impact on global discussions about Islamic higher education.

This volume will be invaluable for academics, policymakers, and religious leaders interested in the future of Islamic studies in Europe. It provides a nuanced understanding of how European higher education can accommodate diverse approaches to knowledge while maintaining academic integrity. The editors and contributors offer a hopeful vision that moves beyond seeing Islamic studies as either a security concern or a purely theological endeavour, suggesting instead pathways towards collaborative approaches that benefit European societies as a whole.

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https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2025.2497166

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