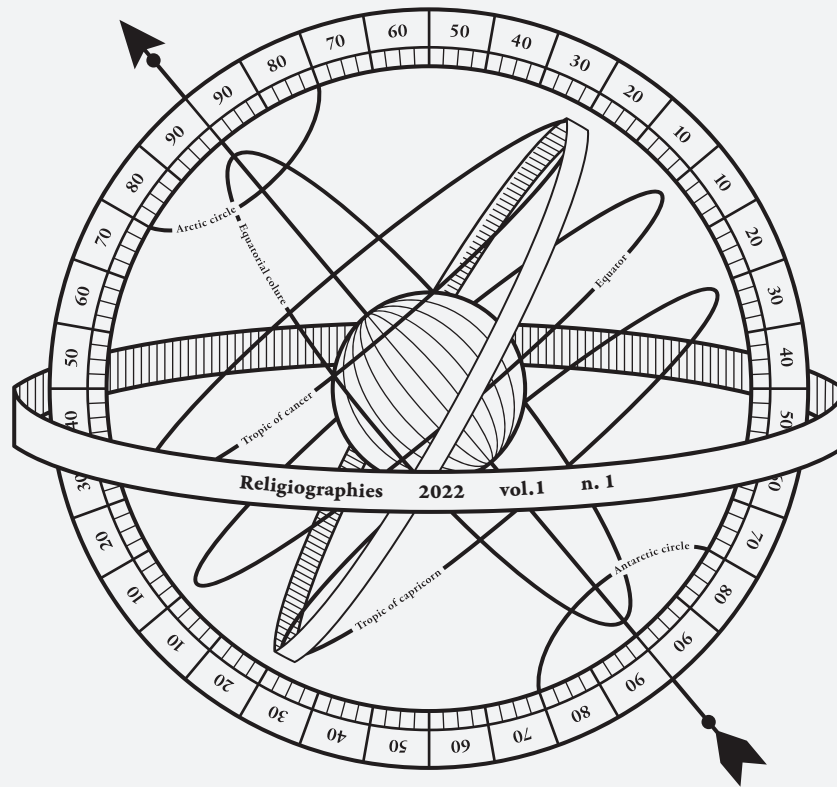


# *Religiographies*



Special Issue

“Holy Sites in the Mediterranean, Sharing and Division”

edited by

Dionigi Albera, Sara Kuehn and Manoël Pénicaud

# Book review by Gianfranco Bria

Fabio Giomi. *Making Muslim Women European: Voluntary Associations, Gender and Islam in Post-Ottoman Bosnia and Yugoslavia (1878-1941)*. Budapest: CEU Press, 2021, pp. 386. Hardcover \$ 105.00, ISBN 9789633863695



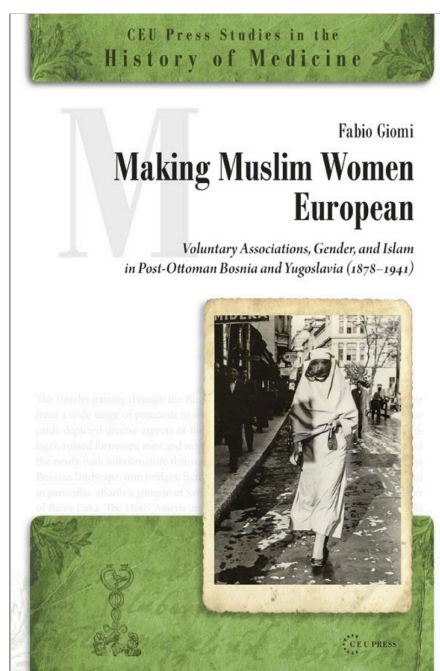
CENTRO STUDI  
DI CIVILTÀ E SPIRITUALITÀ  
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As the author, Fabio Giomi, writes in the first pages, this book is “an attempt to tell a different story and to contribute to the history of Bosnian Muslims in the first decade of the post-Ottoman era, by putting women and their experience in the picture” (p. 5). This sentence sums up the mission of this work, which intends to explore the heuristic power of gender to study the history of Bosnian Muslims, overcoming classical national and ethno-confessional categories. The time frame considered ranges from 1878, the year of the Berlin Congress, to 1941, when Yugoslavia was invaded by Axis troops. During this time, the Bosnian space was integrated into two imperial structures, Ottoman and Hapsburg, and then had a double national experience, first as the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, and then as the Kingdom of Yugoslavia.

