Khadijah Elshayyal, *Muslim Identity Politics: Islam, Activism and Equality in Britain*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2018. Pp. xxxiii + 312. ISBN: 978-1-8360-204-8.

Muslims and Islam remain among the most hotly debated topics of public debate in Europe. A growing number of scholars have critically addressed what they refer to as the 'Muslim Question', i.e.: the constant problematisation of the presence of Muslim minorities.[1] Only recently have scholars begun to take an interest in Muslims' own experiences with and active resistance to the marginalisation of Muslim minorities in European societies. Khadijah Elshayyal's new book on 'Muslim identity politics' is a welcome contribution to this emerging field.

Elshayyal holds a PhD in History and currently works as an Associate Fellow at the Alwaleed Centre, University of Edinburgh. In this book, she traces the history of British Muslim identity politics from the 1960s to the present, focusing on a number of advocacy groups that have played an important role in the political engagement and representation of Muslims, most notably the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB). Her analysis is based on in-depth interviews and informal conversations with key figures in these advocacy groups and other Muslim activists, in combination with archival material from these advocacy groups and from the British government.

Building upon the work of Tariq Modood on Islam and multiculturalism,[2] the author defines 'Muslim identity politics' as a struggle for equal distribution and equal recognition by Muslims, *as Muslims*. In recent decades, the term 'identity politics' has become highly contentious. Critics have pointed to its troubling implications for models of the self, political inclusiveness, and the possibilities for solidarity and resistance. It is tempting to say that 'identity politics' has become an outdated term.[3] Elshayyal, however, argues that, regardless of its flaws or merits, identity politics has been crucial for British Muslims in recent decades,

---

1   See, for example, Parekh, Bikhu, *European Liberalism and 'the Muslim Question'* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008); Bracke, Sarah, "Transformations of the Secular and the 'Muslim Question': Revisiting the Historical Coincidence of Depillarisation and the Institutionalisation of Islam in the Netherlands", *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 2/2 (2013), 208–26.

2   Modood, Tariq, "Muslims and the Politics of Difference", *Political Quarterly*, 74/1 (2003) 100–15; idem, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); idem, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

3   Heyes, Cressida, "Identity Politics", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (*Fall 2020 edition*), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/.

> whether as a platform from which community concerns and demands
> for equal treatment have been articulated, as a site for intra-community
> interactions and the evolution of identity and political engagement
> through debate and disagreement, or as a government-driven strategy
> through which to more coherently and effectively engage in dialogue
> with Muslim communities. (p. 7)

She therefore argues that Muslim identity politics is a topic worthy of close
examination and critical analysis.

After a brief introduction (Chapter 1), Elshayyal explains key concepts such
as equality and (mis)recognition in Chapter 2. In Chapter 3, she discusses early
examples of political awareness and organising among Muslims in the UK
from the 1960s to the 1980s and shows how a concern with cultural identity
preservation gained momentum. In Chapter 4, she analyses the attempts that
were made during the 1980s to attain unity among British Muslims for the ben-
efit of their collective advocacy, especially in the wake of the Rushdie Affair
in 1989. She also explains how the MCB emerged as the preeminent represen-
tative body in 1997 and became the most successful British Muslim umbrella
body to date.

In Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, Elshayyal describes the challenges that
the MCB and other advocacy groups began to face after the 9/11 attacks in
2001, and the 7/7 bombings in London in 2005. While the government had ini-
tially endorsed these organisations and actively encouraged them to speak on
behalf of Muslims, the political landscape became increasingly uneasy with
the notion of affording recognition to group identity. Moreover, the policy pro-
grammes that the British government developed to counter violent extremism,
most notably the Prevent agenda, effectively undermined the trust between
the government and Muslim communities and also limited opportunities for
British Muslims to express their political grievances. As a result, the estab-
lished organisations had to rethink their agenda priorities and the techniques
through which they furthered their causes.

In the last two chapters, the author discusses the most recent developments
in the field of Muslim identity politics (Chapter 7), provides a summary of the
most important research findings, and makes recommendations for further
research (Chapter 8). She observes, among other things, the emergence of a
wide variety of new Muslim advocacy groups, all seeking to represent diverse
voices from among British Muslim communities. She also examines the rise
of activist campaigns that are self-consciously Muslim, but go beyond serv-
ing the interests of Muslims alone, offering a positive contribution to all those

who are considered to be allies in the political sphere, including other minority organisations.

Elshayyal's overarching – and highly convincing – argument is that 'the structure and mechanisms for equality and recognition in the British legal and political systems suffer from a gap with respect to the treatment of Muslim minorities on a par with other minorities' (p. 76), and that

> as long as significant elements within society, be they the press, public political culture or institutions, continue to express hostility, distaste or hatred towards Muslims, there will be no end in sight for Muslim identity politics, since it is these experiences that often serve to make people far more deeply conscious, defensive and even proud of their identities. (p. 202)

In the final chapter, she calls for forms of civic activism that are characterised by cross-community dialogues and alliances that promote the shared interests of communities with a view to narrowing the equality gap in all its manifestations.

A point of criticism regarding Elshayyal's work might be that she pays more attention to the structure of opportunities influencing the political mobilisation of Muslims than to these mobilisations themselves. The book contains surprisingly few quotations from the interviews the author conducted with key figures in Muslim advocacy groups. As a social historian and religious studies scholar specialising in the study of Muslim responses to Islamophobia in the Netherlands and Norway (and as a Muslim woman who has been involved in various forms of activism herself), I sometimes caught myself longing for more 'juicy' stories from behind the scenes of British Muslim activism in which other grassroots activists could recognise themselves and from which they could learn.

What the book does offer is a razor-sharp political analysis of the changing circumstances in which Muslim advocacy groups have fought for equality, with varying degrees of success. Moreover, Elshayyal provides a nuanced and well-balanced account of the interaction between Muslim communities and the state that is well embedded in theoretical debates about identity politics, multiculturalism and equal recognition. I therefore warmly recommend this book to anyone interested in the history of Muslim identity politics in Britain, be they scholars or policymakers.

Bikhu Parekh, *European Liberalism and 'the Muslim Question'* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2008).

Bracke, Sarah, "Transformations of the Secular and the 'Muslim Question': Revisiting the Historical Coincidence of Depillarisation and the Institutionalisation of Islam in the Netherlands", *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, 2/2 (2013), 208–26.

Heyes, Cressida, "Identity Politics", in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (*Fall 2020 edition*), Edward N. Zalta (ed.). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/identity-politics/.

Modood, Tariq, "Muslims and the Politics of Difference", *Political Quarterly*, 74/1 (2003) 100–15.

Modood, Tariq, *Multicultural Politics: Racism, Ethnicity and Muslims in Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

Modood, Tariq, *Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

Margaretha A. van Es
Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Utrecht University, Utrecht, The Netherlands
m.a.vanes@uu.nl