



# Book Review: Young Muslim Change-Makers; Grassroots Charities Rethinking Modern Societies

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This article summarizes William Barylo's work examining the dynamics of social movements and philanthropy among young Muslims in Europe through field studies of eleven organizations in France, Poland, and the UK. The book highlights the emergence of small-scale Muslim charities initiated by the younger generation within the contexts of secularism, Islamophobia, and contemporary social crises. Using a phenomenological approach, Barylo explores how religiosity, identity, and social participation shape the activism of young Muslims, which is not only religious but also political and humanistic. Through social charity, they reveal a face of Islam that is humanistic, active, and progressive—not as objects of policy, but as subjects of social change. This movement proves that Islam can be a source of social innovation and participatory democracy in Europe.

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## INTRODUCTION

The issue of the position of Muslims in modern European society has been a long-standing debate in the sociology of religion and identity politics. Dominant narratives in Western media and politics often position Muslims as a "social problem," frequently linked to extremism, radicalization, and an inability to integrate with European secular values. Since the events of September 11, 2001, security discourse has replaced multiculturalism discourse, reducing the image of Muslims to "objects of surveillance" rather than "social subjects" actively contributing to modern European civilization.

It is within this context that William Barylo presents the book *Young Muslim Change-Makers* as an effort to deconstruct the singular representation of European Muslims. He starts from a concern over the absence of alternative narratives depicting Muslims as positive moral and social agents. Through a rich and reflective ethnographic approach, Barylo investigates the real lives of young Muslim volunteers involved in small charitable organizations in France, Poland, and the UK. This focus is important because it reveals a frequently overlooked social dimension of Islam: charitable grassroots movements—a form of activism emerging from below, voluntary in nature, and rooted in the spiritual ethics of Islam.

Barylo rejects older analytical frameworks that view Islam merely as a ritual system or just a religious identity. For him, Islam is a system of values and social praxis that gives rise to non-partisan political action, public service, and interfaith solidarity. Within this framework, the philanthropic movement of young Muslims serves as evidence that faith can transform into social action balancing spirituality and civic responsibility (citizenship).

The historical context of this research is rooted in the socio-political situation of France and Western Europe in the 2000s, marked by rising Islamophobia and a crisis of public trust in government. Phenomena such as the headscarf ban, the burkini controversy, and anti-Islam political rhetoric demonstrate how extreme secularism creates alienation for the young Muslim generation. However, amidst such social pressures, a new social movement grew, refusing to become victims of the dominant discourse. Young Muslims instead chose the path of concrete action through humanitarian work, education, environmentalism, and empowering the poor. Barylo asserts that philanthropy has become a new form of ethical Islamic politics—not the politics of power, but the politics of service. This concept is rooted

in the principles of sadaqah (charity), ukhuwah (brotherhood), and shura (consultation), translated into modern language as social solidarity, participatory leadership, and participatory democracy. Thus, young Muslim volunteers in Europe demonstrate that faith-based social participation can be a means of decolonizing modernity—redefining modernity from the perspective of non-Western spiritual ethics.

Theoretically, the book's introduction also challenges the European paradigm that separates the "sacred" from the "profane". Barylo observes that in the daily practices of Muslim volunteers, the boundary between the two becomes fluid. Seemingly secular activities—like feeding the homeless, cleaning the environment, or smiling at strangers—are placed within a theological framework as social worship. Thus, Islam becomes not just a ritual-oriented religion, but a "spiritual citizenship" that unites faith and public ethics.

Furthermore, the introduction serves as an epistemological critique of the Western academic tradition that often studies Islam using Eurocentric categories. Barylo rejects sociological classifications that confine Muslims to labels like "liberal," "conservative," or "fundamentalist". He considers such approaches reductive and failing to capture the complexity of the European Muslim experience, living at the intersection of culture, religion, and modernity. Instead, he offers a phenomenological approach that starts from the subjective experiences of the volunteers—how they interpret Islam, perform charitable acts (Rusydziana & Ali, 2023), and build social relations in a pluralistic environment.