The author decided to focus on voluntary associations as a kaleidoscope through which to analyse the history of Muslim women and gender relations in the post-Ottoman Bosnian space. Associations, according to the author, have left a plethora of written traces, largely unexplored. Moreover, the associational prism will allow us to gain “a glimpse of Muslim women in their relationship with the rest of society and how this changed over time” (p. 8). In this way, Giomi’s book aspires to give back Muslim women’s agency and “get rid once and for all of the Orientalist stereotype portraying them as silenced and oppressed” (*ivi*). Muslim associations were the privileged institutions where Muslim women became visible and that took on the Muslim woman question (p. 11). Similarly, the author is aware of the limits of the associational focus, which risks pushing other segments of Yugoslav society into the background.

The book has the great merit of proposing an insight into the pre-1941 experiences of Bosnian Muslim women within a historiography that has tended to obscure pre-socialist female agency. The silence on women’s issues in the inter-war period has served to implicitly confirm the idea that “Muslim women had remained in the shadow of a timeless patriarchal oppression, obscurantism and passivity up to the establishment of the socialist state” (p. 17). A different awareness of the role of women and gender relations in post-Ottoman times has only recently started to emerge, after the great emphasis on confessional and ethnic studies, and Giomi’s book is one of the milestones of this new awareness.

The volume is divided into seven parts, organised thematically and chronologically. The first two chapters focus on the Habsburg period, the last four on the Yugoslav period. The first chapter focuses on three points: first, it addresses the place of Bosnia within the administrative and political apparatus of the Habsburg Empire; second, it looks at the impact of the Viennese government’s educational policies on Muslim women, aimed as these were at encouraging them to follow the standards of civilisation proposed by the Hapsburgs; third, it deals with the role of Muslim women within voluntary associations. The Empire aimed to forge Muslim women who were typically Habsburg, socialising and educating them according to its gendered ideal of progress within a new educational system. In this way, the Austro-Hungarian authorities intended to essentially de-Ottomanise Muslim women and place them within their ideal of human progress, in which education was one of the focal points. However, this strategy encountered various forms of opposition from some Islamic families and especially from Islamic authorities such as the *ulema*. However, as the first chapter points out, in those years, voluntary associations - with philanthropic and cultural aims - composed of Muslim women developed and acquired a new visibility in the public sphere. These new organisations

were associated in different ways with Hapsburg modernity, even if they advocated a reinterpretation of some traditional values, resulting in a bridge between modern and traditional forms of culture.

The second chapter deals with the evolution of the question of Muslim women in Hapsburg Bosnia as it was influenced by the movement of people and texts across the imperial borders. This movement favoured the influence of social Darwinism, Islamic modernism and positivism. The resulting debate reflected on the imaginary and narrative place of Bosnian Muslims between East and West as an alternative space of civilisation. The issue of women became a symbol of this debate, in which men participated but women also made their voices heard. As Giomi quotes, “while participating in the debate around the Muslim woman question, women expressed, albeit keeping to the status quo of their milieu, different ideas of appropriate Muslim post-Ottoman femininity” (p. 107). In their writing, they explained that a purely religious, oral and domestic education was no longer sufficient to meet the needs of a Muslim post-Ottoman society. At the same time, Muslim women imagined different forms of sisterhood which probably laid the groundwork for the development of various voluntary associations after 1918.

The third chapter addresses the involvement of Muslim women volunteers with the rest of society. It concerns relations with Muslim and non-Muslim political parties, the Yugoslav administrative apparatus and religious institutions. This part notes how the first Muslim women’s groups found Muslim communities to be the most appropriate space for their involvement. These voluntary associations remained largely excluded from the decision-making process, as male Muslim political elites still managed this. In this case, it was family ties that made the difference: “the ability of a specific association branch to involve the female members of prestigious families in its activities could make the difference between success and failure for its activities” (p. 166).

The fourth chapter seeks to explain how the Muslim woman question became a terrain for confrontation between competing political projects, namely secular progressive, Islamic progressive and feminist. In this way, Muslim women’s voluntary associations participated in the elaboration of new discourses on women, Islam and modernity. The intertwining of these ideologies radically reshaped the Muslim woman question, causing issues to arise that addressed new themes, such as: the active involvement of women in the economy; the precedence of the current needs of society over the preservation of tradition; the importance of national interfaith sisterhood. The practice of the veil was the epitome of these themes, as it became the focus of various progressive discourses after 1918. In this way, the issues of Muslim women became highly politicised. Voluntary associations of Muslim women ultimately became part of the progressive field, along with their male and non-Muslim counterparts. Nevertheless, they were able to produce a different discourse, using terminology that distinguished them from the other associational groups.

The fifth chapter focuses on voluntary activities that aimed to train new Muslim women through education and work. Working together, these associations tried to raise funds by maintaining good relations with the organisations that could finance them, such as ministries, governorates, municipalities, Islamic institutions and the Crown. In this way, they provided support for the education of Muslim girls, some of whom succeeded in having remarkable professional careers. This challenged the Orientalist

ideal of submissive Muslim women. In this respect, the cultural associations promoted a progressive ideal of accomplished women in extra-domestic work; while the philanthropic associations were more inclined to preserve female domesticity for the urban poor.

The sixth chapter analyses the different leisure activities for recreation and sociability in which Bosnian Muslims were involved, through the gendered prism of associative networks. Festive events, such as the *zabava*, have been interpreted “as collective performance of existing class, gender, national and religious hierarchies as a tool to reinforce collective loyalties” (p. 310). In these performances, the exposure of the body was regarded as the main marker of civilisational advancement. A new model of Muslim women was created in reaction to Orientalist discourses and in order to survive in the Yugoslav cultural landscape. The *invisibilisation* of confessional markers on women’s bodies served as a strategy to avoid being subsumed into the Serbian and Yugoslav national body. Through the ritual of *zabava*, the cultural associations developed their own idea of emancipation, which was to be guided by enlightened Muslim males. In fact, it was a paternalistic form of emancipation, which marginalised women from the decision-making process. Nevertheless, the bodily self-expression practices of these rituals gave women a new visibility, allowing them to gain new public spaces and eroding sexual segregation.

The seventh and final chapter deals with two new phenomena that shaped Bosnian society from the second half of the 1930s. The first concerns the growing success of Communist ideas and organisations among young people, especially secondary school and university students. The second concerns the emergence of Islamic revivalism as a reaction to the progressive secularisation of Bosnian and Yugoslav society. Both these movements proposed new ideas in the debate on Muslim women and new social practices. Through their associative structures, these two movements were able to promote new forms of (in)visibility and (non-) involvement of women within Yugoslav society. The Communist establishment regarded the project of Muslim cultural progressivism as inadequate. The Muslim revivalists promoted the re-Islamisation of society as the only possible political project. However, the involvement of the Communist and Islamic revivalists challenged the liberal and secular postulates of the Western associationalist model. On the contrary, in the late 1930s we witness associations whose members prepared an upheaval of the established political order in the name of certain radical ideals.

This book has many merits, first and foremost highlighting the involvement of women in associational activities in post-Ottoman Bosnia. In this way, the author notes the agency of Muslim women in building alternative modernity (and civilisation) projects by proposing various discourses and practices that also included their increasing participation in the public sphere. The book intends to re-evaluate gender relations and the role of women in interwar history through the associational prism. This work therefore fills the gap within a historiography, that of Yugoslavia, that speaks “more about horses than women”; at the same time, it frames the associational movements of Muslim women within the larger panorama of gendered movements of the first half of the twentieth century. In this it represents a milestone. The fluency of the writing certainly reinforces the quality of this work, which employs a very rigorous historical method. Not surprisingly, the work is supported by a plethora of first-hand sources, which the author has meticulously researched in archives and elsewhere.

The only flaws of this work lie in the fact that it treats Muslims and Islam as mere political or sociological data. The book tells us little about the beliefs, practices and doctrines of Muslims, which could have provided further useful information on what *being-Muslim* meant in Bosnia at that time. But this is probably more of a choice by the author, who rightly wanted to privilege other aspects in his analysis, than a limitation.

In spite of this, this is an extraordinary book that offers an unprecedented picture of European Muslim women that certainly challenges the most common historiographic and public narratives about this topic. Moreover, it proposes a paradigm of Muslim women's agency that questions mainstream models (Western feminism, Islamic docility, etc.), in order to propose an in-depth, historicised but still little-known gaze on it.