Moreover, this introduction asserts that research on Muslim philanthropic organizations is relevant not only for contemporary Islamic studies but also for the development of European civil society. When the state and formal institutions fail to address social crises caused by neoliberalism, young Muslim charities emerge as alternative actors sowing solidarity, social justice, and inclusivity. This is why Barylo calls these volunteers "change-makers"—agents of change connecting spirituality with social praxis.

Thus, the introductory section of this book is not merely a methodological preface but also an intellectual and moral manifesto: that Islam, when understood ethically and socially, can be a civilizational resource that rebuilds universal human values amidst the crisis of modernity. The young European Muslim charity movements studied by Barylo reveal a dynamic, reflective, and progressive face of Islam—far from frightening stereotypes, while challenging colonial

discourses about "Islam's inability to adapt to modernity".

## DISCUSSION

This research uses a phenomenological-ethnographic approach conducted over seven years, involving in-depth interviews and participant observation. This approach allows the researcher to understand the subjective meanings that volunteers ascribe to their social actions. The theoretical framework employed includes:

- Edgar Morin's complexity theory, viewing Islam as a dynamic and adaptive system within the modern cultural ecosystem.
- Alain Caille's anti-utilitarian theory, explaining social actions based on the ethics of the gift like zakah (Izza, 2021; Uula & Maziyyah, 2022), not merely economic or political motives.
- The concept of metacolonialism (Bulhan, 2015), examining how neoliberal and neo-colonial values influence the mentality and practices of European Muslims.

With this combination, Islam is understood not just as "religion" in the Western definition, but as a value matrix—a cultural environment that gives birth to social action, solidarity, and new forms of participatory democracy.

### Islam as Social Ethics and a Source of Transformation

Islamic Social Ethics refers to the moral and ethical principles that guide how individuals and communities in Islam interact with one another and with society at large. These ethics are derived from the Qur'an, the Sunnah (traditions of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ), and the broader Islamic moral framework that emphasizes justice, compassion, and communal harmony. Islamic ethics are rooted in tawhid (the oneness of God), which establishes the moral foundation for all human behavior. Since all humans are servants of Allah and part of a single creation, social ethics in Islam stress accountability before God, equality, and moral responsibility toward others.

Barylo positions Islam not merely as a ritualistic religious system, but as a social ethical system that shapes the behavior, social relations, and civic politics of young Muslims in Europe. Through ethnographic study, he finds that simple actions like smiling at beneficiaries, maintaining cleanliness, or greeting neighbors are understood by volunteers as part of sadaqah and social worship. Thus, daily activities become a medium for

living out faith (faith-in-action). This paradigm breaks down the classic dichotomy between the "sacred" and the "profane" in Western epistemology. In the volunteers' view, the world is not a neutral space separate from spirituality; rather, every social space is an arena for collective worship. This view marks the birth of what Barylo calls social Islam—a form of religiosity that does not stop at ritual but transforms into social praxis rooted in local realities. Within this framework, Islamic values such as ukhuwah (brotherhood), adl (justice), and khidmah (service) are translated into concrete actions that build social capital and cross-community trust.

### Muslim Philanthropic Movements as Alternative Democratic Spaces

Muslim philanthropy is a central element of Islamic social ethics that embodies compassion, justice, and collective responsibility. Rooted in the principles of zakat or obligatory almsgiving (Ali et al., 2023), sadaqah (voluntary charity), and waqf (Ningsih et al., 2022), it reflects a comprehensive system of wealth redistribution designed to achieve social equity and communal welfare. This paper explores the theological foundations, institutional frameworks, and modern expressions of Muslim philanthropy, emphasizing its role in addressing poverty, inequality, and sustainable development in Muslim societies and beyond.

Barylo observes that small-scale Muslim charities, like Amatullah in France or MADE in the UK, function as social laboratories where the young Muslim generation experiments with new forms of participatory democracy. Their organizational structures tend to be non-hierarchical and based on the principle of shura (consultation). Decisions are made collectively, and leadership is built on trust, not formal power. This makes such organizations a form of primary democracy (Newton, 1999), where every individual feels a moral responsibility towards their community. Furthermore, these philanthropic spaces also create convivial social capital, which are networks of trust and solidarity that cross religious, ethnic, and social class boundaries. Muslim volunteers work alongside non-Muslims on humanitarian projects, building alternative narratives of togetherness amidst the rise of social polarization in Europe, also during covid pandemic (Riani, 2021).

Thus, philanthropic activity has not only a religious dimension but is also political in a substantive sense. It becomes a form of bios politikos—public life driven by the ethics of faith rather than formal political power. In this context, Barylo shows that the young

Muslim generation is reconstructing the meaning of citizenship as active and empathetic participation in social life.

### Countering Islamophobia through Social Practice

One important contribution of the young Muslim philanthropic movement is its ability to challenge negative stereotypes and change public perception of Islam. Through tangible activities like soup kitchens, environmental education, and social assistance, these organizations successfully shift the discourse on Islam from the ideological realm to the realm of humanitarian praxis. Instead of responding to discrimination with confrontational rhetoric, young volunteers choose the path of politics of empathy—building social trust through service. For example, the Amatullah group, initially suspected by security forces, later gained support from local authorities after proving its positive impact on the local community.

This demonstrates the emergence of a counter-hegemonic strategy where Muslims build symbolic power through social performance, rather than through symbolic violence or identity politics. Islamophobia is countered not by ideological debate, but by social actions that foster mutual trust (thick trust). In other words, this movement acts as a social negotiation agent between the Muslim community and the wider society, helping to create a more inclusive, honest, and just social order.

### Challenges of Neoliberalism and Metacolonialism

Barylo also highlights the paradox that arises when some Muslim organizations begin adopting corporate management styles and neoliberal logic. The obsession with "efficiency," "brand awareness," or the number of "likes" on social media reflects symptoms of metacolonialism, a new form of colonization through market values and individualism that turns charity into an image commodity. This phenomenon reflects what Barylo calls "Muslim managerialism"—a tendency to managerialise religion and social charity in ways that mimic Western capitalism. Although well-intentioned, this model risks obscuring the spiritual and collective dimensions of the charity movement. Activism originally based on sincerity and moral consciousness could slip into a competition for image (virtue signaling).

However, Barylo does not view this phenomenon pessimistically. He sees it instead as a transitional phase towards a new awareness: that

Muslims must be able to decolonize their spirituality by separating Islamic ethical values from the traps of neoliberalism. Thus, critical awareness of modern cultural colonialism becomes an integral part of the spiritual and social process of young Muslims.

### From Resistance to Self-Determination

The final chapters of the book showcase an important transformation: from a movement resisting stereotypes to a movement of spiritual and cultural self-determination. Young Muslim activists begin to realize that social change is achieved not only through reaction to external oppression but also through inner liberation and value restoration. This movement combines social activism with aesthetic and emotional dimensions: Islamic cultural festivals, spiritual music, calligraphy art, and environmental initiatives based on eco-Islam. All these become means for reconstructing a holistic Muslim identity—spiritual, social, and ecological aspects.

This process reflects a shift from reactive Islam to creative Islam: an Islam that not only responds to modernity but re-offers it in a more humane and just form. In this context, Barylo observes the emergence of an "ethical modernity"—modernity rooted in Islamic morality, not just secular rationality. Thus, the young Muslim philanthropic movement plays a dual role: as resistance against structural injustice and as a process of self-reconstruction towards a society that is more socially, spiritually, and ecologically just.

## CONCLUSION

The book *Young Muslim Change-Makers* shows that the young Muslim generation in Europe is creating a new paradigm for the relationship between Islam, citizenship, and modernity. They are not merely adapting to secularism, but filling it with spiritual values and social solidarity. Through social charity, they reveal a face of Islam that is humanistic, active, and progressive—not as objects of policy, but as subjects of social change. This movement proves that Islam can be a source of social innovation and participatory democracy in Europe. Barylo's research makes an important contribution to contemporary sociology of religion: showing how religiosity, when combined with empathy and social action, becomes a transformative force that challenges cultural colonialism and builds bridges between communities.

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